

## À la Zoug-Zoug: The Marvelously Askew Life of Alexis Soyer, the Chef who Invented Soup Kitchens

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For nearly 200 years, London's Reform Club has been a bastion of power, privilege, and liberal politics.



Among its most famous members were J. M. Barrie, Henri Cartier Bresson, Winston Churchill, E. M. Forster, Henry James, Lord Palmerston, Andrew Carnegie, William Makepeace Thackeray, and H. G. Wells. These men—and it was an all-male club until 1981—gathered to enjoy their newspapers, tea, lamb chops, brandies, cigars and, doubtless, quite a bit of gossip, in a building of palatial splendor, designed by Sir Charles Barry who was a “starchitect” of the Victorian era.

In the spring of 2014, I spent a fascinating morning at The Reform Club, being shown about by Simon Blundell, who is librarian and resident historian there. After looking over an extensive library of 85,000 volumes (including a complete set of the Hansard books of parliamentary debate, dating back to 1780), and admiring several dining rooms, a billiards room, card room, and vast wine cellar, Blundell ended his tour by escorting me to the “Strangers” room.

An appropriate choice as, in the 19th century, when a member entertained a visitor like me, they weren't allowed into any room in the club but this one. And here, hanging between tall windows facing out onto Pall Mall, was the thing I'd most come to see: a painting of a Frenchman named Alexis Soyer, who was *chef de cuisine* when this building opened in 1841.

In this portrait, which was painted by his wife, Elizabeth Emma Jones, Soyer wears a luxurious brocade dressing gown, a silk scarf, and his sartorial signature: a red velvet beret tilted at a jaunty

angle. He sits before a small dining table, a glass of red wine at the ready, about to begin eating one of his most famous dishes—*Poulet à la Soyer*, or chicken laced with truffles. Soyer holds up a drumstick with one hand, and points at it with the other, quite as if he can't believe his good luck to be enjoying such a delectable dish. Smiling merrily, he appears a dining companion with whom you'd share a most memorable meal.

“Alexis Soyer was flamboyant,” Blundell said after we'd both looked at the painting. “You don't dress like that if you are, well, retiring.”

(In the weeks before my visit, when reading about Soyer, I'd been pronouncing his name as SOY-ur. Blundell, mindful of the chef's French origin, more correctly spoke it as Swah-YAY.)

I suggested to Blundell my hopeful fantasy that something of Soyer's famous kitchen at The Reform Club, one of the most-publicized wonders of 19th century England, might still remain intact.

“Oh no,” he replied. “It's been bashed about over the years. Really, all that remains of Soyer is this painting. There's the history, too, of course.”

What a history it is!

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Alexis Soyer was, most culinary experts agree, the greatest chef in the world in the 19th century. He was also an excellent singer and mimic, a famously witty raconteur, a tirelessly prolific inventor of labor-saving devices for the kitchen, and a shameless self-promoter. Soyer's aggressive efforts to turn himself into a “brand,” set the template for our own pantheon of cooking stars such as Martha Stewart, Rachel Ray, Emeril Lagasse, and Bobby Flay. Nearly everything they've done, Alexis Soyer did first, and probably better.

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Finally, what fascinates me about Soyer is that he was a gastrophilanthropist without peer, and essentially invented the idea of a soup kitchen. When the great potato famine of 1847 struck Ireland, he set off for Dublin, and fed his recipe for “famine soup” to many thousands of starving peasants each day. Years later, he would bring his groundbreaking ideas about what he called charitable cookery to soldiers fighting in the Crimean war, where Soyer served alongside Florence Nightingale.

When Alexis Soyer died, this is what Nightingale said. “His death is a great disaster. Others have studied cooking for the purpose of gourmandizing, that is of greed, and others for show, but none but he for the purpose of cooking large quantities of food in the most nutritious manner for large numbers of men. He has no successor.”

Who was this man? My visit to The Reform Club whet my appetite, but there was a lot more to learn. So, I ordered up a full meal of biographies and books about Soyer, and began to slowly devour them.

