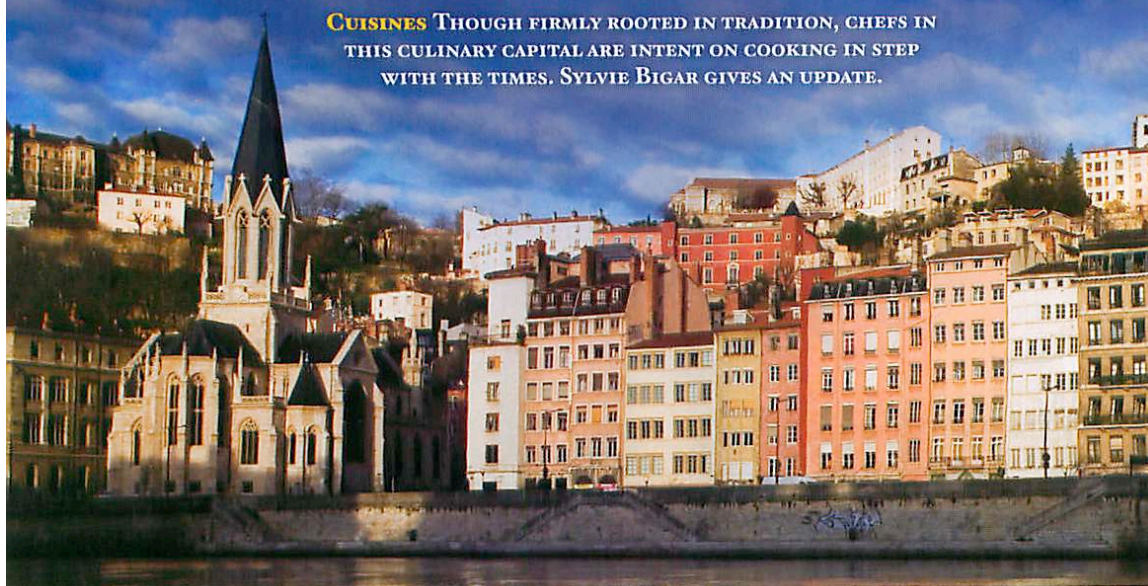


# Lusty LYON

**CUISINES** THOUGH FIRMLY ROOTED IN TRADITION, CHEFS IN THIS CULINARY CAPITAL ARE INTENT ON COOKING IN STEP WITH THE TIMES. SYLVIE BIGAR GIVES AN UPDATE.



In January, Lyon, the second largest French city, will teem with white toques from all over the world. They'll come to coach, cheer, or compete in the 2011 Bocuse d'Or, a biennial competition launched in 1987 by legendary paterfamilias **Paul Bocuse**, now 84. If the U.S. team, led by **James Kent** (Eleven Madison Park, NYC) and supported by **Thomas Keller** and **Daniel Boulud**, brings the bacon home, Lyon will surely benefit from new attention by the American public. But in fact, gourmands and gourmets have sung Lyon's praises and made their way to the "capital of gastronomy" (as coined in 1934 by writer and gastronome Curnonsky) ever since the Roman times, when Pliny the Elder (AD 23–79) wrote fervently about the pâtés and hams he called *Porcina gallica*—Gallic pork. Today, a slew of young and not so young chefs with their feet still solidly planted in tradition are changing the culinary landscape for the better.

For centuries now, Lyon has taken full advantage of its location and the abundant availability of some of the country's best in-

gredients. It lies close to the Charolais region of South Burgundy, known for its prized white cattle; to the intoxicating bouquet of the Rhône Valley orchards; and to Bresse, home to the treasured *poulet de Bresse*, heralded by gastronome Brillat-Savarin in 1825 as "Poultry of the Queen and Queen of Poultry." Rivers of wine from Beaujolais and Burgundy flow determinedly to Lyon, and some of the best and smelliest cheeses in France flourish in the area: Saint-Félicien and Saint-Marcellin, for example.

