



FRANCE

Here, there are really two cuisines: haute cuisine, the foundation of fine cooking everywhere; and cuisine bourgeoise, regional cooking that has evolved from peasant lifestyles. The real flavors of France have their roots in the latter.

TRADITIONAL INGREDIENTS

BUTTER

STOCK

GARLIC

MUSTARD

BEEF

CHICKEN

GAME

CREAM

CHEESE

ONIONS

LEEKs

WINE

The rural way of life is important in France. Despite widespread difficulties, one in sixteen Frenchmen still works in agriculture. The cuisine revolves around their labors and that of artisans who craft farmers' goods, such as crusty breads, pastries, charcuterie, and cheeses. Even people who have migrated to cities retain ties with their regions of origin and, though they may now do their shopping at the *hypermarché* (supermarket), they usually buy seasonal produce at markets and cook the dishes they grew up eating.

Bread has always been the staple here; it is so important that its price is regulated. But the quality of French bread has deteriorated over the years, and only a handful of artisanal bakeries are still devoted to turning out excellent loaves. Meat and fish are widely eaten, as are vegetables, which play a much more important role in home cooking than they do in haute cuisine.

France is one of the biggest and wealthiest countries in Europe. Sometimes referred to as *l'Hexagone* because of its shape, France shares

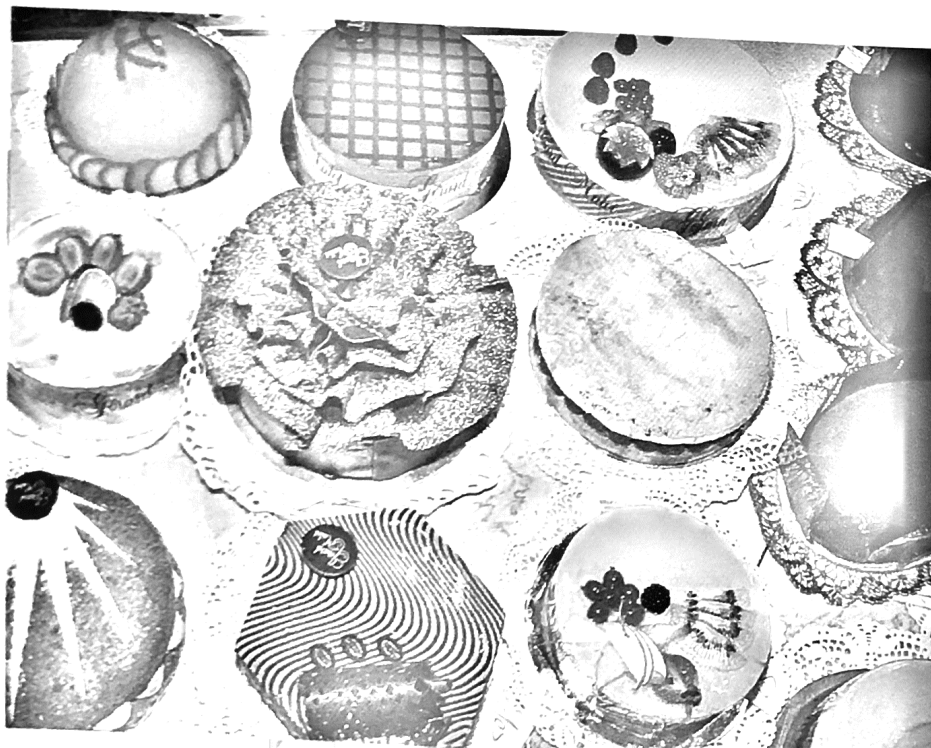
borders with Spain, Italy, Switzerland, Luxembourg, Belgium, and Germany. A fertile country with long rivers and a variety of landscapes, there are 22 official regions, each with its own identity. Some have their own dialects, such as Alsatian, Flemish, and Provençal; all have a distinctive cuisine.

Despite these differences, however, all French cuisine is connected by its deep flavors and its ability to satisfy the senses—a result of refined cooking techniques and impeccable ingredients. The ingredients are often simple; the French do not rely on pungent spices and aromatics to achieve strong tastes. It is their techniques that bring out the essence of food. Sauces are the glory of French cooking; they enrich, enhance, and complement dishes, and transform ordinary economical meals into memorable ones. Stocks made from meat, bones, and aromatics are literally the foundation—though many great French dishes don't require them.

Although French cuisine has a very strong identity, there have been some outside influences exerted on the cooking. Workers have come from Italy, Spain, Portugal, and, most recently, from North Africa and the former French colonies. This has not greatly altered French culinary habits; however, North African food is quite easy to find in cities like Paris and Lyons, and throughout the south. Southern French cooking is Mediterranean and there are Arab inflections in the southwest.

Food through the day

Eating and mealtimes are quite consistent throughout the north, west, and center. Breakfast is a light meal, usually eaten between 7 and 9 am. Strong coffee with milk, hot chocolate, or tea are



the habitual beverages, taken with buttered bread and jelly, or a pastry such as a croissant, brioche, or *pain au chocolat* (chocolate-filled pastry). In cities many people have their breakfast in cafés.

Until quite recently the midday meal was the main meal of the day, and this is still true in some rural areas. Even in cities, where eating on the run has caught on with alacrity in recent years, many people still sit down to a three-course meal in a café or a restaurant. A typical French meal begins with a salad, charcuterie, soup, vegetable tart, or quiche; the main course is meat or fish with a vegetable garnish. Cheese and/or dessert follows. The French like their desserts, and they have a large repertoire to choose from. Wine and water are the usual beverages, and a demitasse or a herbal tea invariably ends the meal. Bread is always present at the French table.

If lunch was a light one, dinner will be the main meal of the day and will be like the meal described above. But, just as often, dinner is light: a soup with bread or charcuterie and a salad, followed by cheese and perhaps dessert; or it could be meat or fish.

The north and west

These regions of France stretch from the borders with Germany, in the east, and Belgium, in the north, all the way to the Atlantic coast. The foods of each region often reflect these neighbors and their surroundings and all are unique. This part of France also includes Paris, with its concentration of some of the best regional specialties from all over France.

Champagne, Le Nord, and Picardy

The region of Champagne extends from Chablis in the north of Burgundy to the Belgian border. Although primarily known for its great sparkling wines, it is actually more of a wheat and cereal-growing region, with only 5 percent of the land devoted to viticulture.

The cuisine here is hearty and simple; specialties include *andouillettes* (small tripe sausages) and ham from the Ardennes, which is the same dried ham that is enjoyed across the

border in Belgium. Boiled dinners with lots of cabbage and other vegetables, called *potée champenoise*, are common. The lakes and streams from the southern part of the region provide cooks with trout and other freshwater fish.

