

# Pigging out in Provence

Forget about beastly Libyans and irksome Nicaraguans. This week's really important news comes from France's magnificent countryside. Grapevines are beginning to flower; garlic is budding; olives are sprouting and spears of white asparagus push up triumphantly from the greening fields.

From the sunny hills of Provence to the forested slopes of northern Alsace, spring is working its magic across France. Happy plump *vâches* are lowing "mu"; cheerful *poulets* are going "puque-puque", eyed with ardor by randy *cogs*. Frisky goats are making divine *chèvre* cheese; full-figured porkers will soon become noble *saucissons*.

Down in D'Artagnan's home of Gascony, venerable Armagnac and soft Roquefort are about to come out of the caves in which they have been maturing. On the flower-covered Mediterranean coast, saffron, the soul of the fish soups *bouillabaisse* and *bourride*, will soon blossom.

Ah, distant mirages. Back from two weeks of my annual gastronomic pilgrimage to France, I am now languishing on the Mahatma Gandhi diet. Not 15 days ago, I was spotted high up in the French Alps, lunching with elan in the warm sunshine. A friend remarked of me, as I sipped my Beaujolais, "there is a truly happy man." Amen.

Now I grimly masticate cardboard apples and naugahyde lettuce.

Nowhere on earth can you eat as in France. In most other countries you eat to stay alive. In France, each lunch and dinner can be a cantata of rapture and joy. Among the French, food is as much an art as painting or music. Only China, Thailand, Belgium — and perhaps Italy — share this noble art of grand cuisine.

Alas, French food does not travel. Cooking techniques alone do not account for the uniqueness of French cuisine. The basic quality of its food is a factor equally important. Where else, for example, could one see, as I did, an award plaque in a small food shop, "Winner of the 1984 Grand National Carrot Competition"? Where else would one of the nation's greatest chefs kill himself over a failed sauce?

French bread, that supreme collaboration of man and nature, cannot be reproduced anywhere else. Cheese in France bears little resemblance to what we get here. Unlike the styrofoam imitations we have in North America, fruits and vegetables in France have savor, texture and life. True French

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food must be eaten fresh, in season and in France.

Travel in North America and you have the same bleak food from coast to coast. In France, every few miles seem to bring a new regional treat, and a new reason for halting for a meal. Needless to say, travel in the French countryside can be slow and broadening. I consult my special gastronomic map, showing each area's specialties. An hour to decide on where to lunch, two to sup, a *digestif* and then time to think about dinner.

Now, a word about desserts. At home, I never indulge. But in France desserts cannot be resisted. Just when you think you will fall over and die if another crumb goes down your throat, the dessert wagon rolls up to the table. *Tartes, babas, gâteaux, mousses, éclairs* — and that most dangerous of all treats, the *île flottante*, an island of soft meringue floating on a small sea of heavy cream, egg yolks, vanilla, sugar, caramel and cognac.

How, I kept wondering with mounting envy, do the usually slim French manage to pack away two meals a day without ending up looking like the Michelin Man? I can only conclude that there is, deep in Gallic blood, a yet undiscovered genetic factor that counteracts fat, carbohydrates, booze, nicotine and funny toilet paper.

The Soviets may have a bigger army than France; American buildings may be higher and Japanese microchips faster, but when it comes to food and soul satisfaction, France is the world's superpower: *Le Big Numero Un*. Anyone who doubts this truism should have a splendid outdoor lunch in the warm spring sunshine of Provence. Sip a 30-year-old Armagnac, savor the aroma of wild thyme on the air, and reflect if you would really not rather be eating cold stew in Gorki, burgers in Toledo or horrid raw fish in Wakayama.

For me, the choice was clear as a glass of Vichy. But all good things must end and I steeled myself to begin my diet on the return flight home. The Air France stewardess glided over to where I sat. "Monsieur, perhaps a slice of *foie gras*?"