

A COMPLETE FRENCH DINNER

In general, the essay is not my favorite literary form. Still, this is The Literary Club. What better venue could there be for trying your hand at a literary form you dislike? Consequently, I offer you my essay on the complete French dinner.

For many of the French, food is an obsession. Breakfasts are very light. Lunch too is usually insubstantial. A sandwich such as a *croque monsieur* might be accompanied by a single glass of wine or maybe a *pressé*. The *citron pressé* or lemonade is my preference. These days you might even have a *Coka Lite*. That's French for diet Coke. For some people, a late afternoon coffee is in order. Ah, but dinner. Dinner is anticipated all day long.

You might believe that you have had a complete French dinner but likely you have not. People, even French people, seldom do anymore.

At the outset, it is necessary to decide what type of cuisine is to be enjoyed. There are several distinct possibilities. As you might assume, regional specialties abound but this examination will focus on foods consumed more or less in the center of France, in the region surrounding Paris known as the *Ile-de-France*.

Put aside those astonishing accounts by Rabelais of enormous feasts gobbled down by Gargantua and Pantagruel in which hogsheads of wine washed down barrels full of oysters. Also disregard famous meals of various royal or Imperial figures recounted in minute detail by French historians. The focus of this examination will be on meals available to ordinary people, albeit with discriminating taste.

French cuisine is not static. It has undergone giant waves of change over the centuries. Disregarding *nouvelle cuisine* — as every person of discriminating taste does — there are two important general categories of French cuisine: the *cuisine classique* and the *cuisine bourgeoise*. Royal personalities and their chefs set the standards for the *cuisine classique*. The French monarchy was innovative and forward thinking in some ways which ultimately resulted in the general betterment of French society. In general however, the royal government was extremely repressive. Rigid rules were imposed and strictly enforced over every aspect of culture and woe to anyone who dared defy those rules.

In gastronomic terms, for example, there were only four dishes which could be consumed at the outset of a dinner. Today, the possibilities are many. Because of its breadth of choices, the *cuisine bourgeoise* will be the focus of this essay.

Before examining the various courses consumed in a complete French dinner, a word about courses themselves may be appropriate. A very long time ago, the so-called *French service* was the practice of placing many dishes on a sideboard all at once in the fashion we today might describe as buffet style. The idea of serving individual courses one after another did not originate in France. Of all places, it came

from Russia. The term “Russian service” is seldom heard anymore however. We reflexively associate multiple course dinners with the French.

Well now, exactly how many courses comprise a genuinely complete French dinner? As with any aspect of French culture, there can be arguments but as a general proposition a complete French dinner consists of seven courses.

One must decide however when the count begins. In a typical French household it is possible that guests may be served small foods before the formal start of a meal. Prior to entering the actual dining room, while still in a salon or sitting room, a variety of so-called **hors d'oeuvres** may be served. Contrary to what a literalist might believe, that term does not mean “out of work.” The term **hors d'oeuvres** literally means **hors** or “out of” or, as I would interpret it, “apart from” the main body of a meal, “the works” so to speak.

As a general rule, **hors d'oeuvres** are not served in the dining room of a home nor in restaurants. I do recall however a wonderful exception to this general rule. Many years ago, my late brother and I toured the Loire Valley. In the heart of this region what was once a vast royal hunting preserve still exists. At one end of this domain stands the formidable **Chateau de Chambord**. At the opposite end is the **Chateau de Cheverney**. It is still owned by an ancient aristocratic family. About midway between the two **chateaux** is a small **hameau**, that is a tiny hamlet in English. At the time of our visit, there was a Michelin two-star restaurant named after the chef, Bernard Robin, located there and it was in that little restaurant where I enjoyed the best meal of my life thus far. The astonishing price for that superb meal was roughly the equivalent of twenty-five dollars.

