

Gourmet Magazine

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February 2005 Cover

Gourmet Magazine (1940 to 2009) was an American food magazine. More than that, one could argue it was the most prestigious food magazine ever yet produced.

It treated food as a part of culture. Though it carried recipes, it was not a recipe magazine. (It was not until 1965, 25 years after it had been printing recipes, that Gourmet even set up its own test kitchens.) Instead, it was more of an "aspirational life-style" magazine, known for its long, leisurely articles of which food might be the focus, or, it might be just a pretext for the article, which veered off in other directions. They sold a fantasy; they sold you what you might create in your life, if only for one brief moment in early summer's dappled sunlight or mid-autumn's moonbeams on the bay.

"Gourmet was and long has been the market leader. It may not always have sold the most – though it regularly shifted over a million copies – but it always was the glossiest, the shiniest, the most indulgent. Gourmet was a magazine people collected. It was a habit." -- Jay Rayer [1]

To many subscribers, Gourmet Magazine was above all a "good read", rather than something you propped up in the kitchen as an instructional recipe guide. Many felt that the best issues of Gourmet Magazine were always the summer ones, which would transport you by rapture to a sunny sidewalk cafe in Rome tossing crumbs to the little birds hopping by. The magazine was also often a work of art in itself, with its full page, glossy colour "food porn" pictures and on location food shots set around the world, drenched in early evening white-burgundy hued sunlight. Each month's cover would be eagerly anticipated. Gourmet took such pride in its covers that the subscriber and news stand covers were often different.

Gourmet Magazine was launched December 1940 [2], at a less than auspicious time. Even a decent glass of wine with dinner was a challenge, to say the least. Nascent American wineries had been killed off by Prohibition; European market access was difficult owing to World War Two which had begun one year before. Americans were wondering how much longer they would be able to stay out of that war, and the Great Depression hadn't yet fully relaxed its grip on the country.



September 1943 by Henry Stahlhut
Click to enlarge

Surprisingly, however, even though established "food" magazines of the time still worshipped at the altar of Home Economics, *Gourmet Magazine* was a success from the start, because it gave people an escape from the times.

The magazine was the idea of Earle R. MacAusland (1891-1980). He conceived the magazine in his mind in the late 1930s and began putting the pieces for it together. He approached a Boston artist Samuel Chamberlain who agreed to be an out-of-house resource. Chamberlain was useful because he could both illustrate, and write well. MacAusland also recruited a professional chef, Louis Pullig de Gouy (who died in 1947.) Pearl Metzeltin was the first editor-in-chief.

The first issue appeared in December 1940 (dated January 1941). MacAusland was 50 years old at the time. That first issue was a mere 48 pages, with an illustration of a roasted boar's head on its cover. The main piece was on the food and wine of Burgundy. In fact, the early years of the magazine would focus on French cooking as well as eastern American food.



August 1944 by Henry Stahlhut
[Click to enlarge](#)

In 1941, Clementine Paddleford came onboard as a regular contributor. The "You Asked for It" column of recipes requested by readers started in 1944. The magazine started running serial narrative articles that became popular with readers. The covers were often by Henry Stahlhut.

From 1945 to 1965, *Gourmet's* offices were in The Plaza hotel in New York.

When the chef de Gouy died in 1947, Louis Diat (1885-1957) of The Ritz-Carlton in New York became the in-house chef. Diat laid claim to having invented Vichyssoise.

James Beard (1903 - 1985) was an associate-editor editor in the late 1940s. He left after a falling out with Earle MacAusland in 1950.

From 1949 to 1951, the magazine surveyed French cooking region by region, but even while this massive exercise was being undertaken, other cuisines besides French had started to claim print space in the magazine. By the start of the 1950s, Italian cooking was no longer a stranger to the pages, and pasta no longer meant "macaroni."

In the 1950s, the magazine started to become well known for two things -- its romantic treatment of food, and overly-elaborate recipes that required ten kitchen helpers and ingredients no one could get in America. Also in the 1950s, the magazine began to tie food with travel, by anchoring food in its locale in minute detail, resonating with the number of Americans who had been to Europe during the war or who could now afford to get there at least once in a lifetime.



