

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 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 most important people at court. An example being François Vatel. A pastry chef and caterer by trade, he organized exceptional parties and festivities for up to 3000 people. But Vatel is also famous for having committed suicide during a reception because the delivery of the fish was late. A film, *Vatel* (2000), by the filmmaker Roland Joffé starring Gérard Depardieu and Uma Thurman was devoted to this incident. The film won a 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 from unsophisticated medieval cooking to modern *haute cuisine*. The 17th Century thus saw a kind of culinary revolution in which the formerly-used strong and exotic spices were replaced with more natural products, local herbs and new vegetables. And greater care was taken with their cooking, as well as that of meats and fish, so that they retained as much of their taste as possible. "When I eat cabbage soup, I want it to taste like cabbage," said François-Pierre de La Varenne.

In the 18th century, Gastronomy ventured somewhat out of the royal chateaux and began to gain a foothold with the general public. Antoine de Beauvilliers was the first chef to take such an initiative; he invented the first restaurant when he opened a "bouillon" in Paris in 1765 where the customers were seated at small tables with tablecloths. It was a great success. And, the great chefs of the princes, dukes and marquis followed this example during and following the French Revolution of 1789 when they were put out of work after their employers fled the country. Opening their own restaurants was a means by which they could pursue their profession and continue the traditions of French gastronomy that a much wider public could henceforth take advantage of. Thus, the French Revolution played a definite role in the development of *la haute cuisine* in France.

The tradition continued and French cuisine became richer and more bourgeois by the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th. It was a period where formal banquets could be interminable and such excesses inspired numerous chefs in the 1960's and 70's to innovate with what was called *La nouvelle cuisine*, which was lighter but still maintaining the same high quality.

French Gastronomy Today

In this time of fast food outlets, TV diners and small restaurants that are within the means of any budget, French gastronomy is certainly not what it used to be. If it still exists today through the great restaurants, it is less and less affordable for everyone. Some great restaurants turn a higher profit by organizing business diners or in catering to a more well-heeled clientele from Japan or the United States. As far as the traditional restaurants are concerned, which represent the highest percentage of the number of dining establishments in France, they can be disappointing. Those that are opened in the more tourist oriented sections of cities scarcely make an effort any more towards anything other than their exorbitant profit margins for the quality of food served. And some of the small neighbourhood restaurants are just barely acceptable. There are, nevertheless, numerous small restaurants and bistros that are delicious, friendly and not overly expensive. A little research and listening to word-of-mouth comments from others (see article on page 25) can be a big help in finding just the right little place when you have the urge to sample some of the many pleasures of *la cuisine française*.

One positive note is the fact that an increasing number of great chefs who understand the importance of educating the tastes of their clientele in order to perpetuate the traditions of great French cuisine have begun organizing cooking classes or *haute cuisine* workshops either in their restaurants or in individuals' homes. It is easy to arrange a meal in one's home that is on a par with those of the greatest restaurants and at a more reasonable price. These classes have been such a great success that they have spread throughout France (see page 27) It can be hoped that in this way French gastronomy traditions will be given a new impetus.

Another relatively new tendency in French cuisine is the increasingly important influence of cooking from other parts of the world. This is evident in the large number of Asian and Middle-Eastern restaurants, as well as from other regions of the world. The quality of some of them is very average, but there are more and more foreign restaurants with excellent quality and that adapt their cuisine to French tastes, thus creating a new gastronomy based on foreign influences and using different spices and cooking methods. Some of the dishes are absolutely sumptuous. Many of the new, authentic Thai, Indian, Lebanese and Italian restaurants have by and large surpassed the quality found in a typical, traditional French restaurant.

This exotic influence has not gone unnoticed by French chefs. They are trying more and more to adapt these new and exotic flavours to their own cooking while at the same time using their talent for presentation, both with respect to choosing more innovative designs for their plates as well as in the actual arrangement of the dishes on the plates, all of which is part and parcel of great culinary art and of the purest of gastronomical tradition. And, the French, both the young as well as the not so young, seem to appreciate this tendency very much. At any rate, it is a subject that could serve as the ingredient for lengthy conversations around a table.

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 combien 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 quelqu'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 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 cuisine gastronomique, celle qui sait atteindre les sommets de qualité, de raffinement et de goût, elle n'a vraiment pris son essor en France que lors de la monarchie absolue et autoritaire, celle du "roi-soleil", Louis XIV, au XVII^e siècle. Le nombre de plats servis était considérable, tout comme était immense la valeur attribuée aux repas, devenus somptueux, mis en scène de façon théâtrale pour satisfaire aux souhaits du roi tandis qu'il dînait avec sa Cour 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 nommé aux Oscar, et présenté en sélection officielle à Cannes, est accessible en DVD.

