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The French Paradox

Ah, the French Paradox. Remember? Ten years ago French scientist Serge Renaud claimed on "60 Minutes" that red wine melts away low-density lipo-proteins (the bad part of cholesterol) and the food world collectively clutched their forks and paid serious attention.

How could this be? Do dreams really come true? Then, when the list increased to include olive oil, onions, garlic and strawberries, and every cardiologist was prescribing a glass or two of red wine with dinner, we decided they did indeed. Oh, those French had it right.

But it wasn't fair. How come they could so shamelessly indulge in their fabulous cheeses, butter- and cream-laced dishes, eat three times as much saturated animal fat as we do on this side of the Atlantic, and still be thinner and have fewer heart attacks than we do?

We found answers in a beautifully clear article, "The French Paradox" by Laura Fraser, on the web at www.salon.com. Fraser quoted University of Pennsylvania psychologist Paul Rozin, who said, quite simply, the French have positive attitudes about food and, generally, we don't. We worry and obsess and can't just slow down and love chocolate or heavy cream without having the fantods. But the French don't have a problem; to them these and all the other foods they enjoy are a wonderful celebration.

Attitude is fine, but there's more to good health than agonizing over whether or not to have dessert. It seems the French have strict rules about
food and eating. Claude Fischler, a French nutritional sociologist, explained that his countrymen may eat whatever they want, but there's no snacking, no seconds, no skipping meals, no bolting down food and no eating desserts first! And, possibly most important: their portions are smaller than ours. Clearly it's attitude again. For the French all this is simply a regime and an enjoyable way of life; for us, such rules and conformity come under the dreaded category called "diet"!

Rozin and Fischler go on to say the biggest predictor of health may not be the content of someone's diet, but how stressed out they are about food and how relaxed they are about eating. In other words, writes Laura Fraser, the more pleasurable it is to eat, the healthier it is for you.

Harvard epidemiologist Eric Rimm states that there is something to eating patterns that makes a difference. Eating slowly, enjoying it more and greater peace of mind may contribute to better overall health. "It can't just be the total calories you get at the end of the day", he insists, and we don't disagree with him at all.

But wait, we all know that after the feast comes the reckoning. Two British researchers, Dr. Malcolm Law and Professor Nicholas Wald, claim that the French Paradox is simply a time lag in the changing French diet. Beginning in the 1970s, the French began consuming more hamburgers, fries and other imported fast foods, and, worse, by the '80s, the overall quality and freshness of everyday food was beginning to decline. Sadly, they're simply catching up with us with food quality and cardiovascular health, for Law and Wald say that it takes between 25 and 35 years for the increase in fat consumption to translate into heart disease. Oh, dear. Are the bons temps over?

Why not find out for yourself? From May 13 to 19 in Southwest France, Oldways Preservation and Exchange Trust, in conjunction with the Harvard School of Public Health, has organized " The Real French Paradox" program in Bordeaux. Led by international food writer and award-winning author Patricia Wells and Walt Willett, M.D., Dr.PH, Nutrition Chair of Harvard's School of Public Health, it also features cookbook author Paula Wolfert and none other than the father of the French paradox, Serge Renau. The Program is geared to both medical professionals and gourmets, and continuing medical education credits are offered. Oldways describes the event as "A great blend of science and nutrition in a food and wine lover's paradise!" We say, assuage your guilt today! Contact Oldways immediately, and tonight, slow down and really enjoy that crème brûlée.

On today's menu:

- Anne's Goat Cheese Gratin
  - Tomato Sauce
- Medallions of Beef with Foie Gras and Truffles (Tournedos Rossini)
Anne's Goat Cheese Gratin

We avidly read Patricia Wells' restaurant reviews in the *International Herald Tribune*, then ate our way through Paris and France with her wonderful guides, *The Food Lover's Guide to Paris* and *The Food Lover's Guide to France*. Back home we snatched up each of her cookbooks to try and recreate the magic in our own kitchens... and indeed, while the scenery outside was radically different, the dishes were redolent of the beloved French countryside!

One of our favourites, *Patricia Wells at Home in Provence*, contains recipes inspired by her country farmhouse, and we've made this lovely dish again and again. You may make it one large dish, but beware, says Wells – it's so good that the first half of the table will devour it all. Best to serve this in individual gratin dishes so everyone gets a taste!

