

This is my anecdotal treatment of bouillabaisse and cassoulet, from *Through Darkest Gaul with Trencher and Tastevin*, written in 1997. M. Daguin has sold his hotel in Auch; the Paris restaurants I mention are much the same.

Bouillabaisse, Cassoulet

*Bouillabaisse, cassoulet,
Their making is not paltry play.
Cassoulet, bouillabaisse,
Bad victual doth the fool abase.*

Freely translated from the langue d'oc ☺

Bouillabaisse and *cassoulet* are two classic peasant dishes that have been promoted from “folk song” to “art song”. Folk music may be handed down from generation to generation, but the songs are different every time you hear them. Although there are certain accepted conventions, each event is determined by the forces available and the inspiration of the performers: no one complains if they slip in a variation, or even make up an extra verse. So long as the tradition is maintained to a degree that satisfies the audience, the hook will not reach out from the edge of the stage.

Art songs, on the other hand, are meticulously written out. The composer is God. Not only the notes are indicated, but also the dynamics and tempos and the manner in which they should be altered. Overlaying this are further conventions introduced by those performers who are particularly revered. Sometimes these may contradict each other, and then fierce battles rage among their followers.

Ardent purists in both genres are agreed on only one thing: you do not feed the song into a sausage factory to be ground up and spit out as Musak. Barbara Allen and the Maid of the Mill both lose their virtue when they bed down with pop stars.

—But what has this to do with geese and gurnards? you rightly ask. Classic folk recipes were pragmatic solutions to particular problems. When the fishermen had disposed of their catch, what to do with the ugly little suckers that no one wanted? When the Golden Egg—the *paté de fois gras*—had been extracted for the *seigneur*, how did the farmer and his wife set about cooking their own goose?

BEFORE domestic freezers, fish stews were the art of utilizing the ephemeral. They could be great feasts for special occasions but when you were hungry, whatever fish or shellfish you had went into the pot. (Just ask a peasant, if you can find one.) Waverley Root, in his classic *The Food of France*, devotes a dozen pages to demonstrating that “each locality [has] its own variation of the dish. . . [T]he exact constituents of any particular *bouillabaisse* may depend. . . on what the nets have brought up that day.” The unsightly *rascasse* appears to be the only essential ingredient, the stone that the builders had rejected becoming yet again the chief cornerstone. Years later in his *Provincetown Seafood Cookbook*, Howard Mitcham, after hitch-hiking on a fishing boat, would proudly tell of the memorable stew he made with a mountain of “trash” fish he had snatched from the swooping gulls.

On Cape Cod we had the clambake, in which various mollusks and crustaceans were cooked in a hole in the ground (together with corn-on-the-cob, potatoes in their skins, and whatever) on a bed of stones first heated by a fire which had been built over them. On these occasions I ate lobsters with the casual abandon of a young landlubber devouring hot dogs. But we had no equivalent hodgepodge which was boiled up with fish and vegetables, except for the hot spicy Portuguese stews that were off limits to us little WASPS-in-training. It would be years before I tasted the foods whose mysterious aromas had wafted up from the kitchen down the hill.

MY eventual search for the ambrosial *bouillabaisse* met with mixed success. Ten years ago Mary and I were in Provence for a heavenly week during which I spend the nights recording Barre Phillips and Barry Guy improvising on their bass fiddles in Barre's Romanesque chapel. The B&B at which we stayed served wonderful dinners, but I had set my sights on the ultimate experience. An hour's drive away over the coastal mountains at Lavandou was a Michelin-starred restaurant whose listed specialty was the sacred stew. Nothing for it but to make the pilgrimage.

Arriving in good time for lunch, we learned that their *bouillabaisse* required twenty-four hours notice. By this time I had vowed not to be defeated, and so we made the necessary arrangements and stayed on for a well-prepared but anticlimactic set menu. The next day, another long drive over the mountains to the coast. The occasion was already marred by my admission that the cost of a *bouillabaisse* for two at this gastronomic temple was 800 francs. It had better be perfect.

It wasn't. After a long wait an enormous cauldron of over-stewed fish arrived, with large rings of tough squid and a double handful of tiny crabs, each containing about a teaspoon of meat. The broth was thin and anemic, not remotely as fishy as the *soupe de poisson* we regularly made at home. But the quantity seemed endless—Santa's sack would not have served as a doggy bag.

While my stomach was swelling to meet the challenge, Mary went off to the powder room and returned looking bemused. She had just had a surreal experience. While she was combing her hair, the waiter had entered, put his arms around her waist, and started to kiss the back of her neck. She faced the quandary of the functionally mono-lingual: a high-school French qualification had not taught her what to say to an unwelcome *libertin*. (Today such behavior even on the Riviera would probably raise his voice by an octave.) She left immediately—he offered no resistance—and returned to a meal which was scarcely more welcome. We puzzled over what to do, if anything, and were thoroughly nonplused. Our mood was not improved when *Madame* at our B&B informed us that she could have done a real *bouillabaisse* at a fraction of the price. When the scene of our *contretemps* disappeared from the next Michelin, we wondered if our wanton waiter had finally been, as it were, exposed.

