

THEY EAT HORSES DON'T THEY?

'An entertaining
tour from adultery
to the Paris Metro.'

THE TIMES

'Intriguing,
cheeky and
entertaining.'

SPECTATOR

THE TRUTH ABOUT THE FRENCH



PIU MARIE EATWELL



PIU MARIE EATWELL

[Start Reading](#)
[About this Book](#)
[About the Author](#)
[Reviews](#)
[Table of Contents](#)



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*To Alek, Oscar and Noah,
my Franco-British sons,
who cheer for France and England
(depending on who's winning)*

CONTENTS

Cover
Welcome Page
Display Options Notice
Dedication
Prologue

Apéritif

The archetypal Frenchman wears a beret and striped shirt and rides a bicycle festooned with onions

Part 1

The King of Cuisines and the Cuisine of Kings
Myths about French Food and Drink

French cuisine is the best in the world
They eat horses, don't they?
... and frogs' legs... and snails
The French are the world's no. 1 consumers of cheese
The French consume a very great deal of garlic
The French don't eat fast food
The French drink wine with every meal
The French don't get drunk

Part 2

Trop Belle Pour Toi
Myths about French Women

French women are the most stylish in the world
French women don't get fat
French women are kitchen goddesses
French women don't shave

Part 3

Dangerous Liaisons
Myths about French Sex, Marriage and Children

The French are obsessed with sex
The French are uniquely tolerant of adultery
The French habitually have large families
French children don't throw food

Part 4

Merde alors!

Myths about French Plumbing

French toilets are repellent
The French don't wash
Every French bathroom has a bidet

Part 5

Bof! Je m'en Fous!

Myths about French Manners

The French are uncommonly rude
French people always kiss when they greet you
The French are a nation of inveterate smokers
The French are cruel to animals

Part 6

Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité

Myths about French History and Society

The French are a nation of Revolutionaries
France is an egalitarian society
The French don't work very hard
The French are a nation of cheese-eating surrender monkeys

Part 7

A Land of Cultural Exceptions

Myths about French Culture

The French are paranoid about their language
French pop music is irredeemably naff
French films are uniformly pretentious

Part 8

City of Light

Myths about Paris

The Left Bank is a haven of writers and intellectuals
The Paris Métro stinks
Paris is the European capital of canine excreta

Part 9

La France Profonde

Myths about the French on Holiday

France shuts down for August

French beaches are polluted

French beaches are packed with topless women

French villages are so quaint

French country style is so chic

Part 10

The Best of Enemies

Myths about the *Entente Cordiale*

The French think British food is revolting

The English have taken over the French countryside... and the French have taken over English cities

The British are the champions of gardening

Digestif

Acknowledgements

Notes

Bibliography

Picture Captions and Acknowledgements

About this Book

Reviews

About the Author

An Invitation from the Publisher

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PROLOGUE

It was on a sunny August bank holiday that I checked into a hotel in the Latin Quarter of Paris for a weekend break. Almost ten years later, I am still in France. The story is the usual one for many expats in France: meet, fall in love, marry. I never did get to stay in the hotel in the Latin Quarter (spending that whole first weekend with my future husband). But I did get to live in several dodgy apartments in the seedier *arrondissements* of Paris. Over the years, I have spent sweltering summers queuing in traffic jams on the motorways leading to the French coast, and many a winter in the deepest Gallic countryside. Now ensconced in a quiet French village, that first Paris bank holiday seems a world away. Another life.

During my first few years in France, I was excited and enticed by everything around me that seemed quintessentially French. A freshly baked croissant – how French! The rudeness of the waiter at the bistro – how French! The thin and glamorous women who tottered down the Parisian boulevards – how French! A glass of wine at lunchtime – how French! Shopping in the local market – how French!

Gradually, however, I began to notice cracks in this ‘French’ experience. Not all, or even most, of the women I saw were particularly beautiful or glamorous. Every so often, there was a polite waiter. The croissant in the café was tired and crusty. There were McDonald’s and other fast-food joints jostling for space beside the cute bistros, with their checked red tablecloths. The supermarkets were stuffed with rows of canned goods. Somehow, however, I ignored these things. They weren’t really ‘French’. The beautiful and glamorous women, the freshly baked croissant, the local market, on the other hand – all these things *were* ‘French’. It was as though I yearned after, needed this romantic, glamorous, ‘French’ world to which to aspire, closing my eyes to the reality which was, often, very different.

But the fast-food joints, ordinary-looking women, and supermarkets with rubbishy food were there, all the same. They were, unmistakably, ‘French’. What they were not part of was what I considered the ‘French experience’.