"Lyon became a logical stopping point for vacationers," says Boulud (**Daniel**, etc.), a native son who would earn his stars in New York City, "because of its situation halfway between Paris and the Riviera. It still boasts one of the largest concentrations of starred restaurants in France. Lyon is a gourmand city, and food is always the topic of choice. But the renaissance we experience today is also due to the top-level food professionals who live and work in Lyon: butchers, bakers, cheesemongers. I still dream of coming back to Lyon and opening a *bouchon*."

Photo by Alexis Grattier/Getty Images



Another famous expat, Jacques Pépin, recalls “growing up in Lyon at my mother’s restaurants, *Chez Pépin* and later *Le Pélican*,” he says. “I knew that we made regional *terroir* fare. To learn *la grande cuisine*, one needed to go to Paris. But now, after 50 years in the United States, Lyon’s influence is still part of me: frog’s legs, roasted chicken, charcuterie, and, of course, blood sausage.”

Most chefs in Lyon today trace their culinary evolution to a trend that began 250 years ago. Often during hard times, women cooks, “*Les Mères*,” were let go by the city’s wealthy bourgeois families. Resourceful and hearty, the Moms didn’t waste any time lamenting; they opened their own restaurants. The first of them to set up shop was La Mère Guy, who launched an open-air *guinguette* (a bucolic popular eatery) in 1759 on the banks of the Rhône River and quickly became famous for her eel *en matelote* (pan-seared eel in a red wine reduction served with pearl onions, mushrooms, and garlic croutons). Later, young men often held their bachelor parties at La Mère Brigousse to taste the shape-

ly pike quenelles known as “Venus tits.” The *Mères* cuisine was traditional and bountiful, drawing the best ingredients from the surrounding areas: charcuterie, artichoke hearts stuffed with truffled foie gras, chicken liver gâteau, or duck *à l’orange*.

Eugénie Brazier opened a small establishment, *La Mère Brazier*, in 1921 on Lyon’s Rue Royale. A simple woman, she said “Cooking is not very complicated. You just have to be organized, have a good memory and some taste. How did I learn to cook? By cooking.” By 1933, she was the recipient of three Michelin stars, the first woman ever to claim such an honor. On her menu were warm saucissons, chicken with cream sauce, chicken quenelles, and the famous *volaille truffée demi-deuil* (poached Bresse chicken with slices of black truffles tucked beneath its skin). Though the restaurant closed in 2007, it was reopened in 2008 by Mathieu Viannay, who doesn’t alter the *volaille*. More about that later.

The *Mères* often cooked in *bouchons*, Lyonnais cousins of Parisian bistros, named not for the ever popping cork (*bouchon*) nor

for the crucial *bouche* (mouth), but for the emblematic cluster of straw called *bousche* in ancient French that innkeepers displayed over their doors.

Picture a frayed red and white checkered tablecloth covering a well-worn wooden table groaning under the weight of gray earthenware bowls of *cervelas* salads (slices of garlicky cured pork mixed with potatoes) and *céleri remoulade*. It's customary to order the *tablier de sapeur*—honeycomb tripe breaded and fried, named for its striking resemblance to the old leather aprons worn by local firemen; *cervelle de canut* (silk weaver brain, a cheese spread named for the city's indefatigable silk workers); *andouillettes* (grilled tripe sausage served with creamy mustard sauce and mustard on the side).

Today, the Association for the Defense of the Bouchons Lyonnais, helmed by its enterprising director, Pierre Grison, ensures that the title doesn't become a mere marketing tool. He bestows on lucky candidates for membership an "Authentique Bouchon Lyonnais" plaque displaying a happy red-nosed puppet. A humble but warm atmosphere and a restaurateur with good personality count as much in gaining the label as traditional cuisine.

