

THE
Apprentice

MY LIFE IN THE KITCHEN



Jacques Pépin



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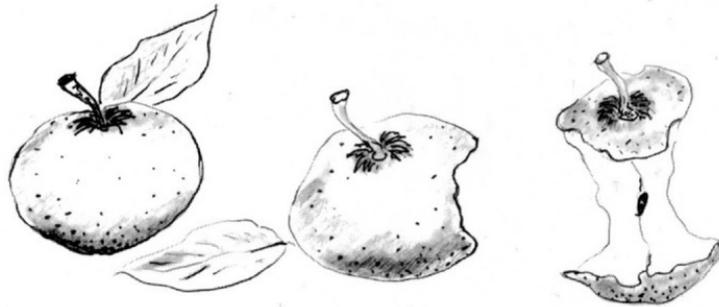
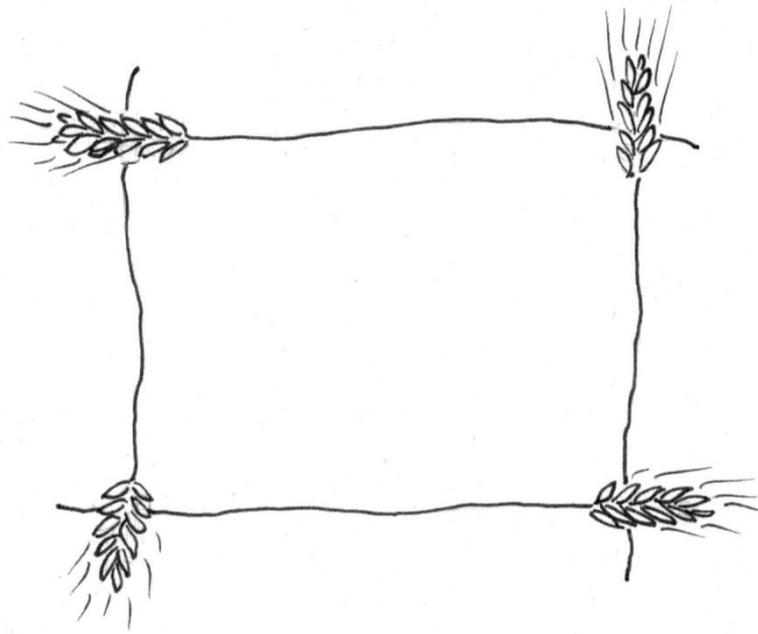
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I DEDICATE THIS BOOK TO MY TWO BROTHERS,

ROLAND AND BICHON,

WHOSE LOVE OF GOOD FOOD, OF WINE, OF FAMILY,
AND ESPECIALLY OF LIFE IS REFLECTED IN THIS BOOK.

THEY DEPARTED TOO EARLY BUT WILL
ALWAYS BE PART OF MY LIFE.

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At the time that this book was going to print, I had the great misfortune of losing my older brother, Roland, to lung cancer, the same sickness that took my younger brother, Bichon, five years ago. Both of them are very much a part of this book and very much in my heart, and I want to acknowledge their important influence on my life.

This book would not have been possible without the help of Barry Estabrook. I started writing essays about my apprenticeship more than fifteen years ago, and always in the back of my mind I thought I would shape them into a book someday. I wrote about my experiences in the kitchen as a child in France, my years in Paris, my life after coming to the States, the way cuisine changed during those years, and what I acquired and learned along the way. Eventually, I had a pile of little stories and anecdotes going back over four decades, but I needed help to shape my rough manuscript into a book. This involved and complex task resulted in hours of lively discussions between Barry and me. I benefited mightily from his clear insights and his grasp and knowledge of good storytelling. His professionalism, unassuming approach, and gentle manner made him a pleasure to work with. He brought the material to life without ever imposing his style of writing or his ideas on me, insisting always on keeping my voice first and foremost, and for this I will forever be gratefully indebted.

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Finally, I thank all the people who have been part of my life for the past half-century for their help, support, and love.

1. The War Years



MY MOTHER made it sound like a great adventure.

"Tati," she said, using the nickname my brother had given me as a toddler, "you are going to a marvelous place. A farm. A real farm."

My six-year-old's imagination filled in the rest of the details. Enormous plow horses. Fat, grunting pigs. Dairy cows with sharp horns and swollen, swaying udders. All manner of fowl: chickens, ducks, geese. Dogs and cats. In short, heaven.

Maman had more practical reasons for sending me to a farm. School had ended, and I would be on summer vacation for the next two and a half months. In towns and cities, food was always scarce in France during the Second World War. In the countryside, farmers may not have had two sous to rub together, but gardens produced vegetables, corn grew in fields, pigs became fat, chickens laid eggs, and cows gave milk that was turned into cream, butter, and cheese. Out of kindness, rural folk would take in the children of townspeople, giving room and board in exchange for chores. Although hearty, the food at the farms was simple and straightforward, coarse and without variety. A gratin of squash with cream, homemade cheeses, roasted or boiled potatoes, and cured pork held in barrels from the previous year were the most common dishes. Occasionally on Sundays, farm families ate roast chicken or rabbit, followed by plum or apple tarts. Nothing fancy, but compared to what we ate in town, this was feasting. In the fall, the children would return home tanner, stronger, and fatter.

The big day came. Maman prepared a picnic lunch. I hopped into a trailer that she towed behind her bike, and together we set off through a landscape of hills, valleys, vineyards, fields, and roadsides shaded by the leafy branches of plane trees. Late that afternoon, we arrived in Foissiat, a hamlet in the center of the rich agricultural region of La Bresse. We pulled into the courtyard of a farmhouse identical to any of a hundred Maman had already pedaled past. It was fashioned from blond-colored mud and round stones and had a red tile roof, plain except for being topped by the ornate and vaguely Middle Eastern-style Saracen chimney. Just as I had imagined, chickens, ducks, and a pair of majestic geese squabbled, quacked, and honked in the courtyard, and a stinky, mud-caked pig grunted in one corner. It was exciting and a bit scary to be that close to real farm animals.