To the north and west of Champagne, Le Nord, which includes Picardy and Flanders, is a region of unstable weather influenced by the windy English Channel; the food is accordingly rich and warming. Belgian Flanders extends into France here, and the foods of the two countries have much in common. Beer is widely drunk, and it is used in cooking the same dishes that are cooked in Belgium, like *carbonnade* and *coq à la bière*. Shellfish from the English Channel and North Sea—particularly mussels and oysters—is a mainstay. As in Belgium, *moules-frites* (mussels and french fries) is a local dish. Endives, which originated in Belgium, are a specialty and are known by their Belgian name, *witloof*, meaning “white leaf.”

Fresh salmon

Fish, such as this delicate salmon, are used in many classic French dishes, often poached and served with *beurre blanc*—a style for which both Angers and Nantes claim credit.

Cakes and pastries (opposite)

Specialized *pâtisseries* throughout France sell marvelous pastries, tarts, gateaux, and other sweet baked goods.





Artichoke harvest

The farmland around Brittany is known for its tasty globe artichokes, called *gros camus de Léon*.

Sugar beets are the main crop of Picardy. Napoleon experimented with extracting sugar from beets to get around the English embargo on sugar in the 19th century. His success established French "sugar independence," and most of the country's sugar still comes from the fields of Picardy. Locals have consequently developed a love of sweet foods. Hard candy is popular, particularly the mint-flavored *bêtises* from Cambrai. Sugar is widely used in cooking, even in beef stews and with vegetables like cabbage.

Potatoes are another staple of Le Nord. Antoine-Auguste Parmentier, who led a campaign in the late 18th century to get the French to adopt the potato instead of bread as their staple, came from Picardy. He didn't fully succeed with his mission, but the potato did eventually become established as the most popular vegetable in France.

Alsace-Lorraine

A narrow region bounded on the west by the Vosges Mountains and on the east by the Rhine, Alsace was for centuries part of Germany, until the Treaty of Münster in 1648. For the next 300

years the region was passed back and forth between the two countries. It has been French since the end of the Second World War.

Linguistically and culturally, Alsace shares much with Germany. The Alsatian dialect is a German one, the architecture is Bavarian, with half-timbered houses adorned with geranium-filled window boxes, and the food, such as its vast array of charcuterie, has much in common with that of its neighbor. Sauerkraut with all the pork trimmings is the region's signature dish. Dining in Alsace is informal and convivial; where there are wine bars in the rest of France, there are winstubs here. As in other areas with a combined German and French influence, Alsatian cooking exhibits both the robustness of German food and the subtle refinements of French cuisine.

The soil in Alsace is rich, and the agricultural output abundant. The region's products are celebrated with village festivals throughout the year—there are grape and harvest festivals; a cheese and folklore festival; a cheesecake festival; a sauerkraut festival; a redcurrant festival; an onion festival; and fairs that honor turnips, frogs, herrings, pâtés, and snails.

Alsace is known for its foie gras and its *pâté de foie gras*. Foie gras is eaten plain, but also used by local chefs as an ingredient in other dishes. The tradition of force-feeding geese and ducks to fatten their livers has always been a specialty of Jewish farmers. Today, though, about a third of the livers processed in Alsace are imported from Hungary, Bulgaria, Poland, and Israel.

Lorraine, to the west of Alsace on the other side of the Vosges, is a country of rolling pastures and farms. The region has been important since the Middle Ages as a source of salt, a valuable commodity in the past due to its preserving characteristics. Much of the area's wealth was derived from its trade in salt, and today there are still more than 20 working salines.

Game is important in both Lorraine and Alsace. The forests around Ribeauvillé and Riquewihr supply game not only to local cooks but to top chefs throughout France. Freshwater fish from the River Ill include pike, perch, eel, and roach. Carp, from ponds of Sundgau in the

south, is also popular. A freshwater fish stew, called *matelote alsacienne*, is the best-known fish dish in the region. Snails, crayfish, and frogs' legs are also widely eaten, though now much of the supply is imported.

Alsace has a home-baking tradition that is unique in France. Local breads include: rye breads with caraway seeds; a dense, dried pear and fruit bread called *berawecka* or *bierwecke*; and a fluted, yeasted cake called *kugelhopf*. Alsatians also bake wonderful thin-crust main-dish and dessert tarts.

The famous cheese from this region is *Münster*, a strong cow milk cheese, made in the Vosges mountains in the summer and early fall. It is aged to varying degrees, and goes perfectly with the wines of the region, particularly *Gewürztraminer*.

Normandy

Settled in the 9th century by Vikings—Norsemen who gave the Normans their name—Normandy is a rainy region of beaches and chalky cliffs, of lush green, rolling pastures, apple orchards and farms. It is a land of farmers and sailors, with a cuisine that is a mix of delicate dishes based on cream and butter, and nutritious peasant fare based on earthy ingredients like tripe, charcuterie, and *graisse à la normande* (pork and beef fat simmered with vegetables and herbs).

Norman fishermen supply the region and much of the rest of France with many kinds of fish and shellfish. Sole is prized here, and other popular fish include plaice, lemon sole, mussels, shrimp, crabs and oysters. Norman towns lend their names to various fish preparations, such as *sole à la dieppoise*, a preparation that includes shrimp, mussels, mushrooms and cider or white wine; and *les demoiselles de Cherbourg*, baby lobsters served with bouillon flavored with calvados brandy.

The northernmost department in Normandy is the Manche, a name that refers to the English Channel which surrounds it on three sides. Some of the food here overlaps with that of neighboring Brittany, such as *présalé* lamb, delicate-tasting lamb that has fed on the salt marshes around

Le Mont-Saint-Michel, and *morue à la cherbourgeoise*, salt cod with potatoes and onions. This part of Normandy is known for earthy dishes, such as *andouillette* and *andouille*, sausages made with hog stomach and intestines.

The eastern Norman department of the Calvados is dairy and apple country. Black-and-white cows are prized for their meat and their high milk yield. The local butter is wonderful. The top of the line is Isigny butter, which is sold in wooden containers; a sweet butter with a low whey content, it is ideal for puff pastry. Other dairy products include some of France's most highly regarded cheeses: Camembert, Livarot, Pont-l'Évêque, and Brillat-Savarin.

Brittany

France's westernmost region, Brittany juts out into the Atlantic, with the English Channel to the north and the Bay of Biscay to the south. The

CAFÉS AND BRASSERIES: EVERYDAY TREATS

The Paris café was created by people from the Massif Central during the 19th century. At this time many poverty-stricken peasants were forced to leave the region and seek work in the city. They made a living selling firewood and coal from small shops that doubled as wine shops, and these eventually grew into cafés. Much of the Paris catering trade is still owned by Auvergnats and their descendants.

The brasserie, on the other hand, is a creation from Alsace. This is a region of beer drinkers as well as wine drinkers, so these large, informal restaurants specialize in both drinks, as well as in simple French dishes. Brasseries are a fixture throughout France, and many still have Alsatian connections.