Un autre chef célèbre s'est fait connaître à la même époque: François-Pierre de La Varenne, Cuisinier du marquis d'Uxelles et auteur d'un livre *Le cuisinier français*, reconnu pour avoir marqué le passage entre la cuisine médiévale, peu sophistiquée, à la haute cuisine moderne. Le XVII^e siècle a donc connu une sorte de révolution culinaire dans laquelle les forts épices d'origine exotique d'autrefois ont été remplacés par des produits plus naturels, fines herbes locales, et nouveaux légumes. Et un plus grand soin a aussi été apporté à leur cuisson, ainsi qu'à celle des viandes et poissons, pour qu'ils conservent le maximum de leur goût. "Quand je mange une soupe aux choux, je veux qu'elle ait un goût de chou", disait François-Pierre de La Varenne.

Au XVIII^e siècle, sortant un peu des châteaux, la gastronomie a commencé à se populariser. Le premier à en avoir pris l'initiative a été le cuisinier Antoine de Beauvilliers, qui a inventé le premier restaurant en ouvrant à Paris, en 1765, un "bouillon", dans lequel les clients étaient installés devant des petites tables recouvertes de nappes. Ce fut un grand succès. Et un exemple suivi pendant et après la Révolution française de 1789 par les grands chefs des princes, ducs et marquis, qui se sont retrouvés privés de leur emploi après la fuite à l'étranger de leurs maîtres. Ouvrir leur propre restaurant était le moyen de reprendre leur métier, et de maintenir la tradition de la gastronomie française dont pouvait bénéficier désormais un plus large public. C'est ainsi que la Révolution a joué un rôle certain dans le développement de la haute cuisine en France.

La tradition s'est perpétuée, la cuisine devenant plus riche et bourgeoise à la fin du XIX^e siècle et au début du XX^e, période à laquelle les banquets pouvaient être interminables. Des excès qui ont incité de nombreux chefs à initier ce qu'on a appelé la nouvelle cuisine, plus légère mais gardant le même niveau de qualité, durant les années 1960-1970.

La gastronomie française aujourd'hui

A l'époque du *fast food*, des plats congelés, et des petits restos abordables pour toutes les bourses, la gastronomie française n'est certes plus ce qu'elle était. Si elle existe toujours, perpétuée par les grands restaurants, elle est de moins en moins abordable pour tout le monde. Certains grands restaurants font parfois davantage de profits en organisant des dîners

d'affaires ou en accueillant une clientèle riche venue du Japon ou des Etats-Unis. Quant aux restaurants traditionnels, qui représentent la plus grande proportion du nombre des établissements en France, ils sont parfois décevants. Ceux qui s'installent dans les quartiers touristiques ne font plus aucun effort (sauf pour aligner des chiffres exorbitants, injustifiés pour la qualité servie). Quant aux petits restos de quartiers, certains sont tout juste acceptables. Et pourtant on trouve partout de petits restos excellents, très sympas et pas chers du tout. Un peu de recherche, et le système du bouche à oreille (voir notre article page 25), peuvent beaucoup aider à trouver le meilleur endroit où apprécier quelques-uns des plaisirs de la cuisine française.

Une tendance positive est que de plus en plus de grands chefs, comprenant la nécessité, pour maintenir la tradition de la haute cuisine française, d'éduquer le goût des consommateurs, organisent des cours ou stages de grande cuisine, chez eux ou même à domicile. Car on peut très bien organiser chez soi un repas digne des plus grands restaurants gastronomiques à un prix bien plus abordable. Ces cours connaissent tellement de succès qu'ils se multiplient partout en France (voir page 27). On peut donc espérer que la tradition gastronomique française connaîtra ainsi un nouvel élan.

Nouvelle tendance d'inspiration étrangère

Une autre tendance de la cuisine française relativement récente est l'inspiration de plus en plus grande de plats venus d'ailleurs. La multiplication des restaurants asiatiques, du Moyen-Orient, et de bien d'autres régions du monde, le démontre. Certains sont de qualité très moyenne, mais on trouve de plus en plus de restaurants étrangers de très haute qualité, qui, adaptant leur cuisine au goût des Français, sont en train de créer une nouvelle gastronomie, d'inspiration étrangère, faisant entrer de nouveaux épices ou méthodes de cuisson, et offrant parfois des plats absolument somptueux. Bon nombre de nouveaux restaurants thaïlandais, indiens, libanais, italiens authentiques, ont largement dépassé le niveau de qualité d'un restaurant français traditionnel.