April 1952 / [Click to enlarge](#)

In the 1960s, the tie with travel became far stronger even, with lots of colour photographs and on-location shots. The travel pieces began covering what was happening now in other places, which represented a break from Gourmet's previous emphasis on seeing places to connect with a romantic and literary past. The 1960s was the dawn of the cheap airfare travel era; Gourmet provided its readers the knowledge to transform themselves from "tourists" into "travellers."

By the end of the 1960s, the magazine had collected a group of writers with specialist, even academic, expertise on certain topics, rather than the all-purpose writers it had relied on before. In 1969, James Beard returned to the magazine, despite his volatile temper.

In the 1970s, there was further emphasis on specialized items such as short-grain rice or fresh coriander, but at least those things were available in stores now.

Nouvelle cuisine pushed its way onto the pages, and Caroline Bates started her American west coast pieces for the Spécialités de la Maison column, focussing on what was happening food-wise in California -- a signal that New York was no longer the be-all and end-all for food.

In 1975, the magazine heralded the advent of food processors.

Earle MacAusland died in 1980. By this time, the magazine had decisively left its fascination with French food far, far behind. It started focussing on American regional cooking, and Italian food. Food by the 1980s had also become a political and nutritional issue for some, but Gourmet tried to rise above that. MacAusland's widow sold Gourmet in 1983 to Condé Nast, and Jane Montant became chief editor of the magazine.

By the end of the 1980s, Gourmet tried to catch up to life around them by offering simplified menus and shorter articles because while people liked to read about good food, even Gourmet readers had less time to spend at it. The magazine started to introduce recipes that could actually be made on week-day evenings -- though still, you had to plan to do nothing else that evening. One page travel pieces were introduced.



August 1969 / [Click to enlarge](#)



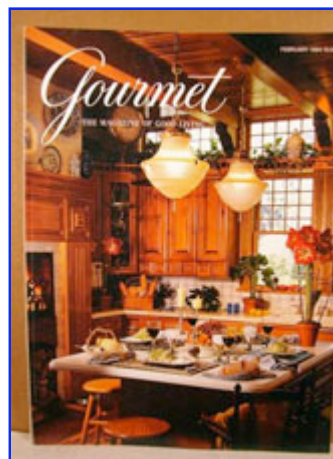
May 1976 / [Click to enlarge](#)



August 1985 / [Click to enlarge](#)

In 1991, Gourmet was doing well as a business. Advertising pages had increased, as had circulation [3]. In 1999, Ruth Reichl was appointed chief editor. She was the first ever from outside the magazine, having previously been a restaurant critic for the New York Times.

Loyal readers blamed the magazine's eventual demise on Reichl. Some embittered readers even said the magazine got what it deserved, as it had got too out of touch in every way. Some readers felt that the changes in the 2000s made the magazine too pedestrian, and run-of-the mill; that the magazine was actually educational up until the 2000s, after which it became more style than substance, and more about beautiful people than food. One of the final issues, in September 2009, had fashion models cooking in the Hamptons.



February 1994 / Click to enlarge

But in reality, the readers were still with Gourmet, despite the Reichl naysayers. In 2008, Gourmet had a circulation just shy of a million readers -- 980,000, but the decisive factor in its demise appears to have been advertising revenue. Ad pages had dropped 50% in 2009 from 2008. And the magazine wasn't looking good compared to its main competitor, Bon Appetit. In 2009, Bon Appetit had better numbers all round: 1.4 million circulation (vs Gourmet's 980,000), higher readership average income (\$83,563 US versus \$81,179 for Gourmet readers), and younger readers (49 years median age, versus 50.3 for Gourmet.) [7] And, to boot, that main competition, Bon Appetit, was also owned by Condé Nast -- so the company could lose one food magazine, and still have a premium one in its stable of publications.



July 2003 / Click to enlarge

"It was really an unconscionable act," says Caroline [Bates]. "There was no sense of history of this magazine." [5]

In the second half of 2009, the McKinsey & Co. consulting company helped Condé Nast (owned by S.I. Newhouse Jr at the time) identify which of its magazines to kill. The food magazine recommended to go was Gourmet, and that was that. The last issue was November 2009. It does not look like a last issue, because it was prepared the month before when Gourmet's employees had no idea that the sudden-death end was weeks away. The 2010 issues for January, February and March were already planned, even to the point that food was being photographed for them. [Clifford, Stephanie. Ruth Reichl Speaks About Closing of Gourmet. New York Times. 6 October 2009.]

