

Cassoulet Confessions

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Hospitality

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I DIDN'T EAT cassoulet for breakfast that first morning at the Garcias' in Carcassonne, and I didn't sip red wine, even though they all did. Yes, the kids too. The dish played a crucial role in the family's diet. Or perhaps it was more than their diet. The chef made cassoulet three times a week and there was always some left over and that was that. It would sustain, it would support. In the Aude, one of the poorest French départements, food was no entertainment. Food was life.

I had café au lait and a thick tartine, a hefty slice of peasant bread. Laurence cut for me. Creamy, yellow butter made it scrumptious. For once, Garcia stayed at the table. He'd seemed gruff on the phone when I had called from New York, but it was this very morning that I first felt he was intrigued by my obsession and, dare I say it, touched that I was back to learn more. Had the pig's head been a test of my resolve?

"It's one thing to master a dish," he said softly, "it's another to understand where

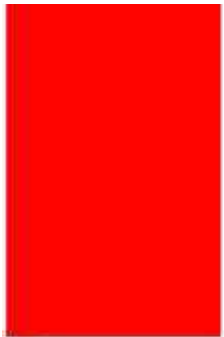
it comes from, how it travels from the bounties of the regional soil and into the kitchen. I know you're itching to get your hands dirty, but I think you literally need to get your feet in our dirt first."

I was instructed to stand at the counter, my hands thrust deep into an immense bucket, and pick through what looked like a stream of white beans, the size of beads, to remove any that were broken or stained. They felt soft, almost like an immense rosary. I thought I'd be done quickly, but it took more than two hours. Every time I called him over to announce I was done, he'd find more I'd missed. My legs were hurting, but I held on: how many hours could I stand like that without moving? Finally, he asked me to step away and poured the beans into a massive pot filled with water and fresh bay leaves and left them to soak.

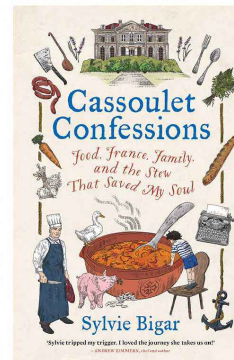
Back in the car, no smell of blood this time, we headed towards the hills on our way to the duck farm. I had travelled through

France extensively. Geneva lies only four or five hours north of Provence, so for school vacations, my family would often drive south on the iconic Nationale 7, the ancient Roman way that connects Paris to Menton near Nice, through lavender fields and rows of cypress with elongated limbs, but the Aude landscape was completely different. Garcia and I rode first through lush forests of chestnut trees and venerable oaks — "Where elk and boars roam," he said, "but you'll never see them" — and then alongside dramatic, rocky peaks crowned by ruins of Cathar outposts and castles. The Cathars were a religious group that emerged in the early Middle Ages and flourished in the Languedoc until the Catholic Church, invoking heresy, called for a deadly Crusade against them.

We turned into a small lane and got out in front of a stone house with wooden doors. On each one, the naïf profile of a duck had been carved, and above the door, a stone duck heralded the entrance. There was no mistaking where we were.



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“Ducks were domesticated since Roman times,” explained the farmer, Patrick Lauzy, as we toured the farm, “and duck confit is a crucial part of cassoulet.”

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To make duck confit, a cook salts a piece of duck, usually the leg, and lets it rest overnight or longer to drain the moisture out before cooking it in its own fat. The leg is then preserved in yet more fat in a glass jar. This may sound utterly disgusting, even inedible to some, but it is both delicious and even healthy (more on fat later). Throughout the southwest of France, the best chunks of pork, goose, rabbits and game are confit and installed into prized cans and glass jars — a far cry from spam!

It had started to rain as we left the house and walked towards the forest, the path quickly flowing into mud.

“You need boots,” said Garcia, as if he couldn’t believe I had shown up so unprepared. I acquiesced as Lauzy told the story of the five-generation farm and how the world of duck had changed since he was a child.

“It’s the Americans’ fault,” said Lauzy. “What do you mean?” asked Garcia. “With the foie gras.”

“What about the foie gras?”

“They say it hurts the animals, ha!” said Lauzy. “Can you imagine?” “Well, it can’t be pleasant,” I said.

Garcia shot me a dark look.

“Anyway, Lauzy,” he said, “let’s not

blame the Americans. Without them our foie gras would be boche.”

He was using the French derogatory term for Germans that originated during World War II, a word my mother spoke every time she recounted her flight from the soldiers who had invaded her beloved country.

“Je les emmerde les Américains,” (f*ck the Americans) said Lauzy.

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Were we going to be thrown out from the duck farm too? But Garcia started barking in Occitan and I strolled ahead, as if this debate did not concern me one bit. Soaked and muddy, I approached the immense fenced-in area where dozens of ducks led their peaceful lives, blissfully unaware that they would soon be transformed into carnal delicacies.

I remained silent on the way back, remembering that my father, who always said he ate to live and didn’t live to eat, harboured few opinions about food. While his parents were notorious bon vivants, enjoying white wine or champagne with their appetisers, then noted reds with the meats, and often visiting Michelin-rated restaurants, my father didn’t seem to care what he was served. Then it struck me: the only dish he ever professed to love was canard à l’orange, an elaborate and ancient recipe of roasted duck cooked with bitter oranges. How odd for a man who seemed so austere to relish such an extravagant recipe!

Later, back in the kitchen, Garcia leaned towards me and whispered, “In the old

days, we didn’t use domesticated ducks for cassoulet. We shot wild partridge.”

I wasn’t even sure what a partridge was, besides a kind of wild bird, but from his secretive attitude it was clear that this piece of information mattered. One of the first recipes for partridge dates from 1651, he explained, and was written by François Pierre de la Varenne. In his early cookbook, *Le Cuisinier François (The French Cook)*, fresh herbs were introduced for the first time, replacing the exotic spices of the medieval times. “That’s when cooks started appreciating the flavour of the ingredients.”

Side by side, we cleaned and prepped veal and beef bones, vegetables and a towering bouquet garni. Hours later — days, really — all the simmering, skimming, and praying would create what chefs call ‘stock’ — the broth that serves as the base for most French sauces, and is crucial in the making of cassoulet.

“There were tons of partridge in the vineyards in the old times,” he continued, “since they fed on grapes, but they were a bit tough, we had to stew them slowly.” I was only half-listening. Domesticated duck or wild partridge? I was elsewhere, thinking about my father. Who was he really? Domesticated or wild? ■

This is an edited extract from Cassoulet Confessions: Food, France, Family and the Stew That Saved My Soul by Sylvie Bigar. Hardie Grant Books; \$32.99