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THE FOOD BOOK



A JOURNEY THROUGH THE GREAT CUISINES OF THE WORLD







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Melbourne | Oakland | London



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Sign in the window of
a Lyon restaurant.

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France

‘The French think mainly about two things – their two main meals’, a well-fed *bon vivant* friend in Paris once told us, ‘everything else is in parentheses’. And it’s true. While not every French man, woman and child is a walking Larousse Gastronomique, eating well is still of prime importance to most people here, and they continue to spend an inordinate amount of time thinking about, talking about and consuming food.

CULINARY CAPITALS PARIS, LYON **KNOWN FOR** CHEESE,
HAUTE CUISINE **IMPORTS** NORTH AFRICAN FLAVOURS
EXPORTS 1.7 BILLION LITRES OF WINE **DEVOUR** PAIN AU
CHOCOLAT **AVOID** SNAILS



APERITIFS



Sharing food, drink and friendship on a Parisian street at night.

CULTURE

The Celtic Gauls, France's original settlers under the authority of Rome from around the middle of the 1st century BC, were immoderate in their eating habits even by their conquerors' standards, consuming 'bread in a very small quantity with a great deal of meat either boiled, roasted or grilled', according to the Greek geographer, Strabo.

The Gauls favoured such 'oddities' as cranes, herons, hedgehogs and dormice, highly spiced with cumin, coriander, mint and pepper.

The Franks, successors to the Gauls, introduced a certain amount of refinement but not much was changed on the menu. Emperor Charlemagne had banquet tables laid with silver and gold goblets and plates, but the food remained primarily meat-based. Even by the time the first French-language cookbook was published by Guillaume Tirel (or Taillevent) in about 1375, menus consisted almost entirely of 'soups' (actually sodden pieces of bread boiled in a thickened stock) and meat and poultry heavy with the taste of herbs and spices, including new ones like ginger, cinnamon and cloves first introduced via Spain by the Moors.

The 16th century was something of a watershed for French cuisine. The culture of the Italian Renaissance arrived full swing during the reign of François I, who ruled 1515–47.

When Catherine de Médici, future consort to François' son, Henri II, arrived in Paris in 1533, she brought with her a team of Florentine chefs and pastry cooks who introduced such delicacies as aspic, truffles, *quenelles* (dumplings), artichokes, macaroons and puddings to the French court. French cooks, increasingly aware of their rising social status, took the Italians' recipes and sophisticated cooking styles on board, and the rest — to the gratitude of epicures everywhere — is history.



GREGELMS / GETTY IMAGES

Perhaps the most decisive influence on French cuisine at this time, however, was the work of chef François-Pierre de la Varenne. La Varenne downplayed the use of spices, preferring to serve meat in its natural juices sharpened with vinegar or lemon juice. A basic tenet of French cuisine was thus born: to enhance the natural flavours of food in cooking and not disguise it with heavy seasonings.

REGIONS

Climatic and geographical factors have always been important to food in France. The hot south tends to favour olive oil, garlic and tomatoes, while the cooler, pastoral regions to the north emphasise cream and butter. Areas near the coast specialise in mussels, oysters and saltwater fish. People do eat dishes from outside their region — a *choucroute*, say, in a Marseille brasserie. But these dishes will never be as good as they are when they're at home; the ingredients and the preparation just won't be there to give them their authentic tastes.

Diverse though it is, French cuisine is typified by certain regions: Normandy, Burgundy, Périgord, Lyon, Provence and Alsace. Still others such as the Loire region, the Basque Country and Languedoc-Roussillon have made incalculable contributions to what can generically be called French cuisine.

Brittany and Normandy

Normandy stretches along the English Channel from Brittany to Picardy. The topography here is one of flat grasslands and *bocages* (small forests), interrupted by gentle hills. The climate is mild but damp, excellent for grazing and for most crops, except grapes. The region supplies roughly half of France's dairy products. Cream is an integral part of many of the region's rich, thick sauces and Norman butters are particularly sought-after. The markets of Trouville, Honfleur and Cherbourg



Tasting olive oil on the Cote d'Azur.