The farmer's wife greeted us, ruffling my hair and cooing. It was a surprising sound, given its source: the tallest, roughest-looking, and most powerfully built woman I had ever laid eyes on. She had a bright red face and wore the traditional peasant's bonnet.

While she and my mother went into the house, the farmer, a big man with a great moustache that curled up at the corners, took me to the barn, which was even more exhilarating than the courtyard.

Although I had seen plenty of cows in my day, I had never stood close to one. In that shadowy building, where the sweet scent of hay and raw milk mingled with the acidity of manure and urine, a dozen broad, wet noses turned in my direction. The closest cow, an enormous beast, lifted her tail and hunched her back. I jumped away just in time to avoid being splattered by the resulting mess. That was my first act as an apprentice cowherd.

We returned just as the farmer's wife heaped dinner on the table—literally. She slopped spoonfuls of a yellowish brown porridge, called *gaudes*, not onto plates or bowls, as we ate it at home but directly into hollows carved into the wooden tabletop. We gathered around as the farmer's wife poured cool, raw milk over our *gaudes*. With no further ceremony, we all sat down and dug in. The *gaudes* were thick and smooth and had the salty, slightly nutty taste of the roasted corn flour from which they had been made. The best part of dinner was getting to eat with my elbows on the table and not even being asked whether I had washed my hands. What a summer this was shaping up to be!

But as soon as the last oil lamp was blown out that night, my excitement vanished, replaced by a hollow sense of emptiness and abandonment, sadness and fear. The farmer's wife had done her best to provide what comforts her home offered. I was given a tall bed beside the wall. For warmth, she tucked an eiderdown around me, and I curled up beneath its homespun cover. It smelled of the fields and outdoors, a foreign scent to a six-year-old boy who, until that night, had always fallen asleep in his own bed in a second-floor apartment in a busy little town. Lying there with a *coeur gros*, a heavy heart, I thought of my family. Papa, a jovial bear of a man. Zizi, or Roland, eighteen months my senior, a mentor, constant companion, and best friend, so much more than a big brother. Richard, known as Bichon, just a baby. And, most of all, my beautiful, effervescent mother, who had slipped away without my even knowing.

My pillow was still damp from tears when I woke up the next morning to begin the routine that would set the tone of my summer days. At first light, after a breakfast of café au lait and bread and jam, the farmer led me into the barn and presented me with a wooden staff. The other component of my cowherd's uniform was a pair of wooden shoes stuffed with hay. I was also introduced to my workmate, a big black mutt. Our job was to escort the cows out into the fields in the morning, watch over them during the day, and see that they returned safely to the barn in the evening. Although I fancied myself very important and hardworking, the truth is that the cows and their canine overseer knew what was expected of them far better than I did.

Still, there have been few prouder dairymen than I as I trailed home behind my twelve charges that evening. Inside the barn, the woman sat me on a stool beneath one of the animals, which caused me some nervousness, given the size of the beast and my close call the previous day. She took my fingers gently in her callused hand and placed them on the cow's teat, showing me how to pinch the top with my thumb and forefinger and then pull down, squeezing with my palm. To my delight, milk squirted noisily into the pail, more each time I repeated the motion, until it brimmed with creamy, frothy milk. The woman took down a small bowl and filled it.

"It's yours, *mon petit*," she said, handing me the bowl.

The milk was foamy and slightly tepid, with a rich, buttery flavor.

She had no way of knowing it, but that plain country woman, whose name I have long forgotten, taught me one of the most important lessons of my life: food could be much more than mere sustenance.

That night, I didn't cry.

I WAS BORN on the eighteenth of December, 1935, in the town Bourg-en-Bresse, about thirty miles northeast of Lyon, the second of three sons of Jeanne and Jean-Victor Pépin. Weighing only two and one half pounds, I nearly died at birth. The midwife lined a shoebox with dishtowels and put me

inside, placing the makeshift incubator between two bricks that had been warmed on the stove.

~~Like his grandfather, father, and older brother before him, Papa was a cabinetmaker, an *ébéniste*~~ from the word for "ebony." He specialized in period furniture such as the *table en chiffonnier*, a narrow dresser made of cherry wood, with three drawers and elegant curved legs carved in the Louis XV Provençal style. It was precise work, more art than craft. In his workshop, he had a can of *colle de bois*, or wood glue, that he kept hot on a small wood stove. It had an awful smell. He told me it was made from mistletoe berries. I was fascinated by the idea of those little white berries turning into that darkish, thick, sticky, and smelly mixture.

In contrast to my small, energetic mother, my father was big, barrel-chested, and jovial—a happy guy, a man's man, more like one extra overgrown kid under our roof than an authority figure. He'd throw us in the air and catch us, bounce us on our beds, and wrestle with us, and he was always up for a game of soccer or rugby, a sport at which he excelled. He loved to drink wine in the company of his many friends. It always put him in a cheery mood, and when he had a few too many glasses of Côtes du Rhône, he would sometimes remove his shirt and dance on a table, La Bresse's answer to Zorba the Greek. When fooling around like this, he would show off by hurling walnuts against the outside windows of the café with the accuracy of a major league pitcher. The nuts shattered each time but never broke the glass. It was his private trick, and he got a kick out of seeing our puzzled faces. No one ever found out how he did it. My mother, who tried it once, broke the window, and Roland and I never dared to attempt it.

