

It had to be stew

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In *Cassoulet Confessions*, food writer SYLVIE BIGAR discovers the secrets of the French stew. Her odyssey leads her on a journey to a meeting of minds, and palates.

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Come for lunch, he'd said. At Domaine Balthazar, weeks after my initial call and 3782 miles from New York, lunch burst through the door with as much pomp as could be mustered by a group of meaty, middle-aged oompa-loompas ambling into the dining room dressed in scarlet robes with billowy sleeves, yellow ribbon tied at the neck.

This was not the simple Sunday lunch I thought I had been summoned to. Everything spoke of ritual, of tradition, of ceremony. The dresses, red with white trim, matched by soft, beret-style caps, reminded me of academics in graduation processions. Miniature versions of the *cassole*, the terracotta pot that provided the basis for the name cassoulet, hung on green ribbons around thick tan necks, like medals of honour. Men and women sang in a mysterious language as they marched out of the kitchen.

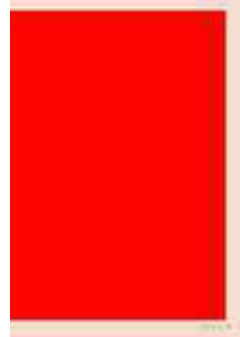
And this parade had a float. A centrepiece shaped like a stretcher and framed by two elongated poles made of raw wood held a platform fashioned from planks. From the side

hung a red satin banner with gold fringes, emblazoned with the words Académie Universelle du Cassoulet. Resting on the platform, presented with a pride ordinarily reserved for an infant prince, was a pair of gargantuan *cassoles* too big for me to wrap with my biggest bear hug. Each end of the stretcher was gripped by a man in a robe. The procession streamed into the dining room.

The bouncy beat of their singing sounded like a folk song, or maybe some sort of anthem. I tried to make out the lyrics then, recognising none of the words, tried to place the language. French? No, I knew the singing was not in *ma langue maternelle*, my mother tongue. It was not in Italian, the other language I spoke, nor in English. I could usually distinguish Spanish, German, and bits and pieces of other languages, but this was unlike anything I had ever heard.

I would soon learn that the language was Occitan, a medieval romance language indigenous to southern France and northern Spain. I would also learn the French version of the tune, as well as its translation:

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*Rediscover in cassoulet
The taste of simplicity.
The taste of truth.
Respect the art, respect the tradition.
Simmer, oh simmer hour after hour.
Break the crust, carefully, time after time
Burning your fingertips, just a tiny bit.*

But in the moment, in that overstimulating, overwhelming moment, all I could manage was a bit of marvel and a lot of wonder. Where the hell was I?

I tried to take it all in. Earth-toned tiles and salmon-coloured curtains gave the room a warm if somewhat rustic atmosphere, which contrasted with the elegance of the impeccably pressed white tablecloth. Had I been invited to a banquet? Looking down, I found a beige china plate flanked by two forks on the left and two knives on the right. Above the plate, a spoon rested next to a roll of crusty bread. Four wine glasses anchored each setting. There were no water glasses. I counted about twenty guests, but I was the only one not singing.

I watched the parade circle the table for the three minutes it took to complete the song. The group came to a stop opposite me. It took two members of the robed fraternity to lift the pot from the platform and place what was obviously the guest of honour on a silver tray on the table. I rose to get a better view. Peering down into the *cassole*, I saw a bubbling, golden crust.

Holding a massive wooden spoon as long as his arm, Garcia stood still, ready to pounce.

“*Allez!*” he erupted suddenly.

As with a javelin, he jabbed into the living, bubbly crust, releasing a fog of fumes. I almost felt the blow and winced, wondering if the thing was going to explode. Two large dollops of what looked like supersized beans, duck meat, and sausage, moist with shiny, unapologetic fat, landed on my plate. I couldn’t wait. I scooped a bite and lifted it to my lips.

They all stared (“the American didn’t even wait for us to be served,” someone whispered), but I couldn’t see. I’d closed my eyes.

Home, I thought, shuddering. This is the taste of home. It didn’t make any sense.

I opened my eyes and put my fork down. They were still staring at me. What I had just tasted had nothing in common with any mundane stew I had experienced during my past travels through France. How could this even be called a stew? Each ingredient sang its own gustative melody. The beans, plump and creamy but still intact, seemed to

have absorbed the grassy, floral essence of the bouquet garni – that bundle of fresh mountainous herbs and veggies – but also the earthy flavour of the meats. The duck was tender with thin crisp peaks, strands of pork melted in my mouth, and binding it all was what I could only describe as caramelised sensuality. It was, in fact, the crust of the cassoulet.

“*Délicieux!*” I shouted, throwing my arms in the air.

Berets went flying as the entire group jumped up and cheered before we toasted the cassoulet with a deep red wine from the nearby Minervois region. Later, on my palate I recognised garlic, loads of fragrant garlic. The scent took me back to a conversation with Arianne, my best friend’s mother, who as a young bride in tightfisted 1950s Geneva – the old Calvin stronghold – realised she was finally free to cook with garlic. In her parents’ kitchen, the unwelcome bulb had been deemed vulgar, but she now used its sensual, smelly power as a means to celebrate her sexuality and her new culinary freedom. Every time she squeezed a clove out of its tight sock, she told me, she felt like a porn star.

There was more garlic in the crisp salad served in the terracotta bowls that made the rounds after the cassoulet, and by then I had sipped three different southern wines I never knew existed.

But what was this academy, I wondered. The French Hogwarts? The brotherhood of deliciousness? I would learn that, shedding any semblance of modesty, Garcia based his newborn association on the Académie Française, a body of literary authorities created in 1685 whose mission was (and still is) the safeguarding of the French language. His universal academy would safeguard cassoulet. Protect it. Defend it. Against whom? And why?

I vaguely remember someone offering rosemary sorbet and a sweet late-harvest muscat, but the rest of the day is a blur. I woke up the next morning with no memory of how I’d gotten from the restaurant back to the hotel. I looked out to a ribbon of ramparts studded by thin towers coiffed with red brick roofs; ancient stone walls peeking out from under blankets of ivy, and, beneath my window, a steady flow of tourists gawking at the medieval city.

The phone rang.

“*Sylvie, tu dors!*” said Garcia.

“No, I’m awake,” I responded, my mouth pasty.

“Ten minutes at the drawbridge. We have to talk.”

“*Oui, chef.*” ●

Cassoulet Confessions: Food, France, Family and the Stew That Saved My Soul by Sylvie Bigar (Hardie Grant; \$32.99) is on sale now.