

Food

The French Vanguard

Escoffier still reigns, but his touch at today's most successful French restaurants is lighter and brighter than ever.

By Dana Bowen, Special to *R&I*

R&I (Restaurants and Institutions) is the leading source of vital information for the entire foodservice industry, covering chains, independent restaurants, hotels and institutions.

Published 24 times per year, *R&I* reaches 154,100 subscribers, including executives who operate independent and chain restaurants, hospitals, colleges, schools, airline foodservice, and hotels/resorts, as well as dealers/distributors and consultants in the foodservice supplies industry.

France's Charles de Gaulle once famously complained: "How can anyone govern a nation that has 246 different kinds of cheese?"

His point was political: If you can't decide between a spoonful of creamy vacherin or a chunk of piquant Roquefort, how can you form a consensus on anything at all?

Restaurant professionals, however, can't help but ponder the culinary implications of de Gaulle's statement. If French food is so diverse, how can an umbrella term such as "French cuisine" encompass the breadth and depth of a gastronomical category so monumental, it forms the groundwork of most Western-based cooking?

It can't. And so, there's a tendency to compartmentalize French food in easy-to-digest categories. Classic French, aka haute cuisine, is the descendant of Auguste Escoffier, who codified its techniques and multicourse menus; French bistro or Brasserie fare, offers comforting, often provincial staples in environments from casual to urbane; and New French, a catch-all term for the evolution of French food in its homeland and beyond.

Since most chefs have cooked their share of classic dishes and bistro hits, it's in New French that today's latest menu innovations are found.

The strongest inclination is to look to Paris for culinary trends. There, Alain Passard, chef of Michelin three-starred L'Arpège, has forged new appreciation for vegetables by shifting his menu away from meat. And Joël Robuchon is making waves with L'Atelier, a casual restaurant with a busy open kitchen that whips up internationally inspired small plates.

In stateside kitchens, French food has always been tailored to American tastes. The first sample came with the introduction of haute cuisine at the 1939 World's Fair French Pavilion, which led to Henri Soule's opening of Le Pavillon in New York City. Much later came the next generation of French chefs who created nouvelle cuisine—

that lighter, brighter response to the burdens of French classicism. It coincided with, and was further influenced by, California cuisine's seasonal focus.

Over the past decade, as tastes changed, health concerns arose and new ingredients and equipment emerged, many classic French restaurants grew long in the tooth. And this year, a good number called it quits.

Adopt and Adapt

Modernizing classic French menus means tweaking, not starting over. "You have to offer traditional dishes," says Scott Zahren, CEC and director of culinary for Philadelphia-based foodservice contractor Aramark's Innovative Dining Solutions, which manages campus facilities across the country. "But in many places we're replacing the fat with more nutritional substitutes."

One example is chicken cordon bleu, the special-events staple. "Where the fat comes in is the standard breading procedure and deep-frying. Now you'll see veal cordon bleu that's stuffed with ham and cheese, cooked in a very small amount of oil and finished in the oven."

Mark Moran, executive chef at The Conference Center at NorthPointe in Columbus, Ohio, agrees. The Gaithersburg, Md.-based Sodexo USA managed facility includes a ballroom that accommodates some 600 guests. "I stuff chicken breast with Gorgonzola, wrap it in prosciutto, and serve it sliced on the bias," Moran says, adding that the dish comes with field greens and raspberry-walnut vinaigrette.

Moran's beef tenderloins are no longer served with thick demi-glace but rather with quick reductions of pan juices. "With the quality of the meat you get today, we don't feel the need to cover it with heavy sauces." When preparing fish, he thinks fruit, not butter; such as the mango-papaya salsa served with his sautéed skate.

These global flavors suggest Fusion-French, a category that's gained momentum in recent years. In New York City, French-inspired Japanese restaurants—such as Josh DeChellis's Sumile, Marcus Samuelsson's Riingo and Eric Ripert's Geisha—have recently opened. In Santa Monica, Calif., John Makhani launched Cinch, another French-Japanese fusion.

And in Kansas City, Mo., after feeling the sting of Sept. 11, 2001, and anti-French sentiments, Patrick Quillec, chef-owner of Café Provence and Café Paris, closed the traditional Café Paris bistro and re-opened it as Hannah Bistro Café. His new menu features American cuisine with a French soul, with international twists that have made it a popular spot with his new all-age crowd.

How do these chefs balance the mix of cuisines? "I think there's a certain clientele still looking for tradition," he says, rattling off the béarnaise and hollandaise he's been whipping up since he was a kid in Brittany. So he offers those classic dishes separate from the globally inspired innovations.

He also does a lot of international adaptation. Mussels—traditionally cooked with a cream sauce—are further enhanced with anise-flavored liquor. French fries are doused with paprika, curry and a bit of butter for sweet crunch.....

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