*Serves 6*

About 10 ounces soft goat cheese or a mix of rindless soft goat and cow or sheep's milk cheese, cubed (300 g)
2 tsp minced fresh hyssop leaves (optional) (10 mL)
2 tsp minced fresh rosemary leaves (10 mL)
2 tsp minced fresh oregano leaves or a pinch of dried leaf oregano, crushed (10 mL)
1½ to 2 cups homemade tomato sauce (recipe follows) at room temperature (375 to 500 mL)
About 24 best-quality black olives, pitted

1. Preheat the broiler
2. Scatter the cheese on the bottom of the baking dish or dishes. Sprinkle with half the herbs. Spoon on just enough tomato sauce to evenly coat the cheese. Sprinkle with olives and the remaining herbs.
3. Place the baking dish or dishes under the broiler about 3 inches (8 cm) from the heat. Broil until the cheese is melted and fragrant, and the tomato sauce is sizzling, 2 to 3 minutes.
**Tomato Sauce**

Wells says this is her idea of what a homemade tomato sauce should be: rich, elegant, smooth, and tasting of fresh herbs. She sometimes doubles the recipe so there's always some in the freezer for days when there's no time to cook!

*Makes about 3 cups (750 mL)*

- 2 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil (30 mL)
- 1 small onion, minced
- 3 plump, fresh garlic cloves, peeled and minced
- Sea salt to taste
- One 28-ounce (765 g) can peeled Italian plum tomatoes in juice, or one 28-ounce (765 g) can crushed tomatoes in puree
- Bouquet garni: several springs of fresh parsley, bay leaves, and celery leaves, tied in a bundle with household twine

In a large unheated saucepan, combine the oil, onion, garlic and salt, and stir to coat with oil. Cook over moderate heat just until the garlic turns golden but does not brown, 2 to 3 minutes. If using whole canned tomatoes, place a food mill over the skillet and puree the tomatoes directly into it. Crushed tomatoes can be added directly from the can. Add the bouquet garni; stir to blend, and simmer, uncovered, until the sauce begins to thicken, about 15 minutes. For a thicker sauce for pizzas and toppings, cook for 5 minutes more. Taste for seasoning. Remove and discard the bouquet garni. The sauce may be used immediately. Stored in the refrigerator up to 2 days, or frozen up to 2 months. If small quantities of sauce will be needed for pizzas or other toppings, freeze in ice cube trays.

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**Medallions of Beef with Foie Gras and Truffles**

*(Tournedos Rossini)*
Could there be anything more decadent than this dish? It has it all, and then some. What a test of the French Paradox... and don't forget the prodigious red wine to go with it! *Caviar, Truffles and Foie Gras* by Katherine Alford gives us the recipe and story that the composer Rossini, a devoted fan of truffles, asked a chef to prepare this dish. The chef balked, suggesting that it was ill conceived. The maestro said that if the chef was offended, the maestro himself could prepare the dish quickly while the chef's back was turned. The word *tournedos* thus supposedly comes from the French phrase *tourner le dos*, to turn one's back.

*Serves 4*

*Sauce:*
- 2/3 cup Rainwater Madeira (150 mL)
- 2 Tbsp minced shallot (30 mL)
- 1 sprig thyme
- ½ bay leaf
- 2 cups veal stock (500 mL)
- 1¼ tsp arrowroot mixed with 1½ tsp water (optional) (5-6 mL)
- 1 to 2 Tbsp cold unsalted butter (5-10 mL)
- ¾ tsp kosher salt, plus salt to taste (4 mL)
- Freshly ground black pepper to taste
- ½ tsp red wine vinegar (2 mL)
- ½ to 1 ounce fresh or preserved black winter truffle (15-30 g)

Four 4-ounce filets of beef tenderloin medallions, about 1½ inches thick, at room temperature  
Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste  
2 Tbsp vegetable oil (10 mL)  
Four 1-ounce grade-A or -B duck foie gras medallions

1. To make the sauce: In a saucepan, combine the Madeira, shallot, thyme and bay leaf. Bring to a gentle simmer and cook until the wine is reduced to a light syrup coating the shallots. (The wine may flame briefly.)
2. Pour the stock into the wine reduction and simmer until reduced by half. Skim off any impurities that rise to the surface. If the sauce is not thick enough to nap the meat, whisk the arrowroot mixture into the sauce and bring to a full boil to thicken. Lower heat and whisk in the butter. Season with the ¾ tsp salt, the pepper and the vinegar. Slice the truffle paper-thin with a truffle slicer, mandoline or very sharp knife and add to the sauce. Set aside and keep warm in a double boiler over hot water for up to 1 hour. (You may need to
adjust the consistency with a bit of water if the sauce thickens.)

3. Meanwhile, pat the beef medallions dry with paper towels and season one side of the meat with salt and pepper. Heat a heavy skillet over low heat. Add the oil to the pan, increase the heat to high, and place the meat, seasoned side down, in the pan. Sauté until the steaks are a rich burnished brown on the bottom, about 4 minutes. Season the remaining side with salt and pepper to taste, reduce the heat slightly and brown the other side, 3 to 4 minutes. Brown the sides of the medallions by standing them on their sides. Transfer the meat to a plate while you sear the foie gras.

4. Wipe out the skillet and heat it over high heat. Season the foie gras medallions with salt and pepper to taste. Add the medallions to the pan and cook for 1 to 2 minutes or until a deep brown on the bottom. Drain off any excess fat. Turn the foie gras with a metal spatula and cook for 30 seconds to 1 minute or until the foie gras softens but still has some resilience. Transfer to paper towels to drain.

