



At Poterie Not a mound of earth is made into a cassole; at the entrance to the town of Castelnaudary a sign reads THE BEARER OF CASSOULET with a figure holding a conical cassole.

Cassoulet Style

How to cook that most classic of great dishes, and in what pot?
SYLVIE BIGAR stirs up one of the great debates in French cooking.

Cassoulet is not an easy dish. It takes days to make, and there are as many recipes on the books as there are chefs in France. No one disputes the haricots, garlic, and variety of meats, but after that...read on. Purists rely on the word of the gastronome Prosper Montagné, born in Carcassonne, France, in 1865. The author of the first Larousse Gastronomique, he sanctioned mostly three recipes, which he called the Trinity. Of these, he declared the town of Castelnaudary's version the Father. It includes fresh pork, ham, shank, sausages, and bacon skin. Carcassonne's recipe, dubbed the Son, also relies on pork but adds red partridge



and at times leg of mutton. The Toulouse version, named the Holy Ghost, uses local sausage, mutton, and duck confit combined with breast of pork.

The controversy doesn't end there. There is a veritable war of words over which earthenware pot, or cassole, produces the most authentic result. Choose your weapon: spouted conical cassole or one with a more rotund form.

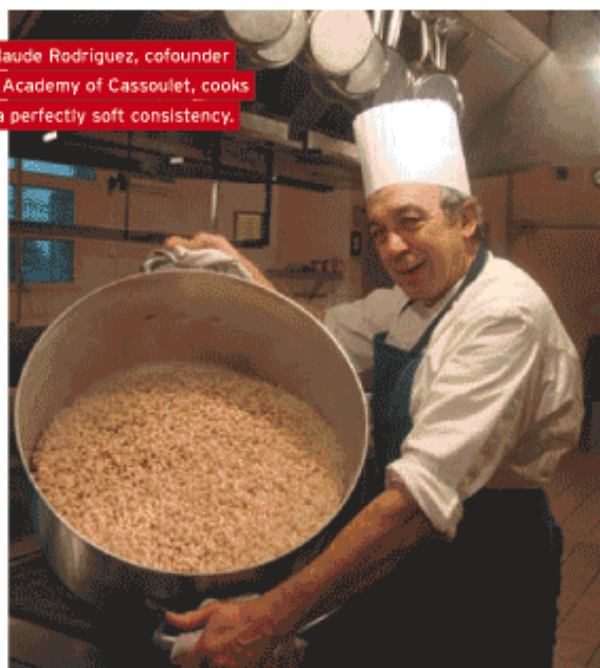
When, in 1985, Ariane Daguin founded the New Jersey-based fine foods provider D'Artagnan, she became America's leading source of foie gras, duck confit, and all things southwest French. She recalls her father's restaurant, the legendary Hôtel de France in Auch, in

PHOTOGRAPHS BY SYLVIE BIGAR

La porteuse de Cassoulet



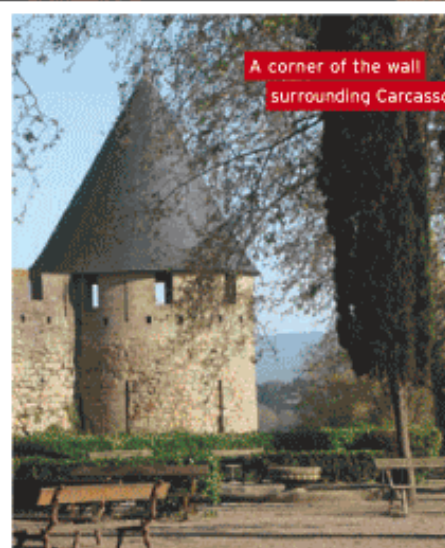
Poterie Not uses the same colorful glazes on cassoulets as it does on its garden urns, above.



Chef Jean-Claude Rodriguez, cofounder of the Universal Academy of Cassoulet, cooks the beans to a perfectly soft consistency.



Bubbly cassoulet just out of the oven, in its rotund cassole



A corner of the wall surrounding Carcassonne

Where to Indulge

AU TROU GASCON At his Paris restaurant, Alain Dutournier favors the round cassole, in which he cooks cassoulet with pork sausage, pork rind, ham, lamb chop, goose gizzards, and duck confit with haricots tarbais. 40 Rue Taine; 33-1/43-44-34-26

THE BRASSERIE BY PHILIPPE MOUCHEL Over in Melbourne, Australia, Mouchel creates cassoulet in a round earthenware pot and uses Australian beans. His recipe calls for pickled pork belly, duck confit, Toulouse sausage, and lamb shoulder. It takes him three days to prepare the dish. 8 Whiteman St.; 61-3/9292-7808

HOSTELLERIE ETIENNE Chef Eric Rousselot, in the French town of Labastide-D'Anjou, uses the conical cassole from the Not brothers for his mix of pork sausage (made by his local butcher), pork shank, and homemade duck confit with lingot beans. 1 Rue St.-James; 33-4/68-60-10-08

PAYARD PATISSERIE & BISTRO In New York Philippe Bertineau adds root vegetables to his masterpiece: rutabaga, celery root, and turnips. Meats include pigs'-hocks-and-ears confit; pork belly, skin, and sausage; and confits of duck legs and gizzards. He cooks the mixture in a large stockpot, then creates individual portions in copper pots. A dusting of breadcrumbs, a few minutes in the oven, and voilà! 1032 Lexington Ave.; 212-717-5252

RESTAURANT CHATEAU SAINT MARTIN In Carcassonne, France, Jean-Claude Rodriguez swears by the rotund cassole. His cassoulet (a three-day endeavor) includes a pig's head, pigs' feet, pork shank and skin, plus red partridge during hunting season. All ingredients come from the region. Hameau de Montredon; 33-4/68-71-09-53

the heart of Gascony, and the family recipes that influenced her. "At home my grandmother cooked the traditional cassoulet in a rotund cassole. She submerged the crust three times at least, letting it re-form. The whole house exhaled cassoulet. I believe in the round style. The conical one, with its smaller bottom, can burn the dish—a disaster. Everything is rotund chez nous."