At that lunch only my brother ordered an **aperitif** before the meal. After all, the French have extremely severe penalties for driving under the influence. When his wine arrived so did a tray of numerous tiny treasures. There were two of each item so I assumed I was invited to sample them. I did so enthusiastically. The two most memorable were tiny **croissants**, those extremely buttery crescent-shaped rolls that are crisp on the outside and light as air on the inside. These particular miniature **croissants** were stuffed, respectively, with caviar and alternately a **mousse of foie gras**. I doubt I will ever forget those wonderful **hors d'oeuvres**.

By the way, customarily the French do not consume *strong* drinks before or during a dinner. So, do not expect to be offered an American-style cocktail in a French home. Frankly, I would not order one in a formal restaurant either. Likewise, the French do not generally place ice cubes in their beverages. If the prospect of forcing down an aperitif such as a **Dubonnet rouge** or a glass of **Pernod** without ice is just too daunting for you, then by all means ask for some ice. In fact, I usually do ask for “**beaucoup des glaçons**” or plenty of ice cubes in my water glass.

In any event, calling **hors d'oeuvres** an actual course of a French dinner would be a bit of a stretch.

In a private home when you are taken to be seated in the dining room or at a restaurant when you begin your dinner formally, the true first course to be brought to the table is called the **entrée**. A word about nomenclature is needed here. In American usage, the term “entrée” refers to the main dish. Not so in France. It just so happens that the term is a French word which literally means “the entry.” Fittingly, it marks the very beginning of a complete French dinner.

Gone forever are the days when only four possibilities existed under the **cuisine classique**. Nowadays, the possibilities are endless. For example, today a dinner might begin with a soup — hot or cold. Personally, I would be hard pressed to say whether I preferred a hot potato-leek soup or an icy cold vichyssoise. They are both delicious and each has its merits. Once in a very old Parisian restaurant, I enjoyed a superb **bisque de homard**. I happened to spill some on my pricey French necktie and the waiter insisted on taking it from me — the tie, not the soup. Near the end of the meal he returned it to me. It had been freshly dry cleaned. Yes, I was embarrassed. Thank goodness I had been seated in the foreigners’ section of the place rather than in with the civilized French diners.

Caviar is another possibility for an **entrée**. The first French king to try it, I believe that may have been Louis Seize, in English the ill-fated Louis XVI, is said to have spat it out. These days though caviar is a popular, if expensive, **entrée** choice. It is particularly well liked when accompanied by an icy cold flute of champagne.

Another tried and true entrée favored by many is of course **foie gras d’oie truffé**. This is the fattened liver of a goose that is enriched with truffles. **Foie gras** is usually served with a sweet wine. A match made in heaven is a good **foie gras d’oie** with a small glass of wonderfully viscous **Chateau d’Yquem**.

I could go on at length about **entrées** but I will only mention two more. I will ignore, for example, **escargots** and the rather odd so-called **caviar des escargots** in which some indulge. I happen to love Burgundian-style **escargots** but either you know and love them too or no-one can convince you to try them.

Once in a restaurant recommended to me by a lady at the headquarters of a preservation society to which I belonged, I had an entrée which is both extraordinarily easy to prepare and delicious too. It was a small Mediterranean melon set in a mound of crushed ice with the cavity hollowed out and then filled with Port wine. It is difficult to find Mediterranean melons here in Cincinnati but any small melon will do and the flavor is well worth the slight effort of making it at home. Try it sometime.

The last of the entrées I will mention is a pretty pedestrian one, though good of course. It is **crudités**. These are raw, or more commonly blanched, vegetables. At my own home, I have been known to serve guests slices of baguette buttered thickly and covered with thin slices of radish topped with just a sprinkling of **sel de Camargue**, a French sea salt.

Once you have finished the entrée course, you are well into the meal and eager for what is to come. The second course of a genuinely complete French dinner is the fish course. Incidentally, on a French menu the offerings in question are nearly always labelled **poisson** and almost never **fruits de mer**, that is fish rather than seafood, even though shellfish and other types of seafood are often listed.