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Alexis Benoist Soyer was born in rue Cornillion, Meaux-en-Brie on February 4, 1810. If the final part of this town’s name looks familiar, it’s because Soyer’s hometown was also the birthplace of brie, what is undoubtedly France’s most famous type of cheese. Soyer was the third, and youngest, son of Emery Roch Alexis Soyer and Marie Madeleine Francoise Chamberlan, who together ran a small grocery store.

### **Soyer’s sous chefs were soon devoted to him, as countless others would be for the rest of his life.**

While still a small child, Soyer showed a natural gift for music; he had a strong, clear singing voice, and a good ear for melody. Because his uncle was Grand Vicar of the local cathedral school, when he was only nine years old, Soyer was sent here to train as a chorister. Bored by the discipline, and endless practice drills, at the precocious age of 12, Soyer decided to leave home and join his brother Philippe, who was a chef in Paris. Quite by accident,

then, he fell into a culinary career, and worked for the next four years at Chez Grignon, a venerable restaurant with twenty different dining rooms.

Soyer proved himself to be a quick study. Soon, he was a sufficiently accomplished cook to have a dozen chefs working under him at Douix, another well-known Parisian dining spot. Most of these men were older than he, and no doubt found it irritating to be ordered about by a 17-year-old. Yet, his charm and good-natured personality eventually won them over. Soyer’s *sous chefs* were soon devoted to him, as countless others would be for the rest of his life.

In his free time, he frequented the Theatre des Varieties, often seeing the same show many times. Soyer studied the actors’ and singers’ performances with hopes of one day appearing on stage himself. He would delight his friends and co-workers by spontaneously bursting forth with songs, or doing impersonations of famous comedians of the day. Though Philippe eventually persuaded his younger brother to abandon dreams of a life in the theater, Soyer never lost his enthusiasm for attracting attention to himself. He began dressing in elaborate costumes of his own design, and arranged impromptu concerts, as well as “sing-a-longs” at the most curious times and locales. Soyer’s true genius for creating headlines lay ahead, however, in England, to which he set off in 1831, again to join forces with Philippe, who was by then a personal chef to Adolphus Guelph, The Duke of Cambridge.

Soyer could not have picked a more auspicious time or place to move than London in the 1830’s. Following the Napoleonic Wars, Britain was at the onset of its imperial century, a period of relative peace in Europe and around the world which became known as the Pax Britannica. With its victory over France, Britain now had no real international rival, and its Royal Navy proudly ruled the globe’s main maritime routes. Due to its “superpower” status, between 1815 and 1914, Britain annexed nearly ten million square miles of territory, and brought nearly 400 million people under its rule.

While British naval officers and merchants flexed their muscles around the world, back home these efforts created unimaginable

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wealth. This was largely spent on the construction of private castles and mansions, the likes of which had never been seen before. As lavishly-appointed homes required hospitality on a similarly grand scale, competition was keen among Britain's aristocracy to retain the services of talented kitchen staff. In particular, no fashionable home was complete without its having a French *chef de cuisine*. A cook at the top of his game could ask for, and receive, not only a fantastic salary, but perks such as seeing his name printed on the menu.

Not short of ambition, or ego, Alexis Soyer found London very much to his taste. After only a short time working alongside his brother at The Duke of Cambridge's, Soyer ventured off on his own to cook at several other stately homes, eventually landing a post at Aston Hall, a vast Georgian mansion set in a landscaped park in Shropshire. Accessible only by stagecoach, Aston Hall was regal, but rural, too. Society was limited, and newcomers were the source of keen interest. Soyer—cheerful, charming, and gregarious—was soon renowned, not only for his adorable French accent and delightfully risqué stories, but his generosity of spirit. Then, as now, most chefs jealously guarded their recipes and tricks of the trade; Soyer, however, was always willing to explain how to prepare one of his dishes. Soon, the neighboring estates were collecting his recipes, or begging to “borrow” Soyer for an evening to cook for one of their dinner parties. Soyer quickly began to develop an excellent reputation among the most powerful men and women in Britain.

While the term “gentleman's club” currently has a tawdry connotation of half-naked women stomping about in high-heels, affluent men in mid-19th century England gathered in their private establishments to wine and dine, negotiate business, and hatch plots against, or on behalf of, those political leaders they either favored or despised.

