



The Dutch and their Appetites

Changes in Eating Habits in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

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[ANNEKE H. VAN OTTERLOO]



Café *Mille Colomes*
on Rembrandtplein,
Amsterdam,
painted by G.H. Grauss
in 1918.

In the opinion of foreigners the Dutch, unlike the Belgians, have never progressed very far in the culinary arts. There's nothing new about this observation; it's been almost a cliché since the seventeenth century. In that celebrated and prosperous era the Dutch made a name for themselves as a people with robust appetites, a great capacity for drink and a weakness for smoking tobacco-pipes. At the same time they also earned a reputation for their lack of refinement and appreciation of culinary pleasure. That impression is partly based on the group paintings of civic guards popular at the time, in which all these excesses are depicted. But paintings are not always a reliable source of information when it comes to daily life, where eating habits play a central role. Travel records are another source. How did Dutch appetites fare two centuries later? Here our informant is Ortigão, a Portuguese journalist who visited the country in 1883. He recounts what he saw in a restaurant called *De Karseboom* in Kalverstraat in Amsterdam: 'Most

Somewhere in the
Netherlands, 1949.



of the guests order a bowl of soup, a meat dish and vegetables. They put the meat and the vegetables on a plate and mix them together, spread themselves out comfortably, cut everything up into little bits, drench the whole lot in the gravy left on the serving dish, then wolf it all down, forkful by forkful, with mechanical voracity, exhibiting a fierce appetite and an even greater lack of gastronomic sensitivity. Few of the customers eat bread, even fewer take dessert and almost no one drinks with their meal. Once the dish is empty they hastily settle the bill.¹

Senhor Ortigão was in the Netherlands at this particular time for the Amsterdam World's Fair, a badge of modernisation and progress. In the last decades of the nineteenth century factory production made huge strides in the Netherlands and the big cities grew proportionately. Commercial traffic became livelier, restaurants and other eating establishments appeared, and it would not be long before department stores such as *De Bijenkorf* were established. Coffee houses opened near the harbours and factories. In the cities, busy centres evolved where businessmen, office workers, ladies out for a day's shopping and people with the day off would make their way and become the 'guests' of the new eateries. But unlike the restaurants of Brussels, for example, our Portuguese visitor's observations suggest that these were not places to see and be seen or to flaunt one's refined style or manners, to say nothing of the quality of the meal itself. Restaurants did exist, but they often functioned merely as places where people could fill their stomachs if they couldn't do so at home. It would be more than a century before the first Dutch restaurant finally earned foreign recognition in the shape of a three-star rating (from the authoritative French Michelin guide). That was in 2001, and it was awarded to chef Cees Helder of the Parkheuvel restaurant in Rotterdam.

This remarkable event may signify that a fundamental change has taken place in the way the Dutch relate to their cooking and their stomachs. This piece will consider the questions *what* changed, *how* it happened and *what brought it about*, and *who* made the major contributions.² Dishes will be dealt with as well, and the location where the cooking occurs will not be limited to the exclusive restaurant alone. Everyone has to eat, lofty and humble, from the countryside to the city, from east to west and from north to south – in the Netherlands, too.

Bread with no chalk or sand: modernisation, industrialisation and urbanisation

Eating habits are bound up with society as a whole in a variety of ways. Changes in the economic, social and cultural sectors are directly reflected in what people can and want to eat, and how they do it. At the end of the nineteenth century, the Netherlands was busily engaged in industrialisation. This affected the living conditions and way of life of the population at large, most of whom lived in the countryside and worked on the land. The existing cities continued to grow and new cities sprang up; they offered newcomers the opportunity to build a new life for themselves. This brought with it a profound change in cooking and eating habits, for factory workers, office personnel and factory owners alike – in short, for people from every walk of life. Living in cities meant that the women of the house or their domestic staff had to buy the ingredients for the household's daily meals instead of getting them from the potato field, the kitchen garden or the pickle vat, as was usual in the countryside. At the end of the nineteenth century, food was still a major item in the housekeeping books

In 1920 bread factories had been around for more than sixty years, but home baking was still done in the country side.



of most of the 'working class'. More than half of a worker's wage had to be spent on potatoes and bread, supplemented by very small amounts of butter, sugar, milk, vegetables and a very occasional bit of bacon or meat. Households also had to buy fuel to cook with and to heat the room they lived in (usually it wasn't much more than that). Many low-paid urban workers' households found it hard to make ends meet. The more well-to-do groups from the middle class, however, could live quite well and eat a varied diet. The contrasts in lifestyle and eating habits between families ranked higher or lower on the social ladder were considerable.