5. To serve, remove any strings from the medallions and place the medallions on warmed plates or a platter. Top with the foie gras and nap with the sauce, making sure that a couple of slices of truffles rest on each serving of foie gras. Serve immediately.

**Accompanying wine? Tony Recommends...**

a full-bodied red with good fruit extraction – Châteauneuf-du-Pape, Côte Rôtie or Hermitage from the Rhône, Amarone (Veneto), Australian Shiraz.

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**The Cheese Plate**

To know and understand great cheeses, first read *The Cheese Plate* by Max McCalman and David Gibbons. McCalman, one of the foremost experts on cheese in the world, is the maître fromager at the top New York restaurants Picholine and Artisanal. He tells us that cheese is as old as time and certainly civilization, that our prehistoric ancestors sustained themselves by preserving the excess summer milk of their dairy animals to get them through many a cold, dark month when food was sparse. They fermented their milk and their grape juice and were set for the winter... Wine, cheese and bread, all that is really needed for survival. We agree completely!

Today, cheese is a building block of the Mediterranean diet and a delicious
source of protein, whether a snack or leisurely finish to a good meal. In Old World cultures, it is consumed in moderation with an appreciation bordering on reverence.

As we all know, France excels in cheese making; the numbers and quality are simply astonishing. How many cheeses? McCalman says probably more than 600, but nobody knows for sure. Our favourite quote on the subject is from the late General Charles DeGaulle, who is credited with saying, "How can anyone be expected to govern a country with 325 cheeses?"

Governments may come and go, but France will always produce great cheeses. We loved this cheese selection from *The Cheese Plate* with its perfect progression from delicate to assertive with contrasts or complements at every turn. Start at ten o’clock with Garrotxa; then Durrus, Torta del Casar, Munster, Vacherin Firbourgeois and the King of cheese, Roquefort!

Vive la France and her cows!

*Accompanying wine? Tony Recommends...*
Generally speaking, dry white wines go better with soft cheeses and reds with hard cheeses; but if you want to select a single wine to match a wide selection, I would opt for a Beaujolais from a named village – Morgon, Moulin-à-Vent or Fleurie, for example. Lightly chill the bottle.

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**Crème Brûlée**

Origins of this, the perfect dessert, have been argued about forever; the French splutter with indignation when other countries claim it as an original. In spite of Gallic protestations, the Catalans say it's their own and, worse to the French, the English back up their claim, pointing out that the dessert has indeed been on the menu at Trinity College, Cambridge, since 1850!
Never mind, we say, this is the one when a perfect finish is needed. From *Saveur Cooks Authentic French* by the editors of *Saveur* Magazine comes a recipe adapted from Dieter Schorner, the pastry chef at New York’s acclaimed Le Cirque restaurant in the early 1980s. Simple, yet sweet, rich and sinful, this Crème Brûlée took the city by storm, and no wonder.

For the perfect caramelized topping, you may wish to invest in a small kitchen blowtorch; this isn't the only time you make this fabulous creation!

*Serves 4*

- 2 cups heavy cream (500 mL)
- 5 Tbsp sugar (75 mL)
- ½ vanilla bean, split in half lengthwise
- Small pinch salt
- 4 egg yolks

1. Preheat oven to 275°F (140°C). In a small pan, bring cream, 2 Tbsp sugar, vanilla bean and salt just to a boil over medium heat. Remove from heat and set aside to cool. Scrape seeds from vanilla into cream, then discard vanilla pod.
2. In another bowl, whisk egg yolks with 1 tsp of the sugar until sugar dissolves. Slowly whisk in cooled cream (if it is not cool, yolks will scramble), then strain through a fine sieve.
3. Divide custard between 4 shallow baking dishes, each about ½ cup in capacity. Place dishes in a baking pan, then place pan in oven. Pour enough cold water into pan to come about halfway up sides of dishes. Bake until custards set, 30-35 minutes.
4. Cover cooled custards with plastic wrap. Chill in refrigerator for at least 4 hours or overnight. Before serving, sprinkle 1½ tsp sugar (7 mL) on each custard and use a kitchen blowtorch to caramelize tops, holding torch at an angle (flame should barely touch surface) to brown sugar. (You can also brown the sugar in a preheated broiler, taking care to turn the gratin dishes to avoid hot spots.)

*Accompanying wine? Tony Recommends...*

The trick with matching dessert with wine is that the wine has be sweeter than the dessert. Go for Beaume-de-Venise from the Rhône, or Samos Muscat or Sauternes.
Oldways Preservation and Exchange Trust is a non-profit educational organization that promotes healthy eating based on the traditional foodways and traditional cuisines of cultures from all over the world.

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We wish to thank the following for permission to publish recipes, information and pictures:


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