The more I considered this ‘French experience’, the more it seemed to me to consist of certain specific ideas. For example, it most definitely included rude waiters, bistro-style glamorous women, smoking and dangerous liaisons. It most definitely did not include fast food, fat women and sandwich lunches. Yet these were things I encountered every day.

And so gradually, I began to see around me more and more the *exceptions* to the so-called ‘French experience’. I began to see how my ideas about France and the French, although some of them were true, were also often a construction of my imagination. I asked around my English-speaking friends back home, and found that they shared a lot of these same preconceptions. And not only that, but there was a whole sub-genre of writing, a minor industry of ‘Froglit’ – mainly consisting of books written by foreigners who had spent a couple of years in Paris – busy propagating, promulgating, and disseminating the myth of the ‘French experience’. So I listed these common ideas about the French in my notebook and set out to investigate them, poring over tomes in the local libraries and talking to everybody English or French – that I could persuade to give me some minutes of their time. Were these myths about the French true or false? The results, as you will see, were often quite

unexpected.

THE ARCHETYPAL FRENCHMAN WEARS A BERET AND STRIPED SHIRT AND RIDES A BICYCLE FESTOONED WITH ONIONS

'You aren't one of those French onion sellers, are you?' the woman asked Hercule Poirot.
AGATHA CHRISTIE, ENGLISH CRIME WRITER (1890–1976), *THE VEILED LADY*, 1923

This is a myth that everybody knows, few believe, and even fewer will admit to having witnessed. This is not surprising, since if you do recall having seen a Frenchman wearing a beret and striped shirt on a bike festooned with onions, you are very likely either to frequent raff fancy-dress parties or to be very advanced in years. In my ten years of living in France, I have never seen any Frenchman on a bike festooned with onions, and only occasionally the odd ageing artist by the *Sacré Coeur* in a striped shirt and beret (and those clearly donned for the benefit of the tourists). And yet the image is ingrained in the Anglo-American imagination as that of the stereotypical Frenchman. Where, exactly, does it come from?

The answer is that the image is a British invention. It does, however, ultimately derive from a Frenchman: one Henri Ollivier. In 1828, Monsieur Ollivier, a Breton peasant farmer, made the hazardous trip to the shores of Albion from his home – the fishing village of Roscoff – to travel around door to door, selling his strings of onions to British housewives. He made such a packet that many of his fellow Roscoff peasant labourers quickly followed in his suit. Soon, hundreds of them were crossing the Channel every year with their harvest of onions, which they would store in rented barns while they travelled from village to village peddling their wares on rickety old bicycles. The English called them 'Onion Johnnies', since most of them seemed to be called 'Jean', and some of them were as young as teenagers. They would arrive in July and depart the following December or January, sleeping in barns on top of their piles of onions. This 'unofficial' Anglo-French trade boomed until the outbreak of the Second World War. It peaked in the late 1920s – when 9,000 tons of onions were sold in England by 1,400 Johnnies – before gradually petering out in the postwar period. For many English people, the Onion Johnny was as close to France or the French as they ever got. So it is no wonder he became in British minds the image of the stereotypical Frenchman, immortalized on everything from packets of cheese to the TV series *'Allo 'Allo!* This was ironic because, hailing as they did from Brittany, most of the original Onion Johnnies did not actually speak French. Breton being a Celtic language related to Welsh, the itinerant costermongers naturally bonded with the Welsh as a united fringe against the Anglo-French enemy. Even to this day some former Onion Johnnies continue to meet up with their old Celtic pals at that forum for self-assertion against colonial oppression, the Welsh Eisteddfod.

Onion Johnnies wore the *béret*, the traditional 'cloth cap' of the French peasantry. Though it originated in the Southwest of France, the Basque beret being worn by shepherds in the Pyrenees from the seventeenth century onwards. In the twentieth century the beret came

be associated with left-wing intellectuals and radical artists, including, most famously, Pablo Picasso and Salvador Dalí. It also became, in the 1960s, a powerful symbol of rebellion and radical chic: Che Guevara was rarely seen without one (the image of his trademark black beret version with a red star found a post-revolutionary afterlife on millions of posters and T-shirts the world over), and the beret became the accessory *de choix* of radical and paramilitary groupings as diverse as the Black Panthers in the USA, the Provisional IRA in Northern Ireland, and the Basque separatist group ETA in Spain. Until the 1970s the beret, along with the cloth cap, was one of the types of headgear traditionally worn by film directors, until it was ousted by the now-ubiquitous American baseball cap.



In France nowadays, though, berets are seldom to be seen – except on the occasion of an octogenarian playing *pétanque* in a dusty village of the Southwest. Certainly not in Paris, where it would just be... well, *pas comme il faut*.*

* Even so, there are exceptional circumstances where the beret is still *de rigueur*: for example, berets are sometimes worn by French rugby fans (particularly at away games in Britain), presumably to advertise their national allegiance.

