

Forward to the Past

IN spite of producing two of the most luxurious foodstuffs in the world—black truffles and *paté de foie gras*—the ancient Province of Périgaud, now the Department of Dordogne, is today one of the poorer regions of France. From the time of the Roman occupation it was a prosperous center of European trade, with manufacturing springing up in the 19th century along the banks of the Isle, but it fell victim to two disasters. First, its substantial wine industry was virtually wiped out by the phylloxera epidemic of the 1870s and never really recovered, and then the Great War cut down and destroyed the young men along with the vines. Farms were robbed of their workers; the great forests of truffle oaks could not be cared for and so, thus neglected, they no longer produced in their traditional abundance.

Périgaud has also suffered two English invasions, the first in 1356 during the Hundred Years' War and the second, over five centuries later, a non-violent migration of gentlefolk attracted by its beautiful countryside and extremely low real estate prices. The latter incursion has not had such unpleasant side effects as the post-Mayle blight afflicting much of Provence; driving through the countryside, you don't encounter walled-in mansions with lake-sized swimming pools. The non-combatant English who come here have tended to adopt protective coloration and are among the staunchest and most effective defenders of those simple country virtues that first attracted them.

Many of these expatriates operate *chambres d'hôtes* (bed & breakfast establishments) which may also offer *tables d'hôtes* (evening meals). Some are listed in Sawday's *French B&B*, which makes a point of recommending households that are typically French rather than reassuringly Anglicized. During the summer holidays they fill to overflowing with a cross-section of the world's well-off travellers, allowing their owners to live the rest of the year like modest landed gentry. It's a nice way to run a small estate but an impractical method of financing—or enlivening—a whole county. Eyes glaze over during the long winter months and the younger generation dreams of migrating to where something happens after the sun goes down.

AND so the city fathers of Périgueux, the Department's largest and most beautiful town, have come up with various schemes to bring the world back to its streets during the off-season. One of the most ingenious, begun in 1990, has been a November *Salon International du Livre Gourmand*, a biennial world fair of writers and publishers of cookery books. This is particularly appropriate given that the town is not only a gastronomic capital but was also the first town in the Aquitaine to print books with moveable type and today supports eight independent bookshops—not bad for a town of just over thirty thousand.

The *Salon* jogged along at a modest pace until 1996, when the jury announced that an author's prize would be awarded to the wife of Germany's Chancellor Kohl. Now, there's more to Helmut than just a mountain of cabbage. He didn't reach those monumental proportions by wolfing *Schweineshaxe* with his sauerkraut, but is in fact a cosmopolitan glutton with an enormous library of cookbooks and a wife who knows her way around the kitchen. Delighted with the prospect of international recognition in her own right, Frau Kohl suggested to His Excellency that a weekend in Périgueux could be more fun than a barrel of goose livers, and then for good measure phoned her Paris gourmet friends the Chiracs and invited them down to swell the celebrity list. With two of Europe's greatest collectors of votes, volumes and *vol-au-vents* in attendance, the *Salon* took off like a champagne cork and ambitious plans were laid to triple its size in 1998.

With prestige comes a solemn awareness of history, and so a select group of dealers in rare and second-hand cookery books was invited to set up a roomful of stalls tucked in at the back of the Nouvelle Theatre. The British presence consisted of Brian and Gill Cashman, a jovial duo whose

business name—*Cooking: the Books*—gives a fair indication of their usual level of high seriousness. Some months ago I had idly suggested that if they ever had to take a vanful of books someplace interesting I'd be happy to transport them at cost in exchange for a free holiday. And now they were offering me a week in Périgueux, expenses paid. I'd won the Lottery!

The first bonus was the trip across the channel. Living in Wales just over the Severn Bridge, the Cashmans usually travel overnight by Brittany Ferry from Portsmouth to Saint-Malo. This line still belongs to the French government and they seem to take a certain pride in it. My recent experiences of Sealink and P&O to Calais had left me totally unprepared for the Britannia, an elegant ship whose interior is painted in soft pastels and hung with pleasantly decorative paintings. Not a lager lout in sight; the fare is about the same as for the shorter trip from Dover and a night cabin costs about as much as a modest hotel room, but the crossing is too long for a quick turnaround laden with cheap booze.

