

Dining & Wine

French Cuisine, Exalted by Chefs as a World Heritage Treasure

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Published: September 23, 2008

PARIS



Owen Franken for The New York Times

BOOSTER Guy Savoy wants to preserve culinary traditions



Jean-Paul Cillard/Écomusée du Pays de Rennes

SOURCES OF PRIDE A rooster from Rennes, France.

From the Pantheon of Masterpieces (September 24, 2008)

THEIR battlefield is filled, they know, with hidden land mines and cunning enemies.

So around a half-dozen French chefs and culinary experts from the ad hoc “French Mission for Food Heritage and Cultures” are preparing for war with weapons they know best.

They ate and drank their way through a three-hour strategy session recently to help their country face the daunting task before it: to persuade the United Nations to declare French gastronomy a world treasure. The designation gives a global imprimatur — and global promotion and protection — to the finest cultural expressions around the world.

So by the time the roasted figs, the wine-macerated prunes, the chocolate mousse and the Earl Grey sorbet arrived in the private dining room of Guy Savoy, a chef with three Michelin stars, the men were in deep discussion about the magic of their country’s cuisine.

“It’s everything!” Mr. Savoy said. “France is the only country in the world with such diversity!” He has compiled an informal list of regional delicacies that he thinks should be saved, including the textured andouille sausage of Vire, the smoked garlic of Arleux, the calisson cookie of Aix-en-Provence, the dense brioche of St.-Genis, and a minty candy called “bêtise” from Cambrai.

Jean-Claude Ribaut, the food critic for Le Monde, chimed in: “It’s the art of the sauce. A carcass and some vegetables boiled in water for six hours, then strained and reduced for another three, to make all sorts of stocks. Focus on the basics.”

Meanwhile, Jean-Robert Pitte, France’s pre-eminent food historian and chairman of the group, sampled the rice pudding with Tahitian vanilla and turned nostalgic. “It’s vanilla!” he said. “It’s Grandma! It’s Gauguin!”

They do not talk openly of their enemies — the acclaimed foreign chefs like Ferran Adrià of Spain who have challenged the pre-eminence of French cuisine, the fast-food chains that have infiltrated the country.

But with the French economy struggling and the cachet of French food and cooking diminishing even in France, this long shot initiative is an effort to capitalize on what has long been a great source of national pride.

It was unveiled by President Nicolas Sarkozy himself at France’s annual Agricultural Fair last February, in an offhand announcement that took his ministers by surprise.

He said he wanted France to be the first country in the world whose gastronomy would be formally recognized by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization known as Unesco.

Mr. Sarkozy is by no means a food connoisseur, and even his close confidants confess that he doesn't much enjoy eating. A teetotaler, he often fakes his way through toasts.

But he has been a relentless booster of France, and for him, the initiative seems to be less about taste and more about the creation of new jobs at home and the projection of power abroad.

"Agriculture and the jobs that produce it every day are the source of our country's gastronomic diversity," he said. "It is an essential element of our heritage."

He added, "We have the best gastronomy in the world."

For decades, Unesco has kept a list of World Heritage Sites —from Machu Picchu and the Cathedral of Notre-Dame in Reims to the ancient city of Thebes and the Great Wall of China— which it helps protect and preserve through careful monitoring.

Then in 2003, the agency, which is based in Paris, adopted the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage to preserve "oral traditions and expressions" and "performing arts, social practices, rituals and festive events; knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe; traditional craftsmanship."

Today, Unesco recognizes such cultural manifestations as the storytelling of Kyrgyzstan, the sand designs of Vanuatu, the Ugandan craft of making bark cloth, the folk singing known as iso-polyphony in Albania and ox-herding in Costa Rica.

France's European neighbors in some senses are competing against the French proposal. In June, Spain revived its own initiative to win recognition of the health-conscious Mediterranean diet, based on olive oil, fish, grains, fruit, nuts and vegetables; Italy, Greece and Morocco swiftly joined the campaign.

In Italy, Coldiretti, the Italian farmers' association, even argued that Italy's food heritage is superior to that of France, since the European Union recognizes 166 food specialties from Italy, but only 156 from France.

At first blush, Unesco also is less than enthusiastic. Mexico's application to honor its food traditions was rejected in 2005, even before the convention came into force in 2006.

During a roundtable discussion at the first "Gastronomy by the Seine" festival, an international culinary conference in Paris over the summer, Chérif Khaznadar, president of the Unesco group of countries that signed the new convention, was downright dismissive.

