

My Dinner Chez Monsieur Paul

AN ESSAY

BY SYLVIE BIGAR



Sylvie Bigar was born in Geneva, Switzerland, and received graduate and undergraduate degrees from New York University. Her articles have appeared in numerous publications, and she has tested recipes for three cookbooks, including the 2009 edition of the *New York Restaurant Cookbook*. In her quest for the exceptional, she travels to remote villages and hidden places in great cities from her long-established bases in New York City, Geneva, and Bridgehampton, New York.

I HADN'T VISITED LYON for more than twenty years, having moved from Europe to New York and started a family, but on this trip I was returning to report for *Food Arts* on the young hot chefs who'd recently made the city sizzle. I grew up in Geneva, but my grandmother Madeleine was born in Lyon, and throughout my childhood, my father kept an office there. Every Thursday, after visiting what he, and generations before him, called the "capital of gastronomy," he'd bring back the same fluid *fromage blanc en faisselle*, one of Lyon's specialties, which my three sisters and I would lap slowly, fighting endlessly over whether it was better with or without sugar. The Lyon I returned to had cleaned up nicely, shedding its provincial veil of grit and crime and acquiring a polished persona. My father had recently passed away, and perhaps, I thought, I could recapture a piece of his spirit in this city he had known so well. I strolled through Renaissance-era quarters, soaking in their soft coral glow, and peeked into age-old artisanal ateliers, searching for a glimpse of him.

Everywhere I went, people were eating. Thanks to its geography, Lyon had for centuries served as a

hub for some of France's finest ingredients. The old *bouchons* (the Lyonnais relative of the Parisian bistro) still served cornichons in tall earthenware jars with worn-out wooden tongs clipped to their thick love handles, but young eager faces emerged from behind the counters of the patisseries; the hippest bistro was called Le Bouchon des Filles; and Nicolas Le Bec, a blond and tousled enfant terrible who wore black in the kitchen, had garnered two Michelin stars for his eponymous downtown restaurant, launched a sleek casual eatery at the airport, and now ran a whole culinary complex in the new "Confluence area." Gourmands whispered that he was the new Bocuse.

Paul Bocuse, eighty-three, had not been sitting idle, either. Since 1965 he has held on to the meaningful trio of Michelin stars—the top marks on the French gastronomy ladder—for his rigorous take on simple regional cuisine. A brilliant communicator, he was also the very first celebrity chef, with a *Time* magazine cover and a fierce dedication to local fresh ingredients. Fellow Lyonnais Daniel Boulud, who spent some time in Bocuse's kitchen, once described him as "a French national treasure," and for Alain Ducasse, he was the "pope of French cuisine," even though it was a public "secret" that this particular pope shared his life with not two, but three, ladies.

The morning of my arrival, I phoned Martine, Bocuse's cousin, who works as his assistant. "Come at eleven," she ordered in an efficient high pitch, directing me to arrive at L'Auberge du Pont de Collonges, the Michelin three-star gastronomic hothouse started by Bocuse's grandparents on the banks of the Saône. In addition to this flagship, Bocuse had opened five brasseries, and a fast-food joint in Lyon, aided by his right-hand man, Jean Fleury, a burly and solid businessman with a powerful French nose.

This empire building, French style, had begun early. As a young boy in the 1940s Bocuse apprenticed with la Mère Brazier, one of the first cooks who helped write the Lyonnais tradition of great, simple cuisine and the first woman to receive three stars from the Michelin Guide. He followed with eight years at La Pyramide under the genial Fernand Point, a joyous and generous giant for whom the third Michelin star had literally been invented.

"Collonges," I told the grumpy taxi driver hailed in the center of Lyon. "But he's not open for lunch," he responded, turning around to see who could possibly not know that Paul Bocuse doesn't serve lunch. He then described every minute of the meal he had there, twenty-three years ago, for his mother-in-law's sixtieth birthday.

Bright green with red shutters lined with orange: the garish colors of the *auberge* surprised me, but their boldness made me smile. Nearby, colorful frescoes (that green and orange palette again) related the history of gastronomy, starting with an ode to Marie-Antonin Carême—the first cook to codify French cuisine, during the Napoleonic era—and a tableau featuring Fernand Point and his wife, host extraordinaire Mado Point.



Flapping proudly, the American flag over his restaurant paid tribute to the Normandy saviors, reminding me that Lyon was a stronghold of the French Resistance and that American soldiers had taken excellent care of an eighteen-year-old wounded Bocuse, who was freshly enlisted.

“Sylvie?”

He wasn’t my father, but something about the complete assurance with which this bald, stocky, but erect man walked toward me felt very familiar. Fashionably clad in black slacks and a polo shirt, the chef whom everyone called Monsieur Paul was ready for our interview. Ever so charming, he asked about my life in New York. The words flew. I steered the conversation back to the kitchen.

“If you start with great ingredients, you have great cuisine,” he explained, adding that in his world, the cooks don’t decide much, the clients do. Trends? “It’s just like in fashion, one year it’s the miniskirt, another it’s the maxi. Me, I like all skirts!” And he added that his love was in distilling pleasure.

At the end of our conversation, Bocuse stood up abruptly, “You’re having dinner here tonight, and bring a friend.” I didn’t think to argue or to tell him that I was supposed to be on a train to Paris for the evening flight to New York. Nothing else mattered. I would be having dinner at Paul Bocuse that night, while home in New York, my kids wouldn’t understand and my husband would tense his jaw and pretend he did. It wasn’t like I was cheating on him with Bocuse. Or was it?

That night, my Lyonnais friend Blandine, a fellow gourmand, and I giggled like two schoolgirls as we approached the restaurant in a pouring rain. I had not known

her long, but the way she closed her eyes while tasting a bite of foie gras convinced me she was the perfect accomplice. Monsieur Paul, supremely elegant in his starched whites, kissed each of us on both cheeks and led us to a round table in the corner, assuredly putting us under the intense spell of the chef in the tall toque.

The classical decor, with its crystal chandeliers, antique mirrors, rustic furniture, and heavy curtains, shone under a thousand lights. The atmosphere was bubbly. Diners were elated to be there, ready for the experience of a lifetime. Some had waited months to get a reservation. We all craned our necks to see what the next table was being served by a perfect black-and-white ballet of elegant waiters carrying twinkling silver trays and steamy copper pans.

We started with the famous *soupe aux truffes noires V. G. E.*, a truly presidential appetizer that Bocuse created in 1975 for then French president Valéry Giscard d'Estaing and served to him at the luncheon that followed Bocuse's nomination as Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur.

Preceded by a whiff of truffle, a puffy golden hot air balloon anchored to a ceramic soup tureen floated my way. I pierced the crust and plunged in my spoon. The combination of truffles and foie gras was not innovative, but the intensity of the broth added the essential ingredient—pleasure. As we proceeded with the *filet de sole aux nouilles Fernand Point*—a fish gratin—and then a *pigeon en feuilleté au chou nouveau*, it dawned on me that dining at Bocuse was about much more than delicious food. It was about pleasure in all its forms.

I didn't find my father in Lyon. The cheese shop where he bought his *fromage blanc*, la Mère Brazier and Fernand Point—all were long gone. But seated in Bocuse's timeless dining room, with the thick tablecloth under my fingers, savoring the classic dishes I had only read about in culinary anthologies, I could taste the past, and that was enough. N