CRÊPES: FROM BRITTANY

Well-known throughout France, crêpes here benefit from the region's high-quality eggs, butter, and milk. Savory crêpes, called *galettes*, are made with buckwheat flour; sweet crêpes are made with wheat flour. *Galettes* are topped or filled with various foods, including Gruyère cheese, ham, spinach, and seafood. Jelly, honey, apple purée, and chocolate are the most common

toppings for sweet crêpes. In *crêperies*, these light pancakes are usually served with regional cider. However, locals traditionally dip their warm crêpes into *lait ribot* (buttermilk).

westernmost administrative department is called Finistère, meaning the "end of the earth." Between the two coasts is fertile farmland and the forest of Paimpont, a reputed home of King Arthur and his knights. The Gauls gave this land the name of Amor, which means "the country by the sea;" this name echoes in the names of dishes such as *homard à l'armoricaine* (lobster in a tomato and shallot-based sauce). The people here were called Bretons because they had originally come from Britain after Anglo-Saxon invasions.

Along the north and south coasts of Brittany there are many bays and inlets, which provide perfect environments for oysters, scallops, and mussels. Farther out in the shoals, lobsters thrive—both the big Atlantic *homards* and the smaller, clawless *langoustes*. Bretons have always been a seafaring people; for hundreds of years Breton fleets have fished for cod as far away as Greenland and the Newfoundland banks. Local fishermen go out daily in small, colorful boats. When they return in the afternoon, the wholesale fish markets begin. Throughout the restaurants of this region, fish and seafood are served incredibly fresh and unadulterated: raw oysters and other *fruits de mer* (shellfish) are presented on huge platters lined with seaweed; and mussels are steamed, gratinéed, or made into soup. Scallops

from the bay of Saint-Brieuc on the north coast are considered the best in France.

Brittany's ports were important until Napoleonic times, and there was much trading with Mediterranean, Indian, and, later, with New World merchants. Salt was the region's most valuable commodity (sea salt from the Guérande Peninsula is still an important product of Brittany), providing Europe with most of its supply during the Middle Ages. It was traded for oranges and dried fruits, wines, and spices. Spices were made up into curry mixtures by apothecaries, and the seasoning became part of the traditional cuisine. This is why today dishes like *homard au cari* (lobster with curry sauce) are seen on many Breton menus. Mediterranean ingredients like tomatoes, garlic, olive oil, and saffron were also incorporated into some local dishes. *Bouillabaisse des kermokos* is one such dish, which takes its name from the word "kermokos," used to describe the children of Breton sailors and Provençal women.

But for the most part, the cooking here is the simple food of poor country people, adorned with only the best local butter and cream. The region is well-known for its produce, particularly its huge globe artichokes and its strawberries. Over 20 different kinds of strawberries are grown in the Plougastel region, near Brest, and every village has a strawberry tart recipe. Country people make porridges and polenta-like *fars*, which use oats, wheat flour, barley, or buckwheat flour. The batter for one type of *far* is poured into a linen bag, which is tied and simmered for several hours in a *pot-au-feu*, with which it is served. The best known *far* is the *far breton*, a rich prune flan that is found all over Brittany.

Paris and the Ile de France

Paris and its suburbs—the Ile de France is the area within a 30-mile (50 km) radius of Notre Dame—have sprawled over the years, overtaking land that was once agricultural. *Maraichers* (market gardens) used to supply Paris with much of the city's fruit and vegetables, and many French dishes are named for the once-famous produce of specific towns—Montmorency for its

cherries, Clamart for its peas, and Chantilly for its cream. Cultivated mushrooms, *champignons de Paris*, now grown in the Loire Valley, were once grown in caves outside of the city.

Although much of this production is now gone due to urban sprawl, there are still many farms just outside of Paris. No matter how many supermarkets spring up in and around the city, each neighborhood still has its weekly or biweekly market, where local farmers sell their fruit and vegetables.

In Paris you can find all of the best regional foods of France: cheeses, wines, breads, pastry, and cold meat products. Charcuteries sell not only pork products but also classic prepared dishes such as quiches, pizza, terrines, *pâtés en croûtes*, and *galantines* (stuffed meat rolls). This is takeout food at its best; many of the



The *boulangerie*

Parisian bakers sell many different regional breads. This one specializes in dense, sourdough, country bread, *pain de campagne*.

SIGNATURE DISHES

Tarte flambée A cream, bacon, and onion tart from Alsace-Lorraine.

Pot-au-feu The name of this boiled meat and vegetable dish is literally "pot on fire."

Plateau de fruits de mer This shellfish platter is a specialty of brasseries.

Moules marinières This dish of steamed mussels originates in Brittany.

Steak frites The quintessential Paris meal of strip steak with french fries.

Andouillettes à la lyonnaise The Lyonnais-style tripe sausage is stuffed with veal and served with fried onions.

Ravioles au chèvre Ravioli filled with goat cheese from Val d'Isère.

Clafoutis This baked fruit custard is usually made with cherries.

charcuteries specialize in food of a particular area, and along with the prepared meats and salads, they sell local dishes like *choucroute garnie*—an Alsatian specialty.

A city of cafés and tea salons, bakeries and patisseries, wine bars, bistros, brasseries, and fine restaurants, Paris is home to many of France's greatest chefs, some with two or three Michelin stars. Chefs from all over the world come to train here, in restaurants and at cooking schools.

The Loire Valley and the Sologne

A country of chateaux and refinement, the Loire Valley is one of France's most fertile regions, providing the country with much of its fruit, vegetables, grains, and some highly regarded red and white wines. Vast grain fields spread through the northeastern part of the region, giving way to rolling, soft countryside. It is often said that the purest French is spoken in the Loire, and the same can be said of the cuisine: it is pure, classic French—for example, poached salmon and other Loire river fish with *beurre blanc*, local white asparagus, fresh goat cheese, and game from the forests of the Sologne.

Outside the main cities of Orléans, Tours, and Angers, much of the Loire and Sologne is agricultural. Crops include wheat, millet, and beet, and melons, pears, and raspberries. Mushrooms are cultivated in caves near Saumur, where there are many troglodyte dwellings, which were built into the volcanic rock along the

HERBS AND SPICES

CHERVIL this delicate herb brings a sweet, aniseedlike flavor to dishes

CHIVES a mild, oniony herb, one of the *finest herbes* added to omelets and salads

PARSLEY an essential element of the chopped, mixed *finest herbes* added at the end of recipes or in quickly cooked dishes

TARRAGON combines with classic chicken dishes. This is the key ingredient in *sauce béarnaise*

Loire. During the Renaissance, huge rocks were cut out of the stone to build the great chateaux and cathedrals, and the resulting caves were perfect places for cellaring wine.

The Renaissance nobility were attracted to the region because of the hunting in the game-rich forests of the Sologne, south of Orléans. They filled the moats of their chateaux with carp and their chefs came up with some of France's more elaborate haute cuisine dishes like *carpe à la Chambord*, stuffed carp garnished with *quenelles* (light dumplings), truffles, fluted mushrooms, and fried caviar. Hunting is still an important pastime here between October 1 and the end of February; this is the season for duck, pheasant, partridge, deer, and quail.