A goat in Normandy.



Onions and garlic, plaited and hanging against a stone wall.



Fishing boats line the harbour in Marseille on the Cote d'Azur.



Apples used for producing cider and Calvados.



Eating mussels, using the shell to grasp the flesh.

are crammed with lobsters, crayfish, langoustines, prawns, tiny scallops, oysters, mussels and fish. Apples are the third essential staple of Norman cuisine, and *cidre* (cider) is used extensively in cooking. Apples are also the base for the region's signature pastry, *tarte Normande*.

Brittany is also a paradise for lovers of seafood, including oysters from Cancale and the Morbihan Gulf coast; scallops and sea urchins from Saint Brieuc; crabs from Saint Malo; and lobsters from Camaret, Concarneau and Quiberon.

✂ The *crêpe* (wheat pancake) and *galette* (buckwheat flour pancake) are the royalty of Breton cuisine.

The main difference between the two lies in the batter. A *crêpe* is made from wheat flour and is sweet.

The buckwheat flour used in a *galette* is a traditional staple of the region, and the fillings are always savoury. A *galette complète* comes with ham, egg and cheese.

The Loire

The culinary heartland of the Loire, from which most other areas take their cue, is the historical region of the Touraine. The Loire region is v at its gentlest and most refined, offering harmonious landscapes, languid rivers, elegant architecture and wonderful wines such as Sancerre, Chinon and Saumur. When French people look for their common denominator, they end up at the Loire.

✂ The cuisine should be familiar, for it was the cooking refined in the kitchens of its châteaux in the 16th century that became the cuisine of France as a whole.

✂ This is the birthplace of *rillettes*, *coq au vin* and *tarte tatin*.

✂ France's best-known butter biscuit, *le petit beurre*, with its just-asking-to-be-nibbled tooth-combed edge originates in Nantes.

Burgundy

When the Burgundians arrived from their homeland on the shores of the Baltic Sea in the 5th century, they found a land planted with vines, grain crops and mustard. This agricultural legacy of the Romans would in time determine what and how Burgundy would eat, and the region's pre-eminent position on the trade route between the Mediterranean and northern Europe would bring prosperity. Indeed, by the 14th century, what had become the Dukedom of Burgundy was richer and more powerful than the Kingdom of France itself.

- ✂ Burgundy's cooking can be described as *cuisine bourgeoise* at its finest — solid, substantial and served in generous portions.
- ✂ Given what the Romans left behind them, it's not surprising that the 'trinity' of the kitchen here is beef, wine and mustard.
- ✂ The region's best known dish, *bœuf à la bourguignonne* (what the rest of the world calls *bœuf bourguignon*) is beef marinated and cooked in red wine with mushrooms, onions, carrots and bacon.

Périgord, Limousin and the Auvergne

Périgord, better known as the Dordogne, is a land of valleys, fields and forests, prehistoric painted caves, châteaux and, in the south, vineyards. It is one of France's main gastronomic centres and especially renowned for rich dishes made with fresh, locally grown products.

The tranquil, green hills of Limousin present the perfect image of France. The abundance of water nourishes the grasslands that make Limousin a major producer of beef as it does the region's many fruit and nut orchards.

Farther east are the higher plateaus and mountains of the

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Chestnuts for sale at a Parisian *épicerie* (grocery store).



Massif Central, which encompass the historical region of the Auvergne. The terrain, the climate and even the Auvergnats themselves are often described in French as rude (meaning rugged, harsh and tough), so, too, is its cuisine. *Potée Auvergnate* (a hearty soup-stew of cabbage, bacon, pork sausages and potatoes) is the speciality.

- ‡ *Confit de canard* and *confit d'oie* are duck or goose joints cooked slowly in their own fat. The preserved fowl is left to stand for months before being eaten.
- ‡ *Châtaignes* (chestnuts), once a staple food in Périgord, are now used as a flavouring; they can be stuffed in the cavity of a goose before roasting or bound into sausages and blood puddings.
- ‡ A *gigot brayaude* is a leg of lamb studded with garlic cloves and served — *à la limousine* — with red cabbage braised with chestnuts.