It was in 1945 at La Mère Brazier that Bocuse, then a young apprentice, applied for a *stage*. Lasting three years, it helped launch one of the most notable culinary careers of our time.

Bocuse today is a global icon. The main food hall of Lyon was renamed Halles de Lyon – Paul Bocuse in 2006, and he can often be seen shopping there, as he always has. He could have retired, he could have simply enjoyed his legendary *Auberge du Pont de Collonges* (three Michelin stars since 1965). But "Monsieur Paul" is an enterprising man. Assisted by his right hand, *Jean Fleury*, he now runs as many as five bustling brasseries in the center of Lyon, another within the *Mandarin Oriental* in Geneva, and seven more in Japan.

### Five iconic specialties from Lyon

**Gâteau de Foie de Volaille:** A blend of chicken liver custard and diced ham, parsley, eggs, and day-old bread soaked in milk. *La Mère Brazier* added stiff egg whites to the mix before baking it in a bain-marie to serve it as fluffy as a soufflé.

**Quenelles de Brochet, Sauce Nantua:** Silken pike dumplings first poached, then baked, covered in a crayfish béchamel sauce. Today, chicken frequently replaces the traditional pike.

**Andouillette, Sauce Moutarde:** Grilled tripe sausage served with a creamy mustard sauce and Dijon mustard or mustard à l'ancienne on the side. Huge earthenware pots filled with Dijon mustard, cornichon jars, and various salads are an integral part of the *bouchon* decor.

**Salade de Lentilles:** Warm lentils mixed with crème fraîche, accompanied by sliced boiled potatoes doused with vinaigrette and a boiled pistachio-studded sausage.

**Pommes de Terres Lyonnaises:** Boiled potatoes, sliced and roasted in butter with finely chopped onions. —S.B.

Bocuse unsettled the tame Lyon bourgeoisie when he opened *L'Ouest-Express*, his own version of a fast-food restaurant, across from a multiplex movie theater, in the newly gentrified Vaise neighborhood. This bright red-and-white circular room, which accommodates 90, with 120 more on the shady terrace, focuses on the open kitchen. There, chefs in whites and toques cook *à la minute* for a steady stream of young and hungry hipsters every day from 7 a.m. to midnight, certainly not a typical French schedule. On the menu: salads, sandwiches, and sweets, but also pasta, quiche, and the "mijoté (stew) of the day," *blanquette de veau*, *boeuf bourguignon*, or *navarin d'agneau*. The check averages €11 (\$16), and a second location opened last year. "If the ingredients are top, the food is top. The perfect baguette, a thick slice of *jambon* cooked *au torchon*, good butter, that's it," says Bocuse, rolling his eyes in ecstasy.

Bocuse is not the only old-timer enjoying a second wind. For 35 years, *Jean-Paul Lacombe* ran *Léon de Lyon*, an elegant bistro that opened in 1904 and won two Michelin stars. He briefly considered retirement, but when the intended buyers of his restaurant planned to turn it into a supermarket, he changed his mind and converted it into the charming *Brasserie Léon de Lyon*. Now, harried businessmen on a budget can be seen there, devouring pan-seared duck breast and blood sausage tart. Fortunately, the old wine list is still available, and at a 25 percent discount.

Younger chefs are following a similar path. *Viannay*—*Meilleur Ouvrier de France 2004*—who brandished one Michelin star at his eponymous restaurant, decided to transform it into a contemporary tavern renamed *M*. There he installed *Julien Gautier*, formerly chef de cuisine at *Léon de Lyon*, who recently purchased the restaurant himself. Braised beef cheeks and carrot confits vie with fried whiting fillet, potato gratin, and béarnaise sauce.

When *Viannay*, also a partner in a hip brasserie, *33 Cité*, bought and revamped the old *La Mère Brazier* (see "Lyon Legend Roars Again," *FRONT BURNER*, *Food Arts*, April 2009, page 18), he said, "I wanted to bring back the nobility and soul of the most famous restaurant in Lyon."