Une tendance que les chefs français ont aussi constatée. Ils tentent de plus en plus d'adapter ces saveurs étrangères et nouvelles à leur propre cuisine tout en déployant des talents de présentation, tant par le choix d'une vaisselle bien plus innovatrice que par la mise en scène des plats, qui tient du grand art culinaire, dans la plus pure tradition gastronomique. Ce que semblent apprécier beaucoup les Français, les jeunes mais aussi les moins jeunes. De quoi, en tout cas, d'alimenter de longues conversations, autour d'une table.

Annick Stevenson

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 familial 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 gastronomic restaurant.

Un resto = A popular way to say restaurant.

Vocabulaire — au menu

Les amuse-gueule = small very refined little portions of starters, served either with the aperitif or before the real starter. Also served at cocktails and receptions.

Une entrée = a first course.

Le hors d'œuvre = the starter or appetizer.

Le plat principal = the main dish.

Un plat de résistance = the main, and sometimes unique, dish, big enough to provide enough food.

La salade = usually a kind of lettuce salad, most of the time served after the main dish in France.

L'entremets = traditionally, another light meal served between the main dish and the dessert. A bit out of fashion today, or used as a synonym for dessert.

Un dessert = a dessert.

Un plateau de desserts = a selection of desserts on a tray.

Un plateau de fromages = ditto for cheeses.

Le vocabulaire du goût

1) On the positive side

Appétissant =appetizing.

La bonne chère = good food.

Déguster = to savour a small quantity of good food or drinks.

Délectable = a more snobbish way to say delicious.

Délicieux = delicious.

Excellent =excellent.

Exquis = exquisite; a bit snobbish, nowadays.

Une fine bouche = a connaisseur, someone who has a very refined taste.

Etre friand de = to be very fond of such and such a meal; a bit out of fashion.

Un gastronome = a connaisseur who highly appreciates excellent quality of food and knows a lot about it.

Etre gourmand = to love eating plenty of delicious food ; one can also say ‘un gourmand’ as a noun.

Etre un gourmet = to love eating a reasonable quantity of highly delicate and excellent food, and would always choose the best restaurants or shops.

Un mets délicat = a very refined meal.

Un mets très fin = a very fine meal.

Le plat du jour = special of the day.

Se régaler = to fully enjoy one’s meal.

Savourer = to savour good food.

Savoureux = very delicious .

La spécialité de la maison = the restaurant’s specialty.

Succulent = excellent, succulent.

2) On the negative side

Chipoter = to hardly try the food on one’s plate, to be picky.

Dégoûtant = disgusting.

Dégueulasse = a popular and idiomatic way of saying disgusting.

Un glouton = someone who eats much too fast without taking the time to appreciate the food.

S’empiffrer/se goinfrer = to eat much more than needed in a rather disgusting way.

S’en mettre plein la gueule = ditto, but a slang expression that is even more pejorative.

Exécrable = awful; a bit excessive or snobbish nowadays.

Fade = flavourless.

Immangeable = inedible.

Infect = appalling.

Insipide = tasteless.

Sans goût = ditto.

Guides & Stars

Le Guide Michelin

For a gastronomical restaurant, being awarded *une étoile* (a star), or even two or three, is a measure of a very different level of quality. Various organizations give out stars to restaurants, but the most well-known, and the one which still gives the most famous stars, is the *Guide rouge Michelin*.

The *Michelin* guides is now the generic name of a series of guides published yearly by the Publishing Company Michelin, and in more than 12 different countries. *Le guide rouge Michelin*, which, as its names indicates, has a hardback, red cover, is the oldest and the most famous of the European restaurant guidebooks, and the one which allocates the *étoiles Michelin*. The first guide was created in 1900 by André Michelin, and at that time it was only a guidebook full of ads that you received when you bought a pair of tyres for your car... This is because André Michelin was mainly, together with his brother Edouard, known as the co-founder of the Michelin company that made tyres, first for bikes and then for cars.

