

COOK'S CORNER

Serving it up French style

By LISA CARTWRIGHT
Mirror/Guardian/Moment Staff

France. No other word seems to conjure up so much awe by people, many of whom have never even stepped onto its shores. Yet you mention the European country and people's faces glaze over with romantic thoughts of the countryside or the streets of gay Paris. And not far behind the thoughts of shopping on the Champs D'Elysees, are the patisseries and vineyards that produce the other things France is known for – its food and wine.

"France, because of its cooking, is known across the world," said Marjie Caradant, owner of Le Montmartre on Sheppard Avenue in North York. Caradant, who came from Paris almost 20 years ago. "France represents the food: wine, cheese, French baguette and croissants."

Like many European countries, French cuisine is different depending on which region you are in.

In Brittany, the area is known for its shellfish, particularly its mussels and Belon oysters, which are grown on the coast.

that are a staple throughout the country.

Turbot, a fish that tastes similar to sole, is available in Canada, but comes with a price – about \$22 a pound for live fish and \$12 for fresh. If people are going to use the fish, Caradant recommended creating a Normande sauce to accompany it. The sauce is made from fish stock that is reduced, cream for texture, a few mushrooms, butter to thicken and a touch of Vermouth.

Then there is steak frite.

Caradant said a thin slice of New York steak without seasoning or topped with butter is grilled and presented with an order of French fries.

Although served with many dishes, the French can't take credit for fries. That invention belongs to those from Belgium, she said.

And many people don't think "potatoes" when they think of French cooking, but Caradant said they are a staple ingredient that is used in a variety of ways and served in one form or another at almost every meal.

It was a man named Parmentier who introduced the spud to France.

"Italy is pasta, France is potato. Every dish you eat is potatoes."



Mirror photo/DAN PEARCE

Marjie Caradant, owner of Le Montmartre in North York serves up a typical French dish: Les Gambas Grilles, Cote d'Azur.

with sauces made from real creams. Today, different ingredients are used to create the same tastes, but are lighter. But French people aren't overly concerned with fat because they eat differently.

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In Brittany, the area is known for its shellfish, particularly its mussels and Belon oysters, which are grown on the coast.

Caradant said it's hard to get these oysters from France because they lose their freshness. However, the shellfish imported from Nova Scotia, which is similar in size and taste as the French variety, are just as nice with lemon, vinegar and shallots.

"Do not forget a slice of rye bread spread with butter. This dish is an excellent appetizer accompanied, of course, with a glass of Chablis wine."

Beef bourguignon, a stew simmered in burgundy wine, is a traditional dish in the Burgundy region, while cassoulet of Toulouse is known in the southwest area and French onion soup, while found throughout the country, is best known in Paris.

"I will say it's (French onion soup) not only a dish, but is a part of our heritage."

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Other famous French foods include foie gras avec truffles (goose liver with truffles), which is available in Toronto from Quebec for \$55 a pound, and more than 400 varieties of cheese.

Cheese varieties range from Camembert, a milky mild variety that comes from Normandy that gets stronger in flavour and scent when it ages, to Bleu d'Auvergne, a blue-veined cheese that is smooth, but with a sharp taste.

Caradant said she used to serve a cheese plate at her restaurant, but stopped.

"Canadians don't have the palate for cheese," she noted.

But she said with more items being imported from her homeland and the increase of varieties of cheese that Canadians produce, more people are enjoying cheese with wine for a light dinner.

But like anything, cooking has changed in France as well

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French people don't usually eat eggs and bacon for breakfast, but instead enjoy a croissant, coffee or a baguette and butter. Lunch is usually the bigger meal and includes meat, vegetables, potatoes, salad and fruit. Dinner features lighter fare with soup, fish, vegetables and potatoes, salad and cheese.

Salad is usually enjoyed at the end of the meal, which aids the digestion, while the vinegar found in the dressing helps reduce the fat, she said. While fruit is a popular way to end the meal on a daily basis, on Sundays and special occasions the pastries France is known for are served.