But like virtually all young Frenchmen, Papa, then twenty-nine, was drafted when war was declared against Germany. Nine months later, the French army was routed and a period of confusion and disarray called *la débâcle* began. We had no idea where my father was, whether he was safe among the hordes of retreating soldiers who clogged the roadways trying to get home, whether he was suffering in some military hospital, or whether he, like thousands of young French soldiers, lay dead in the mud of what was once the invincible Maginot Line. But by then, those of us at home had our own war to fight.

AT FIRST they were quiet, like wind moaning through branches or the howling of distant dogs. But then it became louder, like the whistle of an approaching locomotive.

I awoke, sitting up.

Maman was already there with Bichon in her arms.

"Hurry, Zizi, Tati," she said to Roland and me.

We hopped out of bed, still in our pajamas, and ran outside behind her. We crossed the street and dove beneath a railroad underpass, where some of the neighbors had already gathered. Maman wrapped us in blankets, and we waited.

The sky lit up. A second later we heard thuds and felt the ground vibrate. Then silence. The adults whispered among themselves. After the consultation, Maman turned to us and said, "We can go back now."

Our home was part of a small apartment complex near a key bridge leading to Lyon and next to a railroad sorting depot. Because of the depot and bridge, it was a strategic area frequently targeted by bombers. After the first raid, we never knew whether or not we'd get a full night's sleep. Night after night, siren wails awakened me, and I ran from the house with my mother and brothers.

The responsibility of keeping three young boys safe and fed during this time fell solely to my mother, then only in her mid-twenties. Maman was strikingly beautiful, with proud, erect posture, high cheekbones, large brown eyes, and masses of black curls swept back from her forehead. She was a tiny, wrenlike bundle of energy, always on the move.

She earned money by working all day as a waitress at L'Hôtel de Bourgogne in Bourg-en-Bresse

In the evenings, she sewed every article of clothing the family wore. And on her one day off from the restaurant each week, she shopped for our food, though hers was hardly your typical grocery run. Early in the morning, she would put on one of her Provençal-style floral dresses and wrap her dark curls in a scarf before mounting an old bicycle with solid rubber tires (no inner tubes), pedaling down our street onto the main road and out to the dusty byways of the countryside. With her slim, muscular legs, she pedaled thirty-five or forty miles, going from farm to farm, filling the wicker basket strapped on the back of her bicycle with bread, eggs, meat, chicken, honey—anything that she could find that would help feed us.

Somehow she managed, and we ate every day, but necessity exposed my taste buds to some unconventional recipes. In lieu of sugar, which wasn't available, Maman made a wartime sweetener by cooking beets in water on her wood stove for hours, straining the mixture, and then reducing the syrup to a thick brownish liquid. It filled the entire apartment with an earthy, slightly caramelized sweet scent—an aroma every bit as appealing to me as the inside of a pastry shop. I loved the stuff almost as much as I hated another one of our staples, Jerusalem artichokes, which we consumed "natural," with no butter, oil, or cream. Their smell made me gag. But when I grimaced and said, "I don't like these," Maman would say, "Too bad, Tati, that's all we have." And I would eat them, though I haven't put a Jerusalem artichoke in my mouth since.

At the end of each meal, our plates were sparkling clean, so clean that we would turn them over, and the small circle in the center of the underside would serve as a dessert plate. Usually, when we had dessert at all, it consisted of a few tablespoons of jam or fruit purée that Maman had made, bartered for at a farm, or purchased on the black market.

When she had the ingredients, Maman made something she called *coque*, or *matefaim*, roughly translated as "hunger quencher," a kind of French toast. For this, she used eggs that she had preserved in a whitish, slimy mixture of lime and water, which made the shells very brittle and rough. She mixed the eggs with flour and water, or milk, if available, creating a thick, unsophisticated crêpe batter, in which she soaked slices of dark, tough, dry bread. To produce the *coque*, she cooked the soaked bread and some of the batter in a skillet coated with a little rapeseed oil. Not exactly French toast, but it did quench our hunger.

Another unlikely favorite of mine was *mou au vin rouge*: cubes of beef or veal lungs cooked with onion and the sediment left in the bottom of a red wine barrel. Before cutting them into cubes, Maman inflated the lungs by blowing into the trachea. I once witnessed the disastrous results of omitting this step. The lung pieces expanded in the cooking liquid, tripling or quadrupling in size, until the lid of the vessel suddenly lifted and pieces of lung spewed out of the pot like volcanic lava. Maman never had such problems with her *mou* and served it several times a month. Even though the spongy texture of the lungs and the acidity of the sauce would not thrill a gourmet, I loved *mou au vin rouge*. In a perverse way, I still do.

Occasionally, my mother got a few pounds of butter, which she would cook and salt to preserve in jars. The darkened scum that rose to the top of the butter and stuck in a ring to the sides of the pot as the butter cooked was *la crasse du beurre*, or "butter's dirt." Despite the name, it had a deep, nutty taste that turned a stale piece of bread into a culinary triumph that ranked right up there with *mou*.

To supplement what my mother acquired on her excursions through the countryside, we had a plot in a community garden about a half-mile from home. Roland and I were assigned to push a homemade cart and clean up behind a large Percheron horse that made grocery deliveries through the neighborhood. Often competing with other local boys, we rushed in and shoveled up the malodorous but precious "piles of gold." Our garden was truly organic. And, thanks to us, the streets of Bourg were kept impeccably clean.

The few crops we grew in our plot were precious: potatoes, radishes, onions, leeks, parsley,

zucchini, beans, and, especially, salad greens. One day, Roland and I were instructed to get salad from the garden. But when we arrived there, we were confused. Which plants were we supposed to pick? After some discussion, we chose the tender young greens aligned in well-cultivated rows, by far the most appetizing specimens and also the easiest to pick, although gathering enough for a salad required the uprooting of three entire rows. We proudly bore our harvest home, only to be greeted by a shriek from Maman. Those seedlings had been transplanted from the cold frame only days before. Although baby greens may be all the rage today, size often trumped quality on the tables of wartime France.