The average French workman these days is just as likely to be wearing a *casquette*, or baseball cap, turned jauntily backwards in the manner of his favourite rap star, as the traditional headgear of the French peasantry. In July 2012, the last traditional French beret manufacturer in the Southwest was bought out in the nick of time, saving the jobs of the

twenty-odd remaining artisan beret-makers.¹ The beret is nowadays mainly used as an item of army uniform, and as such is still going strong around the world. In fact, it is a crowning irony that today's principal market for the ultimate sartorial symbol of the nation of 'cheese eating surrender monkeys' (see [here](#)) is... the US Army.*²At the Opening Ceremony of the 2012 Olympic Games in London, it was the American athletes who sported the beret. The French team – somewhat unsportingly – did not make an appearance on bikes with beret striped shirts and onions, but rather in outfits created by that ambassador of French chic, the German sportswear brand Adidas.

* Though even the US Army is beginning to phase out the beret in favour of the cheaper and more practical baseball cap. In June 2011, the Pentagon announced that the US land army was to renounce the beret in favour of the cap for ordinary workwear, keeping the beret only for ceremonial use. The move was welcomed by the troops. 'I can't stand a wet sock on my head,' was the comment of one officer to the *Army Times*.

Onion Johnnies also frequently wore striped black or blue and white boat-necked shirts, the traditional garb of Breton fishermen. The Breton shirt was created as an official garment of the French Navy in 1858, according to tradition because the stripes made it easier to spot a man overboard. They were not considered remotely stylish at the time (striped garments were also worn by lepers and convicts). In a display of tricolour-tinted nostalgia, the original Navy shirt featured 21 stripes, one for each of Napoleon's victories. The striped shirt was spotted on Breton fishermen by Coco Chanel on a weekend break to Deauville and inspired a nautical collection by her in 1917, subsequently becoming one of the most famous fashion icons in the world. Once an item of peasant garb – a sign of the outcast and dispossessed – the striped shirt now became the ultimate in modern chic, sported by the likes of Brigitte Bardot, Jean Seberg and Jeanne Moreau. It has subsequently been rehashed and reinterpreted hundreds of times by fashion houses from Gucci to Givenchy, incarnating everything from the hunky sailor as gay icon in Jean-Paul Gaultier's 1993 campaign for the perfume *Le Male*, to the retro innocence of a traditional childhood in the classic child's yellow and striped fisherman's coat by *Petit Bateau*.