Another matter of nomenclature needs mention here. In America the term “menu” means a paper listing of the bill of fare available to a diner. In French, the term **menu** has a wholly different meaning and the list of foods available is called **la carte**. In many restaurants and in virtually every **bistro** the chef offers a pre-determined multi-course meal for the day. That meal is often described in *bistros* on blackboards displayed prominently somewhere on the premises. That fixed meal is the “**menu**” for the day. In this paper with one or two exceptions, I will generally use the term “menu” as it is used in America to avoid confusion.

Although I am not especially fond of seafood, I have enjoyed some remarkably tasty fish dishes in France. On that trip to the Loire valley with my late brother that I mentioned earlier, we stayed at a little country place where Princess Diana’s father, the 8th Earl Spencer, stayed sometimes. This paper is not intended to be a travelogue. Nonetheless, if you ever happen to be thinking of visiting the Loire Valley, you might consider lodging here. It is near the city of Tours and yet is secluded, quiet, and both the building and the grounds are beautiful. The food was remarkable when we stayed there. It is called the **Domaine de la Tortinière**. When we arrived we were tired from traveling all day. We waited to go down to dinner in a lounge area where there was an inviting fire in the hearth. We noticed that immediately above the fireplace mantle was a large picture window. For some uncertain reason, that seemed out of place. Then, we suddenly realized that a chimney is ordinarily always above a fireplace. Evidently, chimneys must flank the sides of that window. Clever.

Once seated, we just decided to take a chance on the chef’s choice for the pre-set **menu**. When the main course arrived, I was shocked to see it was fish. Too tired to be intolerant, I tried it and was happily surprised. It was oven-roasted freshwater salmon taken from the Loire river and prepared with special mushrooms called **chanterelles** that had been gathered on the property itself. That was easily the best fish I have ever eaten.

Another absolutely superb fish dish I would heartily recommend to anyone is the **quenelle**. This word by the way is likely not of true French origin. Some theorize that it is a *Frenchified* version of the German word **knödel**. As the German word implies, it is a type of dumpling that just happens to be made from fish. Although there are versions made with other types of fish and some are served with other sauces, my absolute favorite is the **quenelle de Brochet au sauce Nantua**. The fish in this case is pike and the sauce is a rich and buttery one flavored with crawfish from the region of Nantua where the best tasting French ones are harvested. If, like me, you are less than enthusiastic about fish but you happen to see this dish on the menu, by all means try it.

Of course all the usual fish and seafood favorites we have here in America are also popular with many in France. I do recall having dinner one night with some fellow American tourists staying at the same hotel where I happened to be staying. I have forgotten how we met but I recall that they said they did not speak French and were having a hard time finding food they liked. I took them to a restaurant directly across the street from our hotel and I translated some of the items on the menu for them. The **entrée** each of us had was half an avocado stuffed with shrimp in house-made mayonnaise. This is not especially French I suppose but I wanted to show the couple that language never needs to be a barrier to finding good food.

The third course of a French dinner is the **plat principal**, or main dish. Sometimes either because of physical size or because of the elaborateness of the presentation, the **plat principal** can be seafood. For example, lobster tends to be a main dish in many restaurants. In addition, a diner can choose from lamb, sheep, beef, veal, chicken and other fowl, wild game of different sorts, and to the horror of some Americans a good many so-called “variety meats.” More than one television or movie comedy has demonstrated the dangers of simply pointing at random to an item on a French menu and saying “I’ll have this.” Who can forget Lucille Ball’s reaction when the plate of fried calf brains came to her table? When in doubt, ask your waiter for a recommendation. In Paris, he almost certainly speaks enough English to help you and he always considers it an important part of his job to make recommendations. He will be flattered not disappointed. Just ask, “qu’est-ce que c’est que vous commendez?”

As you might guess, it is hard, though not impossible, to go wrong with chicken. One dish which I love to eat and which I enjoy attempting to prepare is **poulet grandmère**, or granny’s chicken. This is essentially a chicken stew with the usual **mirapoix** of aromatic vegetables, wine, some flavorful herbs, and the last minute addition of some separately and crisply sautéed mushrooms. This dish is one of the many which can stand up to a good flavorful red wine.