One afternoon, during the peak of Mussolini's bombing of Bourg-en-Bresse, Maman was off waitressing. Roland, Grandmother, and I were weeding the garden, while Bichon napped in his carriage at the end of a row. By then, the howls of air raid sirens and the thuds of exploding bombs had become so common that we barely looked up from our chores when a loud blast went off nearby. It wasn't until we turned the corner at the top of our street on our way home that we saw the destruction. In front of our building, the landlord's car had been reduced to a blackened, smoldering tangle of metal. Much of the ground floor had been blown away. Protruding above, completely windowless and minus its balcony and the exterior staircase that provided access, was the apartment that had been the only home I had known.

Everyone was gathering what belongings they could and fleeing from the advancing German columns. We lacked a car, but my aunt, La Marraine, said we could get out of Bourg with her. Nothing could have delighted me more. La Marraine was the mother of my favorite cousin, Robert, who was a teenage version of Papa. Traveling with him would make Robert just like another brother.

But to my disappointment, La Marraine informed me that Robert wouldn't be going with us. He had joined the army, and La Marraine said that he had disappeared. We climbed into my uncle's old Citroen; he had also gone to war. La Marraine, who did not drive, drove. Crowded into that car, which smelled of gasoline fumes, old leather, and Uncle's tobacco, we struck out toward the mountains of the massif Central, near the Auvergne region. Our progress was anything but smooth. La Marraine worked the shift like an uncooperative pump handle, and the gears crunched and grated before engaging, jolting the car forward. Just as often, it jerked to a stall. During those interludes when La Marraine got us moving in the right direction, she drove at full throttle, swerving from side to side like someone who'd enjoyed one too many glasses of wine at lunch. We might never have survived that journey had we not passed a young soldier wandering the road. La Marraine stomped the brake.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

The soldier shrugged. "I don't know. I've lost my regiment."

"Well, you do know how to drive, don't you?"

He nodded.

"Good, it's yours," she said, sliding over so he could take the wheel.

A few kilometers later, he spotted a couple of trucks filled with French soldiers along the side of the road. Hoping to get some information about his regiment, our driver stopped and called out. Immediately, a young man in the dark blue uniform of the French army jumped from the truck and embraced him. La Marraine screamed. Incredibly, it was Robert. He took over the driving, and we ended up in a small hamlet called Baribas, where we found lodging in a farm for a few weeks. Eventually, we moved back into our home on rue de l'École normale. One morning I woke up and there, seated at the table as if not a day had passed, was Papa.

Unfortunately, this period of tranquility turned out to be but a moment of peace in the eye of the storm. In late 1943 and early 1944, the Germans began gathering able-bodied men at random and coercing them into forced labor for their war machine. Many men, moved by patriotism as well as unwillingness to participate in a German labor camp, joined the French underground, known as *le maquis*, the term applied to the tight, impenetrable bush regions of Corsica, where bandits would hide

from the law.

—One day my father was strolling down avenue Alsace-Lorraine, the main street of Bourg, when a German officer accosted him, accusing him of being part of *le maquis*. The soldiers lined up Papa and seven other townsmen against a wall outside the Préfecture de police, a seventeenth-century castle-like building at the bottom of the street, and held them there all day at gunpoint. In the late afternoon the soldiers dragged two of the men away and summarily shot them. The Germans returned. Instead of taking more victims, however, they told the survivors to go home. Shortly afterward, Papa moved to the mountains and joined some of his friends in the Resistance.

For a second extended period, he was gone. But this time, he would occasionally slip home, often at night when my brothers and I slept. We would not even know he had been there until the next morning when Maman, wearing a faint smile, told us that our father had visited. He often left behind small gifts of food. For a while, we were awash in sardines. Papa had brought us a few dozen tins that he had gotten from parachuted goods, compliments of the American air force. I still love canned sardines, served simply on top of salad with finely sliced onion and a sprinkling of red wine vinegar.

SUMMER CAME, and once again I was going to leave home to spend a few months on a farm. This time much to my delight, Roland and I went together. There were tears on my cheeks when Maman left us at the train station in Lyon, but they dried quickly as the train, filled with other young boys, chugged toward Chambéry, a town in the Savoy area known for its vermouth, pasta, and fish from nearby lac de Bourget. We spent the night in an army barracks in Chambéry and the next day boarded a small shuttle train to complete our journey to St.-Jean-de-Maurienne, a small town in the foothills of the Alps.

Standing on the platform, I heard a voice calling, "Pépin! *Les frères Pépin!*"

Roland and I separated ourselves from the crowd.

A priest with a rough, leathery outdoorsman's complexion and clad in an old-fashioned ground-length black soutane was calling. We presented ourselves, and without much more conversation, this most unpriestly-looking priest led us to a distinctly un-priestly conveyance: a two-wheeled cart to which a small donkey was hitched. The priest climbed aboard, indicating that we were to sit beside each other on a bench that faced backward. From that vantage point, I had my first encounter with big mountains, immense peaks glowing in the bright sun of that early June day.

The priest and his donkey headed up a dirt road, bordered by the abrupt wall of the mountain on one side and the gaping abyss of the valley on the other. Finally, we arrived in the village of Montvernier. I was hoping that Roland and I would stay in the same house that summer, but the priest took me alone to the home of the family where I would stay, leaving Roland on the cart. Mme. Mercier was waiting for us in the large, central—and only—room of the farmhouse. After a few minutes of conversation, the priest left with my brother, facing backward, waving goodbye to me. Once again, I was alone.