Freshwater fish from the Loire is one of the great delicacies of the region. Perch, sandre, pike, lamprey, eel, herring, and salmon are plentiful. Eel is stewed in local wine to make the dish *fricassée d'anguille*, and *civelles* (baby eels) are commonly cooked in oil and butter. Between spring and fall *friture de la Loire* (small deep-fried fish) are a specialty.

Orléans, in the easternmost part of the region, is France's vinegar capital. This evolved because wine produced in the region, before rapid transport, had often soured by the time it reached this important city. Businessmen turned the spoiled wine to profit by making it into vinegar. Another product of Orléans and its environs is *pain d'épices* (spiced honey bread).

The Loire is wine and goat cheese country. Regional goat cheeses include: *Selles-sur-Cher*, a soft, fresh goat cheese, sometimes sprinkled with powdered charcoal; the pyramid-shaped *Poulligny-Saint-Pierre*; *Sainte-Maure Fermier*, which has a straw running through it; and the cheese disks called *Crottin de Chavignol*, which can be aged or fresh. Vineyards in the Loire extend from its Brittany frontier, the Pays Nantais on the Atlantic, to Sancerre and Pouilly-sur-Loire in Burgundy. The wines are fresh and uncomplicated, both white and red. They can be drunk early and many age well.



Atlantic Coast and Bordeaux

From the Vendée and Poitou-Charentes regions south of Brittany to the town of Arcachon, south of Bordeaux, the land is flat and fertile, ripe for the grapes that make the great Bordeaux wines. The Atlantic offers an abundance of oysters and mussels, raised in large beds along the coast. Eels and snails are also specialties here. Farmers grow highly esteemed garlic, used in many local dishes, particularly roast goat. They also grow special white beans called *mojettes*, which are served both dried and fresh, with ham. Over 50 varieties of goat cheese are produced here.

Earth and sea come together in the cooking of the Atlantic region. This is embodied in one of the area's signature dishes, *huitres à la charentaise*, made from local oysters with spicy sausage. The Vendée and Poitou produce excellent beef and dairy cattle, goat, lamb, poultry, and vegetables. South of the Vendée and Poitou is the province of Charentes, which, alongside cognac, produces some of the best butter in France.

The day's catch

These fish, caught in Lake Haute-Saône in the Franche Comté, will be on the local market stalls by afternoon.

The fromagerie (opposite)

Over 300 varieties of cheese are produced in France. The goat cheeses sold at this market in the Loire are a regional specialty.



Burgundy vineyards

The vintners of this region make fine wine according to traditions that date back to the Middle Ages.

The prosperous city of Bordeaux sits on the Garonne River, where it converges with the Dordogne river in the Gironde estuary. From the 12th to the 15th century this was a disputed area, violently fought over by England and France. Although France eventually resumed control, there has always been an important trade relationship with England, particularly in the wine business. Bordeaux became wealthy through wine, a legacy of the Romans who originally planted the vineyards south of Bordeaux, and the English who, when they held sway in the area, encouraged viticulture.

Dordogne

The cooking of the Dordogne is much like that of southwestern France. Also known by its ancient name of Périgord, this is a rich, green country, where agriculture is key. The Dordogne river winds through a valley of sheer cliffs and caves decorated with prehistoric paintings. Perched on the cliffs are dramatic chateaux built in the

Middle Ages, vestiges of the French-English wars. It is a country of unchanged medieval villages and a rural way of life.

The Périgord has long been a region of small farms, where people raise geese, ducks, hogs, chickens, corn, and tobacco. This is the largest walnut-producing region in France, and the oil from the nut is used in everyday cooking. The walnuts are pressed in the mills dotting the region's many streams. Walnut oil is particularly noticeable in salads and local cakes.

Historically, many of the farmers were sharecroppers who passed small parcels of land down the generations. Recently, the government has encouraged the consolidation of holdings and the farming of cash crops like tobacco.

Food here is rich and rustic, but even simple dishes can be adorned with the region's luxurious specialties, foie gras and truffles. The term *à la périgourdine* refers to a peasant recipe that has been refined by the addition of truffles and/or foie gras: eggs stuffed with foie gras are *oeufs à la*

périgourdine; *cou d'oie farci à la périgourdine* is goose neck, with the skin filled with ground pork, goose, foie gras, and chopped truffles; and *poulet à la périgourdine* is chicken stuffed with foie gras and truffles, flavored with cognac.

The Dordogne is also a land of goose fat, which is used for cooking and for *confit d'oie* (meat and gizzards in rendered fat). Goose rind flavors soups and is eaten as an aperitif. Duck foie gras is also produced here, and duck *confit* is a regional mainstay. The breasts of both goose and duck are widely eaten, cooked rare like beef.

The "black diamond" of Périgord and nearby Quercy is the black truffle. The region supplies about 70 percent of French truffles. Porcini and other wild mushrooms are other treasures. They are cooked in omelets and ragouts, and used as a garnish for meat and poultry.

Central France

The regions of Central France have widely varied landscapes, consisting of lush vineyards, rolling hills, and snow-capped mountains. This area includes Burgundy, Lyons, and its environs, which are considered by many to be the gastronomic heart of France.

Burgundy and the Lyonnais

A country of flat land in the north, limestone hills around Chablis, rugged forest towards the center, and lush vineyards in the south and east, the Duchy of Burgundy was once more powerful than the Kingdom of France. During the 14th and 15th centuries, under the rule of the Dukes of Valois, its territory stretched as far as Belgium and the Netherlands.

Dijon, once the seat of the Dukes of Burgundy, is the administrative seat of the region. Every year, during the first two weeks of November, it hosts an international food fair, where Burgundian specialties, like *jambon persillé* and *coq au vin*, are judged. Dijon's specialties include mustard and *crème de cassis* (a blackcurrant syrup). Kir, the aperitif made with white wine and cassis, evolved here as a way to use up inferior white wines.

Lyons, south of Mâcon, is thought by some to be the gastronomic capital of France. The surrounding regions supply fine raw ingredients, such as Dauphiné cream, Bresse poultry, and Auvergne lamb. Beaujolais is the wine of the Lyonnais, and a characteristic snack is called *le machon*, an assortment of cooked pork meats and sometimes pan-fried tripe, washed down with a pitcher of Beaujolais. The area is known for its sausage, and produces an impressive assortment of charcuterie, including the long *rosette de Lyon*.