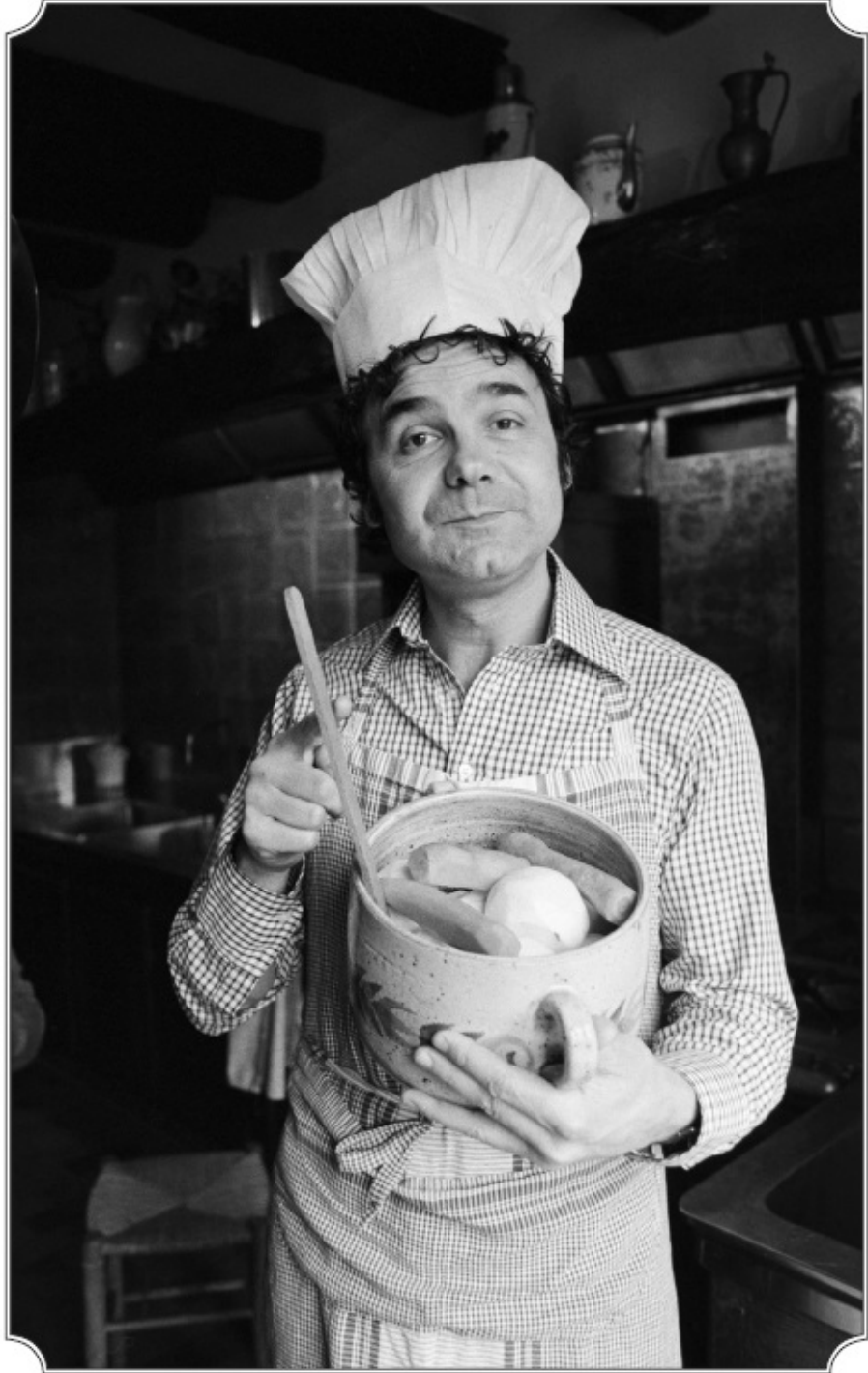
Today, however, Onion Johnnies have all but disappeared from the British landscape. After the Second World War, increased competition from rival producers and English protectionism, together with the fact that wandering Johnnies did not qualify for the new French postwar state welfare benefits, meant that most hung up their berets. Now there are only a handful left who regularly make the trip to sell onions door to door in English streets. Today's Onion Johnnies, however, are as likely to send a round-robin by e-mail to alert customers to their arrival, and make their rounds in a van (although they might keep a bicycle in the back for special appearances). The Onion Johnnies have been immortalized with their own museum in Roscoff (*La Maison des Johnnies et de l'oignon*): here one can see fading black and white photographs of this curious, all-but-forgotten second French invasion of England, have a master class in onion-plaiting by a real Onion Johnny, and listen to nostalgic folk songs and poems (all with a strong onion theme to bring tears to the eyes). There is even an annual Roscoff Onion Festival, where local delicacies such as onion tart and onion crêpes can be sampled. Most powerful of all, the image of Onion Johnny lives on in the minds of millions of Japanese, American and British tourists, as the quintessential mythical Frenchman.

The French for their part are entirely nonplussed by the foreign stereotype of the Onion

Johnny. Given that the original Johnnies were nationalistic Bretons who considered the French an alien race, this is hardly surprising. It is as though the national stereotype of an Englishman were a Welshman selling leeks with a daffodil tucked behind his ear. An absurd thought. But then, the French invented the philosophical concept of 'the Absurd' and the novelist Albert Camus, its most famous proponent, could hardly have come up with a more meaninglessly random national stereotype. In its absurdity if nothing else, the image of the Onion Johnny is archetypically French.



Myth Evaluation: *False*



PART 1

THE KING OF CUISINES AND THE CUISINE OF KINGS

MYTHS ABOUT FRENCH FOOD AND DRINK

FRENCH CUISINE IS THE BEST IN THE WORLD



Lunch kills half of Paris, supper the other half.
CHARLES-LOUIS DE SECONDAT, BARON DE MONTESQUIEU (1689–1755)

It has been taken as gospel for many years that French cuisine is the best in the world. Whether it is regional, bourgeois or *haute cuisine* (and in truth, these all feed off each other) French cuisine is the *crème de la crème* of the world's gastronomic heritage, unbeatable for its distinguished history, refinement and *savoir-faire*. The priority accorded by the French to what they ingest over everything else, including the achievements of science, cannot be doubted: 'The discovery of a new dish,' the eighteenth-century French wit and gastronome Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin observed, 'creates greater happiness for the human race than the discovery of a new star.' The great French playwright Jean Anouilh (1910–81) summed up the ultimate goal of French social interactions thus: 'Everything ends this way in France – everything. Weddings, christenings, duels, burials, swindlings, diplomatic affairs – everything is a pretext for a good dinner.' Just as eating has traditionally dominated French life, so French cuisine has traditionally dominated the world's restaurants. No other single cuisine has exerted such an influence on the world's palate. Until now, perhaps.