FEASTS

Food itself makes French people celebrate. There are special holidays where traditions — even watered down or secularised if religious — still endure.

- ‡ One tradition that is very much alive is called the Jour des Rois (Kings' Day) and takes place in early January, marking the feast of the Epiphany. A *galette des rois* (kings' cake), a puff pastry with frangipane cream, a little dried fève (which originally meant a broad bean but also means a plastic or silver figurine) is topped with a gold paper crown and placed on the table. The youngest person in the room goes below the table and calls out who should get each slice. The person who gets the slice with the bean is named king or queen, dons the crown and chooses his or her consort.



Al fresco dining in the Périgord region, Aquitaine.



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- ✂ *Pâques* (Easter) is marked here as elsewhere with *œufs en chocolat* (chocolate eggs, often filled with candy fish and chickens) and there is always an egg hunt for the kids. The traditional meal at Easter lunch is *agneau* (lamb) or *jambon de Pâques* (Easter ham).
- ✂ At Christmas lunch, families throughout Provence eat *les treize desserts* (the 13 desserts) ranging from orange-flavoured bread and nougats to a variety of fresh and dried fruits that represent Christ and the 12 Apostles. *Fruits confits* (candied or glazed fruit) such as apricots, tangerines, plums, lemons and even melons, are popular gifts at Christmas and New Year in Provence.
- ✂ Menton, known as the warmest spot on the Côte d'Azur, celebrates its most famous product, the lemon, with the *Fête des Citrons* on Mardi Gras in February.
- ✂ Bayonne in the Basque Country honours its lovely ham with *Foire aux Jambons* (Ham Fair) just before Easter.
- ✂ The *Fête du Vin* (Wine Festival) takes place in Bordeaux in late June and early July.
- ✂ The *Fête du Thon* (Tuna Festival) held on the first Saturday in July, is a time when sports organisations set up stands and sell tuna dishes around Saint Jean de Luz.

ETIQUETTE

It's not easy to cause offence at a French table, and while there are some distinctions, manners have more to do with common sense than learned behaviour. A French table will be set for all courses at restaurants (not always at home), with two forks, two knives and a large spoon for soup or dessert. When they finish each course, diners cross their knife and fork (not lay them side by side) face down on the plate to be cleared away.

- ✂ Like other Europeans, the French hold their fork in their left hand and their knife in the right while eating; they don't cut their food and then switch the fork to the right hand as is the custom in North America.
- ✂ Never cut the bread but break it. It is quite acceptable to sop up sauces and juices with bread.
- ✂ Never cut off the tip of pie-shaped soft cheeses, such as Brie or Camembert; cut cheeses whose middle is the best part (the blues, for example) in such a way as to take your fair share of the crust; and at very formal dinners, never go back for seconds at the cheese course.
- ✂ If there are wine glasses of varying sizes at each place setting, the larger one will be for red wine (and water), the smaller for white wine.

THE MENU

A meal in a restaurant rarely consists of more than three or four courses: the *entrée* (starter or first course), *plat principal* (main course) and *dessert* (dessert). Some people choose a *fromage* (cheese) course instead of dessert.

The vast majority of French restaurants offer at least one fixed-price meal, known as a *menu à prix fixe* or *menu du jour*. *Carte* is the word for the menu itself; a *carte des vins* is a wine list. In some places, you may also be able to order a *formule* or *menu touristique*, which usually has fewer choices but allows you to pick two of three courses. In many restaurants, the cheapest lunch menu is a better deal than the equivalent one available at dinner. Many upscale restaurants offer a *menu dégustation* or *menu gastronomique*, which allows you to sample small portions of up to six courses.

- ✂ *Apéritif* — a pre-dinner drink
- ✂ *Dessert* — dessert



Fillet of beef with *foie gras* and truffle on top.



A chef buying herbs at a street market in Paris.



Fougasse, provincial olive bread on display at Carpentras Market on the Cote d'Azur.