A perhaps too familiar and yet always wonderfully satisfying poultry dish is **coq au vin**. I know people who claim this is easy to prepare. Hah! The real thing takes days and requires some essential ingredients that are not easy to come by, such as the feet of the coq, some of his blood, and his minced coxcomb. Ideally the person preparing this dish also should not skimp on the quality of the wine in which everything is braised. A good quality Burgundy must be used to achieve the proper taste. Years ago right here in Cincinnati Maurice Gorodesky at the old Pigall’s was a master of **coq au vin**.

Duck prepared in a French manner is another favorite of mine. I might point out that French butchers cut meat differently from their American counterparts. There is a French cut of the duck breast which I find particularly appealing. It is called the **magret**. You can think of it as more a cut from the front part of the breast than a sideways chop. Usually served with a fruit-based reduction as a glaze, the **magret** invites soaking up every last bit of sauce with a slice or two of **baguette**. Once at, of all places a museum

restaurant, the one at the **Musée d'Orsay**, I literally wiped my plate clean in this manner. The waiter came over to the table and actually congratulated me. I had to laugh. He and I both did.

Veal is another common main course. Many people like **blanquette de veau**. I confess that this dish is not one of my favorites. It always tastes bland to me. Judging by the ingredients that go into it, it should be very flavorful but for me it is not. There are other veal dishes I find far more appealing. **Veau cordon bleu**, or blue ribbon style veal, is one of them. For this dish, thin slices of veal are pounded even thinner in the manner of German or Austrian **schnitzel** or Italian **scallopini**. Then a thin slice of ham and some cheese is sandwiched between the veal slices, the whole then gets breaded and sautéed. You can prepare this at home and it seldom fails to satisfy.

Another excellent veal dish is one which many Americans who have never tried it reject out of hand. **Ris de veau**, or calf's sweetbreads, can look a little strange but they taste so delicious to me I am convinced they must be downright unhealthy. Anything so rich and wonderful just cannot be good for you. Try them sometime. If you need, you can close your eyes.

Beef in France is enjoyed in many forms. For example, Beef Wellington, a roast of beef topped with foie gras and wrapped in puff pastry before being baked in the oven, is a common main dish for the late night or technically I suppose very early morning **réveillon** dinner at Christmas. If you have an opportunity to order this, bear in mind that the beef will be rare.

That reminds me that a word about steak may be in order. The French enjoy steak. You however might not enjoy it the way the French do. French chefs do all sorts of things with steak *except* cook it. Well, that may be an exaggeration. Most French ask for their steak to be cooked **à point**, that is to the point which is "just right." Some however prefer it **sanglant** or "bleeding" and still others, downright **bleu** or so underdone the flesh is still "blue." Then too, there are unique things the French do to steaks. Steak Diane, for example, is covered with crushed peppercorns. Try that, I dare you.

A more accessible beef dish is **pot au feu**. There are restaurants which specialize in this dish and serve nothing else. It is similar to an American pot roast. However, it includes many more types of vegetables and always comes with an enormous beef knuckle on the plate. A small shovel-like utensil is provided so the diner can dig out the soft, gelatinous, and, yes, very tasty marrow and large grain salt is offered to sprinkle with your fingers on the marrow. This is the kind of healthy food any French mother would want her children to enjoy in a big city restaurant. It will do you no harm either.

Other than **charcuterie** or cold cuts, I have seldom seen pork in formal French restaurants. Ham is common at lunch but not so often at dinner. Of course, there are many different types of dining venues in France. One is the **brasserie**. This word

refers to the long-handled pump used to draw beer up from barrels typically stored in cellars. Brasseries serve what is often referred to as “Alsatian” food, that is food which occasionally has a touch of German cooking practices. It happens that Alsace is famous as a region of wonderfully inventive and diverse cuisine. One Alsatian dish which would be familiar to most Cincinnatians is **choucroute garnie**, or garnished sauerkraut. In this dish, sauerkraut is cooked with roast pork loin, sausages of various sorts, and other ingredients. Personally, in France it never quite tastes “authentic” somehow.