FIVE years later, in Paris for a performance of the Berio *Sinfonia* at the *Theatre des Champs Élysées*, I tried again. This time I zeroed in on Port Alma, another Michelin-starred restaurant just a couple of blocks from the theater. The Big B was on the menu for 300 francs. I ordered it for the following evening.

—I am sorry, Monsieur, said the waiter, but a minimum of two is necessary. The fish are too large for only one.

A good sign. They didn't use chunks or fillets.

—That's not a problem. Prepare it for two and I will eat nothing else.

The waiter looked discreetly appreciative.

—Very good, Monsieur.

The next day I skipped lunch. By dinner time I could have devoured a raw sea urchin, spines first. The fish arrived on a platter for my inspection, sleek and bright-eyed. There were no large shellfish. Good. To me, a crab or a lobster perched on top of a *bouillabaisse* is an excrescence. It is no more appropriate there than next to a steak, as in that American *lusus naturae*, Surf 'n' Turf. These noble *Crusacea* deserve one's undivided attention. In a cauldron fit for a feast they enrich the flavor and are not disproportionate, but in a small dish served at table they often return to the kitchen scarcely disturbed, having been placed there to show the rest of the diners that the host has a long purse. One of my fantasies is getting to know a *restaurateur* who will allow me to dine every night off the lazily-picked lobsters sent back to his kitchen.

After a suitable interval the fish returned cooked, still on the bone. They were presented again, piping hot, to show that each had been added at the correct stage. The top fillets were then deftly removed and served with a little of the liquid. The broth was robust and flavorsome, indicating that the chef had followed Root's preferred practice of cooking the fish in bouillon—fish soup, even. If the dish is made with water, as in Lavandou (unless in large quantities, with a whole phylum of fish), the broth can be anemic.

Next came the soup in a separate bowl, thick and rich. It was accompanied by a strong hot *rouille*, by no means to be taken for granted in Paris, or even Province, where it must often be requested.

One lap of the course was covered, my own lap extended. The rest of the fish, which had been kept warm in the kitchen, followed. I loosened my belt and began again. I could feel the eyes of the waiters upon me, as if they had made private wagers among themselves. There went the last morsel of fish. Then came another bowl of soup. It seemed even larger than the first. More in the tureen. Would I reach the finish line? I popped a button and breasted the tape. Thank God I'd ordered only half a bottle of *Muscadet*. No *entrée*. No *Badoit*. No desert. No coffee. No *petits fours*. But I had single-handedly negotiated the rivulets and rapids of the *Grand Bouillabaisse*. There in the bubbling current, fin-to-fin with the *saint-pierre*, the *rouget* and the *rascasse*, swam the *merlan*. The whiting had come home to spawn.

IN Paris later for a ten-day visit, my ambitions were more modest. Michelin and Gault Millau went to the bottom of the stack and up came Gaston Wijnen's *Discovering Paris Bistros* (translated from the Dutch) and Sandra A. Gustafson's insalubriously titled *Cheap Eats in Paris*. The former, though eight years old, was new to me. The latter had been a useful companion through several editions: it led me to several of my long-standing favorites, including two Meccas for American tourists, Chez Denise and Ma Bourgogne, which nevertheless continue to attract the natives, the latter brasserie even refusing all credit cards.

Both books strongly recommended a bistro in the 7th Arrondissement which specialized in seafood: Le Petit Niçois. They agreed that its *bouillabaisse*, available as part of a 155-franc menu, was an outstanding bargain. Wijnen described its exact method of preparation in such detail as to indicate that his information came straight from the *bouche du cheval*: seven varieties of fish cut into large hunks, plus a few mollusks and crustaceans; the firmer ones marinated for several hours in olive oil with onions, tomatoes, garlic, fennel, parsley, thyme, bay leaves, pepper, orange peel and saffron; then cold water added and boiled for seven or eight minutes; then the softer fish added and cooked another seven minutes. It seemed a practical, labor-saving way for a bistro to prepare an evening's supply. But, whether kept warm or re-heated, it would continue to cook. Better to arrive early. As for the end-of-evening bacteria count, when dining out in France I rely on statistics. An equation which includes both my age and the frequency of my visits gives me an excellent chance of dying from some other cause.