Every couple of weeks, Mme. Mercier undertook the formidable task of making bread, a staple for the family. Preparation started two to three days ahead of time. She began with a leftover hunk of dough about the size of a plucked chicken, which she kept covered with water in an earthen jar in the cool cellar under the house. To that, she added flour, water, and salt to form a soft mixture, like slurry, in the *pétrin*, or kneading vessel. The *pétrin* was made of carved hardwood and resembled a coffin in size and appearance. Proudly displayed, with its beautiful carved lid, it functioned as a table or sideboard when not in use for bread baking.

Making the dough was backbreaking work. The first slurry would be left to ferment and rise a little, usually overnight. In the morning, the fermentation would have run its course, and Mme. Mercier added fresh flour and water to the mixture to give it new life. She left the dough again for a few hours to activate and ferment, repeating this process, called a *rafraîchi*, or a refreshing, several

times over the course of three days. Eventually, her dough became strong, elastic, and filled with pockets of air, which would burst and produce a wonderfully aromatic, yeasty fragrance that permeated the farmhouse. On the final day, Mme. Mercier shaped the dough into round loaves, saving a piece to store in the cellar as a starter for the next batch of bread.

Like every other household in Montvernier, the Merciers lacked an oven large enough to bake the dough Mme. Mercier had so laboriously prepared. Instead, the people of the town shared a massive common baking oven with the residents of a nearby village called Montbrunal. Bread-baking day had all the excitement of a carnival. Villagers greeted each other loudly and gossiped in small clusters. Kids ran about and played. I was standing forlornly on the outskirts when Roland appeared.

He was staying with a family in Montbrunal, which meant that I would not only see him on baking days but on Sundays as well, since the villages also shared a single church. Montvernier and Montbrunal were so close together that we could even walk to visit each other during the week when our farm duties permitted.

The oven seemed as large as a house, and together Roland and I watched the baker-farmer feed it with the pile of wood needed to bring it to the proper temperature. The smell of so much baking bread was enthralling. We stood there for hours. One after the other, farmers arrived with their loaves, two dozen or so each, and the baker would take over. At the end of the day, some farmers brought casserole dishes, containing anything from beans to cabbage, to be cooked overnight in the heat retained by the oven.

Back at the farm, Mme. Mercier arranged her loaves like decorative plates on the high, narrow shelves running along two entire walls of the room. Every night for dinner, she brought down a new loaf. Seated at the head of the table, M. Mercier held the loaf on its edge and marked a cross on its underside with his folding wood-handled knife. This was intended as a sign of respect for the bread and an offering to God, although it was more a ritual of food than a religious observance. Only then would he cut the bread into large chunks and distribute it around the table.

An unusual custom dictated that cheeses, made in the village, were always to be consumed with bread at the start of the meal. One of these was a wonderful cheese called Beaufort, rich, dense, and nutty, similar to a Gruyère. Another Savoy cheese, *Tomme de Savoie*, was harder and more pungent than the Beaufort. Sometimes we ate the Beaufort by itself. Other times Mme. Mercier grated it into soups, gratins, soufflés, and stuffings, but the *Tomme* was always eaten on its own. Mme. Mercier's meals always ended with a soup—precisely the opposite order that I had been used to. We also ate homemade cured, dried ham, redolent of the hay in the summer fields. For dessert we had plum tarts made with sugary yellow mirabelle plums about the size of cherry tomatoes.

Montvernier offered plenty of experiences for a young city boy: the glorious peaks of the Alps, the frightening chasms bordering the narrow mountain roads, the powerful and intoxicating smell of the summer hay that we spent hours cutting and gathering, the hair-raising rides perched on bales of hay in a cart pulled by a donkey that occasionally slipped as he headed down treacherous paths on his way to the barn. But for me the most impressive thing about the Alps was that wood-fired bread oven and the way it not only nourished but also brought together the people of two remote mountain communities.

I HAD REASON to dread the end of summer. Although I was officially too young to attend, Roland was already enrolled in Lycée St. Louis, a boarding school in Bourg. Between her six-day-a-week job and her day-off food-gathering expeditions, not to mention caring for Bichon, who'd grown into a big, active toddler, Maman did not have time to watch over me. The solution was to see if she could prevail upon the Jesuit priests who ran Lycée St. Louis to grant me what amounted to early admission.

She, Roland, and I approached the somber stone edifice that housed the *lycée*. We were shown

into a dark reception room. A door shut behind us, and we waited. At length *le directeur* entered. He was a tall, austere priest whose pure white hair made him seem old enough to be on speaking terms with St. Peter himself. He took a seat behind his desk and glowered.

"What is it you want?" he said to Maman.

Normally not easily cowed or at a loss for words, she stammered, "My husband is away."

This merited only a faint snort from the exceptionally long nose of *le directeur*.

"And I have a job, and a baby to take care of, and since Jacques's older brother is already enrolled..."

Le directeur did not so much as cast a glance at or in any way acknowledge the presence of Roland and me. Children, clearly, were beneath this man's contempt.

"The boy is not of age," he said.

"But, please..."

The adult conversation continued for a long time. I'm not sure what she said, but somehow she accomplished a minor miracle: she got *le directeur* to change his mind and, more impressive, to bend one of Lycée St. Louis's strict rules.

I immediately learned that one of the most important of those numerous rules was that students were forbidden to talk. A policy of silence prevailed unless we were addressed directly by a priest or given explicit permission to speak. A natural chatterbox like all Pépins, I ran afoul of that rule early in my studies. The priest who was teaching our class said something that I couldn't hear from my desk in the back of the room, so I asked a neighboring student to repeat it for me. I spoke in my quietest whisper, but the Jesuits of Lycée St. Louis, aged though they may have been, possessed superhuman hearing.

"Pépin!" he roared, before I'd gotten out two syllables.

