

This is France — French Gastronomy

France is still known and recognized (but for how much longer?) as the most important country for culinary excellence. A look back at its history will allow us to understand the reasons for this, and its evolution. But tastes change, real gastronomy has become a luxury that is very expensive, whereas the cooking in typical French restaurants is more and more lacking in originality, and a new, “grande” cuisine, one that is inspired by the tastes, savours and spices from other countries, is emerging.

A Bit of History

How did France become the country of “Haute Cuisine”? A French historian, Jean-Robert Pitte, in his book entitled *Gastronomie française*, traces its origins to the time of the Gauls. That can seem to be surprising, especially since we are aware of the fact that the cooking of the brutish Gauls was very rustic. But, he says, “in Gaule, eating well is inseparable from social political life.” And that is certainly true of the French, as well as a way of demonstrating that gastronomy is not just the high quality of the dishes served, but that it is an entire culture. The presentation of the dishes has almost as much value as their taste, and a true gastronome must also pay attention to *La grande cuisine*. That is certainly what has contributed to this image of France. From time immemorial, the important decisions have been made while seated at a table, and even today someone who

knows how to entertain and can demonstrate his or her high taste for quality dishes served in a very artistic way has a far greater chance of climbing the social ladder than someone who dines at McDonalds. Jean-Robert Pitte provides another confirmation: it was indeed the Gauls who bestowed on the French the mentality of the importance of a meal and of the conviviality around a table, of making the sharing of a meal into a veritable joy, almost a party. That is still the case today. Moreover, if you dine with French people, you will perhaps be surprised to hear them make lengthy comments about the dishes served for the meal, but also talk about what they plan to cook the next day or subsequent days.

But, getting back to *la haute cuisine*, the kind of cooking that is capable of attaining the

La gastronomie française

La France est encore (pour combien de temps ?) connue et reconnue pour être le pays de l'excellence en matière culinaire. Un retour sur l'Histoire permet d'en comprendre les raisons, et l'évolution. Mais les goûts changent, la vraie gastronomie devient un luxe, qui se paie très cher, tandis que la cuisine du restaurant français typique manque de plus en plus d'originalité, et qu'une nouvelle grande cuisine, inspirée de goûts, saveurs et épices venus d'autres pays, émerge.

Un peu d'Histoire

Comment la France est-elle devenue le pays de la gastronomie ? Un historien français, Jean-Robert Pitte, dans son livre intitulé *Gastronomie française*, fait remonter ses origines au temps des Gaulois. Ce qui peut étonner, tant on sait com-

bien la cuisine des rustres Gaulois était rustique. Mais, dit-il, “en Gaule, la bonne chère est inséparable de la vie politique sociale”. Et voilà bien une vérité applicable aux Français. Et une manière de démontrer que la gastronomie ne consiste pas seulement à la grande qualité gustative des plats servis, mais que c'est toute une culture. La présentation des mets a presque autant de valeur que leur qualité, et un vrai gastronome se doit également attacher l'importance qu'elle mérite à la grande cuisine. C'est ce qui a certainement contribué à cette image de la France. Depuis toujours, les grandes décisions y sont prises autour d'une table, et même aujourd'hui quel qu'un qui sait recevoir et peut démontrer de la finesse de son goût pour les mets de qualité servis de manière très artistique a bien plus de chances de gravir les marches de l'échelle sociale que celui qui se nourrit



Jean-Paul Lacombe (at the center) with his cooks, in the kitchen of his famous 2-star restaurant in Lyon (Rhône): “Léon de Lyon”. The restaurant dates from 1904 in the city still considered as the French capital of Gastronomy, with so many other famous chefs (among them, Paul Bocuse). At the end of the year, Léon de Lyon will close to be transformed into a “brasserie de luxe”. Photo: Courtesy of Jean-Paul Lacombe. www.leondelyon.com

Gastronomy (cont'd)

summits of quality, of refinement and of taste, it really took hold in France in the 17th Century during the time of the absolute and authoritative monarchy of the “Sun King”, Louis XIV. There was a huge number of dishes served, and an enormous value placed on meals, which had become sumptuous affairs that were staged in such a theatrical manner so as to satisfy the wishes of the king as he dined before his entourage and on Sundays before the public that was allowed to file past the king’s table as he ate. Meals lasted for hours, and each dish served was a masterpiece. And the royal cook was one of the



César, was nominated for an Oscar and was shown at Cannes. It is now available on DVD.

Another celebrated chef earned his reputation during the same period: François-Pierre de La Varenne, the Marquis d’Uxelles’ cook and author of a book entitled, *Le cuisinier français*, is recognized for having made the transition

Gastronomie (suite)

au McDo. Autre affirmation de Jean-Robert Pitte: ce sont bien les Gaulois qui ont légué aux Français cette mentalité de l’importance du repas, et de la convivialité à table, faisant du partage du repas une véritable joie, presque une fête. Ce qui est toujours le cas aujourd’hui. D’ailleurs si vous dînez avec des Français vous serez peut-être étonnés, non seulement de les entendre commenter longuement les plats servis, mais aussi parler déjà de ce qu’ils prévoient de cuisiner le lendemain ou les jours suivants.

Mise en scène théâtrale

Mais pour en revenir à la cui-

en semaine, et le dimanche devant un public qui était autorisé à défiler près de sa table. Les repas étaient interminables, et chaque mets présenté un chef d’œuvre. Et le cuisinier du roi était l’un des personnages les plus importants de la Cour. Un exemple fut François Vatel. Pâtissier-traiteur de métier, il organisait des fêtes et festins d’exception, auxquels étaient conviées jusqu’à 3000 personnes. Mais Vatel est aussi connu pour s’être suicidé pendant une réception parce que la livraison de poisson était en retard... Un film de Roland Joffé, dans lequel ont joué Gérard Depardieu et Uma Thurman, lui a été consacré en 2000. Ce film, qui a reçu un César, a été nominé aux Oscar, et présenté en

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Vocabulaire — cuisiniers et restaurants

Une auberge = a type of restaurant found more in the countryside, usually serving local products, sometimes rustic, but you can also find more sophisticated ones.

Un bistrot = either a café serving only drinks, or a very simple restaurant. Some major restaurants have a separate bistrot section where they serve more simple and less expensive meals.

Une bonne table = another way of referring to a good and usually renowned restaurant.

Un café-restaurant = a restaurant which has a café section where you can have only a drink.

Un chef = a chef.

La cuisine du terroir = food from locally grown ingredients.

Une cuisine traditionnelle = typical French food. Not always the best, though.

Cuisiner = to cook.

Le cuisinier/la cuisinière = the cook.

Le cuistot = a more familiar way to say cook.

Une gargote = a restaurant which serves very basic meals, not very good either.

Une guinguette = the type of very simple restaurant often located on the banks a river where you can usually eat fish and listen to popular music in the evening.

Le marmiton = the assistant to the cooks.

La nouvelle cuisine = more modern and imaginative food invented in the 1960-1970’s, served in fancy restaurants, in small but very delicate portions, a bit expensive.

Un restaurant = a restaurant.

Un restaurant étoilé = a restaurant with stars awarded by well-known French culinary critics (see article page 22).

Un restaurant gastronomique = a gastronomical restaurant.

Un resto = A popular way to say restaurant.

