

## French Cuisine

French cuisine developed throughout the centuries influenced by the many surrounding cultures of Spain, Italy, Switzerland, Germany, and Belgium, in addition to its own food traditions on the long western coast lines of the Atlantic, the Channel and of course inland. In the 14<sup>th</sup> century Guillaume Tirel, a court chef known as “Taillevent”, wrote *Le Viandier*, one of the earliest recipe collections of medieval France. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, chefs François Pierre La Varenne and Marie-Antoine Carême spearheaded movements that shifted French cooking away from its foreign influences and developed France’s own indigenous style. Cheese and wine are a major part of the cuisine. They play different roles regionally and nationally, with many variations and *appellations d’origine controlee* (AOC) (regulated appellation) laws.

French cuisine was made important in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by Auguste Escoffier to become the modern *haute cuisine*; Escoffier, however, left out much of the local culinary character to be found in the regions of France and was considered difficult to execute by home cooks. Gastro-tourism and the *Guide Michelin* helped to acquaint people with the rich bourgeois and peasant cuisine of the French countryside starting in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Gascon cuisine has also had great influence over the cuisine in the southwest of France. Many dishes that were once regional have proliferated in variations across the country.

Knowledge of French cooking has contributed significantly to Western cuisines. Its criteria are used widely in Western cookery school boards and culinary education. In November 2010, French gastronomy was added by the UNESCO to its lists of the world’s “intangible cultural heritage”.

## *History*

### **Middle Ages**

Medieval banquets were held where multiple courses would be prepared but served in a style called *service en confusion* or all at once. Sauces were highly seasoned and thick. Many foods were preserved with salt, spices, honey, and other preservatives. Some spices used then, but no longer in French cuisine are cubebs, long pepper, grains of paradise, and galingale. Visual display was prized. Brilliant colours were obtained by the addition of juice from spinach for green, yellow from saffron or egg yolk, red from sunflower. Gold and silver leaf were placed on food surfaces brushed with egg whites. *Tourte parmerienne* was a pastry dish made to look like a castle with chicken-drumstick turrets coated with gold leaf. One of the grandes showpieces was swan or peacock sewn back into its skin with feathers intact.

## Ancien Régime

Paris was the central hub of culture and economic activity and the most highly skilled culinary craftsmen were to be found here. Markets in Paris such as Les Halles were very important to the distribution of food. Those that gave French produce its characteristic identity were regulated by the guild system, which developed in the Middle Ages.

During the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, French cuisine assimilated many new food items from the New World. Although they were slow to be adopted, records of banquets show Catherine de Medici serving sixty-six turkeys at one dinner. The dish called *cassoulet* has its roots in the New World discovery of haricot beans, which are central to the dish's creation, but had not existed outside the New World until its exploration by Christopher Columbus.

Haute Cuisine has foundations during the 17<sup>th</sup> century with a chef named La Varenne. As author of works such as *Le Cuisinier françois*, he is credited with publishing the first true French cookbook. His book includes the earliest known reference to *roux* using pork fat. His recipes contained new techniques aimed at creating lighter dishes.

Chef François Massialot wrote *Le Cuisinier roïal et bourgeois* during the reign of Louis XIV. It is in this book that a *marinade* is first seen in print.

## Late 18<sup>th</sup> century – early 19<sup>th</sup> century

The French Revolution was integral to the expansion of French cuisine because it abolished the guild system. This meant anyone could produce and sell any culinary item he wished.

Marie-Antoine Carême was born in 1784, five years before the Revolution. He became known for his *pièces montées*, which were extravagant constructions of pastry and sugar architecture. He contributed to the refinement of French cuisine. The basis for his style of cooking was his sauces, which he named *mother sauces*. These *fonds* or base sauces included espagnole, velouté, and béchamel, and are still known today. He had over a hundred sauces in his repertoire. In his writings, soufflés appear for the first time.