A cassole featured on the cover of Paula Wolfert's latest edition of *The Cooking of Southwest France: Recipes from France's Magnificent Rustic Cuisine* (Wiley 2005) led to a meeting between Wolfert and Tom Wirt, a potter and cofounder of Clay Coyote Pottery in Hutchinson, Minnesota. Having seen the book cover, he wanted to replicate the antique conical cassole the author had bought decades earlier in the Languedoc region of France. "I love this shape," says Wolfert. "If there's too much grease in the

pot, you can empty it with the spout. But I use it for many things—I even wash my spinach in it. There is just so much more surface potential for caramelized goodness to form and be folded into the beans."

Poterie Not, founded in Mas-Saintes Puelles in 1830, is one of the region's oldest artisanal potteries and sells only the conical cassole. "We use traditional clay from Issel, a nearby village," says third-generation potter Robert Not, "and our oven can accommodate just this shape." These cassoulets are available at New York's Le Fanion and, starting late October, Kate Hill—an American who teaches traditional cooking in southwest France and lives on an anchored barge—began selling them on her Web site.

The cassole debate can be dizzying: Chef Philippe Bertineau, of Payard Patisserie & Bistro in New York, is in the rotund camp, saying it allows for more uniform cooking.



The Grand Hôtel Fourcade restaurant in Castelnaudary used rotund cassoules in the fifties

Perfect Dish

L'ATELIER DE LA POTERIE This Castelnaudary store, owned by Henri Moreno, carries the rotund specimen in red earthenware that the Academy of Cassoulet recommends. From \$75. At 57 Allée du Cassieu; 33-4/68-23-58-21; poteriecassouletcastelnaudary.com

CLAY COYOTE POTTERY In Hutchinson, Minnesota, this shop sells conical pots in a yellow salt glaze. \$95. At 17614 240th St.; 320-587-2599; claycoyote.com

D'ARTAGNAN No cassole is complete without the perfect cassoulet. And D'Artagnan's Cassoulet Kit includes all the finest ingredients—duck confit, sausage, haricots—needed to create the dish. \$70; 800-327-8246; dartagnan.com

LE FANION Poterie Not, in the tiny French village of Mas-Saintes Puellies, does not ship its glazed conical cassoules. Luckily, this small New York shop carries the conical caramel-yellow and terracotta ones from the Not collection. The next shipment will arrive in spring 2009. \$140. At 299 W. Fourth St.; 212-463-8760; lefanion.com

THE FRENCH KITCHEN For those who can't make it to Gascony for Kate Hill's Camp Cassoulet classes, the American instructor now sells Poterie Not's conical dishes on her Web site, complete with a recipe booklet, two pounds of beans, and a bouquet garni fresh from the source. \$105; 978-895-4782; thefrenchkitchen.com

"The result in a conical pot can be too dry toward the top and too mushy at the bottom," he says. Daniel Boulud, however, prefers the cone, explaining, "It is crucial that the inside of the cassoulet not dry out and the outside crisp well. I add breadcrumbs and top them with liquid foie gras and herbs for a golden and delicious crust." Jacques Pépin, on the other hand, doesn't think shape matters. "I have prepared cassoulet in round and oval earthenware tureens," he says. "The quality of what is inside is more important than the shape of the dish."

Where, then, does a student of cassoulet go for the final word? To the source. Chef Jean-Claude Rodriguez, cofounder of the Universal Academy of Cassoulet in Carcassonne, has been making the dish for 48 years. Established in 1998, the association includes more than 100 gourmards, chefs, and locals whose mission is to discuss, debate, cook, and eat cassoulet. (Their road map showing where to find the best in southwest France is available at routedescassoulets.com.)

I visited Rodriguez and asked about the cassole controversy. He was adamant, citing a

19th-century text, *Le Triple Almanach Gourmand*, in which writer Germaine Boué mentions the unmistakably portly and primeval cassole. Its shape, the book states, allows for distribution of the juices. With a conical pot, Rodriguez asserts, the juice remains at the bottom and the beans cannot melt in the same way. The rotund cassole lets the juices spread universally keeping the cassoulet moist. What they call a cassole in Castelnaudary, he adds, "is simply a grézale, the spouted bowl used in the past to remove the salt from the pork fat, hence the spout." Rodriguez's gospel is supported by the chef André Daguin. Even though he does not cook in Auch anymore, Daguin remains the ambassador of southwest French cuisine. "If you use soft beans," he says, "the cone may be all right because the space for the gratin is larger, so it won't melt into a purée. But if your beans are the traditional haricots tarbais, then potbellied is the way to go." He references anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss to seal his case: "Lévi-Strauss once said that women cook the same way they make babies—in rotund receptacles filled with warm, salty liquid." ■