In today’s world vegetarianism seems to appeal to ever larger numbers of people and at least one notable French chef has pioneered the trend. Many years ago I knew Christian Constant as a wonderful **patissier**, or pastry chef. He went on to become the **chef de cuisine** at some very prestigious Parisian restaurants, such as **Les Ambassadeurs** in the luxury **Hotel Crillon** right on the **Place de la Concorde**. These days his fame as a specialist in vegetarian cuisine is growing. I am a committed omnivore and thus know very little of vegetarian cuisine, French or other.

Of course, cheese soufflés also afford relief from blood on the tooth, as they say. I have never seen cheese soufflés offered on a menu in France however. Since the preparation time is so long, I would be skeptical if I did see it. I have made cheese soufflés at home though and they can be satisfying. For lunch or an evening meal lighter than a complete French dinner, they do nicely.

Following the **plat principal**, a **salade** course is served to refresh the palate. Generally speaking, it often consists of simple greens with an absolutely perfect vinaigrette dressing. Once at a restaurant belonging to a famous chef named Joel Robuchon I encountered a salad surprise. On top of the customary mixed greens were two dark, shriveled disks of something or other. I tasted one. The flavor was intriguing. I could tell it was a dehydrated thin slice of apple but there was more to it than that. I called over the waiter and inquired. Monsieur Robuchon had come up with the idea of sprinkling thin apple slices very lightly with curry powder before then dehydrating them. I have never encountered that anywhere else but it was memorably good.

Some of you might object that other French salads are substantial and that is so. Those large complex salads tend to be meals in themselves however. The famous **Salade Niçoise** comes to mind. An excellent dish to be sure, do not expect it to come to table as the fourth course of a complete French dinner.

The fifth course of a French dinner is the **fromage** or cheese course. French people believe that cheese aids the digestion. They love their cheeses. Entire stores are devoted to cheese. To say that France offers many different cheeses from which to choose is an understatement of epic proportions. Once, Charles de Gaulle, lamenting the fierce political independence of individual French voters, asked rhetorically “How do you govern a country that has two hundred and forty-six varieties of cheese?” I promise not even to attempt mentioning more than, say, a hundred of them.

Actually, I only have a few general comments. If you try a cheese course sometime, it is a convention to taste an odd number. Three is common. You want variety. For example, select a soft cheese, a hard one, and maybe a blue. **Roquefort** is a familiar and excellent choice for a blue but there are other possibilities. **Bleu d'Auvergne** is similar except it has a noticeably saltier taste than **Roquefort**. A hard cheese that you might enjoy is **Mimolette** from Normandy. It is dark orange in color and quite hard. Some refer to it as the French cheddar. A good soft cheese which reputedly was the favorite of Napoleon is **Époisse de Bourgogne**. The little corporal is said to have especially enjoyed it with a glass of **Gevrey-Chambertin**. **Époisse** is made from pasteurized cow's milk so you can buy it right here in Cincinnati. My own hands-down favorite French cheese is a soft unpasteurized cow's milk cheese from the **Haute-Savoie** region called **Reblechon**. Because it is not pasteurized, it is unavailable here. Both **Époisse** and **Reblechon** are smelly but wonderful. On one of those television travel shows I once heard a French woman rhapsodizing about one or the other of these two and describing it as smelling "like the feet of an angel." That is such a French comment!

One rule you need to bear in mind if you truly want to enjoy French cheese like a native is that the French eat their cheese with only two things: a knife and a fork. Do not munch leftover slices of baguette with it. While some fruit with cheese can be a good ending to a lunch or other light meal, it is not an appropriate part of the **fromage** course of a French dinner.

Ah, the sixth course of a French dinner is **dessert**. Hohn-hohn! "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways."

Many French restaurants, including some here in the U.S., have separate menus devoted exclusively to desserts. The most sensible way to organize a discussion of the topic is to separate the possibilities into general categories.