I snapped to attention beside my desk.

"Come to the front of the room."

I came forward and was ordered to get down on my knees in front of the class and extend my arms to the side, palms up. On each palm, the priest placed a heavy book. He forced me to hold those books until my arms burned with pain. Whenever I lowered them, even by an inch, he ordered me to get them back up.

Thursday provided us with a day off from classes, but not from discipline and rules. The priests' idea of letting boys play in the woods was to make us form a single-file line, with a priest at its head and another at its end, and march us along in that manner. The forest had been the scene of some fighting, and the priests warned us not to touch any military ordnance that we might see lying around. I resisted until near the end of our "play" session, when I spotted a brilliant gleam of brass under a leaf. I checked behind me. The priest bringing up the rear was behind some trees, out of sight. The lead priest was looking the other way. I made a swipe. It was a spent cartridge casing, sleek and beautiful, a treasure beyond compare to a boy whose father was off in the mountains fighting with *le maquis*, wearing an ammunition belt studded with shells just like that one. I pocketed it.

When we emerged from the forest, the priests stood before us. One demanded, "Did any of you pick anything up in there?"

I was too frightened to confess, even if I had wanted to, so I stood there shaking, my prize clutched in a sweating palm deep in my pocket.

"No?" the priest asked.

We all remained silent.

"If you have anything, drop it immediately."

Nothing hit the ground.

"Pépin!" he said. "Hands out of your pockets."

I did as told, leaving the cartridge in my pocket.

~~He strolled over to me and frisked the outside of my pants. Before I could speak, he smacked me twice, as hard as he could across the face.~~

Corporal punishment was swift, certain, and harsh at Lycée St. Louis, but it was an era when stern discipline was the norm, even at home, and to their credit, the priests meted it out equally. I got used to it. But the same cannot be said for the food, which was simply inedible. On my first morning there, an older student told me that for breakfast, we were having *le caca de René*. René was the infant son of the female cook, and *caca* being ... well ... if you've ever changed a soiled diaper, you understand. In the dining hall my bowl was filled with some ignoble gruel, whitish and thick. It turned out that we were served—and required to eat—*le caca de René* several times a week. The slop lived up to its name in every way. Although we were hungry and nearly starving, we would even pay fellow students to consume our servings of that vile concoction.

Things started looking up after breakfast, however. As we filed out of the dining room after the meal, we were each allowed to take one piece of black bread out of a basket. The bread was hard and stale, but it had to be better than *le caca de René*. I was about to gnaw off a chunk when my new friend cautioned me to stop. Taking his own piece, he struck it on the corner of the table. Several flea-like insects fell out and began scurrying for freedom. In time, this step became routine.

Many of the boarders were farmers' kids who from time to time received parcels of goodies, honey or salted lard or sausages, items that city kids like us never got. I became excellent at bartering, and for a few marbles or a roll of string, I would wangle all kinds of food. When I had nothing to trade with, I cajoled and pleaded. One day I convinced a farm boy to spread some of his jam on my dry piece of bread. I was just about to bite into this delicacy when I glanced down the table and saw that another boy was dipping his knife into a strong-smelling purée of salted fish. I deftly turned my slice of bread jam side down, so only the bare side was visible, and begged the other boy for a smear of his purée. Assuming that the only thing I had to eat was a piece of dry bread, he took mercy. I thoroughly enjoyed my some-bites-sweet, some-bites-fishy open-face sandwich.

During the winter, the dorm was cold enough at night to freeze the water in the trough where we were supposed to wash. My feet stayed cold for so long that they grew red, raw, cracked, and painfully itchy with chilblains. Finally, spring came, and with it the prospect of a great celebration. Roland was to have his first communion. All the family, including La Marraine and my cousins from Bourg, even Robert, were going to gather at our apartment on rue de l'École normale. My mother would be cooking.

I needed to acquire a suitable gift for Roland, and I finally decided that the perfect thing would be the dry salami sausage called *saucisson*. Every member of our family loved *saucisson*, especially Roland, particularly after six months of *le caca de René*. In warrationed France, acquiring a *saucisson* was difficult, and for a boy confined to Lycée St. Louis, it was attempting the impossible. But I was determined.

At school I knew a farm kid whose father kept cattle and pigs and was also adept at sausage making. The boy, well aware of the value of decent food at St. Louis, flatly refused to get me a *saucisson*. I bartered with him for days. First I put my collection of marbles on the table. He shook his head. I asked him what he wanted. What possession of mine could be more valuable than my beautiful cat's-eyes and puries?

"Your knife," he said.

My prized pocketknife. That was too much.

"Absolutely not," I told him.

For a time we each stood our ground. Finally, with only a week to go until the big day, I approached him and told him he could have the knife. It was a major sacrifice, but this was, after all,

Roland's first communion.

"And your marbles," the farm boy said.

We sealed the deal, and I placed the precious *saucisson* in my *casier personel*, the small locker each student had, which was as close as we got to having private space at that school. Hopefully, it would be safe from other hungry students. I couldn't resist checking on my prize two or three times a day to see if it was still there. Each time I looked at it, my mouth watered and my hand reached out toward it. Eventually, I gave in to temptation and bit into the end of the sausage, just to taste it. After that, I continued to gnaw at my *saucisson*. Luckily, with a couple of days to go before that special Sunday, I had nibbled only about a half-inch off the end and was pleased that I had managed to keep the original shape of the sausage intact.

As the weekend approached, my anxiety increased. I couldn't wait to see the look on Roland's face. My mind was not focused on my studies, a bad idea at any time at Lycée St. Louis, but especially so when asking for dispensation to attend a special event. So maybe I was a few seconds behind the rest of the students in lining up before morning classes.

