

Cuisine of Provence

The Cuisine of Provence - The Hidden Richness.

For years Provençal cooking has been relegated to a poor substitute for the rich cuisine of Burgundy and northern France. "Of course", gastronomes would say, in condescending tones, "it's very healthy but how much bouillabaisse can you eat?"

Anyone who still believes Provençal cooking is reduced to fish stew and olives has never tasted Chef Jean-Andre Charial's version of stuffed zucchini blossoms garnished with fried zucchini flowers, or Jany Gleisse's fabulous dessert of home made ice cream under a cupola of lavender honey with a fresh lavender sauce.

Then there's Gerard Passadat's "Petit Nice", the only restaurant in all of France to get the sought after third Michelin star in 2008. But you don't have to visit a Michelin star restaurant to appreciate the variety and the flavors of Provençal cuisine. You can find not only regional but local dishes such as the petits farcis of Nice with their ground meat and/or vegetable stuffing or the lou fassum of Saint Paul-de-Vence that's a version of cabbage stuffed with sausage meat, chard, onions and rice.

Nimes has its brandada, salt cod soaked for several days in milk or water and then mashed into a hot puree with olive oil.

Whatever the locality, Provençal cuisine has always exploited the use of fresh vegetables and quality fish and meats well before rich butter and cream sauces became known as cholesterol factories.

Gifts of the Mediterranean.

Fish remains a mainstay along the coast with rock fish such as rouget, conger (eel), loup de mer, daurade, and sarde being the most prevalent. Grilled simply with olive oil and dried fennel and some lemon, these fish become a gourmet's delight. Shell fish is also plentiful and prepared with the simplicity that lets the product speak for itself. Bouillabaisse is the exception to this simplicity with as many recipes as there are restaurants.

Marseille claims to be the home of the best bouillabaisse and, with restaurants like Michel-Brasserie des Catalans and the Petit Nice, it would be difficult to argue that position. A fragrant combination of rock fish and shell fish coupled with vegetables, tomato sauce, saffron and other "secret" ingredients, bouillabaisse is one of the more elaborate Provençal dishes.

Meat and Game.

There's nothing very elaborate about roasted rabbit with rosemary and olives but it's still a delicious example of Provençal cuisine. The back country is filled with game such as becasse, wild boar, rabbit, deer and partridge - all of which find their way to small, local restaurants that still offer a daily menu for 11 euro (\$15), including wine. And while beef isn't a mainstay of the regions, you'll find many stews and daubes at reasonable prices.

Lamb however is a mainstay and some of the best lamb in France comes from Sisteron next to the Haute Provence. Sisteron lamb grilled over a wood fire with herbs of Provence and a honey sauce can, in my opinion, compete with anything Burgundy (or, for that matter) Paris can offer.

So yes, Provençal cooking is healthy. And yes, it takes advantage of the many varieties of fresh, naturally grown fruits vegetables but it is also flavorful and a wonderful addition to French cuisine.

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About the Author

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