

## EATING

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French cuisine is the West's most important and influential style of cooking. With the arguable exception of the Chinese, no other cuisine can compare to French for freshness of ingredients, reliance on natural flavours and the use of refined, often very complex cooking methods. Add to that the typical Parisian's passion for anything connected with the table and you will soon realise what everyone else here already knows: you are in a gourmet's paradise.

The very word 'cuisine', of course, is French in origin – the English 'cooking style' just cannot handle all the nuances – while 'French' conjures up a sophisticated, cultured people who know their arts, including gastronomy. While there is only some truth to that notion (not every Parisian is a walking *Larousse Gastronomique*, the seminal encyclopaedia of French gastronomy), 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.

Do not think for a moment, though, that this national obsession with things culinary and a familiarity with the complexities of *haute cuisine* (high cuisine) means that eating out or dining in a private home here has to be a ceremonious or even formal occasion, one full of pitfalls for the uninitiated. Indeed, approach food and wine with half the enthusiasm that the Parisians themselves do, and you will be warmly received, tutored, encouraged and well fed.

## HISTORY

Up to the Middle Ages, dining – at least for the wealthier classes and at court in Paris – essentially meant sitting around a large table, sawing off hunks of meat with small knives. Peasants and the urban poor subsisted on bread or dumplings made of rye flour and whatever *companaticum* (Latin for 'that which goes with bread') was available in the cauldron forever stewing over the hearth. Even by the time the first French-language cookbook was published by Charles V's head chef, Guillaume Tirel (or Taillevent), in about 1375, menus consisted almost entirely of 'soups' (or 'sops'), 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.

The 16th century was a watershed for French cuisine. When Catherine de Médici, consort to Henri II, arrived in Paris from Florence in 1533, she brought with her a team of

chefs and pastry cooks adept in the subtleties of Italian Renaissance cooking. They introduced such delicacies as aspics, truffles, *quenelles* (dumplings), artichokes, macaroons and puddings to the French court. Catherine's cousin, Marie de Médici, brought even more chefs to Paris when she married Henri IV in 1600. The French cooks, increasingly aware of their rising social status, took the Italians' recipes and sophisticated cooking styles on board, and the rest – to the eternal gratitude of epicures everywhere – is history.

France and its capital enjoyed an era of order and prosperity under Henri IV, who famously wished all of his subjects to have a *poule au pot* (chicken in the pot) every Sunday. Later in the 17th century, the sweet tooth of Louis XIV launched the custom of eating desserts, once reserved for feast days and other celebrations, at the end of a meal.

The most decisive influence on French cuisine at this time, however, was the work of

chef François-Pierre de la Varenne (1618–78), who learned his trade in Marie de Médici's kitchens. La Varenne's cookbook, *Le Cuisinier François* (1651), was a gastronomic landmark for many reasons. It was the first to give instructions for preparing vegetables; it introduced soups in the modern sense, with the 'soup' being more important than the sops it contained; and it discarded bread and bread-crumbs as thickening agents in favour of *roux*, a much more versatile mixture of flour and fat. Most importantly, 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 to disguise it with heavy seasonings.

The 18th century, the so-called Grand Siècle (Great Century) of reason, brought little enlightenment to the French table apart from dishes and sauces named after lords and other royalty by their sycophantic chefs. This was the century when newfangled foodstuffs from the New World – tomatoes, corn, beans, red pepper and especially the potato so integral today in French cuisine – gained currency, and when the fork became a standard part of the table setting. Most important was the new trend to serve dishes in a logical order rather than heaping them in a pyramid on the table all at the same time (see p222).

This century also saw the birth of the restaurant as we know it today. In 1765 one Monsieur A Boulanger opened a small business in rue Bailleur in the 1er, just off rue de Rivoli, selling soups, broths and, later, that old crowd-pleaser, sheep's trotters in a white sauce. Above the door he hung a sign to advertise these *restaurants* (restoratives). Hostelrys and inns did exist at the time, but they only served guests set meals at set times and prices from the *table d'hôte* (host's table), and cafés only offered drinks. Monsieur Boulanger's restaurant is thought to have been the first public place where diners could order a meal from a menu that offered a choice of dishes.

During the French Revolution and the ensuing Reign of Terror, the ovens in the kitchens of the great aristocratic households went cold, and their chefs were driven in tumbrels to the guillotine. But a new avenue soon opened to those who managed to escape execution: employment in the kitchens of the hundreds of restaurants opening to the public in Paris. By 1804 Paris counted some 500 eateries. A typical menu at that time included

12 soups, two dozen hors d'oeuvre, between 12 and 30 dishes of beef, veal, mutton, fowl and game, 24 fish dishes, 12 types of *pâtisserie* (pastries) and 50 desserts.

The first and most important of these new chefs was Marie-Antoine Carême (1784–1833), who set out to establish 'order and taste' in French gastronomy and became personal chef to such luminaries as French statesman Talleyrand, England's Prince Regent and Tsar Alexander I. But to most English speakers, the name Georges-August Escoffier (1846–1935) is more synonymous with *haute cuisine*. Escoffier, nicknamed 'the king of chefs and the chef of kings', was a reformer who simplified or discarded decorations and garnishes, shortened menus and streamlined food preparation in kitchens, having taken his cue from Prosper Montagné, one of the great French chefs of all time and author of *Larousse Gastronomique*.

The most important development in French gastronomy in the 20th century was the arrival of *nouvelle cuisine* (new cuisine), a reaction against Escoffier's *grande cuisine* (great cuisine). This low-fat style of cooking eliminated many sauces in favour of stock reductions, prepared dishes in such a way as to emphasise the inherent textures and colours of the ingredients, and served them artistically on large plates. *Nouvelle cuisine* made a big splash in the diet-conscious 1970s and '80s, when it was also known as *cuisine minceur* (lean cuisine), and its proponents, including chefs Paul Bocuse, Jean and Pierre Troisgros and Michel Guérard, became the new saints of the grazing faithful from Paris to Perth.

By the turn of the millennium, however, this revolutionary new style of cooking had fallen out of favour and new genres and styles were being developed and explored. First came the concept of *fooding*, formed by combining the English words 'food' and 'feeling' and used to describe the art of appreciating not only the contents of your plate but also what's going on around you – ambience, décor, 'scene'. Before long it was the word in the mouths of *branché* (trendy) Parisians and within a year an annual Semaine du Fooding (Fooding Week) was established. Fooding guide books were written, a fooding dictionary published and *Le Nouvel Observateur* started calling its annual restaurant review 'Le Guide Fooding'.

But this 'fusion confusion' just wasn't enough and within a few more years journalists at the now defunct lifestyle magazine *Zurban* were again slicing and dicing words. Their new creation was the term *bistronomie*,

## SMOKE-FREE PARIS

And they said it could never happen in the capital of a country where more people smoke (and eat more saturated fats and exercise less) than almost anyone else in the developed world. On 1 January 2008 France expanded a year-old ban on smoking in public places (schools, hospitals, offices etc) to include all bars, restaurants, night clubs, and even – *sacré bleu!* – sacrosanct cafés. It's true that, unlike their London equivalents, café and bar owners here have the option of installing a hermetically sealed smoking room covering up to 20% of the café's surface area, though no food or drink can be served within. And hotel guestrooms – not the lobby or other public spaces – are a separate matter, something that has caused no end of confusion even in the industry (see p332). But one thing is clear: a fag with that *café crème* or Armagnac is no longer an option (at least indoors). Those of you who still engage in the retro habit of smoking tobacco have two choices: stub out or step out. And, boy, can the rest of us now breathe easy.