

In Lyon, Battle of the Bouchons

By Roy Furchgott September 2, 2001

If there are two things the French are good at, it's cooking and quarreling. In Lyon, the ancient city that was once the Roman capital of Gaul, both have been raised to an art form. Especially since the ongoing quarrel is about food.

I knew nothing of this when our party of four stepped into Le Stepharo, an unassuming restaurant in Old Lyon. We were barely through the door when the pixiesh co-owner, Sylvie Chanavat, bellowed, "Allo, Docteur!" with an absurdly exaggerated wave. I thought she was talking to someone behind us. But she addressed nearly everyone in the room as "Doc" or "Professor." On a good evening, I was told, some might advance to "General" or "Magistrate."

A greeting from the owner is one of the hallmarks of the bouchon, a form of restaurant peculiar to Lyon. Historically, bouchons are loud and lively, and their meat-and-cream-sauce-laden cuisine is the local comfort food. It's also one of the few fine, authentic French meals you can buy for less than \$20 a head, including appetizer, main course, salad, dessert or cheese platter, and wine.

Chanavat flew about the room with sizzling dishes of gratin Dauphinois (potatoes au gratin), quenelles au brochet (fluffy pike dumplings in a cream and cheese sauce) and melt-in-your-mouth fraise de veau (pork intestines in a red wine and mustard sauce). There were cold sausages called saucissons, sweet St. Marcellin cheese on nut bread, and a local red wine that seemed unremarkable by itself, but with the food . . . ! As Bon Papa, my French girlfriend's 91-year-old grandfather, likes to say, "It goes down like Jesus in velvet underpants."

From the marble-topped tables to the personal service by Chanavat and her husband, Robert, Le Stepharo appears to be the epitome of the authentique bouchon.

Not so fast, says Louis Chabanel, a longtime bouchon devotee and owner of one, Le Pasteur. Perhaps 200 Lyon restaurants call themselves bouchons, he says, including pizza parlors, ethnic restaurants and chain restaurants. It's enough to make his distinguished gray hair stand on end. Chabanel enlisted the help of fellow bouchonier Pierre Grison to lobby the mayor of Lyon to establish an accreditation board, the Association des Authentiques Bouchons Lyonnais, which determines if a restaurant is the real thing. "The tradition is getting lost," Chabanel frets.

Le Steptharo is not a member; Robert Chanavat bristles at the idea that someone else will dictate what is authentic. Chabanel hints darkly that Le Steptharo is not as authentic as it appears to the American eye.

There are, in fact, only about 20 members in Chabanel's group, though he plans to add three this year. He concedes that some will drop out. As the debate continued, I found myself becoming drawn in.

What makes a proper bouchon? At \$20 a pop, I could afford to investigate.

I met Chabanel one morning at the Halles de Lyon, a marketplace with dozens of food stands, many offering the finest products Lyon has to offer. Many bouchon owners start their day here, searching for fresh and seasonal ingredients that will determine the day's menu. Fresh food is a central tenet of bouchon cooking, Chabanel said. One of the bylaws of his group is that no one may have a freezer.

As we walked through the aisles, he demonstrated how to pick a fish -- look for red gills and shiny surface, make sure the fish is slightly stiff, and never judge by smell. He pointed out his favorite brand of chicken, which still had its head and tail feathers. At his preferred meat stand, he asked for tripe, unfurled it, lovingly appraised it, cut off a piece and ate it raw.

A lot of bouchon food is made of what might be called inferior cuts. It goes back to the turn-of-the-century tradition of the bouchon, when it was the workingman's place to eat. Food was cheap and plentiful, but to keep costs down, dishes were often made from stomachs, brains, giblets and such (all the more reason to perfect the sauces). Men stopped on the way to their jobs, perhaps in the renowned silk factories of prewar Lyon, for the machon, a breakfast of dried sausage and wine. They returned to eat and drink after work.

But things change, and even Chabanel is willing to accept progress. "It's not just all the organ meats all of the time -- we also serve the foie gras, the duck, the luxury items," he said. In fact, he is even willing to bow to fashion. He no longer cooks with pig cheeks -- they're out, he concedes. Pig ears are in.