A new crop of such gentleman's clubs was established in London as a result of the Great Reform Act of 1832, a much-needed political reform intended to correct abuses in the election of

MPs, or members of Parliament. Prior to this act, there was no consistency of criteria for what qualified as an election borough, or who was able to represent it in Parliament. Often enough, MPs were simply hand-picked by a wealthy patron. The Great Reform Act of 1832 was intended to end such cronyism by greatly increasing the number of districts which would be represented in Parliament, as well as nearly doubling the number of citizens who could vote. This watershed moment is now seen as the birth of truly representative democracy in Britain.

### Inspired by the Farnese Palace...Sir Barry designed what is widely recognized as a masterpiece of Italianate architecture.

The Reform Club was not only named in honor of the 1832 legislation, but founded as a very symbol of Liberalism. Think of such gatherings as the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, or the Aspen Ideas Festival convened each year by Charlie Rose, and you have an idea of the sort of bullish optimism that attracted people to The Reform. Membership was relatively egalitarian, and welcomed individuals who came from a broader range of social and even religious backgrounds than was typical for clubs in London at this time. Not surprisingly, The Reform's democratic attitude soon made it popular with Americans who wanted a “home away from home.”

“Around the time The Reform Club was built, many of the men's clubs like it were devoted to gaming,” Blundell said, using a slightly archaic term for gambling. The Reform was not like this, he assured me. “It was a more serious-minded place.”

A popular one, too. In fact, the club found itself almost immediately oversubscribed. Membership quickly reached one thousand, among which were nearly 250 MPs. Needing more space and grander facilities for such large enrollment, a committee set about commissioning a new clubhouse, eventually selecting Sir Charles Barry to draw up the architectural plans. Inspired by the Farnese Palace, one of his favorite buildings in Rome, Sir Barry designed what is widely recognized as a masterpiece of Italianate architecture.

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By this point in our visit together, Simon Blundell and I were standing in the club's atrium, where an upper balcony, or loggia, surrounds a large square entry hall on the ground floor. It was Sir Barry's intent that this courtyard be left open to the sky, as it is at the Farnese. "This might have worked in sunny Rome, but certainly not in London," Blundell observed. Club members demanded Sir Barry enclose the courtyard, or "saloon" as its called, with a steel and wrought-iron skylight.

When the building was complete, The Reform's development committee probably felt the problem of overcrowding was now solved. However, they'd not reckoned on the immense popularity of their executive chef. It soon became obvious the most famous aspect of The Reform Club was not any of the Neo-Classical flourishes of Sir Charles Barry, but a basement kitchen master-minded by Alexis Soyer.

When he accepted his new job at The Reform, Soyer was all of 27 years old—noteworthy young for a post of such visibility and responsibility. He was also recently married to Elizabeth Emma Jones who, like her husband, was someone who'd known great acclaim at an early age. (Jones first exhibited her paintings at the Royal Academy at age ten.)

### All the various tasks...were arranged like members of a symphony orchestra within easy view of their conductor, Alexis Soyer.

Soyer threw himself into his work, and soon enough was cooking five meals a day, totaling hundreds, even thousands, of breakfasts, coffees, lunches, teas, dinners, and after-theater suppers for Reform Club members. On the morning of Queen Victoria's coronation in 1838, Soyer had his first experience of mass cookery, when he made enough breakfast for 2,000 guests of the club who were in London to witness the young monarch's ascension. What allowed this nearly fantastic output of food was Soyer's altogether new degree of organization.

Working alongside Sir Barry while construction was underway, Soyer was given free rein to design the culinary space as he saw fit. His custom-built kitchen at The Reform Club was a marvel of ergonomics and cooking technology. Airy, spacious, and well-lit, it allowed for no confusion, shouting, or drama. Elevating the French ideal of *mise-en-place* (or "putting in place") to previously-unknown heights, every type of meat, fish, poultry, fruit and vegetable had its ordained spot. There were cellars within cellars, and separate rooms for ale, wine, knives, and plates. All the various tasks—deboning, filleting, chopping, boiling, and baking—were arranged like members of a symphony orchestra within easy view of their conductor, Alexis Soyer, who sat in the middle of the kitchen, with a wooden spoon in his hand instead of a baton.