The dining room was delightful both to sit in and to eat in: the salad buffet which began the evening meal included huge bowls of shrimp and ecrevisses that actually tasted of their species, and the entrecote, ordered *bleu*, arrived both hot and translucent, an impossible feat in a typical P&O freezer-to-microwave kitchen. The bottom line was just under seventeen pounds for a four-or-more-course meal which included decent serve-yourself cheeses and desserts. Given a calm sea, I'd happily cross the Atlantic in this trim little ship; as Katherine Hepburn proclaimed to Cary Grant in *The Philadelphia Story*, she was “yar”.

After a breakfast of impossibly fresh and flaky croissants (were they baked on board? delivered by parachute?) we set out for Périgueux past familiar places that beckoned to me like seductive sirens: the carefully restored walled city of Saint-Malo; the Vielle Auberge in Hédé where Mary and I once experienced the perfect Sunday lunch; and Brantôme, the Venice of the Dordogne, an island of ancient stone buildings and quiet canals.

And finally, after a day's driving, there was Périgueux, its identity unambiguously asserted by the Cathedral of St. Front. Here was effrontery indeed! Its predecessor was built in the first half of the twelfth century, contemporaneously with St. Mark's in Venice, and modestly echoed its domes and cupolas; but the present nineteenth century restoration—or ravishment—is an architect's wet dream, an over-the-top fantasy of Byzantine bijouterie whose minarets proliferate like rigid, erect worms emerging from a compost heap. An early creation of Paul Abadie (“a deplorable builder who wrought much havoc throughout south-western France”), it would later inspire a pair of devout Catholic businessmen who hired him to repeat the unrepeatable in Paris in order to celebrate the city's escape from invasion during the Franco-Prussian War. The result was the Sacré-Coeur, the Sacred Heart which bleeds atop Montmartre to this very day.

But within the Périgueux cathedral's surreal shadow the city fathers have been doing creative penance for the sins of their grandfathers. As recently as 1972 the *AA Road Book of France* remarked sadly that *The picturesque quarters round the cathedral are also being demolished. . .*; but on Wednesday morning after breakfast I climbed the short hill to the Place Daumesnil in front of the cathedral and found myself on the edge of a 40-acre network of pedestrianized cobbled streets lined with fully restored mediaeval and renaissance stone buildings, all given over to the legitimate shops, offices and residences of a working town. And in three of the most beautiful squares a myriad of stallholders were selling an amazing variety of home produce: fresh goat cheeses, all sorts of poultry, root vegetables with their crisp fresh leaves still attached (ready to be added to a *soupe au pistou*). . . and there were seafood stalls, practically giving away oysters for as little as a franc-and-a-half apiece. But no time to linger—there was a vanload of cookbooks to be unpacked, sorted and shelved. A more detailed inventory of the market would have to wait until Saturday.

THE guide/catalog for the *Ve [5e] Salon International du Livre Gourmand* shows what its organizers wanted to accomplish. Given the fact that the Festival takes place in south-central France, it was not surprising that 22 of the 35 publishers who had taken stalls this year were French. And, as was quite proper, the wine- and food-makers who were allowed to exhibit were all, so far as I could tell, from the Perigord. Furthermore, whoever selected them made decisions that were firmly based on quality rather than mere profitability: the two dozen or so exhibitors, if allotted a corner in one of Britain's highly commercialized nibble'n'tipple shows, would stand out like *fillet mignon* in a burger joint.

Look at the book awards and you get a clearer picture. Out of a total of 81, only the first 18 were given to books in French from French publishers. The rest were grouped together as *Les Prix Internationaux* and were selected by an international jury headed by Xavier Darcos, the Mayor of Périgueux (who is more than just a figurehead politician), together with a German, an Argentine, an Italian, an American, and the French editor of *The International Cookbook Review*. Many of the categories are deliberately international (and named in English), such as "Wine books in English", "Scandinavia", "Cookbooks in German", "Spain", and "Italy". (The award for "Best culinary journalist" went to Jeffrey Steingarten for *The Man who Ate Everything*, which gets no argument from me.)

