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French Provincial Cooking

Elizabeth David

Illustrated by Juliet Renny

Published by Penguin Books
in association with Michael Joseph

Extract

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PENGUIN BOOKS
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MICHAEL JOSEPH

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But I have only a limited space, so I must restrict myself, first of all, to thanking Miss Audrey Withers, for so many years editor of *Vogue*, for making it possible for me to go to France on several journeys to collect material for cookery articles subsequently published in the magazine. It is these articles, with a number published in *House and Garden* between 1956 and 1959, which form the nucleus of this book.

Other material and recipes republished here first appeared in *The Sunday Times*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *The Wine and Food Society Quarterly*, Harrods *Food News* and *Wine*, edited by T. A. Layton.

M. André Simon very kindly gave me permission to reprint an article by Mrs. Belloc Lowndes which first appeared in *The Wine and Food Society Quarterly*, and Messrs. A. D. Peters to include an extract from Marcel Boulestin's *Myself, My Two Countries*, published by Cassell & Co. Messrs. Martin Secker & Warburg have also kindly allowed me to reprint a passage from Maurice Goudeket's *Close to Colette*, and Mr. Vivian Rowe has generously permitted me to reproduce an excerpt from *Return to Normandy*, published by Messrs. Evans Brothers.

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Introduction

STAYING in Toulouse a few years ago, I bought a little cookery book on a stall in the *marché aux puces* held every Sunday morning in the Cathedral Square. It was a tattered little volume, and its cover attracted me. In faded pinks and blues, it depicts an enormously fat and contented-looking cook in white muslin cap, spotted blouse and blue apron, smiling smugly to herself as she scatters herbs on a *gigot* of mutton. Beside her are a great loaf of butter, a head of garlic and a wooden salt box, and in the foreground is a table laid with a white cloth and four places, a basket of bread, a cruet and two carafes of wine.

The promise of the cover was, indeed, fulfilled in the pages of this delightful little book, called *Secrets de la Bonne Table, 120 Recettes inédites recueillies dans les provinces de France*. The author, Benjamin Renaudet (date of publication not disclosed, but probably about 1900), had collected genuine recipes from country housewives, gourmet doctors, lawyers and senators, from gamekeepers and their wives, from landladies of seaside *pensions*, from the notebooks of family and friends. The dishes described are not spectacular, rich or highly flavoured, the materials are the modest ingredients you would expect to find in a country garden, a small farm, or in the market of a quiet provincial town. But it is not rustic or peasant cooking, for the directions for the blending of different vegetables in a soup, the quantity of wine in a stew, or the seasoning of the sauce for a chicken reflect great care and regard for the harmony of the finished dish. This is sober, well-balanced, middle-class French cookery, carried out with care and skill, with due regard to the quality of the materials, but without extravagance or pretension.

The book exudes an atmosphere of provincial life which appears orderly and calm whatever ferocious dramas may be seething below the surface. Here you find the lawyer's wife at work preparing her special *noisettes d'agneau* for a dinner party; a great-aunt of one of the author's friends serves the same soup her mother served to Madame Récamier when she came to dinner; the farmer's wife gathers mushrooms to garnish the chicken she is cooking for her husband when he comes in with friends from a day's shooting; a senator's cook proves to a sceptical company that an old hen can be made into a dish fit for a gourmet; the author's great-uncle at last discloses his recipe for the liqueur he makes every year and keeps locked in his linen-cupboard.

The ravages of two world wars, the astronomical rises in the cost of living, and the great changes brought about by modern methods of transport and food preservation have not destroyed those traditions of French provincial cookery. In one way indeed these circumstances have oddly combined to preserve them. After the 1914 war patriotic Frenchmen began to feel that the unprecedented influx of foreign tourists hurrying through the country in fast cars, Riviera or Biarritz bound, not caring what they ate or drank so long as they were not delayed on their way, was threatening the character of their cookery far more than had the shortages and privations of war. Soon, they felt, the old inns and country restaurants would disappear and there would be only modern hotels serving mass-produced, impersonal food which could be put before the customers at a moment's notice, devoured, paid for, and instantly forgotten. It was at this time that a number of gourmets and gastronomically-minded men of letters set about collecting and publicising the local recipes of each province in France.