Yet by around 1890 the largest and least fortunate segment of the Dutch population had a better chance of being able to obtain adequate food, both quantitatively and qualitatively, than fifty years before. Back then, in the 'black forties', there were serious shortages and even talk of famine due to the high price of grain and the failure of the potato harvest. In 1847 deaths outnumbered

Vincent van Gogh,
The Potato Eaters. 1885.
Canvas. Rijksmuseum,
Amsterdam.

births, but that was the last year that the figures produced such a result. An uncertain pre-industrial rhythm would turn into a modern industrial tempo. The food supply slowly became more stable and less precarious with the advent of steam navigation and mass production. In 1856 the country's first bread factory was established in Amsterdam by Samuel Sarphati, a physician with a social conscience and an urban reformer who also built the Amstel Hotel. Bread, the staple food of the masses, was expensive and was often adulterated with sand and chalk. Sarphati's aim was to improve the quality of the bread and lower its price by means of factory production.

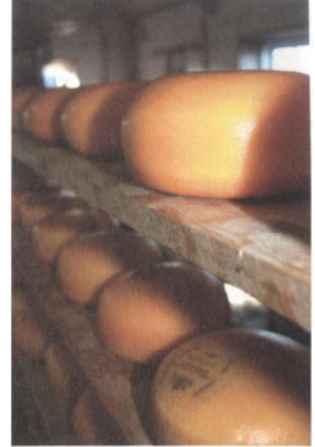
There were other basic items whose production moved from the household and the small producer to the factory. Some were completely new – margarine, for instance, the first 100% industrially manufactured article, which would replace butter, and especially lard, after 1871. Lard had to be rendered from fat in the kitchen (the traditional 'pot of lard') before it could be used. Margarine, or 'artificial butter', was half the price of real butter and originally consisted of a combination of skimmed milk and fats derived from offal. Two Dutch butter merchants from Oss in Brabant, Sam van den Bergh and the brothers Anton and Jan Jurgens, were the first margarine manufacturers. Margarine manufacturing, which at that time was still a by-product of the emerging meat industry, spread quickly during the last decades of the nineteenth century and in around 1930 would form part of the basis for the food giant Unilever.

Other new discoveries also made it possible to extract and process sugar from beet instead of sugar cane, flour and syrup from potatoes, powder and fats from cocoa and to produce other new luxury products such as jam, custard powder and chocolate products. In the second half of the nineteenth century the Netherlands built up a major food industry.³ Some of these products were initially exported, such as margarine and meat to England, but others were aimed directly at the emerging urban middle classes.

With industrialisation and urbanisation came the need for new sanitary facilities and other utilities in the new urban districts. This was not immediately apparent to the city councils, and it took several decades before all homes were hooked up to the local or provincial sewage, water, gas and, from the 1920s, electricity networks. Among well-to-do housewives at that time it was also considered modern (in connection with ideas about hygiene and the shortage of domestic help) to prepare meals on an electric cooker with four rings. Modernisation in food production was also reflected in the increasing amount of research, the growing knowledge about food and the desire to disseminate these new insights through education.

Cookery teachers: a typical Dutch taste?

By around 1890 Dutch workers did indeed enjoy a somewhat better and more varied diet than in earlier decades, but it was only then that the middle class became aware of a dietary problem among the working class. Morality played a greater role in this than taste. The middle classes were convinced that working men wasted their wages on drink, and that their wives had no notion of how to provide nutritious meals for their families. As a result, disease and debility were far from uncommon on the shop floor. It was the birth of the 'social question'. Living and working conditions were even made the subject of a Parliamentary



Dutch dairy:
Gouda cheeses.