A massive boiler generated enough steam power to turn rotisserie spits and ventilating fans, operate dumb waiters, and heat the bain-maries. Marble slabs for the cleaning and filleting of fish were bathed with a shower of iced water to keep the seafood fresh. Roasting ovens—formerly a kind of bonfire, where chefs would be nearly singed as they cooked a joint—now had shields to redirect the heat into warming ovens. There were different types of stoves for stewing, steaming and broiling, and—for the first time—gas cooktops.

The invention of coal-extracted gas was initially brought to London's Pall Mall in 1807, where it was primarily used for street lighting. It was Soyer's innovation to deploy gas as a clean and quickly adjustable source of heat for stovetop cookery such as sautéing and frying. Cooking with gas, as any chef even today will agree, was nothing short of a culinary revolution.

Other innovations abounded, all sprung from Soyer's boundless imagination. There were timed cooking clocks, plate warmers, knife-sharpening machines, and a special set of dishes with a double bottom containing silver sand which, heated beforehand, kept food warm until it was served. Cooled rooms, or larders, had weighted doors which were set at an imperceptible angle; a chef could exit, arms loaded, without pausing, as the door

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would close itself. Even pillars holding up the vast ceilings were outfitted to be useful, as whirling racks of spices and condiments were affixed to them. So clean and orderly was Soyer's kitchen, he turned part of it over to a gallery space, in which he proudly displayed oil paintings done by his beloved Emma.

It's a little hard to imagine a kitchen would create such a sensation, yet curiosity was sufficiently strong that, in one year alone, more than fifteen thousand visitors queued up for a chance to gawk at this new spectacle at The Reform Club. For those who couldn't make it to London, or wanted a souvenir from their visit, a large, four-color poster was designed and printed. This sold many thousands of copies, including to notable customers such as the Baron of Talleyrand and Giuseppe Verdi. For V.I.P.s like these, Soyer was always willing to give a private tour. Resplendent in a spotlessly-clean white apron, his signature red velvet cap cocked over one ear, Soyer guided nobility (and members of the press) about, as an endless stream of jokes and *bon-mots* flowed forth.

While pointing out a design feature, his spoon might dip into a pan or pot, and Soyer would offer his guest an *amuse-bouche*. Visitors would leave with their taste buds tingling. Doubtless, quite a few hastened to apply for membership, so they'd be able to savor more than this morsel of Soyer's cooking. Indeed, it became an embarrassingly open secret that nearly as many people joined for its cuisine, as for any progressive political principles the club represented. Like it or not—and many Reformers didn't—Soyer quickly became The Reform Club's unofficial mascot.

Ever-mindful of the power of publicity, Soyer further increased his visibility through the outlandish, some might say atrocious, manner in which he chose to dress. He spent many hours, and untold amounts of money having gloves made to the tightest possible fit; his boots were always polished to a mirror-like sheen. Partial to wearing jackets with voluminous lapels made of watered silk in unusual colors like lavender, Soyer insisted this same silk be used for stripes down the seams of his trousers, and on exaggeratedly deep cuffs. All of his attire was fashioned on what tailors call a "bias cut," in which fabric is rotated against its perpendicular grain, thereby giving garments an exaggerated

drape and swagger. This preference for things slightly askew, what Soyer termed "*à la zoug-zoug*," was even displayed on his personal calling card. It was diamond-shaped, and printed, *bien sûr*, on the bias.

One of The Reform's members, author William Makepeace Thackeray, was amused enough by Soyer's affectations to create a thinly-veiled caricature of him as a French cook named Alcide Mirobolant in *Pendennis*, Thackeray's novel of 1850. (In French, *mirobolant* means "fabulous"). Soyer was obviously in on the joke, as he remained dear friends with Thackeray, even after he'd been publicly lampooned by him.

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Of course, nowhere was Soyer's flamboyance more evident than in what he created in his kitchen. Consider this recipe for ortolans, the eating of which for many centuries has been a rite of passage for a French gourmet.