At the Paris Salon d'Automne of 1924 there was, for the first time, a culinary section devoted to regional cookery. Under the direction of Edouard Rouzier, proprietor of the celebrated Rôtisserie Périgourdine, a series of regional dinners were organised and proved an immense success. Subsequently Marcel Rouff and Maurice-Edmond Sailland (who, under the pen-name of Curnonsky, came to be known throughout France as the 'Prince of Gastronomes') together published a series of guides to regional eating and drinking, not hesitating to criticise the pretentious, the dull, or the over-expensive meal when they encountered it. About the same time Count Austin de Croze compiled a book listing the products, the dishes, the cheeses and wines of every province, followed in 1929 by a closely-packed volume of recipes called *Les Plats Régionaux de France*. Before long regional cookery became fashionable. There had, of course, previously been a few restaurants in Paris specialising in the food and wines of the native province of the proprietors, but they were little known except to the habitués of the quarter and to provincials exiled in Paris. These regional restaurants now began to multiply and become smart. Today one could eat some different provincial speciality in Paris restaurants every day for weeks on end.

Country and seaside restaurateurs also began to realise the possibilities of attracting tourists by advertising some famous local dish on their menus. Often such dishes derive from peasant and farmhouse cookery and depend rather upon some typical product of the region such as a cheese or ham, mountain mutton or river fish, chestnuts, walnuts, lentils, dairy produce, rather than upon important sauces or the skill of professional chefs. But the restaurateurs do not despise them on this

account. They are encouraged to serve them by the local Syndicat d'Initiative, some member of which hardworking body has probably searched the municipal archives for cookery manuscripts and persuaded members of old local families and the librarians of the great religious houses to contribute recipes.

But recipes alone are not enough. A flourishing tradition of local cookery implies also genuine local products; the cooks and the housewives must be backed up by the dairy farmers, the pig breeders and pork butchers, the market gardeners and the fruit growers, otherwise regional cookery simply retreats into the realms of folk-lore. France is still largely an agricultural country and the right conditions for the preservation of their traditions still prevail. These traditions are constantly being renewed from within; the professional cooks and the housewives adapt the old methods to changing tastes and altered conditions without thereby standardising all the food; competitions and gastronomic festivals encourage the chefs to develop new dishes based on the old ones but still using the essential ingredients; the tourist organisations work hard to foster their own local products and cookery magazines publicise them in a sane and sober way, so it is not so surprising that the regional cookery of France is a profitable and flourishing industry as well as a beneficent one.

One hears, however, and reads in the newspapers, so many bitter criticisms from English tourists about French food that a few words of warning may not be out of place. Many people who have read of the great regional specialities such as, let us say, the *Bouillabaisse* and the *Estouffat de Bœuf* of Provence, the *Cassoulet* of the Languedoc, the pike with *Beurre Blanc* of the Loire or the *Coq au Vin* of Burgundy mistakenly suppose that these dishes are cooked every day by the local housewives and the restaurateurs, and are disappointed and indignant if they are not forthcoming at a few minutes' notice. This is as absurd as if a Frenchman came here expecting to find plum pudding or Cornish lobsters at every meal and in every wayside café.

The great traditional set pieces are only made by the country people in France for feast days and holidays, wedding celebrations and other special occasions; their day-to-day food will be the simple dishes of ordinary middle-class French cookery, vegetable soups, egg dishes, beefsteaks, veal roasts, mutton ragoûts, sausages, pâtés, and salads; these may well have a regional character owing to some local tradition of seasoning or according to whether olive oil, butter, or pork fat has been used in the cooking; but they will not be the dishes advertised in the travel agencies' brochures. The restaurateurs do, of course, put these specialities quite frequently on their menus, but not every day, and very often to order only, and the fact that this is so is reassuring to anyone who

prefers his food to be freshly cooked rather than dished out of a great pot kept warm over steam for several hours.

Again, there is the seasonal aspect of French cookery; to many tourists French food is known only through summer holidays, and many of the great specialities of regional cooking are then out of season. Although, yielding to a certain extent to public demand, the restaurateurs put on as many of their well-known dishes as they are able, many of these will not be at their best. High summer is not the most propitious moment for freshly made pork products and pâtés: with the best will in the world I do not think one could eat a *cassoulet toulousain*, a Provençal *chou farci* or a *gratin dauphinois* on a hot August day, even if a chef would consent to cook them. Few of the great French cheeses are in prime condition in the late summer, and the price of fresh fish and vegetables rises steeply in the tourist season.