It's obvious why most of the prizes disqualify the French (and why some of them might appear to follow a national quota system). This is designated an International Salon and its intention is to build an event which will bring more and more people from all over the world who, while they are in Périgueux, will eat so well and see so much beauty that they will tell others and return, preferably with their families. (It's a good plan; clearly, I'm already hooked.) Furthermore, they may encourage importers in their home countries to stock and distribute the foods they have particularly enjoyed. After all, what food writer or publisher wants to travel half-way around the world just to see a platform full of three-star French chefs being awarded yet another round of prizes on their home turf? (But Paul Webster, reporting on the event in *The Guardian*, turned it on its head and wrote condescendingly and at length about France's failure to capture the top awards. Zeroing in on the new *cuisine voyeur*, he proclaimed that the Anglo-Saxons have a "grip on the literary gold mine". It would be wise to remember how Midas ultimately valued his "hard food".)

NOT forgetting that real food was indeed the *raison d'être* of these celebrations, the organizers arranged with twenty-five restaurants in and around Périgueux to serve an appropriate menu of their own choosing at the modest price of 100 francs (around 11 pounds or 17 dollars). There are something like 140 eating places in Périgueux, most of which would have been happy to throw something together, but the committee went for quality and all save one of the local restaurants listed in Michelin and Gault-Millau cooperated. Six of the twenty-five participating venues were in these guides, and in my experience another couple should have been. If I were to report in detail on the successful dishes I was served in Périgueux and where I ate them I would multiply the size of this survey, so I hope you'll be content with names, addresses, phone numbers, and brief summaries, which will be added as an appendix (or, if you prefer, a gizzard).

Two things they all had in common were delicious bread and *confit de canard*. (Goose confit is a by-product of the *fois gras* industry, and the season was only just beginning.) The preserved duck was as omnipresent as *gravlax* in Sweden; if only it were as harmless to the burgeoning waistline! It came with white haricot beans, or with little green puy lentils, or integrally absorbed into a *cassoulet*—or with nothing at all save the crisp brown skin in which it had been deep-fried. Never dry, never soggy, always moist and succulent. And the bread! The bakers seem unaware that the rest of France has been taken over by the baguette, that weightless tasteless stick, useless for anything except perhaps to belabor Mr. Punch or conduct an orchestra. Instead, there are round flat loaves like Greek bread, gray from unbleached flour, crusty and chewy, with large irregular holes

which soak up butter or goose fat like a Mediterranean sponge. Bread and confit, confit and bread—I could eat it 'til the cows come home, and never care if they got lost.

AFTER the rigid rules at the big British venues, I found the casual, laid-back attitude of the staff at the Nouvelle Theatre at first unnerving and then gloriously relaxing. Brian's fluent Spanish immediately won him a cozy relationship with a couple of the janitorial staff, who revealed that we could bypass the crush at the main entrance by driving our van around to an emergency exit at the back of the building through which we could wheel in our boxes and bookcases at leisure. No one else seemed to know this, and I was able to leave my van parked there, unticketed and unmolested, for the rest of the week.

Stopping in the midst of unloading for a much-needed beer, I was informed by the barman that he didn't have change for my 200 franc note—it was too early in the day—but I could have my beer anyway and pay him later. Was this the rude, inconsiderate France that the British complain about? I must have taken a wrong turning.

There was, however, another dimension to the informality. We soon learned that it was impossible to get a definite commitment about anything as far ahead as the following day. Gradually we discovered that there were at least two layers of government pulling the strings: those officials who were locally elected and others who were political appointees from Paris. Not wanting to engage in open warfare in front of the guests, their underlings would politely equivocate until the scales of power tipped one way or the other. Like the scales of justice, these sometimes responded to the discreet pressure of a thumb on the pan.

The amusing side to the politics came out in the jockeying for seats at the dinners that rounded out each day. There were usually two—one for the celebrities in the presence of the Mayor and the other, in his absence, for the plebs. Of course the local politicians and socialites demanded the prestigious invitations, thus displacing many of the foodies; but certain New World social climbers fought tooth and nail for inclusion in the inner circle. I gathered some delicious gossip from Marlena Spieler, a fellow-member of the Guild of Food Writers who had come to give a cookery demonstration but was invited too late to appear in the printed program. In the confusion, she and her husband Alan were sometimes *tête à tête* with the celebrities, sometimes *derrière à derrière* with us plebs. An eloquent and amusing messenger, she would arrive with tales of sharing the Mayor's company and limousine with the ravenously and shamelessly status-starved. What must it have been like two years ago with the Kohls and the Chiracs in royal attendance!

