

FOOD ARTS

AT THE RESTAURANT AND HOTEL FOREFRONT



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EUROPEAN : BURN UP
FLAVORS : THE TRACK



Pilot Light

European notebook

By now, everyone should realize how dangerous it is to let bureaucrats anywhere near the kitchen.

Looking back over the past 20 years of *Food Arts*' existence, one of the most glaring examples has been the goose-stepping assault on European food traditions, variety, and production by desk-bound apparatchiks firing off numbing new Maastricht Treaty rules from their European Union headquarters in Brussels.

Had Europe's mother lodes of singular food cultures suddenly fallen subject to enforced homogenization? Horror stories began to circulate. Chefs were now forbidden to make their own stocks under threat of hefty fines (asked his response, **Paul Bocuse**, the Charles de Gaulle of chef/restaurateurs, snorted, "I'll make the stocks and pay the fines!"). In Tuscany, a centuries old family operation was forced to close because their celebrated artisanal lardo was cured in marble rather than stainless-steel tubs. In Sweden, a venerated strawberry growing dynasty toppled because their famous berries didn't conform to the newly regimented size. Elsewhere, swaths of heirloom apples in great variety were uprooted to make way for future surfeits of a boring Yellow Not-So-Delicious reportedly liked by the Danes. As for limited production artisan cheesemakers, don't ask how many would forever lose their whey nor how many small boat fishermen would sink beneath the gray Maastricht wave.

Listening to many of our European friends and associates, for a while it seemed that if anything were to fatally undermine the growing European Union it was this soulless disregard for the emotional and cultural importance of distinctive ancestral fare to partisans unwilling to give up cherished food traditions. (Remember

philosopher Lin Yutang's rhetorical query "What is patriotism but all the good things we ate in childhood?")

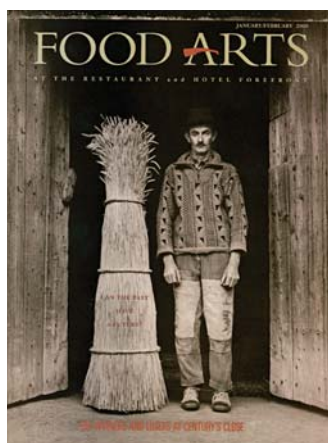
Once all but the dimmest bureaucrats began to get the picture, mollifying countermeasures were introduced in the form of official pro-heritage "denominations of origin" that pinned pride-of-place seals of approval (and merit) on stringently singled-out, traditionally produced regional foods and drink.

Not only did this scheme permit accredited regional producers

to continue in their traditional callings, it conferred commercial exclusivity: no outlander could brand a similar or imitative product using an officially sanctioned denomination, be it regional French green lentils or Italian short grain rice. (Precedents, of course, having been earlier set by such hands-off nomenclature as Champagne and Parmigiano and Roquefort cheeses.)

Whereas in the United States "heritage" is often applied to food and drink traditions deserving of protection, "patrimony" is heard in Europe, particularly in France where, while we're at it, the incessantly used "*biologique*" (usually shortened to "*bio*," pronounced bee-oh) and *durable* (pronounced doo-rah-bluh) translate as "organic" and "sustainable."

All three of these French terms were much in play over the course of "Gastronomy by the Seine," a three-day conference-cum-festival staged in July in Paris aboard splendid yacht-barges tied up near Notre Dame. We'd been invited to participate by its indefatigable organizer Michel Cloes, a gently forceful Belgian lawyer turned international gastronomic impresario and founder of the Chef Culinary Network (www.ccn-world.com). ➤



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Recalling earlier conferences staged in England and Spain by visionary chef **Raymond Blanc** and Madrid Fusión, each one championing the American Food Revolution, seminal American chefs, and contemporary American cuisine, Cloes' introductory promos laid out his program's theme and mission: "...a historic first for Paris...A first annual event, the festival features French haute cuisine and hosts each year a different country. This year, French Haute Cuisine hosts New American Cuisine on the theme of 'Innovation and Creativity: Haute Cuisine for All?' ...We aim at reaching a good balance of public education, advocacy in sustainability best practices, professional networking, and challenging cultural culinary prejudices."

Cloes' roster of multidiscipline presenters and panelists, predominantly French, was luminous by any standard. Among the American contingent, serving either on roundtables or culinary competition juries, were such top chefs as **Traci Des Jardins**, **Joyce Goldstein**, **David Kinch**, **Michael Lomonaco**, and **Geoffrey Zakarian**. And from the world of print, along with ourselves and regular *Food Arts* contributor Stephanie Curtis, the ever "Insatiable" restaurant critic Gael Greene, James Beard 2008 Hall of Fame cookbook author Paula Wolfert (look for her global overview of claypot cookery soon), and moderator/panelist husband and wife team Karen Page and Andrew Dornenburg whose latest inspirational volume, *The Flavor Bible*, a must for chef shelves, has just hit the stores. And from the American agricultural policy and hospitality sectors, Elizabeth Berry, Minister Counselor for Agricultural Affairs at the United States Embassy in Paris (Alaska fisheries were cited as models of sustainability), and **Robert Scott**, vice president of **Starwood Hotels**. Also lending her presence, to our total delight, was legendary American food journalist Naomi Barry, a Paris-based expat since the late 1950s, with whom we reconnected as an old friend and, as of this issue, a warmly welcomed new contributor (see *TECHNIQUES* and *SILVER SPOON*).

We could not have arrived at a fizzier time for France, thanks in the main to the country's laissez-faire challenged first term president Nicolas Sarkozy, who apparently has a brilliant new vision a day and a finger in every quiche. Overlapping in July was 1) his assumption, in the name of France, of the European Union's rotating presidency and 2) the promising wind-down in Paris of the first heads-of-state meeting of the Union for the Mediterranean, an initiative launched by Sarkozy during his 2007 presidential campaign, the foundations of which had been laid by the EU in 1995 to strengthen relations with North Africa and, among other goals, gradually establish a Mediterranean-wide free trade zone. (It should be noted that the EU is presently giving its full support to a new cooperative Central Europe program that bands together an archipelago of countries, including Italy, Austria, Germany, Hungary, Poland, Slovenia, and the Ukraine, to promote tourism, cuisine, environmental and sustainable development, etc. And that Strasbourg has just elected itself the gastronomic capital of Europe (see page 39).

And if all this weren't enough, Sarkozy buzz everywhere (including a full throttle Gastronomy by the Seine debate) continued to vibrate over his hot-potato proposal to the United Nations that French cuisine be protectively enlisted by UNESCO not as a "Heritage Site" like Machu Picchu but as a "World Intangible Heritage" alongside traditional crafts, performance art, and oral traditions (which, come to think of it, any mother lode cuisine most certainly is). As UNESCO won't announce their verdict until late 2009, we'll keep you abreast.

Meanwhile, although our European notebook jottings have already kindled plenty of *Food Arts* stories, they remain only partially mined. What were some of the most outstanding meals? Freshest ideas? Stealable styles? Stick with us for further debriefings in future issues.

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