Inquiry in 1887. The progressive journal *Sociaal Weekblad*, printed menus devised with consideration for nutritional value and cost, and these were served up in the *Volks- en Kinderkeuken* (the People's and Children's Kitchen). In this new philanthropic establishment, families could come to eat or collect their meals for 7 cents a portion. The dishes consisted of pea soup and marrow-fat beans several times a week, and stockfish with potatoes and vegetables once a week. The discussion in the journal had to do with the editors' decision to give pride of place in the working man's menu to the nutritious stockfish. A critical reader noted that stockfish only tasted good when served with butter (too expensive for the working class), but the editors stood firm. The reason 'most of our working-class population eats so poorly' had less to do with taste and expense than with 'habit and prejudice'. It was a matter of urgent necessity to improve the working man's lifestyle and educate him in self-control and orderliness. Eating habits were an important means to this end.

Various groups from the middle classes as well as factory owners, philanthropists, doctors and well-to-do ladies joined forces in the campaign to set up courses in cooking and housekeeping for the 'working-class woman and

Albert Heijn outlet,
Den Bosch, 1907.



her daughters'. The schools were duly established, but they never reached the target group. The first was the Hague Cooking School, later the posh Laan van Meerdervoort School of Domestic Science, started in 1888. In its early days young ladies from the moneyed middle class and their domestic servants profited from the lessons; working-class girls were not admitted until decades later. The most progressive training came from the New Amsterdam School of Domestic Science, with which famous teachers such as Martine Wittop Koning and, later, Riek Lotgering-Hillebrand were connected. The first cookery teachers acquired their practical knowledge of haute cuisine from (French) hotel cooks. In upper-middle-class circles, French cuisine was regarded as setting the standard. For simpler dishes they took field trips to comparable institu-

Innovations of the 1960s and 1970s: supermarkets and shopping trolleys.



tions in England and Germany. The theoretical basis for their recipes, however, came mainly from doctors and other experts in the field of nutrition and health.

The newly developed science of dietetics provided insights into what nutrients human beings needed to ingest each day in order to function well. Housewives at both ends of the social ladder, so the teachers believed, ought to apply this science of nutrition. For this reason they should serve nutritious, varied and economical meals instead of an exaggerated number of dishes or merely potatoes with fatty bacon or boiled *stamppot* (a traditional simple Dutch dish consisting of potatoes mashed with vegetables and sometimes meat). Ideally meals should consist of potatoes, vegetables and meat in varying combinations: nutritious, but simple. Traditional Dutch virtues such as moderation (neither too much nor too little), neatness and orderliness took on an entirely new meaning here. Tastiness, atmosphere and snug conviviality were also emphasised, but not always to the same extent. The teaching of domestic science also made its way into the countryside and thus attained national significance. According to Alan Davidson, the culinary historian who was awarded the Erasmus Prize in 2003, that significance was not terribly positive when measured by the criterion of taste, however. Davidson lays the blame for the underdeveloped Dutch culinary merits directly on the typical Dutch tradition of cookery teachers: *'The conservatism of the Dutch in their kitchens was instilled in the female population by means of the popular cooking schools, which were prominent in the first half of the twentieth century (...) The teachers developed a scientific approach in their courses, in which nutritional values were dominant and questions of palatability and pleasure were considered to be of secondary importance (...)'*⁴

Be that as it may, the teachers of domestic science produced a torrent of frequently reprinted basic cookery books and thus continued to be highly influential in the Dutch kitchen until at least 1960.⁵ In this way they made an important contribution to the modernisation and uniform composition of the Dutch meal. By as early as 1850 these changes had begun to occur in well-to-do middle-class circles, and over a century later they had penetrated to every level of so-



The breakthrough of the refrigerator in the 1960s.

ciety.⁶ Dutch families in every geographic region and all social strata ate three meals a day. Breakfast and lunch consisted simply of sandwiches with cheese, meat or a sweet spread (the popular *hagelslag*, or chocolate sprinkles, jam and peanut butter) washed down with coffee, tea or milk. The hot meal at that time normally consisted of potatoes, vegetables and meat, sometimes preceded by soup and (more often) followed by a sweet dessert of porridge or pudding. As in 1883, it was still not customary to serve any drink with the hot meal. But things can change, as the next section will show .