In 1900 there were only 2,400 cars in France, and the guide given with the tyres was full of

valuable information such as the list of the very few garages in France or the doctors, together with the maps of a few cities and lists of tourist sites. It was only in 1920 that Michelin started to sell the guides and included a list and evaluation of the best restaurants all over France. In 1931 the guide started a classification system using stars, going from 1 to 3.

As everyone knows, the restaurant guidebook business was a huge success and soon spilled over beyond the borders of France with similar red guides being published in other European countries. In France alone, more than 500,000 copies of the guide are sold every year... But the number of chefs who have what is considered the immense good fortune of becoming *étoilés* is rather small in comparison:

- In France in 2007 there are 26 three-star restaurants, 65 two-star and 436 with one star.
- In Belgium there are respectively 2, 10 and 79.
- In Germany: 7, 15 and 168.
- In Spain: 6, 9 and 109.
- In Switzerland: 2, 12 and 81.
- In the UK: 3, 13 and 106.
- And in Austria there is no three-star restaurant, but 10 two-star and 79 one-star.

Le guide rouge Michelin is also quite often criticized by its detractors. One must agree that it has gained such power and influence that earning one more star means that a restaurant will not only have a large increase in its clientele, but also enormous pressure to maintain the quality that earned it the star in the first place. Some chefs simply refuse to play the game and become *étoilés*, or else “give back” their stars. One such chef is Alain Senderens, chef of *Lucas Carton* in Paris which had three stars for 28 years. He returned them in 2005 saying that this distinction had given him too much stress and not enough profit. Considering France to be a very conservative country, he now offers his clients a simpler, but still delicious, cuisine – and a far more affordable one, as he has reduced his menus from 400€ to 100€. The financial stakes of the star-rating system are very high, which explains why one sometimes hears stories of chefs who go so far as to commit suicide because they have lost a star. One of the most recent and striking suicides was that of Bernard Loiseau who had a three-star restaurant. He killed himself in 2003 even though he hadn't lost a star (not yet, however, he had lost a few points in another restaurant guide, Gault & Millau, see below), but he had apparently become such a businessman that he was too overwhelmed by stress, and by financial difficulties, to cope with what had simply become too big.

Le guide GaultMillau

Created by two friends who were distinguished food critics, Henri Gault and Christian Millau, the guide bearing their name, which was first published in 1959, is also extremely well-known and important in France and beyond. Even though after many years of collaboration the two parted ways in 1986, and in spite of the fact that Henri Gault died in 2000, the commercial entity that publishes the guides is still called *GaultMillau*.

Gault and Millau were first known as proponents of *la nouvelle cuisine*, which started in the 1960-70s, and was characterized by less fat and the elimination of sauces in order to give more savour to every ingredient. The most well-known chefs who were involved in this type of cuisine were Paul Bocuse in Lyon (Rhône), les frères Troisgros in Roanne (Loire) and Michel Guérard in Eugénie-les-Bains (Landes).

Contrary to the Michelin guides, GaultMillau doesn't give stars but numeric notations from 1 to 20. However, they have only given a 20 once in the entire history of the guide. They used to say that "perfection is impossible". The only grand chef to receive a 20, in 2004, was Marc Veyrat, and he got the same notation for both of his restaurants that are located in Haute-Savoie: *L'auberge de l'Eridan* (Veyrier-du-Lac) and *La ferme de mon père* (Megève) – which he sold last January.

Ratatouille celebrates French Gastronomy

One of the hit films of last summer, everywhere in the US and in Europe, was the movie about a little grey rat who dreams of becoming a great chef and leaves for Paris to pursue his dream. If you haven't seen it yet, we can only highly encourage you to do so, as it imparts more about French Gastronomy than any other explanation. It explains so well the importance of quality of the meals and the talent of the chef. And it is really funny!

What is interesting, too, is that the restaurant which inspired the movie, said to be the oldest restaurant in France, the *Tour d'Argent*, in Paris, has just reopened in mid-September after a three-month hi-tech makeover. The dining room overlooking Notre Dame cathedral has not changed. Only the kitchens, spread over six floors, have been gutted and rebuilt. The *Tour d'Argent*, which was an hotel with already an excellent kitchen in the 16th century, when it served its poultry specialties to King Henri IV, is certainly one of the French restaurants which has the highest reputation. Its history is interesting too. During the 18th century, it was one of the first to adapt for the best to the culinary Revolution which was taking place, and became the meeting place for most of the gourmets in Paris. But the *Tour d'Argent* was close to the Bastille. On 14th July, after capturing the prison, the Revolutionaries plundered the place – and its wines were looted and drunk in the Place de Grève at the price of the Republic's well being... After being closed for many years, Napoleon's personal chef, Lecoq, brought back the restaurant. It soon recaptured its excellent reputation and was frequented by most of the celebrities of the time. Another owner followed, until it was bought by André Terrail, the grand-father of the present owner, who had previously been trained for ten years in London as the Baron Alfred de Rothschild's cook. He and his son Claude, who succeeded him, maintained the tradition of excellence. "The table is an essential ingredient of the art of living: not only does it exalt the sense of taste but all the other senses as well," said Claude Terrail. And "Nothing should be taken more seriously than pleasure."