■ BRANDIES AND LIQUEURS: A REGIONAL TASTE

JUST AS THE FOOD VARIES FROM REGION TO REGION IN FRANCE, SO TOO DO THE FLAVORS OF SOPHISTICATED BRANDIES AND LIQUEURS. ALSACE, RICH IN ORCHARDS, PRODUCES *Eaux de Vie*, CLEAR, FRUIT BRANDIES, WHICH ARE AMONG THE BEST IN FRANCE. IN NORMANDY OVER 100 VARIETIES OF APPLE ARE GROWN. THOSE THAT ARE UNFIT FOR CONSUMPTION ARE OFTEN DISTILLED FOR CALVADOS. FARTHER SOUTH, THE FLAT, FERTILE LAND OF THE ATLANTIC COAST IS PERFECT FOR THE GRAPES THAT MAKE THE FINE COGNAC FROM CHARENTE AND BRANDY FROM ARMAGNACS. IN THE DORDOGNE, THE LARGEST WALNUT-PRODUCING REGION IN FRANCE, LOCALS MAKE A STRONG, DARK LIQUEUR BY MACERATING THE NUTS IN BRANDY. THE FRANCHE-COMTÉ, ON THE SWISS BORDER, IS THE HOME OF KIRSCH, MADE FROM WILD CHERRIES. OTHER *Eaux de Vie* AND LIQUEURS ARE ALSO MADE HERE; NEAR GRENOBLE, FOR EXAMPLE, CARTHUSIAN MONKS STILL MAKE THE CENTURIES-OLD LIQUEUR, CHARTREUSE.



and *sabodets* made from pork, beef, hog's head, and skin. Earthy food like hog's trotters, crackling, and sow's ears are popular in bars and bistros. Lyons is also a city of *roisseries*, restaurants specializing in roast meats.

Bresse, south of Dijon and east of Lyons, has always been famous for its chicken. Bresse chickens are free-range, cornfed chickens that live in a special finishing room drinking milk and eating corn during the last 15 days of their lives. They are sold with special bands on their legs to denote their place of origin. A mature chicken from Bresse is a *poularde de Bresse*; a younger chicken is a *poulet de Bresse*. When cooked with truffles or morels (a type of mushroom) inserted under the skin, it is called *poularde* (or *poulet*) *demi-deuil*; when cooked in a hog's bladder, it is *poularde en vessie*.

Jura, Franche Comté and the Alps

This is rugged mountain terrain and, as in nearby Switzerland and Italy, it is dairy country. Some of France's noblest cheeses, like Beaufort, Comté, Morbier, Vacherin, and Saint Marcellin, are made here. The cows go to pasture between mid-June and the end of September, and the best cheese is made during this period.

Villages still have working bread ovens here, where huge, dense loaves are made. In some villages breads are made only a few times a year. The bread is dried, and moistened in soups and stews before serving.

The mountains are also sausage country. There are many kinds of local sausage, much of it smoked. Twice a year, on November 11 (St Martin's Day) and the week preceding Ash Wednesday, farmers slaughter hogs and make smoked hams, bacon, and sausages. The best known is *saucisse de Morteau*. *Saucisse aux choux* (sausage with cabbage) is eaten on New Year's Eve. *Bresi*, which is smoked and salted beef served in paper-thin slices with bread and butter, is another regional delicacy.

The French Alps contain lakes filled with freshwater fish. Its forests abound with wild strawberries, raspberries, cranberries, and mushrooms. Orchards fill the valleys. There are

Italian and Swiss influences in the cooking here, with rich pastas and cheese dishes like fondue and raclette.

Some rare and fine wines are produced in the Jura around Arbois. The most famous is a sherrylike wine called *vin jaune*. The fruity white wines made in Savoie go well with the area's rich, creamy foods.

The center

This part of France encompasses several regions: flat Berry in the northwest; the more rolling countryside of Bourbonnais; hilly Limousin to the west, which has much in common gastronomically with southwest France; and, at its heart, Auvergne in the Massif Central.

The sparsely populated Auvergne is remote and mountainous, rugged and poor, and the cuisine appropriately nourishing, based on foods like mountain hams and sausages, country cheeses, and rustic rye breads. Streams and rivers are rich in salmon trout and a related species, *omble chevalier*. Forests supply game and wild blueberries, morels, and cocherelle mushrooms. This is charcuterie country. Every family has a hog or two, and each year the hog is slaughtered so that every part of its body can be used; blood is used for blood sausage, the organs are frozen, and the rest of the meat is used for fresh and dried sausages, salt pork, hams, and pâtés.

Le Puy is famous for its lentils—here it is a small green variety, which are cooked with regional sausages and salt pork. Laguiole, in the Aubrac plateau, gives its name to a cheese, and the town also makes wooden-handled, folding knives that are sold all over France. To the west of the Aubrac plateau is an area known as the Châtaigneraie, or chestnut grove. Chestnuts are used extensively in meat and poultry dishes. Here stockfish (dried cod) is traditional, a legacy from the times when this was the only fish to be had on Fridays. It is cooked with eggs, cream, potatoes, and garlic for *estofinado*, a dish normally associated with the Mediterranean.

The Auvergne produces some marvelous cheeses, including Salers, Saint-Nectaire, Bleu d'Auvergne, and Cantal. The last of these comes



Camargue rice

A chewy, slightly nutty flavored rice is grown in the Camargue region, where the salt marshes and flat, wide plains are well suited to its cultivation.

from the Monts du Cantal, a group of extinct volcanoes, with grassy slopes that make perfect grazing pastures. Every spring the cowherders take their cows up the mountains to graze at altitude. The best Cantal is Salers, made from the milk of Salers cows. One of the Auvergne's signature dishes is *aligot*, a garlic-rich mix of potatoes and the whey of Cantal cheese.

Some of the oldest vineyards in France are around Saint-Pourçain-sur-Sioule. The robust wine goes well with the hearty local food. A third of the bottled water drunk in France comes from the Bourbonnais and the Auvergne. Vichy is the best-known and largest spa.

The Berry is a land of plains, woods, and marshland. Wild produce, such as fish, frogs, mushrooms, and berries, have always supplemented the cuisine here. Sheep and goats are raised for meat and cheese. Berrichon lamb is highly regarded, and the area's well-known goat cheeses include Valençay.

The Limousin, to the west of the Auvergne, is a stock-breeding and chestnut-growing region. *Boudin aux châtaignes* (black pudding with chestnuts) is a specialty of the Limousin. The region gives its name to a chestnut-eating breed of hog, a sheep breed, and a small reddish cow highly regarded for its meat. It is the home of one of France's classic desserts, the *clafoutis*, which is called *milliard* in the Auvergne.

Provence

The eastern end of this French region juts up from the Mediterranean into the Alpes-Maritimes, continuing into the rugged Alpes-de-Haute-Provence. As you move west, the terrain moves gently away from the sea into hills, where fruit trees, vineyards, and lavender commingle, then it climbs into the mountains that inspired Cézanne. The Rhône delta spreads into the flat plains of the Camargue, an area that produces cattle and, more recently, rice. This is cowboy country where bull-meat is a great delicacy.

The gastronomic constants of Provence stretch from the coast to its northern limit. They include: olive oil, garlic, salt cod, anchovies, and

SIGNATURE DISHES

Tapenade An olive paste, made with capers, anchovies, garlic, and herbs.

Anchoiade A seasoned anchovy paste, usually spread on garlic-rubbed croutons.

Aioli The aioli monstre is a feast in which a variety of vegetable, egg, and cod dishes are served with this garlic mayonnaise.