On a Saturday night, a reservation was essential. It proved to be a cheerful, nautical place in blue and white. American accents could be heard from several directions. A couple at the next table had evidently been guided there by *Cheap Eats*; they too were tucking into the eggplant fritters. Dry and vaguely commercial in flavor, they proved to be a disappointment. In fact, it was superfluous to have ordered a first course at all. The *bouillabaisse* arrived in a large copper saucepan full of chunks of fish, with a few small clams and half a soft-shell crab. It was not elegantly laid out, but the single portion was enough for two, at a fraction of the cost of my two Michelin feasts. The chunks came out of the pan without falling to bits, they maintained their individual flavor, and the broth was a creditable fish soup in its own right, with generous bowls of *rouille*, dry toast and the proper grated *gruyère* that goes stringy in the soup and dribbles down your chin. Available on the *à la carte* menu at under 100 francs, it's got to be the cheapest respectable *bouillabaisse* in Paris, if not in all of France. My other two courses were unnecessary, both the fritters and the *cantal*, which proved to be inferior to the ripe rindy cheese served at Ma Bourgogne in the place des Vosges. No matter. I would return to Le Petit Niçois if their fish stew were the only item on the menu.

IF a *bouillabaisse* is a watercolor which must be executed with *élan*, a *cassoulet* is an oil painting, built up layer by layer and allowed to set between its successive stages. At its zenith it may become a masterpiece, like Lindsey and Charles Shere's Cassoulet for Groundhog Day in *The Open Hand Celebration Cookbook*, spread out over a week and shared each year with the same circle of friends. At the other end of the scale is the version in the London Cordon Bleu *Casseroles* cookbook which, though it includes no cans, bottles or packets, can be prepared from scratch within a few hours and is a recognizable and tasty approximation. In between are successive levels of complexity which yield increasing rewards in accordance with the excellence of the ingredients and the skill and patience of the cook.

As with *bouillabaisse*, there is no general agreement as to exactly what goes into it. According to Waverley Root, it all began in a continuously simmering *cassole* on the back of the stove, "serving as a sort of catch-all for anything edible that the cook might toss into the pot." That was possible when wood-fired stoves were constantly kept alight. Some *cassoulets* within living memory have claimed a twenty-year life span. Eighty years ago in Kentucky, when my father was a circuit-riding preacher, he was served a delicious soup by one of his

parishioners. When he asked her for the recipe, she threw up her hands and exclaimed, “Lor’! There ain’t no recipe for soup! It jes’ *accumulates!*”

The lowest common denominator that Root found was that “...it is a dish of white beans...cooked in a pot with some sort of pork and sausage. After that it is a case of fiddler’s choice.” Everything depends on the fiddler. The Toulouse tradition, including preserved goose, has become the School of Pagannini, in which any substitution is regarded as anathema. Such controversies, although they seem to echo the minute doctrinal divisions which have led armies to mutual slaughter, nevertheless insure that, at certain times and places, the quality of what is served will be very high indeed, whatever school it follows. As with the making of wine, indifference as to detail leads to an indifferent product.

THE first serious *cassoulet* I remember was largely wasted on me. A dozen years ago I was in Auch for a late-night concert with the electro acoustic vocal quartet, Electric Phoenix. On Sunday I escorted them all to lunch at M. André Daguin’s great Hotel de France, where I carefully nibbled my way through a *menu degustation* of Gascony specialties. The maestro himself came out from the kitchen and consulted over our collective menus. Two of our company were vegetarians and, instead of fobbing them off with something simple and boring, he inquired in detail about their likes and dislikes.

The next night after the concert we were all taken down a back street to an ancient room on an upper floor, with no sign to tell us where we were. Seated on benches along trestle tables, we drank darkly dense red wine from dusty unlabeled bottles and waited for we knew not what. After an eternity, bubbling golden-cruled pots appeared on the table and something resembling Boston baked beans with generous hunks of meat and sausage was ladled out. It was very tasty, but it seemed a bit primitive after the elegant repast of the previous day, served on fine china and rounded off with fifty-year-old *armagnac*. One day I would learn that M. Daguin was himself one of the great exponents of *cassoulet*. I would also realize that up those worn wooden stairs in a darkly beamed refectory we had been allowed to share in an ancient ritual. Like John Wesley in an upper room in Aldersgate, I felt my heart strangely warmed.

LATER I would begin to make my own *cassoulet* based largely on Richard Olney’s recipe in *The French Menu Cookbook*. Constructed in four stages which can be completed over a couple of days, it calls for home-made confit of goose; a bean stew made with pork rind, green bacon, a pig’s foot and garlic sausage; and a lamb stew with bony hunks of shoulder, onions, carrots, tomatoes, garlic and white wine. These separate recipes are then combined and baked slowly in a pot, topped with bread crumbs and dribbled with goose fat so as to form a rich brown crust.