The end was publicly announced on 5th October; the staff were given only a few days to pack and vacate the offices.

Some business analysts speculate that Condé Nast's plan is to move Gourmet's readers to Bon Appetit. Subscribers, unless they protested, became subscribers to Bon Appetit instead. It is unclear yet if this will work for the company. The two readerships often sneered at each other across dinner tables. Gourmet was more upscale than Bon Appetit, aimed at a highly-educated market, who wouldn't be caught dead holding a copy of "Bon Appetit" in their hands. Bon Appetit, while aimed at affluent people like Gourmet, is considered more "accessible" and has simple recipes with few intellectual or execution challenges to them. [5a]

In June 2010, Condé Nast announced that by the end of 2010, Gourmet Magazine would be revived for Apple Computer's iPad.

Gourmet Magazine Timeline

1940 - First Issue

1943 - Founder Earle R. MacAusland assumes chief editor position

1945 - Move into offices in Plaza Hotel, New York City

1965 - After twenty years, Gourmet Magazine leaves its offices in the Plaza Hotel for new quarters in Times Square, where it acquires its first ever test kitchen

1980 - MacAusland dies. Jane Montant becomes chief editor.

1983 - Chief in-house photographer Luis Lemus dies. He is replaced by Romulo Yanes.

1991 - Montant retires. Gail Zweigenthal becomes chief editor.

1999 - Zweigenthal. Ruth Reichl becomes chief editor, the first ever from outside Gourmet's ranks

2009 - Condé Nast kills Gourmet Magazine

Some notable people who worked or wrote for Gourmet Magazine

- Craig Claiborne (1920 - 2000) once worked there as a receptionist
- David Rosengarten (1950 -) was a popular reviewer, if only because readers read him to be infuriated by his attitudes
- David Foster Wallace (born 1962, committed suicide 12 September 2008) was commissioned to write a piece on the Maine Lobster Festival, but instead produced a controversial August 2004 dissertation, entitled "Consider the Lobster", about whether and how much pain lobsters feeling upon being dumped into the pot. [6]
- Jane (1946 -) and Michael (1947 -) Stern did series on road food in America
- Joseph Wechsberg (1907 - 1983) wrote for Gourmet for almost 40 years. He was the first person to write extensively on mineral-water in the magazine, in 1970.
- Laurie Colwin (1944 - 1992), the novelist, was loved by many for her warm approach to food
- Ray Bradbury (1920 -) began his novel "Dandelion Wine" as a piece for Gourmet Magazine in June 1953
- Robert P. Tristram (1892 - 1995) wrote articles on hunting and fishing in Maine

Editors in chief of Gourmet Magazine

- Pearl V. Mezelthin (1941–1943)
- Earle R. MacAusland (1943–1980)
- Jane Montant (1980–March 1991)
- Gail Zweigenthal (April 1991–March 1999)
- Ruth Reichl (March 1999– November 2009)

Jane Montant had started work at Gourmet in 1953, answering correspondence that came in from subscribers. [4]
Gail Zweigenthal had started at Gourmet in 1965.

Literature & Lore about Gourmet Magazine

"Whenever I get married I start buying Gourmet magazine." -- Nora Ephron

" Si Newhouse, Lord of all Condé Nast, has, it seems, this thing about garlic. So by personal Newhousian decree, there is to be no garlic used in the [Condé Nast] cafeteria. "We have garlic in our [Gourmet test] kitchens,"

announced Ms. Reichl, proudly seditious." -- Kifner, John. *A Passion for Food, Now Served Monthly*. New York Times. 2 February 2001.

"However stuporous the lobster is from the trip home, for instance, it tends to come alarmingly to life when placed in boiling water. If you're tilting it from a container into the steaming kettle, the lobster will sometimes try to cling to the container's sides or even to hook its claws over the kettle's rim like a person trying to keep from going over the edge of a roof. And worse is when the lobster's fully immersed. Even if you cover the kettle and turn away, you can usually hear the cover rattling and clanking as the lobster tries to push it off. Or the creature's claws scraping the sides of the kettle as it thrashes around. The lobster, in other words, behaves very much as you or I would behave if we were plunged into boiling water (with the obvious exception of screaming)." -- Wallace, David Foster. "Consider the Lobster" in *Gourmet Magazine*. August 2004.