## Late 19<sup>th</sup> century – early 20<sup>th</sup> century

Georges Auguste Escoffier is commonly acknowledged as the central figure to the modernization of *haute cuisine* and organizing what would become the national cuisine of France. His influence began with the rise of some of the great hotels in Europe and America during the 1880s and 1890s. He created a system called the brigade system which separated the professional kitchen into five separate stations. These included the “garde manger” that prepared cold dishes; the “entremetier” prepared starches and vegetables, the *rôtisseur* prepared roasts, grilled and fried

dishes, the saucier prepared sauces and soups. And the pâtissier prepared all pastry and desserts items.

### **Mid-20<sup>th</sup> century – late 20<sup>th</sup> century**

The 1960s brought about innovative thought to the French cuisine. This period is marked by the appearance of *nouvelle cuisine*. The term had been used before but was revived to describe the cooking of Paul Bocuse, Jean and Pierre Troisgros, Michel Guérard, Roger Vergé and Raymond Oliver. These chefs were working against the 'orthodoxy' of Escoffier's cuisine. The first characteristic of Nouvelle Cuisine was a rejection of excessive complication in cooking. Second, the cooking times for many foods was greatly reduced in an attempt to preserve the natural flavours. Steaming was an important trend from this characteristic. The third characteristic was that the cuisine was made with the freshest possible ingredients. Fourth, large menus were abandoned in favour of shorter menus. Fifth, strong marinades for meat and game ceased to be used. Sixth, they stopped using heavy sauces such as espagnole and béchamel thickened with flour based 'roux', in favour of seasoning their food with fresh herbs, quality butter, lemon juice, and vinegar. Seventh, they used regional dishes for inspiration instead of haute cuisine dishes. Eighth, new techniques were embraced and modern equipment was often used; Bocuse even used microwave ovens. Ninth, the chefs paid close attention to the dietary needs of their guests through their dishes. Tenth and finally, the chefs were extremely inventive and created new combinations and pairings.

## *Regional Cuisine*

### **Paris and Ile-de-France**

Over 9,000 restaurants in Paris and almost any cuisine can be obtained here.

### **Champagne, Lorraine, and Alsace**

Game and ham are popular in Champagne as well as the special sparkling wine known simply as *Champagne*. Fine fruit preserves come from Lorraine as well as *Quiche Lorraine*. Alsace is influenced by the German cuisine, especially from the Baden and Palatinate region. Beers made in the area are similar to the style of Germany. Dishes like *choucroute* (the French word for *sauerkraut*) are also popular.

### **Nord Pas-de-Calais, Picardy, Normandy, and Brittany**

The coastline supplies many crustaceans, sea bass, monkfish and herring. Normandy has top quality seafood, such as scallops and sole, while Brittany has a supply of lobster, crayfish and mussels. Normandy is home to a large population of apple trees. Apples are often used in dishes, as well as cider and Calvados. Thick

stews are found in the northern regions. Buckwheat grows widely in the area and is used in the region's *galettes*, called *jalet*, which is where the dish originated.

### **Loire Valley and central France**

High quality fruits come from the Loire Valley and central France, including cherries grown for the liqueur *Guignolet* and the *Belle Angevine* pears. Vinegars from Orléans are a specialty ingredient used as well.

### **Burgundy and Franch-Comte**

Known for their wines. Pike, perch, river crabs, snails, game, redcurrants, blackcurrants are from this region. Savorous specialties include Croûte aux morilles, Poulet à la Comtoise, trout, smoked meats and cheeses such as Mont d'or, Comté and Morbier, the exquisite Coq au vin jaune, and gateau de ménage. Dijon mustard is also a specialty of Burgundy cuisine. Crème de Cassis is a popular liquor made from blackcurrants.