After his death at the age of 88 in June, 2006, his son André (same first name as his grand-father), 27 years old, took over. But in the meantime, in February of the same year, while Claude Terrail was in hospital, the Michelin guide decided to remove yet another star from the restaurant's rating. *La Tour d'Argent*, had already lost one of its three stars ten years previously ! (see article above). Reducing the famous *Tour d'Argent* to a one-star restaurant was a startling decision for everybody. This, in part, was the motivation behind André Terrail's decision to re-establish the restaurant's reputation as a gastronomic legend through an extensive makeover. And *Ratatouille* will undoubtedly be a great help in recapturing the best of its reputation!

A.S.

Web page (French & English):
www.tourdargent.com

Scenario: Ordering in a Restaurant

<p>1) Arrivée au restaurant</p> <p>M. Dubreuil : Bonsoir monsieur. Est-ce que vous auriez une table pour deux ? Le serveur : Vous avez réservé ? M. Dubreuil : Ah non ! Il ne vous reste plus de place ? Le serveur : Je vais voir. Fumeur ou non fumeur ? M. Dubreuil : Non fumeur, s'il vous plaît. Le serveur : Je crois qu'il nous reste encore une table, au fond, ça vous va ? M. Dubreuil : Oui, très bien, n'est-ce pas chérie ? Mme Dubreuil : Oui c'est parfait, merci !</p> <p>Le serveur : Attendez ici un moment, je vais faire débarrasser la table. Voulez-vous un apéritif en attendant ? M. Dubreuil : Pourquoi pas. Et la carte aussi, s'il vous plaît ! Le serveur : D'accord. Vous verrez, vous avez plusieurs menus au choix, ou des plats à la carte.</p> <p>2) A table</p> <p>Le serveur : Vous avez choisi ? M. Dubreuil : Oui, mais nous avons quelques questions. Le serveur : Je vous en prie. Mme Dubreuil : J'aimerais bien prendre le menu à 35 euros, mais est-ce que je peux changer l'entrée ? Le serveur : Oh, certainement, mais il y aura peut-être un petit supplément. Mme Dubreuil : Pas de problème. Donc, je vais prendre le menu à 35 euros, mais avec un feuilleté d'asperges en entrée. Le serveur : Oui. Et pour le plat principal ? Mme Dubreuil : Le gigot d'agneau. Le serveur : Très bien. Quelle cuisson ?</p> <p>Mme Dubreuil : Rosé. Le serveur : Et pour monsieur ? M. Dubreuil : Moi j'hésite encore... Oh je</p>	<p>1) Arriving</p> <p>Mr. Dubreuil: Good evening sir. Do you have a table for two? Waiter: Did you make a reservation? Mr. Dubreuil: Ah no! You don't have anything left? Waiter: I'll go check. Smoking or non-smoking? Mr. Dubreuil: Non-smoking, please Waiter: I think we still have one table, in the back. Will that suit you? Mr. Dubreuil: Yes, very well, right dear?</p> <p>Mrs. Dubreuil: Yes, that's perfect, thank you. Waiter: Wait just a moment. I'll have the table cleared off. Would you like an aperitif while you wait? Mr. Dubreuil: Why not. And the menu as well, please! Waiter: OK. You'll see, we have several fixed-price menus to choose from, or else you can order à la carte.</p> <p>2) At the table</p> <p>Waiter: Have you decided? Mr. Dubreuil: Yes, but we have a few questions. Waiter: By all means. Mrs. Dubreuil: I would like the 35 euro menu, but can I change the entrée? Waiter: Oh, sure, but there will perhaps be a slight supplement. Mrs. Dubreuil: That's no problem. I'll have the 35 euro menu then, but with a <i>feuilleté d'asperges</i> as the first course. Waiter: Yes. And for the main course? Mrs. Dubreuil: The <i>gigot d'agneau</i>. Waiter: Very good. How would you like it cooked? Mrs. Dubreuil: Medium rare. Waiter: And for you, sir? Mr. Dubreuil: I haven't quite decided yet...</p>
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<p>pense que je vais plutôt prendre un plat à la carte. Un steak au poivre.</p> <p>Le serveur : Vous ne prenez pas d'entrée ?</p> <p>M. Dubreuil : Peut-être... Oui, d'accord, je prends les escargots.</p> <p>Le serveur : C'est parfait. Quelle cuisson pour le steak ?</p> <p>M. Dubreuil : A point.</p> <p>Le serveur : C'est noté. Et pour les boissons ?</p> <p>M. Dubreuil : Je pense que nous prendrons plutôt un Bourgogne. Lequel pouvez-vous nous conseiller ?</p> <p>Le serveur : Je pense qu'avec les plats que vous avez choisis, notre Gevrey-Chambertin irait très bien.</p> <p>M. Dubreuil : D'accord, nous allons l'essayer.</p> <p>Le serveur : Un peu d'eau ?</p> <p>Mme Dubreuil : Oui, une demi-bouteille de Saint-Yorre, s'il vous plaît.</p> <p>Le serveur : Très bien. Je vous remercie.</p>	<p>Oh, I think that I'll order something à la carte. A pepper steak.</p> <p>Waiter: You aren't going to have a first course?</p> <p>Mr. Dubreuil: Perhaps. Yes, ok, I'll have the <i>escargots</i>.</p> <p>Waiter: That's perfect. How would you like the steak cooked?</p> <p>Mr. Dubreuil: Well done.</p> <p>Waiter: Got it. And what would you like to drink?</p> <p>Mr. Dubreuil: I think we'll have a Burgundy. Which one would you recommend?</p> <p>Waiter: I think that our Gevrey-Chambertin would go very nicely with what you have ordered.</p> <p>Mr. Dubreuil: Ok, We'll try it.</p> <p>Waiter: Would you like some sparkling water?</p> <p>Mrs. Dubreuil: Yes, a half-bottle of Saint-Yorre, please.</p> <p>Waiter: Very good. I thank you.</p>
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How to Choose a Good restaurant – A Few Timely Tips