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-Charles Gérard/Photonostop

Jean

Andouille sausage from Normandy.



Owen Franken for the New York Times

Joël Thiébault, a farmer who sells his vegetables in Paris.



Laurent Giraudou/Explorer/Hoa-Qui

Calisson almond cookies from Aix-en-Provence.



Amélie Dequidt/Office de Tourisme d'Arleux

Smoked garlic from Arleux.

“There is no category at Unesco for gastronomy,” Mr. Khaznadar said, adding, “I am afraid that the presentation of a dossier on gastronomy will not go any further.”

Even inside France, the idea has been ridiculed. Shortly after Mr. Sarkozy made his proposal, François Simon, *Le Figaro*'s acerbic food critic, wrote that if France wins Unesco status, “Opening the door of a restaurant, making a soufflé rise, shelling an oyster, will become part of cultural activity, like falling asleep at the opera, yawning at the theater or slumping over Joyce's ‘Ulysses.’ ”

To lay the groundwork for a lobbying campaign, the French Senate held hearings over the summer in which chefs, food experts and even specialists in the “arts of the table” testified.

The testimony became a repository for both the memories and the dreams of France's food world.

One witness said it could be a way to save the endangered, black-and-white-streaked Coucou of Rennes (a breed of chicken) and the black turnip of Pardailhan. A second quoted the dictum of the 19th-century food writer Brillat-Savarin that “The discovery of a new dish does more for the happiness of the human race than the discovery of a star.”

Recommendations were made, including recognition of France's rich gastronomic literature; improvement in the quality of prepared meals served in schools, hospitals and nursing homes; campaigns to teach children about the joys of eating good food; and encouragement of young people to appreciate the “nobility” of becoming butchers and bakers.

“It is not a matter of saying a ‘masterpiece is in danger,’ or of mummifying our culinary arts,” said Senator Catherine Dumas, the head of the Senate committee in charge of the initiative. “We have to show that eating well and appreciating good food is part of the French identity.”

She said that while France wants to be first on the list, others certainly could follow. “We are only the pioneers,” she said. “Our move is a humble one.”

France will present Unesco with a formal proposal next year. A scholarly study on the subject by Mr. Pitte at the University of Tours in 2004 will help inform it. More than 300 of France's chefs, including Mr. Savoy, Paul Bocuse, Alain Ducasse, Pierre Troisgros and Michel Guérard have signed a petition of support. The informal group of a half-dozen chefs and experts intends to raise more than \$2 million on publicity and lobbying.

The French will have to decide how to make their case. They could choose to showcase the creations of certain French chefs. Or they could argue that certain foods, dining rituals and long family meals are vital to French identity.

In the most recent issue of the magazine *Le Coq Gourmand*, a food critic, Périco Légasse, called for the celebration of the farmer, not the chef.

“Quality French agriculture is dying,” he wrote, and “our peasants are disappearing, the richness of our soils and the purity of our landscapes are being extinguished.” This is not the time, he added, to celebrate chefs who “jellify” artisanal chicken or “emulsify” a rare crustacean.

But some of France's best-known food producers argue that it will be harder to prove that the diversity of soil, climate and agricultural products that are so identified with local customs somehow come together to form a common, living cultural heritage that should be universally recognized.

On a small farm in Carrières-sur-Seine outside of Paris, Joël Thiébault grows 1,500 varieties of fruits and vegetables, many of them destined for the tables of Paris' most acclaimed chefs.

He plants Japanese mizuna next to Italian escarole. He concedes that Americans understand tomatoes better than the French and says Hungary and Bulgaria produce such good peppers because their soil was never ruined by chemicals.

He urges his visitors to bite into his fluted Brazilian peppers, whose seeds were a gift from Pascal Barbot, a chef who won three Michelin stars.

For him, the glory of French gastronomy is in the ever-changing creativity of French chefs, and he is unsure that such a phenomenon can be codified.

“We are not frozen in time,” said Mr. Thiébault, as he caresses the purple skin of a Kyoto eggplant no bigger than a golf ball. “The taste, the quality of food in the 19th century, in the 20th century is not the same as it is today. Taste is at times very ephemeral.

“Often chefs say to me, ‘I want the taste of my grandmother's tomatoes.’ It's impossible. That was a moment in their lives that cannot be recaptured.”

Or put on a list.

Basil Katz contributed reporting.