Eating out ... of the wall

Up until 1960 eating out was not a common custom in the Netherlands. There were eating establishments for business dinners and hotels for foreign and domestic guests. Well-to-do families would also often eat in a restaurant or have meals sent in, but the average family could not afford such luxury. Eating at home and home-cooked meals was the rule. In 1960, most Dutch people (85%) said they seldom or never ate in a restaurant, but two decades later that figure had dropped to only a quarter. A '*culinary breakthrough*' was what food writer Wina Born called this and other remarkable changes in the Dutch eating culture since the sixties.⁷ How could this happen? The national history of 'eating out' gives us part of the answer.

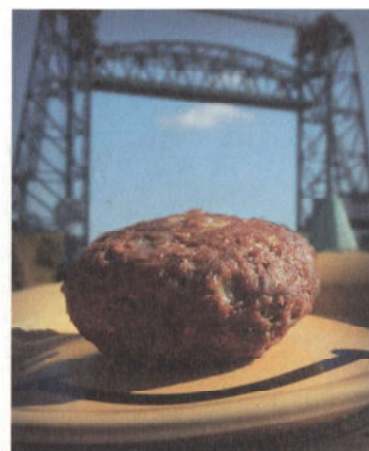
Going to restaurants for pleasure is one aspect of this many-sided phenomenon. Taken literally, eating out even includes the sandwich you make at home to eat in your lunch break, a Dutch custom that continued well into the eighties. It also includes street food: sweet and hearty snacks such as ice cream, herring, rissoles, *frikadels* (a kind of spicy frankfurter) and chips. Patisseries and butchers broke into this market early on and were the first to sell homemade sandwiches and true Dutch beef rissoles. Rissoles themselves were not unknown as lunch fare in bourgeois circles, but the time and place in which they were consumed were both new. After 1920 the downtown areas in the big cities



Eating out of the wall in the 1950s.

and improved public transport by rail and tram opened up new opportunities for small entrepreneurs in the dynamic catering and restaurant sector. The successful sandwich shops were joined by milk parlours, lunch rooms and later – after the crash of 1929 – by the more soberly furnished cafeterias. Some had nothing but standing room at high tables. These eating establishments in the city downtown areas developed alongside the established coffee houses. Here customers could buy and eat warm and cold snacks or order milk, soup, chocolate or coffee to accompany the sandwiches they brought with them. In short, the interbellum period produced a great variety of places where hurried travellers, office clerks and café, cinema or theatre-goers could eat quick, cheap and informal lunches or snacks.

In the thirties, a new arrival on the eating scene was the automat: little cubby-



holes in the wall with locked doors that were filled with salads, croquettes and meatballs by the staff on the cafeteria side and opened at the front by hungry visitors after inserting a coin. Between 1945 and 1960, eating out of the wall became increasingly popular, especially among young people when the consumption of chips made its way from the southern part of the country and became fashionable north of the great rivers as well. These and other hearty snacks were available at snack bars equipped with automats that were hugely popular until the end of the seventies. These were meeting places for young people, who hung out there and were known as 'nozems'. Rissoles, *frikadels* and other street food functioned as outside supplements to the three meals served at home. They were informal, cheap and filling, but they were not a gastronomic breakthrough.

The true Dutch rissoles sandwich

...and the equally true Dutch meatball

The Dutch go Chinese: globalisation and international cuisine

For many years the popularity of the typical Dutch automats and snack bars formed a barrier to the advance of fast food restaurants from the United States. Hamburgers and tempting snacks did not become really successful until after 1980, despite the speedy service and low price. Globalisation from the West was a long time coming. Oriental cuisine, on the other hand, had already been available for decades in simple, informal and cheap restaurants and had be-

Logo of *KunsthalCooking*, a 'Festival of Real Taste', held for the first time at the Rotterdam Kunsthal from 9 to 12 September 2004.



come very popular. Chinese, Indonesian and Chinese-Indonesian dishes such as nasi, bami, shrimp foo yung omelette, babi pangang and *rijsttafel* became increasingly familiar, partly as a result of the post-war decolonisation of the former Dutch East Indies and the spirit of enterprise among Chinese immigrants. Foreigners came to eat *rijsttafel* and even came to regard this attractive dish, with its numerous spicy side-dishes, as typically Dutch. The restaurants offered large portions for little money, giving customers the choice of eating the food there or letting them take it home – precisely the features that the Dutch valued so highly in their snack bars. Nasi balls, egg rolls and saté were delicious, and they very soon appeared in the automat cubby-holes.

