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Translating Cooking Techniques

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The New French Revival

By Rachel Zemser, CCS

French cuisine is in a rut. At least that's what Michael Steinberger, author of the recent book "*Au Revoir to All That*," thinks. Thousands of bistros and cafés are being replaced by McDonald's, and French exports are at an all-time low.

But while the great French chefs are trying to save the croissant and persuade the United Nations to declare French gastronomy a world treasure, U.S. consumers are, once again, firmly embracing French culinary concepts.

Bistro-style comfort foods are resurfacing, but this time in conjunction with local and regional produce and American artisanal—but French-style—cheeses. Retail has seen a resurgence of products that tap into our memories of mom's French culinary experiments, but in convenient heat-and-eat formats. These days, we want inexpensive comfort food at restaurants and pre-made, upscale meals at home.

During the 1960s, Julia Child took the fear out of French cooking with her book

“Mastering the Art of French Cooking.” However, as Michael Pollen points out in “Out of the Kitchen, Onto the Couch” (Aug. 2, 2009, *The New York Times*), the amount of time spent at home on food preparation in America has dropped by 40% since 1965. You might think that rising unemployment and stagnant wages would lead to more at-home cooking from scratch, but we are still eating out, and still spending money on specialty retail items—and the time is right to integrate French culinary concepts into these market segments.

MENUING A FRENCH ACCENT

La Madeline, a French café chain with 61 units that has been in business since 1983, has managed to successfully execute casual, bistro-style food on American plates. “In 1983, many consumers thought of French food as formal, because that is what they found in the gourmet restaurants,” says Susan Dederen, senior director of culinary operations, La Madeline, Dallas. “That is only one side. There are always the friendly, home-cooked, typical meals—the meals you would find in the local cafés and bars. That is the food we brought to our cafés, and the accessibility of it made it popular with our guests.”

The chain’s menu includes items like classic regional French soups, quiche, croque monsieur and crêpes—food that, as Dederen says, “people can feel good about eating.” She notes all necessary ingredients, like mushrooms, shallots, artichokes, apples and almonds, can be easily sourced in the United States and Canada.

Even specialty French items like cheese, breads, cured meats and sea salts are available in the United States. The rise in popularity of domestic local and regional artisanal products meshes well with French cuisine. Clark Wolf, author of “American Cheeses, the Best Regional, Artisan, and Farmhouse Cheeses, Who Makes them, and Where to Find Them,” profiles dozens of small-batch and nationally branded accomplished cheesemakers in the United States, including those that make French-style cheeses like Brie, and Gruyère. Items like easy-to-slice Brie “logs” and individually quick-frozen (IQF) goat cheese medallions streamline product development and back-of-the-house operations.

R&D chefs like to feel confident that their gold standards can be easily and consistently



reproduced in their multi-unit establishments. French food sometimes seems intimidating, but just as Julia Child eased the fears of home cooks across the United States, foodservice suppliers can do the same for multi-unit chains.

“French-style soups like bisques and purées have simple flavors and textures that can be authentically reproduced for high volumes,” says Albert Celentano, director of R&D, Chefco Foods, Arlington, TX. The high acidity (pH lower than 4.6) in a tomato bisque will inhibit pathogen outgrowth, while hot filling at 165°F and above will inhibit the spoilage microorganisms, creating an economical, shelf-stable product. For a more-expensive low-acid

product (pH higher than 4.6) with particulates, like beef bourguignon or cassoulet, the product would fare better if frozen after hot filling, allowing it to maintain optimal texture and authentic flavor.

An even less-expensive “in-house” foodservice option would be to use manufactured soup and stock concentrates like bouillabaisse, beef stock consommé, hollandaise and *demi-glace*. These concentrates can save multi-unit operations time and money, while ensuring consistency and reproducibility.

Other shortcuts, like filled puff-pastry pies, crêpes, potato gratins, quiches and soufflés, are available manufactured in frozen, ready-to-eat forms, in various degrees

Our top 10 tropicals

Acerola

Pineapple

Papaya

Açai

Mango

Coconut cream

Coconut Water

Banana

Guava

Passion Fruit

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Notable Regional Flavors of France

North-Central: Known for Classical Haute Cuisine, Prix Fixe Bistros, Burgundy Wines and Dijon Mustard

- **Croque Monsieur (Paris)**—Grilled ham and Gruyère sandwich
- **Beef Bourguignon (Burgundy)**—Stew with Charolais beef and assorted vegetables braised in Burgundy wine

North-West: Known for Crêpes, Fresh Seafood, Shallots, Salt Marshes, Apples and Cooking With Lots of Heavy Cream

- **Crêpes and Galettes (Brittany)**—Ultra-thin pancakes made from white-wheat or buckwheat flour, water, eggs and cream; fillings can be sweet or savory
- **Tarte Tatin (Normandy)**—Upside-down apple tart in which the apples are precooked in butter and sugar, covered with puff pastry, baked in the oven, and flipped over before serving

North-East: Known for Sausages, Pork, Gingerbread and Other Hearty, German-Style Fare

- **Quiche Lorraine (Lorraine)**—Flaky, open-faced pastry tart filled with bacon and cheese custard
- **Choucroute Garnie (Alsace)**—A dish, sometimes prepared like a casserole, often made with sauerkraut, sausage and other meats, and potatoes

South-West: Known for Cassoulet, Confit, Mushrooms, Game Birds, Foie Gras and Ragout

- **Cassoulet (Languedoc-Roussillon)**—Stew made with white beans, pork (or duck) and vegetables
- **Poulet Basquaise (Pyrénées-Atlantiques)**—Chicken cooked with tomato purée, olives, garlic, and green and red bell peppers

South-East: Known for Garlic, Fresh Herbs, Seafood and Italian-Influenced Cuisine

- **Bouillabaisse (Provence)**—Mixed seafood soup
- **Nougat de Montélimar (Rhône-Alpes)**—Candy made from almonds, lavender honey and pistachios

of approachability. “We can take a high-end French item and translate it into a more-acceptable casual-dining item that is delicious and affordable,” says Edwin Burleigh, regional sales manager, White Toque, Secaucus, NJ.

Foodservice-ready, French-inspired desserts are a great way to introduce authentic classics to the masses. “Single-serving desserts do well with dining chains that need to control portions and cut calories off their menu,” says Jean-Yves Charon, founder, master pastry chef, Galaxy Desserts, Richmond, CA. He also points out that fruit tarts, crèmes brûlées and mousse cakes are popular in casual French bistros and are a great nostalgic comfort food.

Other dessert items that Charon thinks would do well in casual dining are profiteroles and financiers, butter-almond cookies sold to 19th century Parisian stockbrokers—and currently selling well in coffee shops on Wall Street.

“Almonds have long been a part of classic European baking, and as of 2008 have achieved status as the No. 1 nut in new confectionary and bakery products worldwide,” says Christina Campoy, spokesperson, Almond Board of California, Modesto. “Just in the past two years, we’ve seen an explosion of Parisian-style *macarons* appearing in American pastry shops.”

French food is often so simple that multi-unit establishments might have the makings of a French meal already in-house. A thick pan-