*Viannay's* talent allows him to keep historical dishes such as artichoke hearts with foie gras but to reinvent them in a subtle modern way. He empties a small purple artichoke and tops it with a perfect foie gras sphere, a creative take on an ice cream cone. Next to it on the plate, a chopped artichoke heart marinated in vinaigrette supports a seared foie gras slice. *Viannay* also presents his own recipes, such as *John Dory à la plancha* or scallops in salted butter with lemon confit and green peppercorns.

Unlike most new arrivals, when Brittany native *Nicolas Le Bec* landed in Lyon, he didn't make any attempt to bow at Bocuse's altar. Independent, proud, and a bit rebellious, *Le Bec* wears black in the kitchen, often hides his blondish hair under a navy sailor's cap, and may be the most creative chef in Lyon today. Michelin gave him two stars for his tranquil haven now named *Le Bec & Taka*, in the *Presqu'île* area, where a *John Dory*, barely poached in a fiery shrimp broth and served with *shrimp jus and periwinkles*, exhaled a perfect balance of spice and ocean.

In 2009, *Le Bec* launched *Espace Le Bec*, a comfortable and



Clockwise from top left: Bouchon Chez Abel is certified as an *Authentique Bouchon Lyonnais*. Photo by Marie\_Perrin. Jean-Christophe Ansanay-Alex is one of the new breed modernizing Lyonnais cuisine. La Mère Brazier's famous poached Bresse chicken, now cooked by Mathieu Viannay exactly the way Eugénie Brazier did when she opened the restaurant in 1921. So much for slow food: iconic chef/entrepreneur Paul Bocuse brainstorms the world of fast food. Photo by E. Soudan. Bocuse's L'Ouest-Express.

airy lounge, in the growing Lyon Saint-Exupéry airport. A counter with modern stools teems with charcuterie, salads, and vegetable terrines conveniently packed in antique glass jars so gourmands can take them to eat on board. Daurade royale with lime essence and braised Charolais veal breast satisfy the most jaded traveler.

Last September, Le Bec unveiled *Rue Le Bec*, a 21,400-square-foot emporium designed to mimic a lively pedestrian street. The location, where the Rhône and Saône Rivers meet, is part of a revamped industrial warehouse complex. A charcuterie counter, wine bar, casual café, and bakery occupy the first floor. In 2011, he will launch a brasserie in the renovated Opéra Garnier in Paris.

Another Lyonnais chef who shows his dedication to the best ingredients in such dishes as prawns tartare served with a cream of risotto and Port glaze is Jean-Christophe Ansanay-Alex, who cooks with his left hand only (he lost the use of the other in a car accident). He has garnered two Michelin stars for his delightful *Auberge de l'Île*, housed in a 17th century monastery on Lyon's Barbe Island. In 2008, he hopped the English Channel to open *L'Ambassade de l'Île* in London, which earned a Michelin

star for traditional Lyonnais fare in addition to a contemporary menu, but for financial reasons it was forced to close after a year.

A few miles outside the city, Philippe Gauvreau runs his eponymous Michelin two-star restaurant in a new home at the *Pavillon de la Rotonde Hôtel*. From his stint at *Ledoyen* and *Le Grand Véfour* in Paris, he brings a luxurious and classical cuisine enhanced by perfectly rehearsed tableside service. Spit-roasted duck comes in two stages: first filleted with the carcass crushed in an antique silver press to extract the makings of the blood sauce, then served as a crisply roasted leg.

Young and ambitious cooks need no longer pack their bags for the big cities or even America to shine. The city of Lyon now proudly embraces young chefs, allowing them to grow on its own soil, under the tender eye of Les Mères. Still sitting across from Bocuse at dinner one night, I couldn't help asking him when he was opening in New York City? He smiled mischievously, "We don't do suburbs."

Sylvie Bigar is a New York City-based food and travel writer.