But there more was to come when the sixties arrived. A cultural revolution took place, in which established living habits and power relationships went out of the window. The Dutch had more money in their pockets. They bought cars and went on trips to France, Spain, Italy, Greece and Yugoslavia. Migrants came from the same Mediterranean countries to make up the shortages in the overstretched job market. The newcomers brought their own eating habits with them. Both developments resulted in the sudden appearance in ordinary supermarkets of foreign ingredients for experimental cookery and in the opening of a whole range of simple foreign restaurants. A great many Dutch people gradually began eating at such places. The period between 1960 and 1990 was one of vast changes in Dutch eating habits, both inside and outside the home. The food industry also took advantage of the demand for convenience, luxury and variety. International cuisine had conquered the Netherlands, but without the disappearance of pea soup and *stampot* with kale (also now available in packets or tins). Changing trends were in, with something for everyone – and all available and accessible. The contrasts between social groups from days gone by had given way to small variations.

The development of a gastronomic sector

In the meantime there had been a sharp increase in interest in cooking and eating as an art form, and as the mark of a joyous and hospitable lifestyle. This manifested itself in many ways in the media. Cookery books, culinary magazines, recipes featured in daily newspapers and television chefs showed how healthy, low-calorie, fresh and more refined cooking and eating could be. Wine-drinking became widespread and commonplace. This custom had never been so popular before, something that supermarket giant Albert Heijn had a hand in with its special offers and in-house magazine *Allerhande*. A new culinary discourse emerged, which included the establishment of the Alliance Gastronomique Néerlandaise in 1967. The aim of this organisation was to promote an exclusive culinary culture in the Netherlands by putting the emphasis on taste and quality, offering cookery lessons, cookery contests and prizes and encouraging the professionalisation of chefs and other restaurant staff. From then on, more organisations and persons came to demand a place in the 'gastronomic sector', and there were more openings for exclusive restaurants. A consensus developed concerning quality criteria, evaluative bodies and the determination to overcome the Netherlands' poor position in the international world of top restaurants. Finally there came recognition in the form of the three Michelin stars with which this article began.



Not all social distinctions have faded. Wealthy diners in around the year 2000 can satisfy their appetites in Dutch restaurants, too, with a bit of refined cooking. The 'typically Dutch' quality of meals and manners has disappeared from the ambiance, however, as it has in almost every other facet of life. To find that, a present-day Ortigão would probably have to visit the Febo automat in Amsterdam's Kalverstraat. ■

NOTES

1. Ramalho Ortigão, *Holland 1883*. Utrecht: Spectrum, 1964, p. 37.
2. Partly based on: Anneke H. van Otterloo, *Eten en eetlust in Nederland 1840-1990. Een historisch-sociologische studie*. Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 1990.
3. Harry W. Lintsen (ed.), *Techniek in Nederland. De wording van een moderne samenleving 1800-1890*, vol. I.: Zutphen: SHT/Walburgers 1992; Johan W. Schot et al. (ed.), *Techniek in Nederland in de twintigste eeuw*, vol. III. Zutphen: SHT/ Walburgers 2000.
4. Alan Davidson, *The Oxford Companion to Food*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 264.
5. *Recepten van de Huishoudschool Laan van Meerdervoort (het Haagse Kookboek)* and *Het Kookboek van de Amsterdamse Huishoudschool (het Wannéekookboek)* were still being reprinted throughout the twentieth century. Martine Wittop Koning's *Eenvoudige berekende recepten* went through a considerable number of reprints between 1901 and 1951.
6. Jozien Jobse-van Putten, *Eenvoudig, maar voedzaam. Cultuurgeschiedenis van de dagelijkse maaltijd in Nederland*. Nijmegen: Sun, 1995.
7. Wina Born, *Culinaire herinneringen*. Utrecht: Het Spectrum, 1999, p. 62.