Unfortunately, there are a few restaurateurs in France today willing to barter their birthright of taste, moderation and simplicity in cooking for the cheap publicity and quick profits of showy food served in and out of season to gullible customers with more money than sense. It is, however, perfectly easy to keep away from such pretentious and phoney places, three or four stars in the guides all too often indicate expensive décor and fussy service rather than good food; but it is equally inadvisable to go too far in the other direction. Half the complaints one hears come from people who expect to go to a humble bistro or transport café, the equivalent of which in England it would not occur to them to enter, and there to find an impeccably served and perfectly cooked meal of choice ingredients for the price of a glass of beer and a sandwich in an English public house. They will, of course, be disappointed, and the publicity recently given to the *Cafés Routiers* in this country is partly to blame. These transport cafés are places where an adequate meal, served, it is true, rather more attractively than in their English counterparts, is provided in a somewhat perfunctory manner by nimble but overworked waitresses who have not the patience to stand at your table while you deliberate upon your meal; nor has the cook the time to attend to special orders. You must take what is on the menu, unless you want sour looks and a bill out of all proportion. Occasionally you come across an exceptional establishment of this kind; if it happens to be your first experience of such a restaurant, it would be unwise to assume that it is typical; but if you are not in a hurry and if food happens to be one of your serious interests, it would probably be worth staying in the neighbourhood and making friends with the proprietor, who will almost certainly be pleased to provide special local dishes to order, particularly in the evening when there are not so many customers.

For it should be remembered by the traveller in France that in provincial towns and in the country the main meal of the day is at noon. Nowadays many summer tourists economise by having picnic lunches, and this is an admirable plan in some ways because the buying of provisions in the local shops and markets is not only itself an entertainment and an education but gives the traveller a good idea of the resources of the country; in the market you can find out for yourself which are the genuine local cheeses, what kind of sausages and hams are favoured in the district, what vegetables and fruit are in season, what is the particular characteristic of the local pâtés, and which fish have been plentiful in the market, so that even if you can't afford the really good restaurants you will at least get some idea of the region's food. On the other hand, when you arrive at your evening's destination, you may well find, at any rate in the more modest hotels and restaurants, that the specialities on the midday menu were all eaten up and you will have to make your choice from the already rather too familiar *terrine du chef*, the *truite aux amandes*, the *entrecôte garnie*, the *poulet rôti* and the *crème renversée* of the routine and relatively expensive set meal.

The cooking of these dishes would possibly make them into notable meals here in England, but in France one's expectations are higher, and one's disappointment at a dull meal consequently greater. But still, with a little forethought (one's plans all too often go astray when driving about the countryside, but I am supposing for the moment that they have not) one can nearly always get good food in France. Often it happens that a long day's drive, arduous sightseeing, or hours in the unaccustomed sunshine have made one too tired to cope with a 'menu gastronomique' of seven or eight courses even if money is no object, and in any case so much of one's enjoyment of a meal depends upon having the right food at the right moment. So as long as one arrives in good time for dinner, it is always worth explaining to the *patron* of the restaurant or the hotel what sort of meal one would like; the chances are that he will be able to provide one or two of the lesser local specialities such as some sort of *charcuterie* and perhaps a little cheese which he would not otherwise have thought of offering, because English people are generally thought only to want beefsteaks or fried eggs and chips; he will be only too pleased to find tourists interested in the genuine food of the country, and those who reject the pompous menu got up for innocent foreigners are likely to find all the more respect in his eyes.

Under such circumstances I have eaten some of the most enjoyable of French country meals; unexacting ones, ordered and served with the minimum of fuss. An omelette, perhaps, followed by the sausages which were a speciality of the local butcher, a vegetable dish and some cheese;

or perhaps snails and a homely stew, intended probably for the *patron's* own dinner but gracefully surrendered; or a vegetable soup, a slice or two of country-cured ham and a beautiful big green artichoke; and on another occasion, a *langouste* with a mayonnaise which was among the best I have ever tasted, because of the fine quality of the Provençal olive oil which had gone into it, and which was followed by a dish of tender young string beans of that intense green and delicate flavour which only southern-grown beans seem to acquire

Surely, then, good food is there for those who look for it; bad food, too, and rather more than there used to be, but if one gets it, one very often has only oneself to blame, for arriving late and tired in some small town, for weakly going into a place obviously unsuitable, for omitting to make friends with the *patron* before ordering, for mismanagement generally. Such occasions are bound to occur, but they are the exceptions rather than the rule. And one of the great points about the cookery of France is that it is so extraordinarily varied. There seems to be an inexhaustible fund of new dishes to be discovered.