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The Taste for Civilization: Food, Politics, and Civil Society

Janet A. Flammang

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This book explores the idea that table activities--the mealtime rituals of food preparation, serving, and dining--lay the foundation for a proper education on the value of civility, the importance of the common good, and what it means to be a good citizen. The arts of conversation and diplomatic speech are learned and practiced at tables, and a political history of food practices recasts thoughtfulness and generosity as virtues that enhance civil society and democracy. In our industrialized and profit-centered culture, however, foodwork is devalued and civility is eroding. Looking at the field of American civility, Janet A. Flammang addresses the gendered responsibilities for foodwork's civilizing functions and argues that any formulation of "civil society" must consider food practices and the household. To allow space for practicing civility, generosity, and thoughtfulness through everyday foodwork, Americans must challenge the norms of unbridled consumerism, work-life balance, and domesticity and caregiving. Connecting political theory with the quotidian activities of the dinner table, Flammang discusses practical ideas from the "delicious revolution" and Slow Food movement to illustrate how civic activities are linked to foodwork, and she points to farmers' markets and gardens in communities, schools, and jails as sites for strengthening civil society and degendering foodwork.

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