"You're late, Pépin," said a priest, a notorious stickler for punctuality who had never much cared for me anyway. The same priest later made me stand up in class and explain aloud to one and all why I was gazing out the window instead of reading my lessons. What was I to say? That I was daydreaming about the apartment on rue de l'École normale filled with relatives and friends there for Roland's party? I apologized, and I guess I murmured something under my breath as I sat down after receiving my public humiliation.

"That's it, Pépin," said the priest. "We'll see if you learn to behave after being grounded for the weekend."

My mother pleaded with *le directeur*, but he did not relent; I was to be restricted to school during that weekend. On Sunday after church and before the big meal, the whole family came to visit and comfort me. I handed my *saucisson* to my mother as they left and went up to the empty dorm. There was no one there to hear me crying.

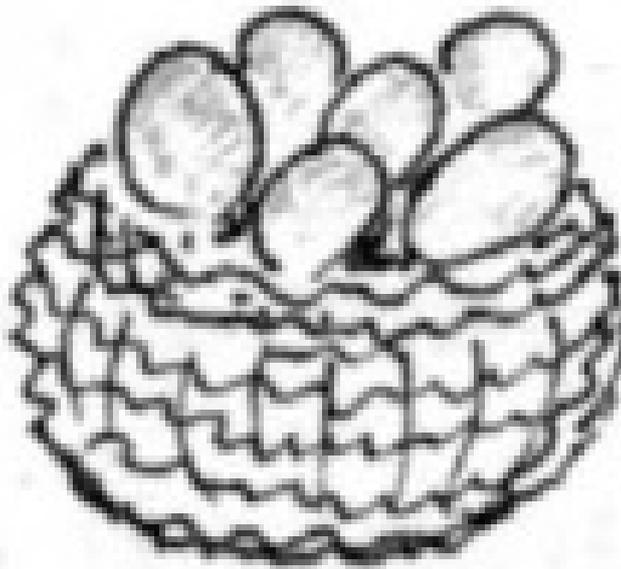
But it has always been hard for me to stay unhappy for long. Time passed. Papa continued to visit occasionally in the night, leaving exotic treats like bananas and oranges. Word reached Bourg that the Allies had landed on the beaches of Normandy. Paris was liberated. Our home was bombed again, this time compliments of the retreating Germans, but no one was hurt, and we soon returned. Then one afternoon, people poured into the streets, yelling, "They're coming! They're coming!" Roland and I joined the crowds standing in the sunshine along avenue Alsace-Lorraine. In the distance there was a rumble, clearly different from the familiar drone of Italian and German bombers. Certainly no car, not even La Marraine's ancient Citroën, ever produced such a racket. The noise got louder, and then its source appeared: an Allied army tank.

Roland and I burst from the crowd and, along with every other kid in Bourg-en-Bresse, began running behind the tank. The soldiers—Americans!—laughed and tossed goodies to us. Roland and I managed to catch gum, something entirely new and such a luxury that we kept it for days, passing it between us; I'd chew it for a while and then Roland would.

The soldiers also threw candy bars. Running behind the tank, I caught one, broke off a piece, and put it in my mouth. For the first time in memory, I experienced the silky, bittersweet richness of milk chocolate.

My war had ended.

Les Qeufis Jeannette



(EGGS JEANNETTE)

YIELD: 4 SERVINGS

WHEN WE WERE KIDS, eggs were a staple on our table. Meat or poultry showed up there once a week at the most, and more often than not, our "meat" dinners consisted of a delicious ragout of potatoes or cabbage containing bits of salt pork or leftover roast. Eggs were always a welcome main dish, especially in a gratin with béchamel sauce and cheese, and we loved them in omelets with herbs and potatoes that Maman would serve hot or cold with a garlicky salad.

Our favorite egg recipe, however, was my mother's creation of stuffed eggs, which I baptized "eggs Jeannette." To this day, I have never seen a recipe similar to hers, and we still enjoy it often at our house. Serve with crusty bread as a first course or as a main course for lunch.

- 6 jumbo eggs (preferably organic)
- 1 teaspoon chopped garlic
- 2 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley
- 2 to 3 tablespoons whole milk
- $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon salt
- $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil (preferably peanut oil)

DRESSING

- 2 to 3 tablespoons leftover egg stuffing (from above)
- 4 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 tablespoon Dijon-style mustard
- 2 to 3 tablespoons water
- Dash of salt and freshly ground black pepper

FOR THE HARD-COOKED EGGS: Put the eggs in a small saucepan, and cover with boiling water. Bring to a

very gentle boil, and let boil for 9 to 10 minutes. Drain off the water, and shake the eggs in the saucepan to crack the shells. (This will help in their removal later on.) Fill the saucepan with cold water and ice, and let the eggs cool for 15 minutes.

Shell the eggs under cold running water, and split them lengthwise. Remove the yolks carefully, put them in a bowl, and add the garlic, parsley, milk, salt, and pepper. Crush with a fork to create a coarse paste. Spoon the mixture back into the hollows of the egg whites, reserving 2 to 3 tablespoons of the filling to use in the dressing.

Heat the vegetable oil in a nonstick skillet, and place the eggs, stuffed side down, in the skillet. Cook over medium heat for 2 to 3 minutes, until the eggs are beautifully browned on the stuffed side. Remove and arrange, stuffed side up, on a platter.

FOR THE DRESSING: Mix all of the dressing ingredients in a small bowl with a whisk or a spoon until well combined.

Coat the warm eggs with the dressing, and serve lukewarm.

2. The Call of the Stove



MAMAN DECIDED to open a restaurant.