Finding a place to eat when you want something out of the ordinary, or else simply a genuinely good meal, is not always easy. It's all the more difficult when you are travelling and are not familiar with the local restaurants and/or regional specialities. For those of you who eat out often, you probably already have your own way of finding new and interesting places to eat, but we offer the following tips that have worked most of the time for us. There is also a scenario that contains essential vocabulary that could be useful to you when you call to reserve a table.

Other than the two guidebooks, Michelin and GaultMillau, which can be excellent references in terms of quality and price, there are also numerous on-line restaurant guides, some of which even offer comments from users who have eaten in the restaurant in question. These comments can be very valuable indicators. Many of these sites provide links to the restaurant's webpage so you can get an idea of what the place looks like and their menu. We provide links to several such sites below. The web pages of a city's tourist bureau will also often contain information about restaurants in a particular city. All of this works, of course, if you have access to the Internet – not always a possibility when travelling.

When in a new area or on the road, travel guides often give advice on restaurants, but these references can often be misleading, and in the case of one particularly popular French guidebook, among others, it was revealed in a series of articles last year that restaurateurs paid the publisher for a listing in their guide. The more reputable guidebooks like *Lonely Planet*, for example, are usually quite reliable. You can always ask people you come in contact with,

but we have sometimes been given poor advice by hotels, who often even have an arrangement with restaurants to shunt clients their way. When travelling, we often spend an hour or so in the afternoon cruising the parts of a city where there are lots of restaurants just to check them out and read their menus. Even if the menu isn't posted outside, you can always go in and ask to see a copy. We have often been totally delighted with places to eat we have found this way.

Some things to avoid:

- restaurants with a “barker” out front trying to coax you to come inside;
- restaurants that have a very touristy looking menu posted outside, often in several languages;
- restaurants where there is almost no one inside even though it is well past the time for dinner or lunch.

Roger Stevenson

A Few Websites

www.lespiedsdansleplat.com

An easy to navigate site with good descriptions of restaurants. Limited to Paris and surrounding departments. No reader comments.

www.guides-restaurants.fr

Limited to Paris and a few other cities in the south of France. English version (link at the bottom of home page). They do solicit readers' input, but don't print the comments on web site.

www.linternaute.com/restaurant/liste

A very good site for restaurants in Paris and most of the major cities in France. Ranks restaurants and you can access readers' comments about the restaurant.