A tiny songbird, the ortolan weighs barely an ounce, and fits easily into the palm of a hand. Ortolans are captured alive with nets, then force-fed by being placed inside an enclosed box with millet where, as a reaction to darkness, they proceed to eat continuously. Once an ortolan acquires the desired degree of plumpness, the bird is plunged into a vat of Armagnac, France's most beloved variety of brandy, where it drowns and is marinated at the same time. Roasted, an ortolan is eaten whole—bones and all. In Soyer's version, an already decadent dish was taken a few steps further. For one dinner, he obtained twelve of the finest and largest truffles he could find. Since the bird was too small to stuff, Soyer did it the other way around, burying the bird inside the truffle. Ortolan-in-the-coffin is what he called this macabre delicacy.

He also was fond of culinary *trompe l'oeil*. For instance, in fashionable dining at this time, the second course of a meal was often a joint of meat—sometimes beef, more often mutton—presented

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to diners whole, and carved table side. Soyer would occasionally fool his patrons by making *faux* joints out of sponge cake. They were cunningly shaped and iced to look like the real thing, but filled with fruits and ice cream, and surrounded by mock vegetables such as green currants for peas, and peeled apples in place of potatoes. “These dishes,” Soyer wrote, “have often caused the greatest hilarity at table.”

Simultaneously to creating such over-the-top recipes, however, Soyer also championed dishes which seem strikingly Spartan, not to mention more in line with our 21st century idea of what’s healthiest to eat. He was an early advocate of leafy greens and vegetables at a time when “meat and potatoes” was considered a well-rounded meal. Soyer was forever urging his Reform Club members to eat salads of green beans with lentils; or onions pickled with beet root; or celery, scallions, and radishes lightly drizzled with a simple mustard vinaigrette.

### He may have cultivated his taste for fine clothes, and box seats at the theater, yet he never forgot what it was like to be poor child back in France.

A mixture of high and low came naturally to Soyer. He was equally comfortable holding court upstairs with The Reform’s aristocratic clientele, as he was joking with his kitchen staff in the basement. He may have cultivated his taste for fine clothes, and box seats at the theater (he could well afford such indulgences, as with the sale of his cookbooks, posters, various sauces and condiments sold under his name, and salary from The Reform Club, he was making 1,000 pounds a year, when even the most in-demand chefs in London were content to collect 200 annually), yet he never forgot what it was like to be poor child back in France. Soyer preferred to live, as one wag put it, at the point where vermin meets ermine.

Extreme luxury and wretched poverty came to a particularly pointed juxtaposition in the winter of 1846-7. Soyer had just pulled off the most exorbitant meal of his career—a fantastically complex, multi-course banquet at The Reform Club in honor of Ibrahim Pasha, a swashbuckling Egyptian prince, that concluded

with dessert in the form of a three-foot-tall meringue cake shaped like a pyramid. Had he a mind to, Soyer could undoubtedly have topped even this menu, but why? Instead, Soyer swung his inner pendulum far in the opposite direction, setting himself the task to research the living conditions of London’s poorest citizens and what they were eating.

Horried by the living conditions he found in the city’s slums, Soyer began firing off outraged letters to the editorial boards of various newspapers. “We found in many of the houses, five or six in a small room, entirely deprived of the common necessities of life—no food, no fire, and hardly any garment to cover their persons, and that during the late severe frost,” he wrote in one letter. In another, Soyer described a mother and her children starving, having “not tasted a bit of food for twenty-four hours, the last of which consisted of apples partly decayed, and bits of bread given to her husband.”

While Soyer understood lack of money was the main problem, he also believed such poor fare resulted from ignorance, specifically lack of knowledge about proper nutrition and general rules of cookery. He’d already published two cookbooks aimed at the middle class reader—*Delassements Culinaires* in 1845, and *The Gastronomic Regenerator* in 1846. It was quite a departure then, for him to release his next book, in 1847, entitled *Soyers Charitable Cookery: or, The Poor Man’s Regenerator*. In this, he set out to offer faster, cheaper and more nutritious recipes for the “poor and laboring classes.”

What’s striking about these “poor man’s” recipes is they utilize culinary techniques—such as browning meat before putting it into a soup or stew—normally associated with more refined fare. “Twenty years’ experience and practice in the culinary arts has taught me that it requires more science to produce a good dish, at trifling expense, than a superior one with unlimited means,” Soyer explained.