Friday evening brought the two contingents together under the same roof for a *Soirée Espagnole* at the *Restaurant Universitaire* (a fancy name for the local college cafeteria). Arriving by taxi, I opened the door upon total pandemonium. Marlena and Alan had preceded me as part of the Mayor's entourage, but the three of us were shunted off to another room where, we were assured, it would be "much more fun". For the first hour, the fun consisted of sitting at dozens of long trestle tables, jammed together like illegal immigrants, waiting for something to happen. Pitchers of sangria and a few tapas began to materialize around us and it seemed that we were expected to fight our way to a cafeteria line at the far end of the room and help ourselves. We reached the line, with attended cash registers—were we supposed to pay by the dish? There were dozens of expensively dressed couples ahead of us, who drifted away when they were told that they were there by mistake and should be sitting in the other hall being elegantly served along with the mayor. A harassed waiter, sensing that we were on the far edge of desperation, sent us back to our table, assuring us that food and drink would be forthcoming.

Another long wait. Then musicians climbed onto the stage at the end of our table: about fifteen splendidly costumed performers with a whole museum's worth of multi-stringed guitars, mandolins, vihuelas, bandoras and various folk instruments, who proceeded to serenade us—

without amplification! It was worth all the waiting, the hunger, the confusion, just to hear the glorious sound of these old instruments, not coming through cheap loudspeakers at deafening levels. It was traditional Spanish music, played as their ancestors might have played it, with the subtle but detectable variations of tone and timbre weaving in and out of its haunting melodic structures. And then a flamenco ensemble—two virtuoso singers/guitarists and a bang-on-a-box percussionist, with two dancers: one a sultry jet-haired Latin beauty, the other bright and blonde as a primary schoolteacher, but with a convincingly dark frown to accompany her perfectly coordinated posturing and strutting. It was all as rare—and as unforgettable—as the aroma of a mature peasant stew, simmering at the back of an old wood stove, redolent of the flavors of bygone generations. The wine and tapas, when they finally arrived, would have won no blue ribbons; but I, at least, forgave them.

EVERY day there were a few stalls in the old market squares selling this and that. Thursday had been particularly rich in fresh wild mushrooms, with such an abundance of horn-of-plenty and chanterelles, at such modest prices, as to make me wonder if there could be any left in the fields. But Saturday proved to be the really serious market day. The stalls, under square blue umbrellas packed edge-to-edge, held fruits and vegetables I'd neither seen nor heard of. There were exotic varieties of turnip with concentric decorator-rings and luxuriant masses of greenish-purple tops, enormous black-skinned radishes, a dozen different varieties of goat cheese from a dozen independent farms, from puckered little Cubjac *crottins*—i.e., turds, as these sophisticated Gauls call them—to the soft fresh *Le Biquet* from Mère Elyann, a venerable *fromagère* as round and wrinkled as her cheeses.

But even more impressive than the comestibles were the plump, sharp-eyed women who moved purposefully from stall to stall, squeezing a radish, hefting a pumpkin, pressing a chicken breast to test its resilience. They are the substratum of culinary culture, the critics who must be constantly satisfied, the foundation of taste and integrity which gives the markets—in fact, the whole agricultural complex of Perigord—the inspiration and the incentive to maintain its standards. Such traditions are not handed out by publicists, or even taught by experts, but rise ultimately from the very earth which gives savor and sustenance.

THIS particular Saturday was the opening of the *foie gras* season, and so a huge double tent had been set up in the Square St-Louis, within which long rows of tables were occupied by perhaps a couple of dozen local farmers and their wives exhibiting what looked like the entire duck population of the world since time began. There were free samples, little squares of toast spread with fresh *foie gras*; in the jostling crowds, the unscrupulous browser could have gone the rounds again and again, consuming a small fortune in duck livers. [N.B. I didn't.]