Crepes are one inviting type of dessert. They can of course be savory as well but sweet crepes are at once both a delicate and a substantial way to conclude a dining experience. The most famous of the crepe desserts is **Crepes Suzette**. These were created accidentally by a teen-aged waiter and served for the first time to the Prince of Wales who later became Edward VII, a **bonviveur** if ever there was one. The combination of butter and orange is famously tasty and the flaming presentation is spectacular.

A much less famous crepe dessert which I used to enjoy too frequently is an unnamed one made with a batter that is sweetened with *brown* sugar. Once cooked, each crepe is coated with blackberry preserves and then with sour cream. That combination of caramel-like brown sugar mixed with sour cream and the intensely sweet but deep wine-like subtlety of the blackberry preserves is another one of those perfect marriages of flavor.

Dessert **soufflés** offer another dramatic presentation. They do take time to prepare so they must usually be ordered early during the dinner. I used to get these at a Basque restaurant in Alexandria, Virginia, which had superb raspberry ones that were well worth waiting for. They are delicate and airy yet intensely flavored. At my home, I often make a frozen version of a Grande Marnier soufflé that never fails to garner praise and recipe requests.

Gateaux, cakes that is, are somewhat different in France. You seldom see the elaborately frosted cakes found in eastern Europe or even here in America. French cakes tend to be simple but impossibly rich tasting. The **gateau Breton** comes to mind. It is dense and very buttery and filled with a very thin insertion of a fruit preserve, usually prune. A type of French cake which is difficult to find, even in France, has an exterior made of fondant molded into some fanciful shape and then filled with pastry cream. If you ever see one of these cakes, please try it just for the experience.

One famous gateau is not really a cake at all. The **gateau Saint-Honoré** is a tour de force of pastry making skills. It is a concoction of puff pastry, pastry cream, and frosting and the entire thing is surrounded with spun sugar. That latter element, the spun sugar, is a special type of a substance most of you know as “cotton candy.” Think about that a moment. Just a moment though.

Glaces, or ice creams, and **sorbets** are my favorite desserts to make. Parisian **confiseurs** are very creative in devising new flavors and presentations for frozen treats. I suspect many of you know **Bertillon** on the **Ile Saint-Louis** in Paris. Of course, it is not a restaurant so going there is an independent pleasure.

Rather than pies, the French tend to make tarts with open tops and low sides. **Tarte Tatin**, named after the Tatin sisters who invented it, is made with apples and is especially delicious when served warm. A commonly available small individual pastry is the lemon tart with the word “**Citron**,” which is French for lemon, written across the top.

Puff pastry desserts are always popular. I mentioned the **gateau Saint-Honoré** a moment ago. One of the prettiest puff pastry desserts is known as **Paris-Brest**. Circular in shape, it is intended to resemble a bicycle tire and is named after a famous bicycle race between Paris and the city of Brest. It is sliced horizontally in half and filled with pastry cream and then the top is decorated elaborately.

A spectacular puff pastry presentation is the **croquembouche**. I purchased one of these for a party I once gave. It is made from a large number of individual cream puffs that are stacked into a cone shape and held in place by caramel drizzled down the sides. This caramel is essentially just burnt sugar and is different from **creme caramel** which is burnt sugar to which cream has been added. Both caramel and **creme caramel** are French inventions that were created by Marie-Antoine Carême. You need to use something sharp — we used an ice pick — to separate the individual cream puffs from a **croquembouche**. We found a bottle of Champagne inside to stabilize the cone shape.

Earlier I mentioned accompanying some fellow Americans to a restaurant across from a hotel where we were all staying to help them order a decent French dinner. Our dessert that night was **profiteroles**. This is a fairly simple and straightforward puff pastry dessert. It consists of a few small round puff pastry balls split open and filled with rich French vanilla ice cream. Each ball is then re-assembled and hot fudge topping is ladled over the little balls. My new friends really enjoyed that simple dessert.