Not content to devise new recipes, Soyer set out to design yet another radically new type of kitchen. For all the contraptions Soyer invented at The Reform, his most revolutionary

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ideas utilized new ways of manipulating heat. While the club's ovens and cooktops were immovably massive, Soyer began to tinker with more portable versions on which he intended to prepare food for poor people living in impoverished districts of London. Donating proceeds from the sale of his cookbooks to finance this effort, he furthermore opened an exhibition space with pictures painted by Emma, his late wife, and called it Soyer's Philanthropic Gallery.

He set up his first "soup kitchen" in the neighborhood of Spitalfields in East London, where many of the residents were French Protestant (or Huguenot). Once a thriving location for the hand-weaving of silk, most of Spitalfields' workers were driven into poverty when cheap, machine-made silk flooded the market. On the first Saturday he cooked here, Soyer claimed to have prepared and served enough meat and pea soup in an hour and a half to feed 350 hungry children. So great was his enthusiasm—as well as, it must be surmised, his need for attention and admiration—Soyer insisted on serving his charity recipes to his fancy friends at The Reform.

This bold effort on behalf of an easily-overlooked group of people created a sensation. Could it truly be that the same man who'd kitted out the most famously lavish kitchen in all of Great Britain, was now feeding many hundreds of poor people each day? Imagine if a contemporary fashion designer like Ralph Lauren suddenly announced he'd come up with a new "haz mat" suit to be worn by doctors fighting infectious diseases. Worlds don't collide like this too often.

One of the nobility who was most impressed was the Duchess of Sutherland, for whom Soyer once worked. She was now doing volunteer work as a member of the Poor Relief Committee. After she'd tasted his soup, and toured his kitchen in Spitalfields, the Duchess approached Lord Bessborough, who was Lord Lieutenant of Ireland. The two of them asked The Reform Club to grant their *chef de cuisine* a leave of absence so Soyer could bring his amazing ideas about charitable cookery to Dublin where, in the summer of

1846, for the second year in a row, blight had destroyed the Irish potato crop.

Contrary to popular belief, this pestilence didn't only affect Ireland. It plagued all of Europe, where many poor people relied on eating potatoes when they weren't able to buy anything else. What was different about Ireland, however, was nearly all the country's citizens were so poor, they couldn't ever afford to eat anything but potatoes. When blight caused the sudden disappearance of their sole form of sustenance, hundreds of thousands of Irish people were starving, or already dead. Adding to this suffering, the winter of 1846-47 was one of unusual severity. No one could recall the last time snow piled this high, or temperatures fell so low.

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Never content to leave well enough alone, Soyer constantly revisited and revised his inventions. If in Spitalfields he'd managed to feed 350 in an hour and a half, could he not feed 1,000 in an hour in Dublin? With this ambitious goal in mind, Soyer focussed all his gifts for efficiency, and knowledge of the most scientific methods of cookery, on to plans for a new type of soup kitchen. In a very short time, he'd managed to sketch a design, and have it produced by the leading engineering firm of Bramah, Prestage & Ball. Off to Ireland Soyer went, prepared to cook what he now called "famine soup."

He chose to construct his kitchen directly in front of the Royal Barracks in Dublin. A temporary structure, 48 feet long and about 40 wide, its exterior was made of canvas supported by wooden boards. At the center, on wheels, was a steam-boiler large enough to make 300 gallons of soup at a time. This was surrounded by tables for *sous chefs* to cut the vegetables and meat which went into each new batch. Along the tent's perimeter were long tables, eighteen inches wide, their wooden tops perforated

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by large round holes. Into each, a white-enameled iron basin was placed, with a metal spoon attached to it by a chain. There were 100 of these bowls which, when filled, would each hold a quart of soup.

After gathering outside the tent, visitors moved forward through a series of switchbacking partitions (again, *à la zoug-zoug!*), until a bell rang, whereupon exactly 100 people would be let inside. Once seated, they were allotted precisely six minutes to eat their soup. Soyer insisted on this timing, as it allowed him to brag he'd succeeded in feeding 1,000 people an hour. Before exiting through a door at the tent's opposite end, each guest was given a quarter pound of bread, or a biscuit. Bowls were quickly swabbed clean and refilled, while another 100 people were let in.