Soupe au pistou A thick vegetable and bean soup, enriched with a pestolike basil paste, called pistou.

Pissaladière The onions for this pizza are cooked with the pissalat (capers) until soft, then spread over the crust.

Artichauts à la Barigoule This fragrant artichoke stew can be eaten hot or cold.

Nougat This chewy confection is made with almonds, honey, and egg whites.

goat cheese. The seasonal fruits used here are figs, cherries, peaches, apricots, sweet melons, strawberries, and quinces. Popular vegetables of the region include tomatoes, eggplants, onions, summer and winter squash, artichokes, and leafy greens. And local aromatic herbs, used as seasonings, are thyme, rosemary, sage, bay laurel, basil, fennel, and parsley.

On the coast, fish dishes are plentiful and are made from the morning's catch, sold daily on the pier of practically every seaside village. The most famous of these is the nourishing fish stew called *bouillabaisse*. As you get closer to Italy, particularly in Nice and its environs, dishes begin to resemble those of adjacent Liguria, with an abundance of pasta, pizza, gnocchi, and basil-scented sauces. During the first half of the 19th century, Nice bounced back and forth between France and the Italian house of Savoy. In 1860, it voted to become part of France, but its cuisine retained elements that we associate with Italy. An Italian ravioli, however, could never be confused with the ravioli of Nice. This is filled with *daube*



FOOD

Le gros souper is the traditional Christmas Eve dinner of Provence. A *repas maigre*—meaning it doesn't contain meat—it is a feast

nonetheless—every dish is traditional, and each detail filled with symbolism. The meal always ends with the "13 desserts." These desserts are innately Provençal; they are simple and unadorned. The number probably symbolizes the number of Christ and his apostles. *Pompe à l'huile*, an olive oil and orange-flower-scented bread, is always present, as are dried fruit and nuts, and oranges or tangerines. Dates, *pâte de coings* (quince jelly), and candied fruits are big treats at the Christmas table.

(beef stew), with ricotta cheese, known as *brousse*, or with pork and Swiss chard. Nor is the distinctly Provençal onion pizza called *pissaladière* typical of its neighbor to the east. Many other dishes in the Comté de Nice are rarely seen in other parts of Provence: the chickpea-flour pancake called *socca*, double-crusted vegetable and rice tortes, batter-fried vegetables and squash blossoms, named *beignets*, stuffed vegetables known as *farcis Niçois*, and polentalike *panisses* made with chickpea flour.

As you move north into the thyme and rosemary-covered mountains of the interior, fish gives way to lamb, rabbit, and hearty, meat stews

ago from the eastern Mediterranean, through the ever-important western Mediterranean port of Marseilles. Tomatoes came from the Americas via Italy, and Nice's taste for sweet and savory combinations is informed by the cuisines of the eastern Mediterranean and North Africa. During the first half of the 20th century, the largest wave of immigration came from southern Italy; so, in addition to the pizzas and pastas of Nice, we find Neapolitan-style pizza and pasta throughout the region. In the last 35 years, the cuisine has been most influenced by North African immigrants and by the colonials who returned to France after the Algerian war and brought their beloved dishes like couscous with them.

The gastronomic traditions of Provence have also been influenced by the Christian calendar. As in Greece and Italy, cycles of fasting follow cycles of feasting. On the fasting days—Fridays and during Lent—fish is eaten instead of meat or, in the interior, salt cod and legumes (beans, lentils, or peas) replace fresh fish. Villages all over Provence celebrate their patron saints, from spring through to the fall equinox, with huge feasts, where tables groan with great platters of salt cod and vegetables served with aioli (garlic mayonnaise), *daube*, and vegetable gratins.

Food through the day

Breakfast in Provence is light, as it is throughout the rest of France. *Café au lait* or tea is drunk with bread or croissants. Locally made fruit preserves and the many honeys produced throughout the region make luxurious condiments.

In the past, workers took bread to the fields or to the olive oil mills for their mid-morning meal, which they would eat with anchovy paste, *tapenade* (olive paste), aioli, or tomatoes. Agricultural workers would take portable lunches, like flat omelets filled with Swiss chard, vegetable tortes, or *pan bagnats* (Niçoise salad-filled sandwiches), and they would then come home to a fragrant stew, which had simmered slowly as they worked. Today, many workers drive home or to a village for their lunch. However, the dishes have not completely disappeared with the lifestyle.



Harvest in Provence

All of the fresh vegetables required to make ratatouille, a popular Provençal dish, are for sale on this open-air market stall.

Although today's economy has brought an abundance of meat into Provençal supermarkets, it used to be scarce and of a sinewy quality but ideally suited to long stewing. As the country climbs into a more severe Alpine, landlocked region, olive oil gives way to walnut oil, butter, and shortening. Grains, and potatoes, cooked into filling, cheese-topped gratins, are important staples in the mountains of Provence.

A taste of history

Provence, like the rest of southern Europe, has absorbed elements of the cuisines of its neighbors, its trading partners, and its immigrants. Saffron and hot peppers arrived long

Reading the

MENU

PROVENÇAL MENUS ARE GREAT FOR LOVERS OF FISH, OLIVES, AND GARLIC. THERE ARE ALSO SOME WONDERFUL, WARMING VEGETABLE DISHES.

aperitif

If you like fish, then anchoïade is good, or you can try the olive paste, tapenade, which sometimes has tuna added.

first course

The entrées in this region are delicious. For example, there is pissaladière, mesclun salad, or salade niçoise.

main course

Light dishes include fish, chicken, or meat served with a vegetable gratin such as tian de courgettes (zucchini). For a warm dish on a winter's day try a nourishing soupe au pistou or bouillabaisse.

dessert

Fruit is available fresh or baked into tarts.

drinks

Choose a local red, rosé, or white wine from the Rhône Valley, Bandol, or Coteaux d'Aix. For dessert, you could pick Muscat de Beaumes de Venise, a sweet wine that tastes just like muscat grapes.

