

food scene **FRANCE** & boil & bubble

**Bastille Day is July 14, so chef FRANCISCO MINOLI honours French cuisine with a tribute to Provence and a fabulous bouillabaisse.**

When talking about France, respected around the world as the home of fine cooking, I must start with my favourite region, Provence.

Situated in the southeastern part of the country, Provence could be considered another country – beautiful, sensuous, mythic, dreamed of, feverishly desired.

Provence is also a cliché, an all-too-often hollow catchphrase employed to sell almost every menu around the world, and always lending the herbal scent of authenticity to everything from flowerpots to fabrics, to contrived (and inharmonious) dishes that would have about as much resonance for the average citizen of the region as sushi or shoofly pie! The native cooking of Provence, in fact, has almost nothing to do with the supposedly “Mediterranean” dishes so frequently given a spuriously Provençal provenance in American restaurant menus.

Traditional Provençal cuisine can be modest, rustic, repetitious, and is a cuisine of peasant subterfuge – based on the ingenious extension of meagre resources, and on dried, brined and oil-packed ingredients, both for preservation and to intensify their flavours, so that a little goes a very long way.

It is not necessarily only the grilled, herb-sprinkled beach food of popular conception; it can be solid, hearty, inland stuff, designed as sustenance.

Frédéric Mistral, the great poet of Provence, once referred to France as “a cold country with a hot sun”.

The legendary Escoffier, who was not only a great chef himself but who both codified and revolutionised classical French cuisine, was born in Provence and got his professional start there.

It was in Provence that contemporary culinary pioneers like Roger Vergé, Louis Outhier, and Jo Rostang thrived, and in Provence (and on its immediate borders) that the now-internationally known Relais & Châteaux group of premium restaurants was founded.

Today, with such noted chefs as Alain Ducasse in Monaco and Moustiers-Sainte-Marie, Jacques Maximin in Venice, Jacques Chibois in Grasse, Alain Ryon in Cuers, Reine Sammut in Lourmarin, Christian Morisset in Juan-les-Pins,

and Franck Cerutti in Monaco and Nice, there are nearly 50 Michelin stars between the Rhône and the Var (rivers), from Montélimar south to the Mediterranean coast, and half a dozen more in the extended Provence between the Var and the Italian border.

“Whether it is because of the mild climate of this land of flowers and fragrant herbs or because of the origins of its people – Celtic, Greek, Latin, with a touch of Arabian, I cannot say”, wrote French food writer Austin de Croze nearly 70 years ago, “but Provence is, first of all, a land of imagination”. I’ve found this to be true time and again as I’ve visited the restaurants of Provence in recent years.

I’ve also discovered that it’s not only the region’s celebrity cuisiniers who are fashioning contemporary masterpieces from local clay. Imagination, in fact, is rampant and a fact within the local culinary industry.

Quite a few lesser known chefs have particularly impressed me. Some who have only recently come into their own, and others, who have been cooking wonderful food for decades in undeserved semi-obscure, all produce great updated Provençal cooking that is not only imaginative but also intelligently conceived and unfailingly delicious. It is some of the best new food being crafted today in all of France.

As Noves is westernmost Provence, Cagnes-sur-Mer is at the region’s eastern limits, at least according to the old definition, by which Provence ended at the Var River, where the Comté de Nice (whose alliances were Italianate rather than Provençal) began.

Rising above Cagnes itself is the medieval hillside village of Haut-de-Cagnes. Renoir, Modigliani and Soutine, among other artists, once lived and worked in this postcard-pretty settlement, with its tortuous cobbled streets, ancient hewn-stone walls, sun-bleached terracotta tiles and ubiquitous bougainvillea, not to forget the beautiful perfume from the lavenders scattered here and there.



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