### The longer he stayed in Ireland, Soyer saw more that shocked him.

Soyer planned to serve 5,000 rations a day, yet records show he often fed nearly twice that many. People lined up, many hundreds at a time, and waited for hour after hour, sometimes through the night. When the first bell rang each morning, there was tremendous commotion, and occasionally savage struggles would erupt, as people driven half-mad with hunger tried to cut into line.

His original goal was to get his kitchen up and running, and return to his job at The Reform in a matter of a couple of weeks. However, as frequently happens with pioneering efforts of great complexity, things took longer than Soyer imagined. The longer he stayed in Ireland, Soyer saw more that shocked him. He was aghast to learn many poor farmers would go fishing and then, instead of eating what they'd caught, would use the fish as fertilizer for their potato plants. That's because they knew perfectly well how to prepare potatoes, but had no idea how to cook seafood.

After spending seven weeks among the poor and destitute of Dublin, it must have been quite a shock to return to his pampered clientele at The Reform. In his absence, Soyer was surprised to learn, the club decided to open its dining room to non-members

on a daily basis, instead of twice a week, which meant more work for Soyer. "The club will become a mere restaurant," he sniffed.

He wasn't happy about other things, too. Despite his remarkable talent and international fame, Soyer knew he was still regarded as a lowly servant by many in the club. It's not altogether surprising, then, he began to develop something of a bad attitude. While his antics and droll sense of humor continued to delight many members, others found him impertinent, and even insolent. In 1850, Soyer wrote his letter of resignation from The Reform Club, and it was accepted.

Never one to weep over spilt milk, he spent the next few years toying with other inventions and products. There were bottled mustards, chutneys, and cooking sauces to launch. Long before anyone had heard of "soft drinks," Soyer created and marketed a beverage made of fruits, such as raspberry, quince, or apple, mixed with aerated water. He called it Soyer's Nectar Soda Water. He created a device for hiding money in the heels of his dress boots, and an inflatable suit that could prevent drowning.

Of these, and many more schemes, by far Soyer's most lucrative idea was what he called a "Magic Stove." Once again, he astonished the culinary world with an early prototype of a camp stove, which could be easily assembled and used on any flat surface. Especially for a time in which everything was big, heavy, and over-engineered—think of the 19th century's enthusiasm for locomotive trains, or steamships—part of this stove's allure was it was so diminutive, it could be folded up and carried in one's pocket!

Soyer's "Magic Stove" debuted at the height of a Victorian vogue for dining *al fresco*. The chief amusement of such outdoor meals was the marked contrast between refinements of dining—silverware, crystal glasses, and linens—and a "wild" setting. Soon enough, a race was on to convene a picnic in the most unlikely setting possible. With his unquestioned mastery of publicity, Soyer managed to give a "Magic Stove" to The Marquis of Normanby, a peripatetic and highly eccentric figure, not unlike Phineas Fogg in Jules Verne's *Around the World in Eighty Days*. Normanby took his along on a trip to Egypt, where he had the audacity to cook

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a meal on top of the Pyramids at Giza—a fact Soyer wasn't shy about sharing with his friends in the press.

From 1851 to 1855, Soyer toured Great Britain, promoting his latest sauces, cookbooks, and the Magic Stove. Once again, though, as it had with the Irish Potato Famine, a grimmer reality intruded on Soyer's consciousness, when he became increasingly worried over the plight of British soldiers fighting in Crimea. (In March of 1854, France and Great Britain aligned themselves with Turkey which was already at war with Russia.)

While Vietnam is often cited as the first conflict to be broadcast on television, it was during the Crimean war, a century earlier, that newspaper accounts shocked the general public with excruciatingly gory details of warfare. Samuel Morse's invention of the telegraph a decade earlier had created a smaller, more interconnected world. Daily dispatches from the battlefield, many of them telegraphed by Lord William Russell, were printed in *The London Times*, and they exposed the deplorable conditions of military hospitals on the Crimean Peninsula. Russell revealed how a staggering number of British soldiers were not only succumbing to wounds inflicted by their enemy, but being poisoned by the poor quality of food they ate while supposedly recuperating.