And while food is important, so is wine.

"A good meal and a glass of wine is important," she said.

Wine, which varies from region to region, offers different tastes.

"For example, Chablis, which is a white burgundy, very dry and fruity is recommended for oysters. Bordeaux red wine is excellent with beef, lamb and game."

Champagne, which comes from northeast

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And while many items imported from France and Quebec can now be easily found in Toronto, Caradant said there are many differences between the food found in her homeland and that found in La Belle Province.

The difference, she said, is twofold: People in Quebec have come from a variety backgrounds so their food has different influences and the weather also plays a part. Comfort foods such as Quebec's tourtières are not found in France.

"Quebec (food) is very rich because of the wet, cold weather."

Regardless of what food is created in France, it's all prepared the same way: "Everything is (made) from scratch. It's very important to have your own ingredients."

Cooking is an art form, Caradant said, and one that you can learn. Caradant said she learned by watching other chefs and by practising.

"It's very important to watch and see, read a book, see it in person, learn how to cut onions, to cut meat, as well as fillet a fish. In our times, TV is a very important (way) to learn."

Caradant said while the soup originated in Alsace, its popularity grew when it was served at Les Halles, a wholesale market that no longer exists. But it was at this market that the dish would be served with a layer of cheese at night or in the early morning.

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Some dishes aren't enjoyed anymore, such as steak tartar or raw ground beef, and the method of cooking has changed as well. Traditional French cooking is rich, said Caradant,

Breads, sweets and chocolate

There is nothing better when you are in France than to go to the local bakery in the morning and pick still-warm goodies to enjoy for breakfast.

The following list are just some of the things you would find and is provided by *The French Side of Toronto*.

Amandine: Croissant stuffed with almond paste and garnished with almonds.

Baba au rhum: A sponge cake with rum-flavoured syrup.

Bavaroise: Classic French rich custard dessert made with cream and gelatin and served cold.

Brioche: A sweet yeast breakfast bread with a unique lightness, flavour and aroma. It's composed of flour, sugar, yeast, milk, butter and egg yolk. It's similar to the Jewish challah.

Financier: Little coffee/tea cake made with ground almonds and hazelnut butter.

Pain au chocolate: A croissant with a chocolate centre.

Praline: Describes any chocolate where the centre is made of roasted or caramelized hazelnuts that have been ground into a smooth paste and folded into chocolate.

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Cassoulet of Toulouse

This is the most famous dish from southwest France. The meat and beans casserole is considered a complete meal because of the rich ingredients used to make it.

Serves: Four

300 grams white kidney beans
1 pork rind
400 grams bacon
500 grams pork meat (loin)
500 grams lamb meat
4 pieces preserved goose
1 Toulouse sausage (available in Toronto)
200 grams tomatoes
100 grams carrots peeled
4 onions
3 tsp olive oil
3 garlic cloves
1 bouquet garni (aromatic herbs)
2 cloves
Thyme, salt and pepper

Soak beans overnight in water. Cover the bottom of a large casserole dish with the pork rind and put the beans on it.

Add the bacon, two of the peeled onions, pricked with cloves, and the bouquet of herbs, two crushed garlic cloves, cut carrots (into four pieces). Cover with water, season with salt and pepper and simmer for about two hours.

Heat oil in a saucepan and fry the pork and lamb pieces. Add two peeled and minced onions and one peeled and minced garlic clove. Add some thyme, then put the tomatoes cut into pieces and season with salt and pepper. Add five cups of water and cover and simmer for one hour.

Right before the beans are cooked, take out the bouquet of herbs, the onions and pork rind.

Cut the rind into small cubes and put them back with the beans, add Toulouse sausage and the preserved goose, then add the meat with all the cooking juice and other ingredients mixed very gently and simmer for another 20 minutes.