Lunch, which is eaten between noon and 2 pm, can either be light or substantial. In the past this was the main meal of the day, and in many households this is still the case, particularly during a harvest like the vendanges (grape harvest). The main dish might be roast leg of lamb with tapenade, a beef or rabbit stew, or grilled fish served with tomato and caper sauce, or with an intense onion and wine sauce, called raito. This might follow a first course of salad,

PASTIS: THE PROVENÇAL APERITIF

THIS CLEAR, ANISEED-SCENTED LIQUEUR IS A REGIONAL FAVORITE. CAFÉS SERVE MEASURES OF PASTIS IN GLASSES CONTAINING A COUPLE OF ICE CUBES AND ACCOMPANIED BY A PITCHER OF WATER. THE JUGS ARE USUALLY ADORNED WITH THE NAMES OF RICARD OR PERNOD—THE LARGEST PRODUCERS OF THE LIQUEUR. WHEN THE WATER IS ADDED, IT TURNS THE LIQUEUR WHITISH AND CLOUDY. A SLOW DRINK, YOU CAN SIT FOR HOURS ON A SUMMER DAY, TOPPING UP YOUR PASTIS TO MAKE IT LAST. IN NICE A BIT OF ALMOND SYRUP, ORGEAT, IS ADDED TO THE MIXTURE TO PRODUCE A COCKTAIL CALLED THE MAURESQUE.

most typically salade niçoise or mesclun (mixed baby greens), or of a Provençal specialty like pissaladière, anchoïade, or a chard omelet. The main dish might be accompanied by a delicious vegetable gratin. Dessert is light, usually seasonal fruit, such as sweet Cavaillon melon, cherries, apricots, peaches, fresh figs, or stewed quince. All of this is washed down with local wine, which may be a light, dry rosé or red from the southern part of Provence, or a bigger, more elegant wine from the Rhône valley. To finish the meal a herbal tea, made from local plants, like verbena, linden, mint, or chamomile, might be offered, as well as small cups of strong black coffee.

If lunch was the main meal, then dinner is most often soup. When summer vegetables are at their height, this would be a tomato soup with vermicelli or a thick vegetable soup enriched with a basil paste called pistou (pesto). One typical light supper in Provence is a simple garlic soup made by simmering garlic and a few sprigs of herbs in water, with a little olive oil and an egg beaten in at the last minute. Bread is important, not only as an accompaniment to meals, but as an ingredient in many dishes. Soup is poured over thick slices of stale or toasted bread rubbed with garlic. Stale bread is rubbed with garlic and added to salads, and breadcrumbs top gratins and fill vegetables. Fougasse, a ladder-shaped bread often seasoned with olives, anchovies, or bacon, is the classic bread of Provence.

HERBS AND SPICES

BASIL as in nearby Italy, basil is a widely used herb, in dishes like soupe au pistou and salade niçoise

MINT a link to the cuisine of North Africa, mint is often drunk in herbal tea after a meal

ROSEMARY this native herb goes well with the meat stews of the interior

SAFFRON this echo of the eastern Mediterranean is found in bouillabaisse

THYME this herb's pungent flavor is a theme running through much of Provençal cooking

Reading the

MENU

MENUS WILL VARY FROM EAST TO WEST IN THE VAST
SOUTHWESTERN REGION OF FRANCE.

aperitif

In the Languedoc-Roussillon this might be a pastis or a glass of dry rosé. Otherwise a restaurant might offer a sparkling Blanquette de Limoux, a sweet Muscat de Rivesaltes, or a Banyuls. In the central and western southwest an aperitif might be a dry white wine from Gaillac, or a sparkling Blanquette de Limoux or Gaillac Mousseux.

first course

In the Languedoc-Roussillon you may encounter several fish options for an appetizer, such as roasted peppers with anchovies or mussels from Thau. Central and western menus are likely to include foie gras, pâté, terrines, and Bayonne ham. Salads often contain meat in the form of foie gras or duck gizzards and walnuts.

main course

Along the Mediterranean, fish dishes, such as bourride, civet de langoustine, and broiled fish, predominate. Alternatively, you could choose a meat dish of the region: for example, in the Languedoc it could be the stew called gardiane; in the Pays Catalan, boles de picolat (meatballs in green olive sauce), or agneau à la pistache (lamb with garlic) will be present; farther inland, duck dishes such as magret de canard (duck breast) are available, as is the ever-popular cassoulet.

dessert

Restaurants may offer fresh fruit; prunes in red wine; or, in the central and western areas, tourtiers, and ice creams containing prunes and/or Armagnac. In the Pays Basque you may prefer to save some room for a gâteau.



Perpignan. Perpignan is the proud capital of the French Pays Catalan—officially, the Roussillon—and second city of Catalonia. The gastronomic landscape of the Roussillon reflects, in part, a cuisine much like the Provençal-inflected cooking of the Languedoc Méditerranéen, but the food here is much like the food found in Spanish Catalonia (see page 78). Dishes include unusual combinations of olive oil and shortening, meat and fruit, meat and fish, or meat and snails. The lay of the land is similar to that on the Spanish side of the Pyrénées—an impressive coastline that climbs quickly to jagged mountain peaks, bringing meat and fish abruptly together. The Arab influences of Spain are also felt here: pulverized nuts are used to thicken sauces; spices are used in savory dishes as well as in sweet; and pastries are essentially Moorish. Most of the gastronomic feast days enjoyed in Spanish Catalonia—the Cargolada and the Calçotada (barbecued snail festival and barbecued green onion festival, respectively)—are also celebrated in the French Pays Catalan.

Market stall

Local markets are an excellent place to find seasonal produce and local delicacies at affordable prices.

Because the Catalan culture in the Roussillon region is known to be so strong, the description “à la catalane” is applied to many of the region’s dishes. *Salade à la catalane* is a delicious combination of slightly green tomatoes, young onions, sometimes olives, hard-cooked eggs, anchovies, and other tender vegetables in season. What is known as *pain catalan* in the rest of France is what the Catalans call *pa amb oli* (pieces of bread rubbed with garlic and tomato). A tomato sauce seasoned with bitter (Seville) oranges, which is a specialty from the Perpignan area, is known elsewhere as *sauce catalane*, and a



ANCHOVIES: FRESHLY CAUGHT

The village of Collioure, near the Spanish border, is has a reputation for producing delicious anchovies, which are fished nightly from nearby Port Vendres and cured in cellars in Collioure. On a good night, the Mediterranean will yield up to 50 tons of the delicate fish to a determined fisherman; but if the weather is bad, a boat can return from its four-hour journey with nothing. The anchovies, packed in salt and olive oil, are

shipped all over France, but many remain in the Pays Catalan to garnish salads, *pain catalan*, and pizzas.

popular fried egg dish, topped with slices of sautéed eggplant and tomatoes is known as *oeufs à la catalane*.

In the Pyrénées the same cured pork products popular in Spain are widely eaten: white *botifarra* sausage and hams, spicy sausage, and complex pâtés. A hearty pork, bean, and vegetable stew called *ouillade* is considered a national dish of the Pays Catalan. *Crème catalan*, Catalan custard, is as popular here as it is across the border, as are other Moorish-inflected sweet desserts.

The Languedoc Toulousain and the central southwest

As you travel west from Montpellier, you leave the Mediterranean inflections inherent in the southern cuisines of France. Olive oil gives way to goose fat, cured pork products to foie gras and to *confits*—preserved duck, goose, or pork that has been salted to draw out moisture, slowly cooked in rendered fat, then stored in the fat. Confit and foie gras are the defining flavors of this part of France. The *ouillade* (pork stew) of the Pays Catalan becomes *cassoulet*, a rich, thick stew of beans, pork, and *confit*. People here are passionate about *cassoulet*: those from Castlenaudry maintain that the Toulousain sausage has no place in a *cassoulet*, whereas cooks in Carcassonne insist on mutton. The dish has variations, but it always contains beans and preserved meat, and it is probably descended, like other bean and meat stews of the region, from an Arab (or Hispano-Arab) bean and mutton stew.