After reading these reports, a then-unknown nurse named Florence Nightingale was the first to act: she recruited a task force of thirty-eight other nurses and set out for the barracks in Scutari, Turkey (which is part of modern-day Istanbul). What she found was so awful, she termed it “a calamity unparalleled in the history of calamity.” Soyer, who due to his time in Dublin considered himself an expert at culinary relief efforts, volunteered to travel to the Crimea at his own expense.

His former patron, the Duchess of Sutherland, again interceded on his behalf by writing letters of introduction. Helping matters, too, was that Lord Panmure, who'd recently become Secretary of State for War, was an acquaintance from The Reform Club. Panmure agreed Soyer should be granted complete autonomy over the British soldiers' diet.

Before his departure, he rejiggered his Magic Stove into “Soyer's Field Stove” (a version of which proved so effective, the British Army was still using it 120 years later, up until the Gulf War.) Soyer took this portable stove with him to Turkey in March of 1855. With Nightingale's blessing, he immediately commandeered all hospital kitchens, and instituted better ways of storing Army rations, improved cooking methods, and devised healthier recipes.

One of the first things Soyer altered was the how meat was distributed. Incredible though it may seem, prior to his arrival, weight was the only criteria considered in portion size; thus, one soldier might get a serving of filet, while another would dine on bone and gristle. Soyer immediately put a stop to this practice, insisting every man would receive an equal allotment of filleted meat, while bones were repurposed for soups and broths.

### For many decades, Soyer was forgotten by history.

Soyer spent over two years in Crimea, during which time Florence Nightingale and he had countless adventures while they toured the front lines, as well as hospitals and sanatoriums. Unfortunately, Soyer was much more mindful of the soldiers' health than he was his own. Eventually, he would suffer from typhoid, dysentery, fever, ulcers and certainly overwork. When he finally returned to Britain in 1857, Soyer was not a well man. Nonetheless, he managed to write a book about his Crimean experience, entitled *A Culinary Campaign: Being Historical Reminiscences of the Late War, with the Plain Art of Cookery for Military and Civil Institutions, the Army, Navy, Public, Etc., Etc.*

Alexis Soyer died the next year, on August 5, 1858, at the age of 48. His last few years of “charitable cookery” had left Soyer in debt. Creditors seized whatever of his assets they thought had value, and discarded the rest—including most of Soyer's correspondence and personal diaries. For many decades, Soyer was forgotten by history.

His life, though, is too colorful and, well, too tasty to remain untold. Since his death, Soyer has been the subject of several different biographies. Among them are *Relish: The Extraordinary*

## À la Zoug-Zoug: The Marvelously Askew Life of Alexis Soyer, the Chef who Invented Soup Kitchens

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*Life of Alexis Soyer* by Ruth Cowen; *The People's Chef* by Ruth Brandon; and *Portrait of a Chef* by Helen Morris.

At his old place of employ, The Reform Club, Soyer's memory lives on, too. Several of his recipes are still on the menu, quite unchanged since the mid-19th century, though the same can't be said of the chefs cooking them.

### Food is the great equalizer.

Towards the end of my visit, I spoke to Lauren Barrett, a young assistant chef, whose arms were covered with tattoos. Soyer's recipe for lamb cutlets, "Reform-style," are still extremely popular, she said. For the record, they're coated with plenty of bread crumbs, and drenched in a sauce in which floats chopped pieces of tongue, gherkins and hard-boiled egg.

Another perpetual favorite is Soyer's sherry trifle. "It's still the same old recipe, with just raspberries in it," Barrett said. "I'm not allowed to do anything else to it."

Eating such a rich dessert, I feel a trifle less guilty about my indulgence by telling myself I'm upholding the memory of Alexis Soyer, a great man who did a great many things for the poor.

On my way out of The Reform, I paused for one more look at his portrait in the Stranger's Dining Room. Soyer's welcoming facial expression seems to say, "Please, come join me! There's plenty to eat!"

Seeing his happy gaze, I decide Alexis Soyer is the Father of Gastrophilanthropy because he understood that every human being has two main worries: a fear of being hungry, and the dread of being alone.

Food is the great equalizer. After all, no one is a stranger once you've shared a meal with them.