In front of the tent were dancers and musicians in folk costume, the latter playing accordions and elbow-inflated bagpipes much like the uilleann pipes I'd seen in Ireland. Off to one side two sweating cooks, laboring over a massive barbecue like the fires of hell itself, were grilling an acre of sizzling duck legs whose tantalizing aroma was rapidly drawing to the square everyone who passed within sniffing distance. And there in the midst of it all was the ubiquitous Mayor, delivering fluent extemporaneous speeches, reaching into a basket and extracting winning raffle tickets, chatting with passers-by, cracking jokes. During a lull, I asked him if he ever went home. "You're everywhere," I teased. "Last night I expected to find you in my hotel room." A loud laugh and, quick as a flash, the French *reposte*: "Only if I were with your wife." *Touché!*

AT noon there was an optional tour including lunch at the Auberge de la Truffe in near-by Sorges, the black truffle capitol of the world, followed by a truffle hunt and a visit to a goose farm. Here, within a few hours, was the culinary essence of Perigord—at 275 francs, definitely a bargain. The

bus would only hold about fifty; better reserve early. Alas, the tour proved to be a masterpiece of anti-publicity: I only heard about it by word of mouth and others I passed it on to were informed that it was leaving on another day, or that it didn't exist. In the end there were only five of us plus the guide and the driver.

Nevertheless, it proved to be one of the best half-day tours I've ever taken. The bus drove through idyllic countryside consisting of forest interspersed with small farms. There was no visible monoculture, no endless rolling fields of the sort that make East Anglia look like the plains of Kansas. We were all English-speaking, including the guide, who was well-informed and eager to share her knowledge. I gathered some remarkable information, such as the fact that four-fifths of Perigord's propertied families own at least a small plot of forest! How this is capitalized is very carefully controlled; for instance, walnut trees, when they cease to be productive, can be lucratively cut down for furniture but must be replaced with other walnut trees.

Certain key facts began to fit together. The land is beautiful to look at but covered with poor, rocky soil. It would be uneconomic to convert it to massive agribusiness exploitation, and so it continues to be used for those purposes for which poor soil is best suited. Ironically, the ancient knowledge which is everywhere dissipating under the pressures to "modernize" is also the latest solution to be urged upon the threatened population of the Third World: "sustainable agriculture". For instance, a Perigord farmer might still maintain a small walnut orchard, raise a few ducks and geese and cultivate the grains with which they are fed, plant vegetables, keep a few chickens for eggs and goats for cheese, use the manure for fertilizer, and take to the market what his family doesn't eat. They've done it for hundreds of years and will go on until the EU immobilizes them in red tape, after which the experts will arrive to teach them how to start all over again.

And so, in certain respects, Perigord reminded me of northern New England, minus the rigorous climate. The stony, intransigent soil; the surviving old architecture; the absence of heavy industry; the dogged survival of old customs and old culture; the beautiful countryside, which tends to mask the underlying poverty of the area—all these now bring a heavy influx of tourists during the summer. It could be called the baroque organ syndrome: the great Schnitgers and Silbermanns survived mainly in those churches which, during the nineteenth century, were too poor to rip them out and replace them with the all-singing, all-dancing instruments demanded by the Romantics. Today they're played by the virtuosi and revered by the scholars.

LUNCH at the Auberge de la Truffe brought me closer to the elusive black gold. I've been served truffles on several occasions, but I'm still not certain whether I've actually tasted them. Our first course came surrounded with the famous *sauce périgueux*, made from a reduction of demi-glace and truffle essence, together with chopped truffles and Madeira. Waverley Root cautiously suggests that one does not directly taste black truffles, but rather the effect that they have on other flavors. The sauce was certainly delicious—but why? Charles Shere tells me that the smell of fresh black truffles is not unlike that of latakia, the pungent Turkish tobacco we used to have blended into our pipe tobacco. I begin to wonder if I have entered into an area as metaphysical as transubstantiation. Will I ever taste the true truffle? Or should I smoke it? And will I achieve enlightenment? Or even salvation? The price of fresh truffles and of papal indulgences suggests that both salivation and salvation are beyond my means.

But led by the experts—human and canine—my chances of reaching the Promised Land should be greatly improved. (Pigs used to be the favored truffle detectors, but a single animal and its master may now have to search a number of widely separated areas. Ever try to get a sow into a Citroen?) Back in the bus, we headed for the rendezvous with Kiki. She proved to be a friendly, excitable little terrier who knew that she was out for an adventure. It was a bit early in the season, her handler told us, so we might not find anything. We were a short walk away from a small field of experimentally planted oaks, spaced out along a grid pattern with about three meters between them.

They looked young and unpromising; no gnarled ancient trunks here. But Kiki soon found a location that got her paws going. Human hands took over, carefully scooping the earth aside. Nothing but more earth. Kiki went doggedly (!) back to the spot, digging again. Still nothing. It was probable, we were told, that there was a tiny trace of truffle spoor, so small that humans could neither see nor smell it. Once again, I was in the presence of the ineffable. O ye of little faith! Truffles exist; you must only prepare your hearts to receive them.