Enchant, stay beautiful and graceful, but do this, eat well. Bring the same consideration to the preparation of your food as you devote to your appearance. Let your dinner be a poem, like your dress.
CHARLES PIERRE MONSELET, FRENCH JOURNALIST (1825–88)

That French gastronomy has historically dominated European cuisine is certainly true, at least since the reign of the illustrious King Louis XIV (1643–1715). The *Roi Soleil* ('Sun King') was himself a legendary gourmand, capable of putting away gigantic quantities of food at sitting. His repasts were gargantuan. Lunch – known as *le petit couvert* ('the little table') although there was nothing little about it – would typically consist of four different bowls of soup, a whole stuffed pheasant, a partridge, chicken, duck, mutton with garlic gravy, two pieces of ham, hard-boiled eggs, three enormous salads and a plateful of pastries, fruit and jam (and on top of all this the king would go on to demolish a further forty dishes at dinner). On Louis' death, his stomach and intestines were found to be twice the size of an ordinary man's.



Under such belt-busting leadership, it is not surprising that French cuisine burgeoned during Louis' reign. It was during this period that the famous chef François Pierre de Varenne published the first major cookbook, *Le Cuisinier français*, Dom Pérignon invented champagne, the ritual of the dinner service became established, and a distinct new method of French cookery evolved. This new culinary style broke with the medieval tradition of the heavy use of spices, adding herbs instead to bring out the natural flavour of the food. Then, as always, the chef's calling was a matter of the highest honour. Take, for example, the noble case of François Vatel, chef to the Prince of Condé (Vatel was portrayed on screen in a 2000 feature film of the same name by – who else? – Gérard Depardieu). According to the Marquise de Sévigné, to whom we owe an account of the events, in 1671 Vatel was given charge of preparations for an enormous feast to receive Louis XIV at the Château of Chantilly. Having barely slept for twelve nights during the frantic preparations, Vatel was beside himself when only two of the fish deliveries for the dinner turned up. Not realizing that the rest were on their way, he exclaimed: 'I cannot outlive this disgrace!', retired to his room, set the hilt of his sword against the door, and after two ineffectual attempts succeeded in the third, forcing the sword through his heart. At that very moment, the missing fish arrived. Dinner went ahead as planned.*¹

* Noble gesture or case of overkill, Vatel's act seems to have started something of a tradition of honour among French chefs. Centuries later, in February 2003, the celebrated chef Bernard Loiseau committed suicide by shooting himself in the mouth with a shotgun over the prospect of losing a Michelin star.

There are five divisions of the fine arts: painting, poetry, music, sculpture, and architecture, of which final category the principal branch is pâtisserie.
ANTONIN CARÊME (1784–1833)

The French Revolution put many of the French master chefs out of a job, with the result that they either went to cook for foreign monarchs (thus exporting French cuisine around the

world), or opened one of the new breed of eating establishments that were taking root around Paris: restaurants. The word ‘restaurant’ originally referred to a type of soup called a *bouillon restaurant* (‘restorative *bouillon*’), served in the world’s first such hostelry, founded by Monsieur Boulanger in Paris in 1765. Previously, guests at inns would partake of a meal together at the innkeeper’s table, but Boulanger introduced the innovation of guests dining at separate, small marble tables. This idea caught on, and soon restaurants were mushrooming all over the capital. It was at this point that the lawyer and journalist Alexandre Balthazar Laurent Grimod de la Reynière – the father of modern food journalism – published his first restaurant guide, *L’Almanach des gourmands* (1803–12). An early ancestor of Michelin and Zagat, the *Almanach* was a periodical in which Grimod evaluated cafés and restaurants in Paris: he established ‘tasting panels’ of distinguished testers to whom restaurateurs, pâtissiers and charcutiers would send their dishes for evaluation and subsequent listing, with a rating, in the *Almanach*.[†]

[†] To obtain a rating it was sufficient to send the dish to M. Grimod at his address at the rue des Champs-Élysées, but it was made clear that all dishes for which transport costs were not discharged would be refused.

At the same time, food philosophers like Brillat-Savarin (see [here](#)) wrote compendiums and meditations about the pleasures of gourmandism, containing such aphorisms as: *Dis-moi ce que tu manges et je te dirai ce que tu es* (‘Tell me what you eat and I shall tell you what you are’).

Over this period of growth in public dining, the principles and practices of French *haute cuisine* were being codified by one of the greatest of all French chefs: Antonin Carême, often dubbed the father of French cooking. Born the son of a destitute drunkard in 1784, Carême established himself as one of the foremost confectioners of his time, studying books of Greek and Roman architecture in the national library to give his sugary palaces, temples, follies and ruins stunning authenticity. A stint serving the English Prince Regent and future King George IV was a disaster (he couldn’t cope with the London fog), and so for some years Carême worked for the Russian tsar Alexander I, who later remarked that ‘he taught us how to eat’. Towards the end of his life, Carême focused on the *magnum opus* that was to become the Bible of French *haute cuisine*: *L’Art de la cuisine française*.*

* At least, until Escoffier’s *Le Guide culinaire*, whereupon Carême became the Old Testament and Escoffier the New.