### **Auvergne-Rhone-Alpes**

The area covers the old province of Dauphiné, once known as the 'larder' of France, that gave its name to Gratin dauphinoise. Lyon and Savoy supply sausages while the alpine regions supply their specialty cheeses like Beaufort, Abondance, Reblochon, Tomme and Vacherin. *Mères lyonnaises* are female restaurateurs particular to this region who provide local gourmet establishments.

### **Poitou-Charents and Limousin**

Oysters come from the Oléron basin, while mussels come from the Bay of Aiguillon. The region of Poitou-Charentes purportedly produces the best butter and cream in France. Cognac is also made in the region.

### **Bordeaux, Perigord, Gascony, and Basque country**

Bordeaux is known for its wine. Fishing is popular in the region, sea fishing in the Bay of Biscay, trapping in the Garonne and stream fishing in the Pyrenees. Gascony and Périgord cuisines include patés, terrines, confits and magrets. This is one of the regions notable for its production of *foie gras* or fattened goose or duck liver. The cuisine of the region is often heavy and farm based. Armagnac is also from this region.

### **Toulouse, Quercy, and Aveyron**

Haricot beans are grown in this area, which are central to the dish Cassoulet. The finest sausage in France is commonly acknowledged to be the *saucisse de Toulouse*. Unpasteurized ewe's milk is used to produce the Roquefort in Aveyron. Cabécou cheese is from Rocamadour, a medieval settlement erected directly on a cliff, in the rich countryside of Causses du Quercy. The area is one of the region's

oldest milk producers; it has chalky soil, marked by history and human activity, and is favourable for the raising of goats.

### **Roussillon, Languedoc, and Cevennes**

Restaurants are popular in the area known as Le Midi. The Les Cévennes area offers mushrooms, chestnuts, berries, honey, lamb, game, sausages, pâtés and goat cheeses. Catalan influence can be seen in the cuisine here with dishes like *brandade* made from a purée of dried cod wrapped in mangold leaves. Snails are plentiful and are prepared in a specific Catalan style known as *cargolade*. Wild boar can be found in the more mountainous regions of the Midi.

### **Provinces-Alpes-Cote d’Azur**

Lavender is used in many dishes found in Haute Provence. Honey is a prized ingredient in the region. Rice is grown in the Camargue, with Camargue red rice being a specialty. Anibal Camous, a Marseillais who lived to be 104, maintained that it was by eating garlic daily that he kept his ‘youth’ and brilliance. When his eighty-year-old son died, the father mourned “I always told him he wouldn’t live long, poor boy. He ate too little garlic!”

## *Food Establishments*

### **History**

The modern restaurant has its origins in French culture. Prior to the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, diners who wished to “dine out” would visit their local guild member’s kitchen and have their meal prepared for them. However, guild members were offered food in their own homes to steady clientele that appeared day-to-day but at set times. The guest would be offered the meal *table d’hôte*, which is a meal offered at a set price with very little choice of dishes, sometimes none at all.

The first steps toward the modern restaurant were locations that offered *restorative bouillons*, or *restaurants* – these words being the origin of the name “restaurant”. This step took place during the 1760s – 1770s. These locations were open at all times of the day, featuring ornate tableware and reasonable prices. These restaurants were meant more as meal replacements for those who had “lost their appetites and suffered from jaded palates and weak chests”.

In 1782 Antoine Beauvilliers, pastry chef to the future Louis XVIII, opened one of the most popular restaurants of the time – the Grande Taverne de Londres – in the arcades of the Palais-Royal. Other restaurants were opened by chefs of the time who were leaving the failing monarchy of France in the period leading up to the French Revolution. It was these restaurants that expanded upon the limited menus of decades prior, and led to the full restaurants that were completely legalized with

the advent of the French Revolution and the abolition of the guilds. This and the substantial discretionary income of the French Directory's nouveau riche helped keep these new restaurants in business.

