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By Henry Samuel in Paris

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FRENCH CUISINE 'NOT A WORLD TREASURE', SAYS UN

France's bid to have its cuisine enshrined as a Unesco world cultural treasure appears heading for the chop after a top official of the United Nations body all but wrote it off.



French celebrity chef Guy Savoy: We have an infinitely superior variety of specialities Photo: AP

Describing French cuisine as "the best gastronomy in the world", President Nicolas Sarkozy announced earlier this year that his country would lobby for it to be added to the treasure list.

But Cherif Khaznadar, president of the Unesco assembly of states that have signed the convention to safeguard "intangible" cultural heritage, said that gastronomy does not fit the criteria.

Unesco began drawing up its list of "intangible" cultural treasures, including dance and carnival, in 2003.

Criteria for inclusion include "social practices, rituals and festive events," as well as "know-how linked to traditional craftsmanship."

"There is no category at Unesco for gastronomy. I am afraid that the presentation of a dossier on gastronomy will not get far," said Mr Khaznadar in a panel discussion in the "Gastronomy by the Seine" festival held in Paris.

"Neither in spirit nor in writing can the convention include gastronomy," he added, saying that any candidacy must relate to "specific" elements.

Since France announced its bid, several other countries have protested that their cuisine is equally unique, in particular Italy.

"Italian gastronomy takes priority," said top Italian cook Massimo Mori in a recent duel with French celebrity chef Guy Savoy over the issue.

"In the Middle Ages, our merchants imported spices, salt, sugar, and Venice invented courtly high gastronomy."

"Be objective," hit back Mr Savoy.

"We have an infinitely superior variety of specialities, without even mentioning wines. What real dessert do you offer besides tiramisu?"

But Italy has now teamed up with Spain, Greece and Morocco to get Unesco to pick the traditional "Mediterranean diet," whose abundant use of olive oil coupled with moderate wine consumption is said to be the healthiest in the world.

Bids are supposed to be handed to Unesco by the end of September, but France has secured an extra month to put the finishing touches to its claim. A verdict is due in 2010.