OUR last visit was one I'd been trying to forget. We were promised a demonstration of forced feeding, the traditional method of producing enormous goose livers for *foie gras*. Food production, particularly on a massive scale, is not a process that it's comfortable to think carefully about. If I were God, I'd come up with a method of perpetuating life that didn't rely on mutual evisceration. There's hardly a vegetable—let alone a piece of meat, a glass of milk, or an egg—that we could face with a clear conscience if we were shown the conditions under which it was produced. We would have to consider not only the animal suffering caused by factory-style meat, dairy and poultry production, but also the grinding poverty in which the growers and harvesters of crops are forced to work and live—not only in the Third World countries that grow a steadily increasing proportion of our produce, but even under our very noses. Are you a vegetarian or a vegan on humanitarian grounds? Then go to a farm shop; otherwise, you're only substituting human for animal exploitation. And even farm shops have been known to fill up their empty bins with potatoes and onions from the wholesaler. In the end, better grow your own.

With such dark thoughts I alighted at the goose farm. I've never particularly cared for geese. They seem not only stupid, like chickens, but irascible, even bellicose. (Of course that's an anthropomorphic prejudice and no justification for torturing them.) But these geese seemed curious, even friendly. A flock of about twenty waddled over to the fence to investigate. They probably wanted to be fed. Don't be impatient, I thought; before long you'll get plenty of *that*. We were taken inside a large barn that contained a long row of about twenty pens, each perhaps three meters long by a meter wide, holding about a dozen geese, with room to stretch their wings and strut a bit. On a long beam overhead was a travelling hopper and a funnel, with a motor-driven agitator. Guy Meynard, our host, sat down on a stool in the nearest pen, with all the geese to one side of him. One by one he pulled them across, inserted the long funnel down their necks, poured in a scoop of mixed grains, and turned on the motor. The grain disappeared in a few seconds and he took the next goose. It was all over in a couple of minutes. I looked in vain for signs of terror or even discomfort. Except for a few random squawks, the whole barn was quiet. The geese were snow-white; nowhere was there a tell-tale spot of blood that would indicate fighting or self-mutilation. It was probably the most meticulous animal husbandry I'd ever witnessed. I'd eat goose liver from that farm with a clearer conscience than if I were sitting down to a plate of immigrant-grown carrots.

THE next morning Marlina was to give a demonstration of "California Cuisine" in the cooking tent. There was a good stove, a fancy rotating spit, a steel-topped working space and a demonstration table, but no overhead mirror or seats for the spectators; those who were interested could wander in and out as they pleased. Well acquainted by now with the informality, I suspected that Marlina might not have a kitchen helper so I showed up early. Sure enough, she was on her own, so I helped roast and peel peppers and chilis, chop garlic, tear lettuce, and find missing ingredients. Dreams of glory! I was now an apprentice chef in Perigord, complete with a paper *toque* from the Ecole Hôtelière!

Zero hour arrived, an audience of about two dozen drifted in, and Marlina didn't have a translator. Being a hardy soul, she launched straight into her first ever cookery demonstration in French. The small audience was interested, helpful and amused, sometimes calling out missing words as required. No one was scornful or condescending towards the ignorant foreigner who couldn't speak

French properly. Small children watched attentively in the front row and were the first to sample the exotic salad, with roasted peppers vinaigrette draped over feathery lettuce, and the grilled marinated duck breast, with chili and garlic and smoked bacon and a few other goodies we'd tossed in for good luck. It was all random, unpredictable, disorganized—and, according to Marlana, the happiest, most successful, most exhilarating demonstration she'd ever given. Oh. And the results were absolutely delicious. (Although the dishwashing, accomplished by a couple of lads behind a screen in tubs of cold dirty water, made me disinclined to come back for further samples.)

