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## *Is French Gastronomy in Need of a Savior?*

by Monique Y. Wells

Did you know that the most popular dish in France today is couscous? That France is the second greatest consumer of pizza in the world (10 kilos per person per year, just behind the U.S. at 10.4 kilos)? *Quelle horreur* for the few, the proud, the French epicureans!

Since 2002, the European Institute of History and Food Cultures has advanced the idea of French gastronomy as a heritage in its own right. The institute proposed the idea of inscribing France's gastronomic culture on UNESCO's list of intangible heritage to the French Minister of Culture in 2006 and Nicolas Sarkozy announced his full support of the initiative on February 23, 2008 during the annual Salon d'Agriculture in Paris.



**Couscous – the most popular dish in France**

For many, including Sarkozy, French cuisine is the best in the world. And the world's view of French culture is undeniably and inextricably linked to its view of France's cuisine. Yet the French population increasingly turns to cuisines of other cultures to satisfy its culinary desires. Is this propensity seriously eroding France's culinary heritage?

Not according to Jean-Pierre d'Estiennes d'Orves. He is the organizer and general manager of The French Food Spirit Awards, the laureate competition that honors persons who promote French cuisine through culture, science and commerce. He points out that France has taken many food items and recipes from foreign lands and applied French tastes and savoir-faire to them, creating many dishes that are now part of the gastronomic mystique that defines the country. As an example, he explains that yogurt originated in Eastern Europe and was once sold in pharmacies in France. But the French food company Danone (Dannon for Americans) took the concept, adapted it for widespread consumption and commercialized it. Now much of the world thinks of Danone (and perhaps unknowingly of France), when it thinks of yogurt.

At the first annual Gastronomy by the Seine food festival, organized by Chef Culinary Network and held in Paris on July 4th weekend 2008, a round table chaired by d'Estiennes d'Orves addressed the merits of the UNESCO submission with earnestness and passion. Jean-Robert Pitte, food geography expert and president of the French Mission for Heritage and Culinary Culture, opened the discussion by explaining the reasons behind the submission. But he clearly stated that in contrast to Sarkozy's assertion that France's cuisine should be listed by UNESCO because it is the best in the world, the dossier would not be presented in this egotistical manner.

Others on the panel attested not only to the role that French cuisine has played in establishing a national identity among the peoples of the many various regions of France, but also to the

indelible mark that it has made on food preparation and consumption around the world.<sup>36</sup> Numerous cooking techniques and terminology that are used internationally evolved in French kitchens. *L'Art de la table* – the rituals and objects surrounding setting the table and displaying and serving food – was largely developed in France. Even the foundation of the restaurant as an institution owes its existence to French culinary traditions. Savvy entrepreneurs opened public establishments that offered restorative bouillons and other tasty yet healthy dishes to those with weak constitutions and fickle digestive tracts in Paris as early as the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century. This occurred well before the French Revolution, the time when many food historians say that restaurants were created as a result of chefs being forced out of the comfortable households of the aristocracy.

Yet on the same panel, Chérif Khaznadar announced that the French dossier as currently conceived cannot be approved by UNESCO. As president of the General Assembly of the Member States to UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, he stated that the convention does not include gastronomy among the types of cultural expression that are protected – "neither in letter, nor in spirit". He said that only carefully defined "elements" can be included on the UNESCO list.



D'Estiennes d'Orves sees things quite differently. He says applying Khaznadar's logic to the French dossier for gastronomy would be akin to saying that only a few notes of an opera could be meaningfully classified. "*La cuisine, c'est un tout,*" he emphasizes. (Roughly translated, this means that "Cuisine is an entity, the sum of its parts.") He not only wholeheartedly supports the French submission, but also believes that other countries should submit dossiers for their own cuisines. He says that Khaznadar is not the final decision maker and that his opinion may not be shared by the members of the multinational committee that will evaluate the dossier.

**Jean-Pierre d'Estiennes d'Orves**

The European Institute of History and Food Cultures also sees things differently, saying that the terms of the convention invite the French to apply and that gastronomy fits perfectly with the criteria outlined by the convention's text.

The text to which M. Khaznadar refers reads as follows (from the UNESCO web site):

The "intangible cultural heritage" ...is manifested inter alia in the following domains:

- (a) oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage;
- (b) performing arts;
- (c) social practices, rituals and festive events;
- (d) knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe;
- (e) traditional craftsmanship.

"Safeguarding" means measures aimed at ensuring the viability of the intangible cultural heritage, including the identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, enhancement, transmission, particularly through formal and non-formal education, as well as the revitalization of the various aspects of such heritage.

One can well imagine that elements of French gastronomy might fall under the categories of social practices, rituals and festive events and / or traditional craftsmanship. But much will depend on how the dossier is crafted – whether it attempts to have certain aspects of French gastronomy listed or rather seeks to have the entire concept classified.

Mary Hyman, an American food historian who specializes in the history of French food, agreed with Khaznadar that the letter of the Convention does not allow the deposition of a dossier to protect gastronomy. But she also fervently expressed her opinion that there is something intangible yet very real about French culinary culture that unites French people, despite their varying origins and *terroirs*, and that this deserves recognition by UNESCO. For her, the challenge will be to create a dossier that expresses this *je ne sais quoi* in a way that will fulfill the criteria set forth by the Convention.

There has already been one attempt to have a national cuisine listed by UNESCO. Mexico submitted a dossier in 2005. It was rejected. According to Jean-Robert Pitte, a culinary dossier is currently being created for submission by a group of countries along the Mediterranean Sea. But curiously, it does not include France.

The French dossier is scheduled to be ready for submission in late 2009. The UNESCO Convention is expected to rule on the submission in early 2010.

*Une affaire à suivre...*

The Intangible Cultural Heritage website can be found at <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?pg=home>.

For information about The French Food Spirit Awards, please visit <http://www.thefrenchfoodspiritawards.com/>. (American laureates include Brad Bird, Philip and Mary Hyman and Patricia Wells.)