This weighty tome codified the principles and philosophies of French culinary art, including establishing the four ‘mother sauces’ that constitute its cornerstones. Burgundian by origin, Carême’s work (like that of so many great French chefs) built upon the cuisine of his roots, elevating such earthy peasant fare as snails to the heady delights of the classic *escargots à la Bourgogne*.

If Carême was the founding father of French *haute cuisine*, his successor Georges Auguste Escoffier was the first celebrity chef. Coming from a dirt-poor background (as was beginning to be a requirement for French chefs), Escoffier showed remarkable culinary genius from an early age. In 1884 he met the budding young hotelier César Ritz at the Hôtel National in Lucerne, Switzerland; the rest, as they say, is luxury. Escoffier and Ritz together

took over the Savoy Hotel in London in 1890, then the Ritz in Paris, and subsequently the Carlton. Understanding opulence as only the sons of poor men can (Ritz also came from humble origins, having been a hotel groom), the pair redefined fine living for the élite. Escoffier's motto was 'keep it simple' (he never did), but he did streamline the overelaborated cuisine of Carême for a modern age, introducing revolutionary innovations still in use today. It is to Escoffier that modern restaurant kitchens owe the 'kitchen brigade' system of dividing tasks between separate sous-chefs working under the direction of a *chef de cuisine*, while he was also responsible for introducing the *à la carte* menu. Escoffier also worked on the new luxury liners, where it is said that once, having been served a superb dish of salmon steamed in champagne, Kaiser Wilhelm II asked him, 'How can I repay you?' His alleged reply was 'By returning Alsace-Lorraine to France.'

In the later twentieth century French *haute cuisine* was 'simplified' yet again (although somehow, these progressive simplifications never really made it simple), this time by the *nouvelle cuisine* of the 1960s: smaller portions, lighter ingredients, fewer buttery sauces (or, as Elizabeth David cuttingly put it, 'lighter food, less of it, costing more'²).



French gastronomy undoubtedly has an illustrious history, but is it still the king of cuisines and the cuisine of kings? Many think not. French gastronomy has had to take a lot of heat in recent years. The artery-clogging richness of the food, the pernickety presentation, the grandiose self-importance of the French restaurant, the traditional *froideur* of the waiting staff – all have been subject to a grilling. The French just got too complacent, it is said, and their top chefs became too glitzy. Food fashion has supposedly moved elsewhere – to the simplicity and freshness of Italian cooking, the gutsy innovation of Spanish, or the modernist minimalism of Japanese. The buzzwords are no longer *French* (= stuffy and boring), but new and trendy concepts like *Fusion Food*, *Molecular Gastronomy* or – even better, combining two for the price of one (sorry, price of three) – *Science Fusion*. Who, after all, wants a plain old *escalope de saumon à l'oseille*, when you can have exploding milkshakes, foaming mushrooms or bacon and egg ice-cream?*

* 'Molecular Gastronomy' is a relatively recent fad in cooking, which aims to use scientific techniques and chemicals to create unusual or spectacular food. Leading proponents are the Spanish chef Ferran Adrià and the British chef Heston Blumenthal. —

Even the 'Red Bible', France's own Michelin Guide, has recently given the cuisine of its homeland the cold shoulder. The 2012 Guide declared Tokyo the culinary capital of the world, awarding it a total of sixteen stars over Paris' fourteen.[†]

† The Michelin Guide, France's famous annual restaurant ratings book, was first published by car tyre tycoons the Michelin brothers in 1900 and given away as a free handout to motorists. Over the years it has garnered enormous prestige and become a French national treasure, but a fact often forgotten is that it is still essentially a marketing tool for selling car tyres. Underscoring the *bon viveur*-ishness of it all, the company's trademark, the rotund, rubbery figure whom we call the 'Michelin man' is known in French as *Bibendum*.

Michelin itself has felt the heat recently for its alleged stuffiness, with a clutch of decorated chefs handing back their stars to great media acclaim (cynics might point out that giving back stars actually attracts more column inches than getting them). But it is not only Michelin that is sounding the death knell for French cooking. Every other food journalist has been proclaiming the demise of French cuisine, which judging by the stream of journalistic commentary in recent years, must have died more often than Darla in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. The fact that French food was recently added to UNESCO's list of 'intangible cultural heritage' (along with Peking opera and Corsican polyphonic chant) seems only to have had the effect of laying a funeral wreath on a moribund institution that is now officially museum piece.