Meringues of various sorts are another entirely distinct category of desserts. One meringue dessert which is at once both very beautiful and very delicious is **iles Flottantes**, or floating islands. The little “islands” are spoonfuls of meringue which are not baked but rather are poached in milk. They are then floated atop a “sea” of **creme anglaise** which is a thin custard-like substance that is the foundation for not only pastry cream but also French ice cream. The “sea” is often decorated with “debris” in the form of sliced toasted almonds and candied violets and rose petals. The “islands” are usually drizzled with hot caramel.

A fortified meringue can be made with the addition of ground nuts to the egg-white mixture. The famously difficult to make **dacquoise** is one such fortified meringue dessert. Usually, but not always, an extended rectangle in shape, it typically has layers of meringue separated by buttercream filling and the top is often frosted with a couverture of dark chocolate and some candied hazelnuts.

French restaurants in America always used to offer a rolling trolley loaded with what they call French pastries. These are less common in France but they are authentic. The individual items tend to be small pastries and might include such wonders as the **Mont Blanc**. **Angelina’s Salon du Thé**, or Tea Room, on the **rue de Rivoli** in Paris makes these to perfection. They are named after a famous mountain in the French Alps. The pastry “mountain” is made of chestnut cream piped around a mound of meringue set in a small tart shell. A candied chestnut, or **marron glacé**, is often centered inside the meringue mound. Confectioners sugar is then sprinkled over the mountain to resemble Alpine snow.

By the way, Angelina’s is famous for its hot chocolate — alleged to be so thick a spoon will stand upright in a cup of it. That claim is a bit exaggerated but the mixture is very thick indeed. Angelina’s is located next door to the Hotel Meurice which was used by the Germans as military headquarters for their occupation forces during the Second World War. Knowing the love Germans have for hot chocolate, the French **Résistance** used Angelina’s as a prime intelligence gathering venue.

Another favorite small pastry is the **galette**. These are flat, round items that can be as simple as butter cookies or alternatively can be filled with any number of sweetened substances. One of my favorites is the **galette des Trois Rois** so-called because it is properly only made and eaten on Epiphany or Twelfth Night which commemorates the visit of the Three Kings in the biblical nativity story. A member of this Club whose daughter is proficient in French cuisine has told me of a larger version

of this pastry which is sliced and served to multiple individuals. That too sounds good to me. The filling for this galette is made from sweetened ground almonds. The aroma when these are being baked is downright ethereal.

One last type of dessert may seem almost too simple to you. The French do some remarkable things with fruit. You used to see occasionally small wooden boxes of candied fruit. Absolutely perfect pieces of fruit would be carefully peeled and then cooked very slowly, sometimes literally for days on end, until they formed extremely dense and almost intolerably sweet imitations of nature. Fruits preserved in brandies also are still found in shops. Both of these two fruit sweets are too intense for me. One fruit dessert which I do enjoy however is prunes in Armagnac. The version which I enjoy making involves poaching the prunes in sweetened red wine with a touch of lemon juice and rind added and then, off the heat, adding a generous amount of Armagnac. The flavor combination is superb ... and this fruit is a *health aid!*

Well, the seventh and last course of every French dinner, including but not limited to a *complete* one, is the **café**, or coffee, course. French coffee does tend to be strong enough to wake the dead and you might want to avoid drinking it at eleven o'clock at night or so at the conclusion of your dinner. If you want to avoid the caffeine rush, by all means ask for **café décafiné**.

Although rare anymore, I do recall one Parisian restaurant which routinely brought a tray of **petits fours** with the coffee course. That term literally means "little ovens" and refers to any number of fairly tiny treats that can range from small cakes frosted and sometimes filled with something like jelly or even buttercream to what are essentially just candies. On one occasion when I had been discretely jotting down notes in order to remember details of a meal I was thoroughly enjoying — and definitely not because I was a secret restaurant critic— I was brought such a tray of petits fours. It had a total of fourteen different miniature gems. I counted them. No, I did not sample all fourteen.

Well, now you know that a complete French dinner consists of seven courses beginning with an **entrée** and progressing through **poisson, plat principal, salade, fromages, dessert,** and **café. Bon appétit.**

Robert Burdette