

[Japan Society-New York: Documents Project. (1890-1930, Daily Life)]

[Document 51]: “Their cheeks and thighs were as plump and oily as the pig’s flesh.”

Tanizaki Jun’ichirō’s short story, “The Gourmet Club,” written in 1919.

I daresay the members of the Gourmet Club loved the pleasures of the table not a whit less than they loved those of the bedroom. . . . It was their conviction that “if there were genius in the arts, then of course there must be genius in cookery as well.” For in their view, cooking *was* an art, capable of yielding artistic effects that—as least so far as they were concerned—put poetry, music, and painting in the shade. Not only after a splendid meal, but even at the moment they all gathered around a table piled high with delicious things, they felt the same kind of excitement, the same rapture one does on hearing the finest orchestral music. It took them to such giddy heights that it seemed only natural they should think that these epicurean pleasures were as much of the spirit as of the flesh. But the devil, it seems, is as powerful as God, for when any of the sensual pleasures (and not only those of the table) are taken to their furthest point, there is a danger of losing oneself entirely in them. . . .

Thus, as a result of their gormandizing, each and every one of them was afflicted year-round with a large pot-belly. And it was not only their bellies, of course: their bodies brimmed with excess fat; their cheeks and thighs were as plump and oily as the pig’s flesh used in making pork belly cooked in soy sauce. Three of them were diabetics, and almost all of the club members suffered from gastric dilatation. Some had come close to dying from appendicitis. Still, in part from petty vanity and partly out of strict fidelity to the epicureanism to which they were so devoted, none of them was worried about illness. Of, if perhaps one of them did feel some inward fear, nobody was so craven as to quit the club on that account.



“We’ll all be dead of stomach cancer one of these days,” they used to tell each other, laughing. They were rather like ducks that are kept in darkness and stuffed with rich food so that their flesh will become tender and succulent. The point at which their bellies became absolutely crammed with food would presumably be when their lives came to an end. Until then, they would live on, never knowing when to stop eating, with belches continually erupting from their heavy-laden stomachs.

There were only five members of this society of eccentrics. Whenever they were free—and since they were unemployed, this meant virtually every day—they would gather at someone’s house or on the second floor of some club and spend their afternoons mostly in gambling. . . . Then, when night came, the money they’d won would be pooled and used to finance that evening’s feast. Sometimes it would be held at a member’s house and sometimes at a restaurant in town. . . . “What’ll we eat tonight?” was their sole matter of concern from the moment they opened their eyes in the morning. And even as they gambled away the afternoon, they were thinking about the evening’s menu. . . .

They were the sort who’d worry more about satisfying their stomachs than about a gravely ill parent. . . . They scoured all the eateries of Tokyo, hoping to impress their fellow members by discovering some wondrous new flavor. They were like curio collectors rummaging about in dubious secondhand shops on the off chance of making an unusual find. One of them tried some bean-jam cakes at a night stall somewhere on the Ginza and, proclaiming them the most delicious item to be found in present-day Tokyo, displayed his discovery to the other members with the greatest pride. Another bragged that a vendor who came every night around midnight to the geisha-house area in Karasumori sold the best Chinese dumplings in the world.



Source: Tanizaki Junichirō. *The Gourmet Club: A Sextet*. Trans. Paul McCarthy. Tokyo: Kodansha International, 2003, 99-102.

Context.

If poverty stalked Japan's villages in the 1910s and 1920s, affluence spread in the cities, creating a middle (and upper) class that engaged in conspicuous consumption. One expression of consumerist values could be seen in the street-side cafés of Osaka, Kyoto, and Tokyo, or at the move houses and dance floors where young women displayed the latest fashions while young men held their hands and smoked stylish cigarettes. Tanizaki Jun'ichirō captured the spirit of this age in a series of popular novels and short stories that described the lives of the hedonists and the wealth-seekers, sometimes quite wittily. In his hilarious "Gourmet Club," he shows hedonism taken to an extreme, with a group of idle men who know no pleasure greater than eating the most tasty—and most unusual—foods. Dishes they consumed in one 4-day stretch included "pigeon-egg hot springs; phlegm-and-spittle liquid jade; snowy pears, petals and peel; braised lips; butterfly broth; and velvet carpet soup." It was practices such as these that made Taishō Japan (1912-26) a paradise for pleasure-seekers and a bane for traditionalists.

Questions.

1. What does it say about the Japanese sense of cuisine, and of aesthetics more generally, that a short story such as this would have been popular in the Taishō period?
2. What about the attitudes of Gourmet Clubbers, and of the pleasure lovers they represented, might have made government officials and traditionalists desire more strict laws and regulations?



Terms.

Epicureanism. The philosopher Epicurus said pleasure was life's highest good. But while he advocated simplicity as the source of pleasure, the term often is used to describe all pursuits of pleasure, including hedonism and extravagant excess.

Bean jam cakes, Chinese dumplings. Favorite snacks and meal supplements, the cakes were yeasty buns filled with sweet bean jam; the most common Chinese dumplings were *gyōza* (*jiaozi* in Chinese) or half-moon shaped crusts, steamed or fried, and filled with meat and vegetables.

Karasumori. Tanizaki likely was referring to the shrine area near today's Shinbashi train station in central Tokyo, where the Karasumori Shrine has held one of the city's important festivals every May for generations.