Bouillabaisse is only good because cooked by the French, who, if they cared to try, could produce an excellent and nutritious substitute out of cigar stumps and empty matchboxes.

NORMAN DOUGLAS, BRITISH NOVELIST (1868–1952)

But is French cuisine really dead? The French themselves don't seem to think so. Over the last few years, the nation's favourite dish has been consistently French, although the dish traditionally occupying the top spot, the hallowed *blanquette de veau* (veal in white sauce) has now been usurped by the upstart, smoky duck dish *magret de canard*, a child of 1960s *nouvelle cuisine*.*

* Study by TNS Sofres for *Vie pratique gourmand*, 2011. With 21 per cent of votes, *magret de canard* was just ahead of the Belgian dish *moules-frites* (20 per cent) and the North African *couscous* (19 per cent).

Nor do ordinary British people (as opposed to their journalists) seem to think French food is dead: French cuisine was ranked number two in a 2010 survey of British tastes in food, after Italian.³ For the untrendy amongst us who are not rushing to pay a fortune for a prandial pyrotechnic display out of a test tube, regional French cuisine retains its timeless appeal: the

crispness of a real *salade niçoise* in summer, with crunchy crudités and ripe Saint Pierre tomatoes; a hearty *bouillabaisse* with croutons and a fiery cayenne *rouille* sauce on a winter day; Breton crêpes doused in burnt sugar and Calvados for a romantic *dîner à deux*.[†]

† The ingredients of a real *salade niçoise* are the subject of hot debate, but the people of Nice – who can be presumed to know something about the subject – are adamant that only raw vegetables cut the mustard, and that cooked potatoes are therefore a Parisian bistro abomination.

The *caillette* olives in an authentic *salade niçoise* are found nowhere else on the planet except the area around Nice, and every French region boasts similar fruits of the earth, so and sky unique to it (and as many government protection orders). French cuisine is really a thousand regional cuisines, of which *haute cuisine* is a rarefied distillation. Whether contemporary French cuisine retains the global top spot remains an argument between food critics, but France's contribution to the history and development of cuisine remains unmatched. And having given the world its first restaurant, menu, restaurant ratings service, food critic, philosophy of cuisine and back office system, not to mention the delights of *tournedos Rossini*, *caille en sarcophage* and a myriad other exquisite dishes, does French cuisine really have anything for which to apologize?



Myth Evaluation: Arguably true. French cuisine is certainly one of the greatest in the world, although competition is increasingly stiff, notably from the Orient, and its primacy is contested by a new brand of edgy cuisine which banishes garlic butter and the mother sauce in favour of liquid nitrogen and molecular mixology.

THEY EAT HORSES, DON'T THEY?

I'm so hungry, I could eat a horse.

ENGLISH SAYING

Everybody knows the French are into hippophagy. What is hippophagy, you ask? Well, it's got nothing to do with devouring the large, foul-tempered pachyderm that inhabits the waterways of Africa (a step too far even for the omnivorous French). Rather, quite simply, it is the consumption of horses. The English seem to be convinced that the French regularly serve man's second-best friend at the dinner table with the insouciance that would accompany an ordinary *steak au poivre*. It goes with the general perception of the French as people who are prepared to shoot (and eat) more or less anything that moves, and who consider all creatures great and small as being potentially part of the *mundus edibilis*. But is this perception correct?

It's a strange fact that horse consumption in France was socially engineered and a relatively recent phenomenon.⁴ Hippophagy in ancient cultures has a long and distinguished history: it is said, for example, that the horse-eating Tartars or Mongols of Central Asia would put a piece of raw horsemeat under their saddles in the morning, to be pounded to a fine mince by the end of the day – allegedly the origin of the celebrated *steak tartare*. Sadly, the romantic myth is probably untrue, as it is thought that the dish owes its name to the more prosaic fact that it was originally accompanied by Tartar sauce. In the Christian world, however, hippophagy was traditionally strictly taboo, and until the mid-nineteenth century the French were as squeamish about eating horses as anybody else in Europe. Hippophagy had been forbidden by Pope Gregory III in the eighth century as an 'abomination' – although the pope, needless to say, was at the time at least as interested in quashing the pagans of the North, who sacrificed and ate horses, as he was in animal welfare. Horsemeat was a food to be resorted to only by those in the direst straits – such as the French peasantry during the food shortages of the Revolution, or the armies of Napoleon on campaign in the depths of the Russian winter.

