

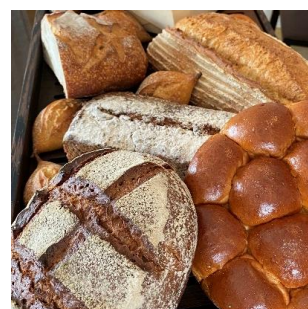
# Taste as an Historical Question: the Case of Bread

**Professor Steven Kaplan**

Cornell University

1 December 2022 at 15:00  
Auditorium I.O.03, Bâtiment I (« i »)

Vrije Universiteit Brussel  
Boulevard du Triomphe  
Ixelles



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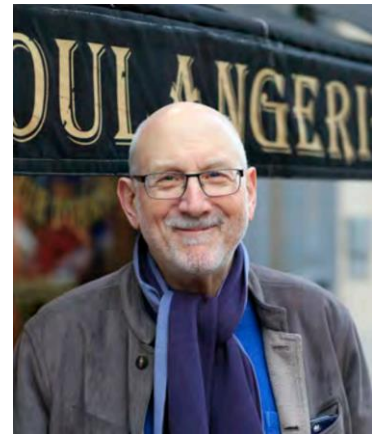
# Taste as an Historical Question: the Case of Bread

## Professor Steven Kaplan

**Abstract:** As a broad cultural category, touching a vast array of domains, including language and literature, music and art, architecture and design, fashion and entertainment, and so on, taste has been for centuries the object of state coercion and social domination as well as all manner of contestation and criticism, of politics and philosophy (a branch of which called aesthetics deals with matters of sense perception redolent of what bakers, among others, call organoleptics), and of intense and profuse scrutiny and debate among historians.

Far more elusive to historiographical treatment is taste construed in much narrower terms, the taste associated, to be sure, with the articulation of preferences, but above all with the actual experience of everyday eating, taste not confined to elites but dilated to a popular (or mass) gastronomy in which the elaboration of rules and usages of “good eating” is for many centuries subordinated to strategies for survival and in any case often constrained and rendered uncertain by social, ecological, market-ideological and technological factors, to wit, acute and widespread poverty; the vagaries of nature imperilling agricultural production and commercial supply chains; hoarding, price manipulation and other speculative, anti-social behaviour; and the evolution of artisanal craftsmanship in bread making.

By taking daily bread as the prism of inquiry, drawing concretely from examples in France and especially in Paris, from the 18th century onward, I will venture to apprehend—to get at—taste as a sensorial phenomenon, as a lived rather than prescribed experience, at the risk of imputing too much agency to consumers long before they were rashly crowned as kings. If you do not find taste to your taste in the rapid historical survey, I hope that the bread-tasting at the end will afford you some gastro-consolation. In both arenas, my grimly joyful mission is to challenge the familiar aphorism “De gustibus non est disputandum.”



Steven Kaplan

**Biography:** Steven Kaplan is professor emeritus and former Goldwin Smith Professor of European History in the Department of History at Cornell University. His primary fields of expertise are French history, the history of markets, economic regulation, and political economy, and the history of food, specifically the history of bread, the grain trade and provisioning. Kaplan has held numerous visiting professorships including at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel in 1995. Passionate about bread, Kaplan prepared for “CAP Boulangerie” and did an internship with Lionel Poilâne.

**Grand Prix de la Culture Gastronomique:** In his last book, “Pour le Pain,” Kaplan raises the alarm bell for bread. In a jubilant, learned and highly researched book, he offers, sometimes with humour, a tasty living lesson in history, a disturbing investigation, and a call to go back to the bakeries. Bread must, once again, become one of the pillars of the gastronomic culture, he argues.

Nominated by the [Royal Club of Gastronomes in Belgium](#) and the American Academy of Gastronomy, Kaplan received the “*Grand Prix de la Culture Gastronomique*” of the International Academy of Gastronomy in 2022.

**Bread tasting:** The presentation of Professor Kaplan will be followed by a bread tasting. Bread will be provided by the following bakers:

- Carine Tripnaux, [Le Pain en Soi](#), Maredret (Anhée)
- Dimitri Pierrot, [Boulangerie Hopla Geiss](#), Saint-Gilles
- Dominique Legrand, [Boulangerie Legrand](#), Namur
- Régis Recour, [Boulangerie Matinal](#), Ixelles
- Yorick Coomans, [Boulangerie Mazette](#), Bruxelles