THAT evening, while the celebrities revelled, the three of us dined again with the B-team. We were seated next to two Frenchmen who turned out to be a local artist and a local writer. The buffet was copious, the wine kept gushing from bottomless bottles, and we all became witty, even hilarious. Conversation turned to what our new friends considered to be one of the greatest threats to the area, the impending motorway. Alas, it had to come, they said, because all of commerce, industry and politics wanted it; but when it comes—adieu the Perigord they know and love. I mentioned the Auvergne and instantly their hands went up in despair. Since its motorway was opened, it has become an enormous holiday camp, with relief to be found mainly in the higher mountainous reaches at the end of narrow precipitous roads—but only on cloudy days when you can't look down at the acres of parking lots in the plains below. It's called progress, with the same demented logic that demands 2½ percent growth per year in order to avoid economic recession. Never mind that the end result is planetary extinction; just keep the wheels turning, no matter where the juggernaut is headed.

I'M back in London, sitting at the computer and looking out at a gray day. I miss the climb from the hotel up the stone steps to the cathedral, the green forested hills across the river, the crisp radishes, the crispy-skinned confit, the dime-a-dozen oysters, the extravagant floral decorations in the little roundabouts. Friends in Angouleme have offered Mary and me their spare room any time we want it. We may go next summer. Will we ever want to come back?

APPENDIX: Perigieux Restaurants

Except as noted, these restaurants participated in the Special Menu for 100.00 Francs scheme promoted by the *Salon International du Livre Goumand*

Auberge de la Truffe

24420 Sorges

05.53.05.02.05

Michelin: Comfortable

Gault-Millau: 12 [restaurant]

Logis de France: 3 hearths

This is where we were so well entertained for lunch on our day's truffle/foie gras tour. About 12 miles NE of Perigieux in the epicenter of black truffle country. For such a holy place, both village and hotel, though attractive, are modest and unpretentious. An ideal place to stay in January at the height of the truffle season, when the hordes are away skiing.

La Ferme Saint Louis

Place Saint Louis

24000 Perigueux

05.53.53.82.77

Closed Saturday lunch & Sunday

Too new to be in the guides, this modestly elegant, exemplary little bistro is just on the edge of the enclosed market. It offers a single 100ff menu with three or four choices for three courses. Perfect duck confit with pui lentils. A sensibly run kitchen with a short but varied menu. Same for the cellar, with ample choice under 100ff. I ate there twice.

Hercule Poireau
2 Rue de la Nation
24000 Perigueux
05.53.09.69.91

Also too new for the guides. I was put off by the cute name but was forced to eat there on a Sunday night when it was the last nearby place still accepting diners. I'm glad I was; the owner/patron is intelligent and charming, the ancient stone building across from the cathedral very beautiful inside and out. Tables amply spaced, menu both traditional and modern but not stupidly trendy.

Aux Berges de l'Isle
2 Rue Pierre Magne
24000 Perigueux
05.53.09.51.50

Closed Saturday lunch & Sunday
Gault-Millau 12, high toque

A modest, slightly shabby hotel at the end of the bridge opposite the cathedral. Going into the restaurant during the day to make a reservation I almost walked out again, but I'm glad I didn't. The food proved to be traditional local cooking offering duck in every conceivable form. G-M, amazingly, gives it a high toque. I wouldn't have called it "elegant"; it's a simple place, serving good solid fare, and very reasonably priced. We lingered long over it. (I didn't see the rooms, but at around 250ff I'd risk it, particularly if I got a riverside view of the cathedral. It's a five-minute stroll across the bridge to the center of the old town.)

Le Roi Bleu
2 Rue Montaigne
24000 Perigueux
05.53.09.43.77

Closed Sunday evening
Gault-Millau 13, high toque

This truly elegant restaurant on the edge of the old town also gets a high toque from G-M, and deserves it. For lunch I had outstanding foie gras and a creditable and generous cassoulet. I was the worst-dressed diner in the place, but was treated as if I were the best. What more could one ask in the way of service?

Le 8
8 rue de la Clarté
24000 Perigueux
05.53.35.15.15

Michelin: single fork/spoon
Gault-Millau 14, high toque

For whatever reason, this restaurant was not part of the 100.00 Franc scheme. Though informal in décor, it was the most expensive (and best) restaurant I ate in. Its G-M rating has just been raised, and no wonder. Not cheap (menus range from 165 to 400ff), but the stuffed quail were tender and tasty, the crème brûlée exemplary. I wish I'd had the *menu degustation*. Michelin should catch up.

In summary, I would happily return to any of these restaurants. All were honest, none were overpriced. They all have the feel of establishments supported by the locals, not reliant on transient and gullible tourists. Once again, the firm foundation of a discriminating populace is manifest all the way to the top.

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