<http://guide-resto.fr>

A relatively new site with a limited number of restaurants and cities, but with lots of input from readers.

Some Regional Cuisine

There are not many countries like France that are blessed with such a rich variety of cuisine and regional specialties in a relatively small area. France's bordering neighbours have had a large influence in some of the regions: Italy has inspired Provençal cuisine; the wonderful fusion of French and Spanish specialties has given us Basque cuisine; Belgian influences are obvious in the northern regions of France; in the northeast, Alsatian food prevails with recognizable German touches; the French countryside that borders Switzerland in the East is best known for its cheese specialties; as for southern French food, it reveals North African influences from across the Mediterranean such as the famous couscous.

The development of France's regional cuisines is also in large part due to locally available ingredients. Thus, seafood dishes predominate along France's Mediterranean and Atlantic

coastal regions. A wide choice of fruits and vegetables are harvested in central France and in the Loire River valley. Meat dishes prevail to the north, where there are many lamb and sheep farms. Truffles have been used in the creation of unique food specialties in southwestern France. And, of course, France's regional cuisines have also been uniquely influenced by the various wine regions, as well as by local cognacs, champagne, liqueurs, and cordials. In fact, wines and liqueurs represent such a vast area that we will deal with them in a forthcoming issue. Whereas each region's specialties merit an in-depth look, the following brief look at a few of them should be enough to make your mouth water.

The city of Lyon has always been renowned for being the Capital of *gastronomie* but if you're not a *cochonaille* (pork products) lover, then you might not enjoy the specialties the city offers, such as the famous *andouillette*, small chitterling sausages made out of pork chitterlings and marinated in white wine, or the *cervelas*, a textured, lean, fresh pork sausage flavoured with truffles and garlic and studded with pistachios. Every region produces its cheese specialties and Lyon has a quite different and original one called *la cervelle des Canuts* which is soft, creamy white cow's cheese flavoured with different herbs. The rather derogatory name translates as "silk weaver's brains", and is thought to reflect the poor regard in which the richer community held the Lyon silk weavers.

Alsatian food is a blend of French and German cultures and makes the cuisine somewhat rich and copious. The most famous specialty is *choucroute*, sauerkraut garnished with potatoes and a variety of meats such as sausage, pork or ham. There are many regional cakes and desserts such as the *kougelhoppf*, which is a brioche pastry with raisins and whole almonds marinated in kirsch. For Christmas, *bredles* and gingerbreads decorate the tables of all Alsatian families. *Bredles* are cookies of different shapes flavoured with anise, cinnamon or almond.

If you love *camembert*, then you should make a detour to beautiful Normandy. The Normans often eat their signature cheese with a glass of cider. Apples play an important part in Norman cuisine, and the region is famous for its desserts such as the ubiquitous apple pie and liquors such as Calvados and cider. In Normandy, it is the tradition to drink a glass of Calvados in the middle of a meal to help digestion. This 200 century-old ritual is called *le trou normand*. Nowadays, a *trou normand* is still served in the middle of a meal, but most often consists of an apple sorbet soaked with Calvados.

In the sunny south of France, in Provence, fruits, vegetables and olives are the core elements of the cuisine. The basic ingredients of *Provençal* cuisine are olive oil, garlic and *herbes de Provence*. Among the typical provençal dishes, *ratatouille*, a vegetable stew made out from tomatoes, peppers, zucchinis, onions and olive oil, and *salade niçoise*, composed of lettuce, tomatoes, green beans, tuna, eggs, black olives and anchovies. Thanks to the abundance of seafood, Marseille created its delicious *bouillabaisse* (seafood bouillon) and *anchoïade*, a sauce made from anchovies, olive oil and garlic. Just north of Provence, in the Ardèche region, a speciality which is rarely found in other regions is called *caillette*, a baked sausage dish made from pork meat mixed with chard or spinach, eggs and spices.

