

Cassoulet Confessions is a fabulous memoir by American award-winning food and travel writer **Sylvie Bigar** that reveals how a simple journalistic assignment sparked a French culinary obsession and evolved into a quest for identity. Here she reveals how it all began and offers *Taste of France* readers one of her favourite versions of the classic dish

It was April 2008 and I was a Swiss-French food and travel writer based in New York City. Months earlier, I had been discussing a story idea with a magazine editor for whom I tracked down unsung cooks, forgotten spices and secret culinary traditions. "Here," I'd said, as we pored over the map of France, my index finger wedged between Spain and Provence, over a French region named Occitanie – at the crossroads of history and civilisations.

"The local speciality is cassoulet," I continued. "An ancestral meat and bean stew I hear tastes like velvet cocoa. The locals speak a mysterious language; they spread bizarre legends."

"Go," was all he said. I exhaled. My editor had just handed me the perfect escape: a few days of solo travel through France with a delicious purpose. Truth be told, I had been dying to take a break from what may have looked like the perfect urban picket fence life.

I'd grown up alongside two older sisters with disabilities, within a wealthy but wildly dysfunctional family, and had sworn I would never have children. I managed to sail through my first marriage without diverting from that credo, but a year

into my second, I woke up one morning with a bad case of nesting fever. Perhaps, I thought, I could placate this new craving by adopting a dog. But once we brought Chocolat – named for the chocolate croissants of my childhood – home from the pound, the fierce love I felt for him just made me crave a deeper connection. It was as if this puppy opened in me a door I hadn't known existed. Beyond that door hid a person I'd never met. A person who stopped taking the pill after 20 years of steady use, got pregnant a few days later and would spend the next nine months on an ecstatic trip, convinced that she had morphed into a magical vessel of life. One child turned out to be not enough. A year after my daughter was born, while leukaemia gnawed at my beloved father, I became pregnant with a son.

Fast forward a few years, I was writing more about food than travel and had turned into a stroller-pushing Upper West Side Mama. A Mama who was dying to escape.

Which explains why from my home in New York City, I flew to Paris and on to Toulouse, where I caught a rickety train, beige paint peeling from its flanks, bound for magical, medieval Carcassonne and its 52 towers. 🐾

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About the author

Award-winning food and travel writer Sylvie Bigar was born in Geneva, Switzerland, and lives in New York City. Her writing has appeared widely, including in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Food & Wine*, *Forbes.com*, *Saveur*, *Bon Appétit*, *Edible*, *Departures*, *Travel & Leisure*, and *National Geographic Traveler*. In French, Sylvie has contributed to *Le Figaro*, *Histoire Magazine*, *Le Temps*, and *FrenchMorning.com*.

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Cassoulet

confessions



Cassoulet

Cassoulet is a classic French stew of duck, beans, sausage and herbs, which has various permutations depending on where you are. Here

Sylvie Bigar shares one of her favourite versions

This recipe is made over three days. On the first day you prepare the stock and soak the beans; on the second day you cook the meats and assemble the cassoulet. The last day, the day of eating, you cook the cassoulet one last time.

Serves 8

INGREDIENTS

1 kg dried lingot or other large white beans
1 pig trotter
300 g fresh pork rind, cut into strips
1 ham bone
1 fresh ham hock
1 bouquet garni (tie together 1 celery stalk, 4 thyme sprigs, 4 parsley sprigs, 3 bay leaves)
10 cloves
1 tablespoon coarse salt
1 tablespoon duck fat
250 g fresh pork belly, cut into cubes
1 medium onion, chopped
2 garlic bulbs, cloves peeled and crushed
450 g fresh garlic pork sausage, cut into 7 cm long pieces
4 confit duck legs

METHOD

Time: 7.5 hours over 3 days

Day one

- Sort through the beans to remove any broken ones.
- Rinse the beans thoroughly and soak overnight in cold water.

3 In a large stock pot, combine the pig trotter, pork rind, ham bone and hock, bouquet garni, cloves, and salt. Cover with water (about 3 litres). Bring to a boil and simmer, covered, for two hours.

4 Let the stock cool, then remove the meats and discard the ham bone. Remove the bouquet garni and wring it out into the stock pot. Pour the stock through a sieve into a storage container. Refrigerate stock and meats separately overnight.

Day two

5 Drain the beans and rinse under cold water. Bring a large pot of water to a boil. Blanch the beans in boiling water for seven minutes, and then drain.

6 Debone the trotter and ham hock. Cut the meat into chunks.

7 In a large pot, bring the stock and the beans to a boil, then simmer for about 30 minutes over a low heat. Drain the beans, reserving the stock and place the beans in a bowl.

8 Meanwhile, melt the duck fat in a large pan. Add the pork belly cubes and brown on all sides. Remove from the pan with a slotted spoon and set aside. In the same pan, sauté the onion and garlic over a medium-low heat until translucent. Stir constantly to avoid burning. Remove from the pan with a slotted spoon, add to the beans and stir until they are well coated.

9 In the same pan, brown the sausage pieces, then remove and set aside. Sear the duck confit to melt its fat. Debone the duck legs

when cool enough to handle.

10 Preheat the oven to 160°C (320°F).

11 To assemble the cassoulet, spread half the beans at the bottom of a cassole or large Dutch oven. Then layer the sausage pieces, the duck confit and the pork meats, and cover with the rest of the beans and then with the stock. Bake uncovered for about two hours. Check regularly to break the crust, making sure it doesn't look dry; add stock or water as necessary. Bubbles should appear around the edges. Remove from the oven and let the cassole rest until cool, then refrigerate overnight, keeping remaining stock if any.

Day three

12 About three hours before serving, take the cassole out of the refrigerator and bring to room temperature (this should take about 45 minutes).

13 Preheat the oven to 160°C (320°F).

14 Add about 250ml stock or water to the cassole and bake for two hours, breaking the crust regularly. Make sure the stew remains moist by adding stock or water as needed.

15 Remove from the oven and serve family style in the centre of the table.

Notes

Please note that the recipes in this book were only cooked in conventional ovens. If using a fan or convection oven, reduce the temperature by 20°C (70°F). This book uses 15ml tablespoons. Cooks using 20ml tablespoons should slightly reduce the amount accordingly.

Going back to her roots

Cassoulet Confessions is an enthralling memoir by award-winning food and travel writer Sylvie Bigar which begins with a simple journalistic assignment and leads to a search for identity.

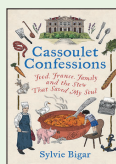
Set amidst the stunning countryside of southern France, this honest and poignant memoir beautifully conveys both a hunger for authentic food and that universal hunger for home.

Sylvie travels across the Atlantic from her home in New York to the origin of cassoulet – the Occitanie region of southern

France. There she immerses herself in all things cassoulet: the quintessential historic meat and bean stew.

From her first spoonful, she is transported back to her dramatic childhood in Geneva, Switzerland, and finds herself journeying through an unexpected rabbit hole of memories. Not only does she discover the deeper meanings of her ancestral French cuisine, but she is ultimately transformed by having to face her unsettling, complex family history. Sylvie's simple but poetic prose immerses us

in her story: we smell the simmering aromas of French kitchens, empathise with her family dilemmas, and experience her internal struggle to understand and ultimately accept herself.



Extracted from *Cassoulet Confessions – Food, France, Family and the Stew That Saved My Soul* by Sylvie Bigar, published by Hardie Grant (£16.99). Order now

on from Amazon