I’m afraid I overdo the crust. I cook the *cassoulet* in a square oven-size three-inch-deep earthenware dish so as to maximize the surface, breaking it up several times so that it continually reforms and enriches, ultimately making up a substantial proportion of the recipe. (It must, of course, be topped up frequently so that it doesn’t dry out.) I have been severely reprimanded for this; it is the wrong shape of pot. I admit that overall texture probably suffers and, when a wonderful aroma fills the house, flavor can be subtracted from the final

product. I hereby confess my wrongdoing. But like a good Catholic I shall doubtless sin again.

However you make it, it will tempt you to excess. Paula Wolfert's search for the perfect *cassoulet* as detailed in *The Cooking of South-West France* turns me as green as a casaba with envy. She cites Prosper Montagné, author of the first *Larousse Gastronomique*, who once came across a sign on a bootmaker's shop in Carcassonne reading, *Closed on Account of Cassoulet*. The making, the eating or the recuperation? Perhaps all three.

BACK in Paris for an extended visit after several years of *cassoulet* construction, I was curious to find out how it fared in a restaurant. By this time I had moved from my elegant 1st Arrondissement hotel to an even more comfortable rented room in a large top-floor apartment near the south-west edge of the Latin Quarter, for an amazing 200 francs a night. (Once again, Sawday's *Guide to French Bed and Breakfast* had made itself indispensable.) My landlady entered into my researches and recommended a restaurant just along the street.

In the end I was nudged in the direction of Lous Landès in the 14th Arrondissement by both Michelin and Gault Millau, the latter pronouncing its version "world-class". Which world? It proved to be watery, with scraps of confit, a small round hard stick of sausage that might have held a mortise-and-tenon joint together, and undercooked dry starchy broad beans. (One cookery pundit, claiming that there is progress in classic cuisine, cites as proof the fact that after the *haricot* was imported from Spain in the 19th century, the *cassoulet* was no longer made with broad beans.)

But the restaurant was modestly elegant, the service was suave and friendly, and the meal was rescued by tiny wild black olives from Nice, an excellent cream of asparagus soup, and a robust prize-winning Chateau de Diusse Madiran 1992 which, at just over 100 francs, was almost the cheapest wine on the menu. After finishing with a summer fruit *sorbet* that was as sharp and refreshing as a traditional English summer pudding, I was prepared to forgive them.

The next day I reported to Madame that my quest had not been successful. She in turn confessed that our discussion had aroused both her hunger and her curiosity, and that she had gone that same night to our neighborhood restaurant and, for the first time in years, had eaten a *cassoulet*. It was, she said, excellent. And the *ambiance*, she asserted with a wink, was *très sympathique*.

I was now under a moral obligation to sample a *cassoulet* on two successive nights. I strolled down to find the restaurant, which went under the unpromising name of *Le Refuge du Passé*. *Passé* indeed. Through the window I could see that the walls were covered with camp theatrical posters and curled photos of luvvies in eternal embrace. It would have made a perfect set for La Cage aux Folles.

That evening the restaurant filled up rapidly with several parties—all straight—who seemed to be anticipating an entertainment of some sort. The *maitre de*, who was as camp as his posters, greeted us all effusively. Ordering from a set menu, I started with a lentil salad topped with a lightly poached egg. Tasty. Then the *cassoulet*, obviously superior to that of the previous night as soon as it reached the table. The texture was creamy; the beans held their shape until bitten into and then dissolved; there was a generous proportion of confit; and

the sausage was thick, juicy and well garlicked. No trace of crust, but that's hard to manage when it's reheated to order.

In the meantime our *maitre de* had returned and was chatting up the tables one by one, gradually pulling them into a collective farce. The skill with which he played us off against each other suggested that he must have spent years on the stage before retiring to the wings. My dessert arrived, an over-the-top dish of vanilla ice cream with syrupy *mirabelle* plums, flamed with *eau de vie*. Cloyingly rich, but appropriate to the occasion.

When everyone had been served, the chef came out and was subjected to a well-polished patter of insults from the *maitre de*. They did a Laurel and Hardy routine in which they slagged each other off, taking turns being on top. I was pulled in along with the other diners, unable to grasp the jokes but nevertheless having to respond with ambiguous pantomime that drew laughs which I couldn't interpret. It was all rather surreal but lots of fun. Everyone went away happy. Good food, amusing entertainment. It wasn't what I'd had in mind, but I wouldn't have missed it for the world.

Meanwhile, I must revisit that Upper Room in Auch before they start serving Honker MacNugget Beanburgers.

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Le Petite Niçois, 10, rue Amélie (7th) Tel: 01 45 51 83 65

Lous Landès, 157 avenue Maine (14th) ☎ 01 45 43 08 04

Le Refuge du Passé, 32, rue du Fer à Moulin (5th) ☎ 01 47 07 29 91

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