The cuisine of southwestern France features various *produits du terroir*. Truffles thrive in the Périgord region and are used in sauces, omelettes and numerous other recipes. The other local specialty of the Southwest is *foie gras*, which is a traditional Christmas and New Year dish. The cities of Toulouse, Castelnaudary and Carcassonne are renowned for their *cassoulet*, a stew made from sausage and white beans in a light tomato sauce. The region is also home to

one of France's best known and oldest cheeses, *roquefort*. If you're a cheese lover, then a detour to the Alps is a must! Traditional mountain cooking is based on cheese and potatoes. A selection of Savoie cheeses would include *tomme de Savoie*, *beaufort*, *reblochon*, *abondance* and *emmental de Savoie*. One of the authentic Savoyard dishes is *tartiflette**. Of course, one cannot forget *fondue*, half *emmental*, half *beaufort* cheese melted with Savoie white wine in a special fondue dish and eaten with chunks of bread, and *raclette*, an alpine cheese melted on a special grill and served with potatoes, smoked cold cuts and pickles.

Céline Anthonioz

For a comprehensive list of regional cuisines (in English):
www.aftouch-cuisine.com/regions-de-france_l2.htm

* For the recipe of tartiflette:

www.learnfrenchathome.com/frenchrecipestartiflette_eng.htm

For the recipe of tartiflette:

www.learnfrenchathome.com/frenchrecipestartiflette_eng.htm

Sucreries et bonbons de toutes les régions

Mmm, c'est bon les bonbons !... Quelques spécialités régionales :

Berlingots de Carpentras et de Nantes = multi-coloured sugar candies in the shape of a pyramid.

Bêtises de Cambrai = hard mint candies.

Calissons d'Aix = white diamond-shaped sweets, made from ground almonds, fruit and syrup and with a white icing.

Caramels d'Isigny = soft caramels made from sugar, butter and milk.

Cannelés de Bordeaux = very small cakes perfumed with Old Rum and Vanilla Bourbon, slightly caramelized.

Coussins de Lyon = marzipan sweets shaped and decorated like cushions.

Dragées de Verdun = whole almonds with a coloured sugar coating, generally white but also in subtle pastel colours. Small, delicate, embroidered sacks of them are given to guests for weddings and after a birth, and they are also used to decorate wedding cakes. They symbolize prosperity, fertility, happiness, and good luck.

Nougat de Montélimar = chewy confection made of sugar or honey and nuts.

Pâtes de fruits d'Auvergne = soft paste-like fruit bars or squares made of fruit and sugar.

Pavés de Paris = small cobblestone-shaped chocolates made from gianduja chocolate and covered with melted chocolate and glazing.

Cooking And Serving In France — Real Professions!

As you have probably noticed, when you go to a restaurant in France, most of the time, the service is very professional and the food or drinks are served in a timely manner. The reason for such professionalism is due to the training the waiters receive from the various and excellent professional schools located throughout the country. Not only does a chef spend many years in school, but the waiters do also!! To become a professional waiter, they have to

attend a culinary school for 2 to 3 years. These schools are called *écoles hôtelières*, and young people who want to have a career in the restaurant and hotel business may do so by starting their training as early as the age of 14 or 15.

At the end of the programme, students receive a diploma in either cooking, service or hotel management. With a diploma, the waiters earn a real salary and do not depend on tips for a living. It is important to treat the waiters with the same equal respect they give you, and when we wish to get their attention, the French will most likely call out to them: *Monsieur, s'il vous plaît!* and not *garçon*, which is very outdated and demeaning!

To find the *Ecoles hôtelières* by French department, click here:

www.lhotellerie.fr/ecole/portail_ecoles_hotelieres.asp

Some hotel management schools offer higher degrees such as an MBA. The most famous are:

Vatel (with an English version), in Bordeaux, Lyon, Nice and Paris for France:

www.vatel.fr

AIM (Business Administration – English website), in Paris:

www.academy.fr

Institut Paul Bocuse (with an English version), in Lyon:

www.institutpaulbocuse.com

Cooking schools for adults

Cooking schools are very popular in France and many of them have professional (and sometimes famous) chefs who teach sophisticated gourmet cooking courses which can last for one day, a week-end or a week. Some of them also offer a mixture of cooking and French language classes lasting anywhere from 3 to 6 months.

They are located all around France and offer many types of cooking programmes depending on the region's specialities (shellfish in Bordeaux and Brittany, duck in South-West, olive oil in Provence...), cooking diversity (festivities menus, sauces, pastries, bread, ...) and, of course, regional wines.

Some of them will take you to the market in the morning to buy the necessary ingredients for the meals, some will provide accommodation in a beautiful setting, sometimes even in a castle, and others will include a tour of the region.

Vincent Anthonioz

You can find a non-exhaustive list of those schools here:

http://frenchfood.about.com/od/cookingschools/cooking_schools_in_france_french_cuisine_cooking_schools.htm