"Working for *Gourmet* was like flying the Atlantic first class. It ruined you for other food magazines. It wasn't just the pay, which could be multiple dollars per word. It was also the awe inspiring heft of the operation: the way food photography events were organised like they were Hollywood movie shoots, complete with casting calls and on-site catering..." -- Jay Rayner [1]

"She [Ed: Caroline Bates] got the job. Started in 1941, the magazine was by the mid-1940s located in the penthouse of New York's Plaza Hotel. It also was the home of founder and Publisher Earle MacAusland - and his poodles and terriers. Two other editors shared the office with Caroline... Although there was a kitchen on the premises, all three editors tried out recipes at home. "We had a French chef in the kitchen for Mr. MacAusland, but we were warned not to go in there. A year or two before I got there, he had thrown a knife at someone." -- Henry, Bonnie. Critic for now-gone *Gourmet* magazine savors the memories. Tucson, Arizona: *Arizona Daily Star*. Monday, 28 December 2009.

Acknowledgements

[1] Rayner, Jay. *Gourmet Magazine to close*. Manchester: *The Guardian*. 5 October 2009. Retrieved July 2010 from: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/wordofmouth/2009/oct/05/food-and-drink-magazines>

[2] "In December of 1940, these three (with initial editor Pearl Metzelthin) unveiled the magazine's first issue." Mendelson, Anne. *Gourmet's First Decade*. *Gourmet Magazine*. September 2001.

[3] Marcus, Erica. *Condé Nast pulls plug on Gourmet magazine*. *Newsday*. 5 October 2009.

[4] Jane Montant, 85; *Led Gourmet Magazine in Period of Growth*. *Los Angeles Times*. 17 January 2002.

[5] Henry, Bonnie. Critic for now-gone *Gourmet* magazine savors the memories. Tucson, Arizona: *Arizona Daily Star*. Monday, 28 December 2009.

[5a] "When *Gourmet* was closed, observers expected an industry food fight. *Bon Appétit's* circulation was forecast to bloom as it absorbed former readers of *Gourmet*, and other magazines began eyeing *Gourmet's* list of more than 900,000 subscribers. Though *Gourmet* was not thick with ad pages, its advertisers were expected to jump to competing high-end food magazines, like *Food & Wine*, *Saveur* and *Bon Appétit*. Half a year after *Gourmet's* final issue, in November, the *Gourmet* readership and ad base seem to have largely vanished." -- Clifford, Stephanie. *Fans of Gourmet Magazine Accept No Stand-Ins*. *New York Times*. 16 May 2010.

[6] "When she took over as editor Ruth Reichl, former *New York Times* restaurant critic, claimed she wanted to make the magazine the *New Yorker* of food, which many of us took to mean that she was going to stuff it full of staggeringly long, wonderfully in-depth, capricious, whimsical pieces. In truth she only realised that ambition once, when she ran a massively long piece by the late novelist David Foster Wallace called *Consider the Lobster*. Sent to cover a Maine lobster festival, he filed a rambling treatise on whether lobsters feel pain, complete with his famous footnotes. Thousands of *Gourmet* readers wrote in to complain. This was not what they bought the magazine for.

They wanted perfect incorruptible recipes for pumpkin pie, complete with filthy food porn photography" -- Rayner, Jay. *Gourmet Magazine to close*. Manchester: The Guardian. 5 October 2009. Retrieved July 2010 from: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/wordofmouth/2009/oct/05/food-and-drink-magazines>

[7] "Gourmet led the food category in advertising, with 1,333 ad pages last year, a 1 percent increase over 1989. The magazine's average circulation for the last six months of 1990 was 899,549, well above the 725,000 circulation that the magazine guaranteed its advertisers. Despite an 8 percent drop in newsstand sales, circulation rose 11 percent from a year earlier, according to the Audit Bureau of Circulations." -- A New Editor for Gourmet. *The New York Times*. 7 March 1991.

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Times Critic Will Become Editor of Gourmet. *The New York Times*. 26 January 1999.

Wortham, Jenna. *Gourmet Magazine Revived for the iPad*. *New York Times*. 22 June 2010.

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