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Until the day the Bastille was stormed in 1789, 70 per cent of French citizens were peasants and poor farmers whose diets were based mainly on grains. Bread was the primary component of their diet.

When the grain crops failed in 1788 and 1789, bread became so expensive that only the aristocrats could afford it and, if it appeared on one's table, it was a mark of social standing. Without his nutritional mainstay, the common man was starving.

Food and the French Revolution

This physical hunger and the hunger for liberté, égalité, fraternité (liberty, equality, and fraternity) were the impetus for the French Revolution. After the uprising, many cooks and servants, whose aristocrat employers had fled Paris or were executed, opened restaurants and made finer foods available to the common man. Now anyone could saunter into a tavern or restaurant, have a substantial meal, and be able to pay for it without robbing a bank.

19th Century and Haute Cuisine

Georges Auguste Escoffier is considered to be the founder of haute cuisine or gourmet French food. During his tenure at some of the great hotels in Europe and America during the 1880s to 1890s, he instituted the brigade system in which professional kitchens are separated into five stations:

Garde manger: This is the chef responsible for preparing cold dishes.

Entremettier: Starches and vegetables are prepared by this chef.

Rôtisseur: This is the chef who oversees the preparation of roasts, grilled, and fried items.

Saucier: This exalted position is relegated to the chef who prepares exquisite soups and sauces.

Pâtissier: A position responsible for the preparation of pastries and desserts, but not breads.

In this way, with each chef preparing a component of the dish, it takes much less time than if one chef prepared one dish from start to finish. Thus, meals could be served faster and tables turned over more quickly (i.e., more money could be made).

Escoffier introduced a lighter approach to classic sauces to enhance a dish rather than mask its flavors. He also took peasant dishes and transformed them using the refined techniques of haute cuisine.

20th Century Changes

World War I heralded the beginning of modern French cuisine. Improved transportation during the first half of the 20th century spread the wealth and regional cuisine that had previously been segregated.

World War II veterans, who had experienced the glories of European sights and cuisine, created a flurry of tourism that furthered the need for grand cuisine at a fair price.

In the 1960s, a new way of cooking helmed by chef Paul Bocuse and others emphasized freshness, lightness, and clarity of flavor in a movement known as nouvelle cuisine.

This new way of cooking got rid of unnecessary and complicated steps. Food was not cooked to death in order to preserve more of its natural flavors. Steaming came into vogue and the emphasis was on the freshest ingredients possible. Heavy sauces thickened with roux were given the boot in favor of butter, lemon, and fresh herbs. Similarly to what Escoffier had done, regional or peasant dishes were the inspiration for a new "clean" approach to cooking.

By the mid-1980s, however, nouvelle cuisine had reached its saturation point and many chefs began returning to the haute cuisine style of cooking, although much of the lighter presentations and new techniques remained.

Today's French Kitchen

Today, French cuisine rides a fine line between haute and nouvelle styles. What remains the same since the 19th century is that fine food is available to everyone, no matter one's income or station in life.

Ubiquitous bistros and cafés now dot the land and the French have their pick of pain au chocolat or brioche daily. In France, there is an eatery for everyone. Attention is paid to the quality, flavor, and appearance of food. It is a pure, nearly religious, sensory experience. What once was subsistence is now an object of daily, living art.

FOODS OF THE FRENCH

The baguette, a long, thin loaf of crusty bread, is the most important part of any French meal. Everyone at the table is expected to eat a piece. It is eaten in a variety of ways, including being used to make

France sandwiches. Melted cheese spread on a baguette is often presented as part of a meal. A meal of grilled food (called la raclette) is sometimes served. Using an open grill, diners melt their own cheese with ham or beef slices, or fry their own egg. The grilled food is accompanied by potatoes. Sometimes diners spear pieces of bread on long-handled forks, and dip the bread into a pot full of melted cheese called la fondue .

The regions of France have varying cuisine: in Brittany (northwestern France), the main dish is crêpes (thin pancakes) with cider; and in the Alsace region (eastern France near Germany), a popular dish is cabbage with pieces of sausage, called la choucroute . The French from the Loire River Valley eat a special dish made of the Lotte fish that can only be found in the Loire River. On the coasts of France seafood is plentiful, including mussels, clams, oysters,

shrimp, and squid. The French enjoy escargots (snails) cooked with garlic and butter, roast duck, and rabbit.

- **FOOD FOR RELIGIOUS AND HOLIDAY CELEBRATIONS**

Major French holidays include Christmas (December 25), New Year's Day (January 1), and Bastille Day (July 14). On Bastille Day, named for the prison that citizens stormed on July 14, 1789, the French celebrate their liberation (freedom) from the monarchy and the beginning of their Republic. There are fireworks, dances, and parties with picnics. Picnics almost always include fromage (cheese), such as Camembert, brie, chevre (goat's milk cheese), or Roquefort.

For Christmas, the French have large feasts with many courses, which usually end with a Bûche de Noël, or Yule log. This cake is shaped to look like a log of wood because of the traditional French custom of lighting a real log at Christmas. On the first Sunday of January, the Christian holiday, Epiphany, is celebrated, marking the three kings' visit to the newborn baby Jesus. For this occasion, a special dessert called la galette des rois, is prepared. A small token, either a bean or porcelain toy, is baked inside. Whoever finds the hidden bean or porcelain toy in their piece gets to be king or queen for the day and wear a golden crown. Traditionally, the king (the man who found the bean in his piece of cake) had to pick a queen and present her with a gift. To avoid this obligation, the "king" would sometimes eat the evidence. To solve this problem, in 1874 French bakers began putting collectible porcelain charms in their cakes instead of beans.

- **MEALTIME CUSTOMS**

When entertaining at home, the hosts pride themselves on making mealtime a memorable and positive experience. For everyday lunches and dinners, four courses are typically served: salad, main dish with meat, cheese with bread, and dessert. Bread and water are always served. Special occasions include even more courses such as an appetizer of savory pastries, or other finger foods. This is normally served with an alcoholic beverage, often French wine. Several bottles of wine may be served with the meal. Coffee is also served.

Restaurants in France are generally more formal than those in the United States. It is expected that patrons are there to have a full meal. Wine is ordered by the half or full carafe (a glass container). Waiters are rarely tipped because a fee for service is added to the bill for the meal. Eating out is a social occasion, and is a leisurely activity. It is considered rude to ask to have leftover food wrapped to be taken home. Several fast food restaurants such as Quick (a French version of McDonald's), and Pizza Hut are available. Sidewalk vendors and cafés or local boulangeries (bakeries) also offer quick.

The typical eating habits of the French include three meals a day, with tea served at 4 p.m. Breakfast often includes a fresh baguette and buttery croissants, sometimes filled with chocolate or almond paste. Coffee, café, is usually very strong; café au lait is coffee served with hot milk. Fresh fruit and yogurt are also common at breakfast. Lunch is the main meal of the day and takes more time to eat than the typical lunch in the United States. For this reason, many businesses are closed between 12 noon and 2 p.m. A school lunch might consist of a baguette filled with cheese, butter, meat, lettuce, and tomato. Dinner usually takes place after eight at night.

POLITICS, ECONOMICS, AND NUTRITION

The diet of the French people is generally considered healthy, and most citizens receive adequate nutrition. In 2001 the countries of Europe experienced outbreaks of two diseases, "mad cow disease" and "hoof and mouth disease" that affected the cattle and sheep herds. Many countries enacted laws and regulations restricting the import and export of meat during that period, until the diseases could be brought under control. In France, there have been protests at some fast food restaurants in an attempt to drive them out of the country to keep the traditional quality of French food and the French lifestyle.