In fact, it wasn't until the 1860s or even later that the French really got into horsemeat, largely due to the efforts of a zoologist named Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, and a fanatic military veterinarian, Émile Decroix. Decroix was obsessed with proving (to a sceptical public) that horsemeat was edible, and to this end he chomped his way through several hundred dead horses suffering from every conceivable disease, and even a mad dog by way of comparison – the purpose of the rabid canine *amuse-bouche* being presumably to prove that if you could survive eating a mad dog, you could survive eating a horse. Taking a rational and unsentimental approach, Decroix and his fellow scientists argued that it was better for the poor of Paris to kill their horses than to starve. There may also, however, have been a less lofty motive to his campaign, in that offloading cheap horsemeat on the poor would have reduced the demand for beef and pork, thus making these classier meats less expensive for the rich.

The French public proved unreceptive to this idea, and so a number of 'horsemeat banquets' were thrown, to which the press were invited – including a particularly famous one

in 1865 at the *Grand Hôtel* in Paris. At this fabulous (or freakish) repast, according to the respected authority the *Larousse Gastronomique*, the menu was as follows:⁵

Horse-Broth Vermicelli
Horse Sausage and Charcuterie
Boiled Horse
Horse à la Mode
Horse Stew
Fillet of Horse with Mushrooms
Potatoes Sautéed in Horse Fat
Salad Dressed in Horse Oil
Rum Gâteau with Horse Bone Marrow
*Wine: Château Cheval-Blanc**

* Those who imagine that they could stomach only the wine on this menu – *Château Cheval-Blanc*, one of the most sublime of the Bordeaux *Grands Crus*, totally horse-free its name notwithstanding – should remember that the only alternative for many Parisians at this time was to starve.

The horsemeat banquets in Paris inspired similar feasts in Britain, in Ramsgate in the 1860s, where the choice dishes were euphemistically described using the French term, a ‘*chevaline* delicacies’. Funnily enough, horsemeat in England did not catch on.⁶

On the other side of the Channel, despite all the press and campaigning – and the legalization of horsemeat for human consumption in 1866 – the poor of Paris remained unreasonably reluctant to consume their ageing nags. Until, that is, an event of seminal significance in French hippophagic history: the Siege of Paris during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71. Surrounded by the invading Prussian army, Parisians found themselves cut off from their customary food supplies. As a consequence, hunger and desperation led to some hitherto unconsidered creatures becoming part of the Parisian diet. Horses were the first to be served up on dinner tables, quickly followed by cats, dogs and rats. Finally – as Christmas approached with the bleak prospect of roasted rat as the star dish – it was the turn of the exotic animals in the Paris zoo. Camels, kangaroos and even the zoo’s famous elephants Castor and Pollux – all were auctioned off to Paris butchers, who made a mint selling slices of zebra and chunks of elephant trunk (culinarily speaking the most prized part of an elephant’s anatomy) to wealthy Parisians. (On 6 January 1871 the British writer, politician and diplomat Henry Labouchère noted in his diary: ‘Yesterday, I had a slice of Pollux for dinner... It was tough, coarse and oily, and I do not recommend English families to eat elephant as long as they can get beef or mutton.’)⁷ The Christmas Day 1870 menu of the chic Parisian Café Voisin, in the rue Saint-Honoré, featured such intriguing delicacies as *éléphant consommé* and *jugged kangaroo* (see [here](#)). Cookery books appeared with recipes and instructions on how to cook everything from giraffe to wolf.

*MENU OF THE CAFÉ VOISIN: 25 DECEMBER 1870, 99TH DAY OF
THE SIEGE (skip)*

Soups:

Red Bean Soup with Croûtons
Elephant Consommé

Entrées:

Roasted Camel à l'Anglaise with Fried Goujons
Jugged Kangaroo
Roasted Side of Bear with Pepper Sauce

Main Courses:

Roasted Leg of Wolf with Venison Sauce
Cat surrounded by Rats
Watercress Salad
Antelope Terrine with Truffles
Bordeaux Mushrooms
Buttered Peas

Dessert:

Rice Pudding with Jam

Cheese:

Gruyère

Now that the ancient taboo had finally been broken, hippophagy in France in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries went from strength to strength, with the consumption of horsemeat increasing by 77 per cent between 1895 and 1904.⁸ In 1871 butchers in Paris marketed the flesh of over 9,000 horses, mules and donkeys, a total weight of more than 3.7 million pounds.⁹ Prized for its high iron and nitrate content but relatively low in fat, horsemeat was regularly prescribed by doctors for all sorts of ailments from anaemia to tuberculosis. Owners of cavalry and shire horses were only too delighted to offload their old nags at the knackers' yards.



The first half of the twentieth century saw the apogee of horsemeat consumption: by 1913, native French horsemeat dealers were unable to keep up with demand and horsemeat had to be imported from abroad. Horsemeat butchers, or *boucheries chevalines* – with the distinctive horse's head above their doorways – burgeoned, particularly in working-class areas.

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