

Nouvelle cuisine is dining to paralysis
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By Steve Marantz
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IN THIS CORNER

Lyons, France — French cooking has a flamboyant tradition built upon legends of men such as the tempermental chef Vatel, who, when informed that a shipment of fish had not arrived for a feast being prepared for King Louis XIV, ran himself upon a sword.

Let us not forget the magnificent Careme, who developed classic French cooking as we know it today, and who doubled as a spy for Talleyrand while serving dinner in courts throughout Europe.

The insidious Pere Gourier dined men to death by serving them rich, heavy food every day for as long as it took to kill them. As many as nine men were believed to have died at the table of their generous host.

Brillat-Savarin, a bon vivant who survived the Revolution and Napoleon Bonaparte without missing a meal, said of his fellow trenchermen, "Animals feed, man eats, only a man of wit knows how to dine."

In France today, La Grande Cuisine of Careme has given way to the lighter

Nouvelle Cuisine, by which Gourier might merely paralyze his victims temporarily instead of killing them. It is light only by comparison.

Fortunately, the new age is not without its great personalities and culinary geniuses, such as Paul Bocuse, whose three-star restaurant in Lyons is considered by many to be the best in the world. My faithful dining companion (FDC) and I were lucky enough to be able to experience Bocuse on a recent visit to France, our first.

To reach the restaurant we took a 6 mile taxi ride along the Saone River, expecting to be delivered to a refined old chateau. Instead, a large neon "Paul Bocuse" announced our destination with less elegance than the golden arches announce Ray Kroc. Bocuse is proud of his name, obviously. His grandfather, also a restaurateur fell into debt, and sold both the business and the name with it in 1921. By 1960 Bocuse had reacquired rights to his name. He also repurchased the old inn,

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Ah, nouvelle cuisine

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which stands next to the current restaurant, that his family had operated since 1765. Guests are never really permitted to forget whose table they are dining at. Large "Paul Bocuse" lettering stares up from the heavy china, and the "PB" monogram brands the silverware.

The dinner itself was what certain movies of rock music are advertised to be — a sensory experience. It would have been fun to watch, even if we had never eaten a bite. FDC came through by ordering the two most theatrical dishes, something called a Loupe en Croute farci Mousse Homnard (bass stuffed with lobster mousse in a crust) and a Poulet de Bresse en vessie (chicken poached in a pig's bladder). The bass appeared so perfectly golden in its pastry shell that Goldfinger might have ordered its execution. And the inflated pig bladder popped away at the touch of the waiter's knife to reveal a plump, juicy chicken.

My own marvels included a Mousse de truite au coulis d'ecrivesses (trout mousse in crayfish soup) and Saute d'agneau aux petis legumes nouveaux Rene Lasserre (lamb in brown sauce with vegetables). Since my culinary sophistication falls somewhere between that of Globe colleagues Leigh Montville, who breakfasts on Twinkies and cola, and John Powers, who knows the best restaurants within a double dribble of any basketball court, I knew I was eating excellent food, but I wasn't sure how to describe it.

The cheese and dessert courses deserved mention. From a cheese board of about 20 varieties, I chose the double goo, sort of a creamy cream cheese topped by a very thick creme fraiche, which is made by adding butter milk to cream. This combination could be artery-hardening lethal.

The dessert carts were a child's fantasy, with numerous cakes, sherbets, glaces, fresh fruits and fresh-fruit top pings. Trays of rich chocolates were laid on our table. We chose to eat wild toppings. Trays of rich chocolates were laid on our table. We chose to eat wild strawberries with cream and raspberry sherbet, and nibbled indolently at the chocolates.

In all, the feast lasted about three and a half hours and cost \$130. On the way out the great chef's mother handed us a souvenir menu and matchbooks. This gesture was outrageously promotional but typically Bocuse. "God is already famous," he is supposed to have once said, "but that doesn't stop the preacher from ringing the church bells every morning."