## **Categories of Food Establishment**

**Restaurant** – open at certain times of the day and normally closed one day of the week. Waiters and waitresses are trained and knowledgeable professionals. By law a prix-fixe menu must be offered. Few French restaurants cater for vegetarians

**Bistro(t)** – Often smaller than a restaurant and many times using chalk board or verbal menus. Waiting staff may well be untrained. May feature a regional cuisine. Notable dishes include coq au vin, pot-au-feu, confit de canard and entrecôte.

**Bouchon** – Found in Lyon, they produce traditional Lyonnaise cuisine, such as sausages, duck pâté or roast pork. The dishes can be quite fatty, and heavily oriented around meat. There are about twenty officially certified traditional bouchons, but a larger number of establishments describing themselves using the term.

**Brasserie** – In general, a brasserie (or brewery) is open all day every day, offering the same menu. These establishments were created in the 1870s by refugees from Alsace-Lorraine. They serve beer, but most serve wines from Alsace such as Riesling, Sylvaner, and Gewürztraminer. The most popular dishes are choucroute and seafood dishes.

**Café** – Primarily locations for coffee and alcoholic drinks. Additional tables and chairs are usually set outside, and prices are usually higher for service at these tables. The limited foods sometimes offered include croquet-monsieur, salads, moules-frites (mussels and pommes frites) when in season. Cafés often open early in the morning and shut down around nine at night.

**Salon de Thé** – These locations are more similar to cafés in the rest of the world. These tearooms offer a selection of cakes and do not offer alcoholic drinks. Many offer simple snacks, salads, and sandwiches. Teas, hot chocolate, and chocolat à l'ancienne (a popular chocolate drink) offered as well. These locations often open just prior to noon for lunch and then close late afternoon.

**Bar** – Based on the American style, many were built at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (particularly around World War 1, when young American expatriates were quite common in France, particularly Paris). These locations serve cocktails, whiskey, pastis and other alcoholic drinks.

**Estaminet** – Typical of the Nord-Pas-de-Calais region, these small bars/restaurants used to be a central place for farmers, mine or textile workers to meet and socialize, and sometimes the bars would be in a grocery store. Customers could order basic regional dishes, play boules, or use the bar as a meeting place for clubs. These

estaminets almost disappeared, but are now considered a part of Nord-Pas-de-Calais history, and therefore preserved and promoted.

## **Restaurant Staff**

Larger restaurants and hotels in France employ extensive staff and are commonly referred to as either the *kitchen brigade* or the *dining room brigade*. This system was created by Georges August Escoffier.

The Kitchen Brigade includes the following positions:- *Chef de cuisine, Sous-chef de cuisine, Chef de partie, Cuisinier, Commis, Apprenti(e), Plongeur, Marmiton, Saucier, Rôtisseur, Grillardin, Friturier, Poissonnier, Entremetier, Potager, Legumier, Garde manger, Tournant, Pâtissier, Confiseur, Glacier, Décorateur, Boulanger, Boucher, Aboyer, Communard* and *Garçon de cuisine*. These translate variously as Head Chef, Deputy Head chef, Senior chef, Cook, Junior cook, Apprentice, Dishwasher, Pot and pan washer, Saucemaker/sauté cook, Roast cook, Grill cook, Fry cook, Fish cook, Entrée preparer, Soup cook, Vegetable cook, Pantry supervisor, Spare hand/roundsperson, Pastry cook, Baker, Butcher and Announcer/expediter.

The Dining Room Brigade includes:- *Directeur de la restauration, Directeur de restaurant, Maître d'hôtel, Chef de sale, Chef de rang, Demi-chef de rang, Commis débarrasseur, Commis de suite, Chef d'étage, Chef de vin, Sommelier, Chef Sommelier, Chef Caviste, Serveur de restaurant, Responsable de bar, Chef de bar, Barman, Dame du vestiare, Voituriers*. Only some of these have English translations, including:- General manager, Restaurant manager, Back server, Captain, Wine server, Server, Bar manager, Bartender, and Valet.