The true origin of bouchons is murky. It appears they have been a part of Lyonnais life for 2,000 years. Legend is that a bouchon was a place where a rider could get a meal and some wine while his horse was wiped clean with a bouchon de paille -- a bundle of straw. The rest stop was marked by straw bundles over the door. Alternately, the word bouchon meant -- and still means -- "cork." Some say that because the rest stops served wine, a cork was nailed to the door, hence the name. (There is yet another contemporary meaning of bouchon: traffic jam. Somehow I doubt it has any bearing here.)

We headed off to Le Mitonee, whose sign said it's a restaurant bistro but whose business card says bouchon. Whatever. It had the bouchon trappings: The owner was at the bar when we arrived; the kitchen had no freezers, just a stove and oven; and the wine was served in the traditional "pot Lyonnais," a 46-centiliter bottle, about half of a standard bottle.

The food was a modern interpretation of traditional fare: sauteed chicken livers served on a bed of warm greens in raspberry vinaigrette; tripe and a peppery, fatty rabbit terrine; and for dessert, tart a{grv} la praline, an almond-and-red-sugar confection that is less sweet than the American version.

But Le Mitonee, we decided, was missing something -- partly, the noise and hubbub of a real bouchon. And the decor was starkly modern, compared with the traditional tile walls and marble tables of other bouchons. Real bouchons tend to share certain details. Besides faded pictures of family and historic Lyon, almost every one posts pictures of the two patron saints of bouchons: Paul Bocuse and Gnafron.

Bocuse, the legendary chef whose Restaurant Paul Bocuse has been a Michelin three-star continuously since 1965, has trained many of the owners of traditional bouchons -- or at least they'll tell you he did. Gnafron, on the other hand, is a hand puppet -- and a drunken one at that. With his red nose and wine glass in hand, he has, since the 1700s, represented a Lyonnais workingman in the local version of a Punch and Judy show. Generally his role is to cause mischief, and he is much beloved. Gnafron adorns the crest of the bouchon association. Despite the fact that the food at Le Mitonee is very good, there was no Gnafron to be seen.

Fortunately, Gnafron would rejoin us at a later lunch at Brunet, a restaurant with dark wood and an informal atmosphere, and a member of Chabanel's association. We were squeezed into a sunny corner and handed menus unusually vast for a bouchon. Our waiter, Marc Gazzolo, overheard us speaking English and handed me a menu with a translation. "No using the translation until you have tried the French. It's cheating," he said, with mock severity. He maintained a running banter in both perfect English and French.

Brunet's large menu was filled with seasonal specials, and Chabanel's promise of cuisine both high and low. Because it was hunting season the offerings included partridge with prickly pear, thinly sliced duck over a fricassee of woodland mushrooms, and a dish made of mixed wild mushrooms. The menu also included such standbys as chicken hearts, liver and cockscomb simmered for five hours in a savory red wine sauce, and dishes made of every conceivable organ meat and gland. I was inured to it at this point, and our companion's order of ox muzzle did nothing to put me off my duck served in a butter garlic and parsley sauce.

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Throughout our meal our waiter kept up a jolly repartee. Looking at our cleared plates, he asked if we were finished. "Unless we are supposed to eat the plates," said one of our sated party. "Please don't," he said sadly. "It is all that is left of my inheritance."

And then one of Monsieur Chabanel's measures for authenticity came back to me. "Conviviality," he had said. "Always a good word. It's a place to have a good time; the people should have happy eyes."

As we perused the dessert menu, I realized we were a table full of happy eyes. Maybe that's definition enough, but I doubt many natives would agree.

For a list of bouchons accredited by the Association des Authentiques Bouchons Lyonnais, check its Web site, www.lyon-atable.com/scripts/Liste_Resto.asp?TESTPAGE34. Other Lyon restaurants include: Le Stepharo, 30 Rue Tupin; Le Pasteur,

83 Quai Perrache; Le Mitonee, 26 Rue Tronchet; and Brunet, 23 Rue Claudia. For general information on Lyon: French Government Tourist Office, 410-286-8310, www.franceguide.com. Roy Furchgott last wrote for Travel on bicycling in London.

About 200 Lyon eateries claim to be real bouchons; only 20 are accredited.

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