Cool limestone caves near Montpellier provide the perfect aging grounds for pungent, blue-veined Roquefort cheese, made from the milk of sheep that graze in the nearby Pyrénées—and also, today, in Corsica.

Between the mountains of the Massif Central and the Pyrénées the land is gentle and rolling, fertile farm country dotted with medieval fortified villages and feudal villages, called *bastides*. The rich land yields up: corn for fattening the livers of its many geese and ducks; prunes and other fruit trees; vines that produce robust red and white wines; wild mushrooms, particularly porcini; and black truffles. Arab influences are evident everywhere in the cuisine; *confit* is preserved in exactly the same way as the red-meat based *khelea* of Morocco; aniseed is used to flavor breads; cinnamon, nutmeg, and saffron season poultry and tripe dishes; prunes and quince are used in rich meat stews; and fish are cooked with onions, spices, and raisins. The region’s pastries, particularly, have Arab inflections. A beloved traditional tart called a *tourtière* is made with paper-thin, filolike pastry and filled with fruit, such as apples and prunes. Crêpes are flavored with orange-flower water.

Eating outside (opposite)

Many people take at least one meal a day in cafés, often outdoors, which can be found on just about every street of every town.



Plum *tourtière*

The renowned plums from the area around Agen make a delicious filling for the strudel-like fruit pastries called *tourtières*.

anisettes (anise liqueur), lemon, and almond; cakes are perfumed with orange-flower water and cookies are made from almonds.

Basque country

As in the Pays Catalan, the Spanish border means little when it comes to the culture, gastronomy, and language in the Basque country—the Pays Basque—of southwestern France. Here, as in Spain, people speak a language that is unrelated to French or Spanish, and are fiercely proud of their culture.

SIGNATURE DISHES

Salade landaise Duck breast and wild mushroom salad.

Ttoto Basque-style fish soup, containing sweet and hot Espelette peppers.

Omelette au Roquefort Roquefort omelet, cooked in shortening.

Civet de langoustine A spiny lobster stew that contains ham or salt pork.

Gardiane A beef or bull-meat stew containing black olives, served with rice.

Poulet basquaise Chicken with sweet peppers, ham, and tomatoes.

Piperade A stewed pepper and tomato sauce from the Basque region.

Croustades, pastis, and tourtières
Filled, double-crusted fruit pastries made with thin, filolike dough.

The long coast along the Bay of Biscay and the high mountains of the Pyrénées have produced fishermen who make wonderful fish dishes, especially with tuna, and shepherds who make good sheep milk cheeses, known as *brebis*. France's most highly esteemed salt-cured ham, *jambon de Bayonne*, has been made here since the Middle Ages. The secret to its special taste, it is said, lies in the salt used to preserve the pork, from Salies-de-Béarn, and the salt used to cure it, from Bayonne. The ham lends its distinctive flavor to many Basque dishes.

The other ingredient that distinguishes Basque cooking came from the New World, perhaps as far back as the 15th century. This is the chile pepper, grown around the tiny village of Espelette and called by that name. The *piments d'Espelette* are harvested either green, when they are sweet and only slightly picante, or mature, when they are red and hotter. They are stewed with tomatoes, onions, and garlic to produce *piperade* (a rich-tasting sauce, which can top grilled tuna or meat), to flavor scrambled eggs

(also called *piperade*), or to fill an omelet. Add Bayonne ham to this mixture and it becomes the sauce for the region's most beloved chicken dish, *poulet basquaise*. Green *piments d'Espelette*, white onions, and tomatoes complete the triumvirate of Basque colors, and they have a particularly regional flavor when they are used on top of white-fleshed monkfish, another popular regional dish.

Food through the day

Breakfast in southwestern France is light, as it is throughout the rest of the country. An agricultural worker, who might begin working in the fields at 4 am, also might have a bowl of garlic soup at 8 am, made with the renowned, pink-skinned garlic from Albi. *Café au lait* or tea is drunk with bread or croissants, accompanied by locally made fruit preserves and honeys.

Lunch, eaten between noon and 2 pm, is traditionally the main meal of the day. A three-course lunch might begin with foie gras, a salad or a seafood appetizer, then continue with a main dish, of fish or meat, and finish with a local dessert or fresh fruit. But in the cities this is changing, as businesses are now less likely to shut down at midday; lunch might be as light as a sandwich. In the Languedoc Méditerranéen, the Roussillon, and in the Basque country, main dishes are often fish dishes, simply broiled, topped with *piperade* or aioli (garlic mayonnaise), or rich fish soups. If the main dish is meat, it could be lamb, Catalan meatballs with a green olive sauce, or, in the Camargue, a rich beef or bull-meat stew. Moving west from the Mediterranean, main dish choices are bound to include *confit*, sausage, and duck breast. Dessert could be simple fresh fruit in season. But this part of France also produces marvelous pastry and other desserts: rich *gateaux basques*, strudel-like *tourtières* and *croustades*, prunes in red wine, and Catalan custard.

Dinner, eaten between 8 and 10 pm, can be a multicourse meal like those described above, or it can be simpler. Soup is the most widely eaten dinner in the southwest, whether garlic soup, fish soup, a light soup called a *tourain*, or heartier



■ WINES AND DIGESTIFS: OF THE SOUTHWEST

THE LANGUEDOC-ROUSSILLON PRODUCES 40 PERCENT OF FRANCE'S WINE. FOR YEARS, MANY OF THE REGION'S WINES WERE NOTORIOUSLY BAD, CONTRIBUTING TO FRANCE'S INDUSTRIAL "WINE LAKE." BUT IN RECENT YEARS THE SERIOUS WINEMAKERS HERE HAVE BEGUN TO BE RECOGNIZED. THE AREA IS BEST KNOWN FOR PRODUCING LIGHT, SPICY REDS AND FRUITY ROSÉS. RED WINES HERE ARE ROBUST AND TANNIC, AND ARE DESIGNED TO ACCOMPANY THE STRONG-TASTING MEATS OF THE REGION.

THE AFTER-DINNER DRINK OF CHOICE HERE IS ARMAGNAC. MADE FROM GRAPES, IT IS AGED IN OAK BARRELS FOR BETWEEN FOUR AND TWENTY YEARS. FORTIFIED WINES ARE POPULAR DIGESTIFS ALSO; REDOLENT MUSCATS ORIGINATE IN RIVESALTES AND FRONTIGNAC, AND RICH, PORTLIKE WINE COMES FROM BANYULS.

garbure and *ouillade*. They can be accompanied by pâté or terrine, salad and fruit. Omelets and egg dishes, such as roquefort omelets, truffle omelets, *piperade*, and *oeufs à la catalane*, also make delicious light dinners.

Bread is all-important. Thick, brown country loaves are sliced and added to soups to soak up the broth, and in the Basque country people might eat yeasted corn bread called *méture*.