She was not one to let practical considerations stand in the way of her plans. Never mind that food was still rationed—especially meat, sugar, and chocolate—and we had to walk miles to the village of Crêpieux to get bread. Maman fully intended to run the restaurant, front and back, even though her only claim to professional cooking experience was the snippets of knowledge she had picked up by looking over the shoulder of the chef at L'Hôtel de Bourgogne during lulls between waiting on customers. We couldn't afford to buy a thriving, successful restaurant. Instead, we had to hope that we could somehow revive one in the last gasps of failure.

On the advice of a real-estate agent named M. Menu, Maman settled on an establishment ten miles from Bourg along the busy main road running through the town of Neyron. A two-story structure wedged between someone's house and an alley running down to the Rhône River, the eatery that carried the hopes and dreams of the Pépin family bore the dubious name of Hôtel L'Amour, although it had been many years since the four upstairs rooms had provided lodging for anything other than mice and dust motes.

But Maman's mind was made up, and on the appointed morning an ancient truck shuddered to a stop in front of our apartment. All of our belongings were loaded aboard, and, by evening, we had become restaurateurs. Maman had worked out a deal with the owner of the building to pay a fourth of the asking price, with the remainder to be paid in monthly allotments.

Ours would be a family enterprise from the outset. While Maman hung fresh curtains and painted interior walls, she dispatched Papa outside to give the dingy roughcast stucco façade a fresh coat of pastel pink. Maman spent days on her knees with a pail and scrub brush until the once-dingy black-and-white tile floors gleamed. By then Papa was heard pounding and sawing in the cellar, a junk-filled pit that would have offended the sensibilities of a sewer rat. In a few days it became a clean cellar for the restaurant's wines.

Maman drafted Roland, Bichon, and me into service in the hours before and after school, which, much to my relief, was run by a far less rigid administration than that of Lycée St. Louis. We came home, tossed our books on a kitchen counter, and immediately began peeling onions and potatoes or stringing beans and Swiss chard.

We were also put in charge of the two dozen hens that pecked about the back courtyard. They were fattened on vegetable peels and trimmings as well as on leftover soup. In return, the flock kept Hôtel L'Amour supplied with fresh eggs and, when the moment arrived, they became the primary

ingredient in steaming plates of *poulet à la crème*. Our assistant was Bibi, a little black puppy who more than made up in feigned ferocity what she lacked in stature. Bibi was the terror of the henhouse. She strutted in each morning, head held high, her tail curled proudly over her back. To her delight, the chickens shrieked and scattered around the courtyard.

At an early age, I learned what it means for a cook to have respect for his ingredients. One morning, Bibi and I encountered a hen that had been sitting on a nest of eggs the day before. Now it lurked in the far corner of the henhouse, wings spread on the floor and a glint in the eye that followed our every move. Periodically, a small yellowish head would poke out from the feathers. With the usual bravado, Bibi began to bark, scattering the rest of the flock but not the hen in the corner. Bibi took that as an affront. She approached the bird and intensified her barking. The hen puffed her feathers, raised her head, emitted a fearsome squawk, and charged, all flying feathers and flailing claws. Bibi and I fled. From that day on, Bibi slunk across the courtyard only when necessary with head down, eyes averted, and tail firmly between her legs, and all broody hens remained firmly on their nests.

The large courtyard was shaded by a linden tree, and we gathered and dried its leaves and flowers to make *tilleul*, an infusion commonly consumed after dinner in those parts of France. The back wall was covered with grapes, mostly *noah*, or Concord grapes, and *baco*, thick-skinned black grapes with inky juice not suitable for wine but good enough for eating or for Maman's jam.

Slowly, business started picking up. Despite her lack of experience, Maman was a natural behind the stove, and the improved fare drew more customers, mostly working-class people from the neighborhood who expected simple but well-prepared food at affordable prices. In keeping with his natural inclinations, Papa arranged that Hotel L'Amour become headquarters for Neyron's *belote* tournaments, lively card games that drew more patrons and also allowed Papa to participate in a favorite pastime while still officially "at work." His size and strength came in handy whenever a customer partook of too much wine and became rowdy. At such times, Papa calmly put his cigarette in an ashtray, laid down his cards, got up from the *belote* table, enveloped the miscreant in a bear hug, and jettisoned him before rejoining the game, literally without missing a trick.

Ever the entrepreneur, Maman made a deal with a man who came once a week with an old motion-picture projector to show black-and-white movies in a room adjacent to the café dining room. That same room became Neyron's dancehall on Saturday nights. She also cajoled officials at the telephone company into installing a phone booth in the restaurant, a rarity, and for a time, Hotel L'Amour became a telecommunications hub. People who came to make calls frequently stayed for a glass of wine or a bite of something from the kitchen. In exchange for a free telephone, however, we had to deliver messages to the homes in the area. It became a professional sideline for Roland and me. Maman received all manner of calls, which she wrote down, dispatching us around the county as delivery boys. Sometimes this meant jaunts of several miles, and if we were lucky, a tip of a few francs at the door of a distant farmhouse. Barring that, a farm wife occasionally favored us with a *tartine de confiture*, a slice of homemade bread slathered with quince or apricot jam.

It was during one of these deliveries to the nearby agricultural village of Neyron-le-Haut that Roland and I embarked on our brief, ill-fated career as petty thieves.

A shortcut to Neyron-le-Haut took us across vineyards planted with Gamay grapes intended for winemaking, tempting treats for two perpetually hungry boys. One glorious autumn day, Roland succumbed. Looking around and seeing no farmer, he plucked a single purple grape.

"It's good, Tati," he said, issuing a "mmmmm" to reinforce his point.

"If the farmer sees us, he'll beat us," I said. "Maybe shoot us."

Neither assertion was an exaggeration. Many farmers in the area owned shotguns and were not averse to discharging harmless but excruciatingly painful loads of rock salt in defense of their crops.

"He won't be able to see us," said Roland, pulling off an entire bunch of grapes and sitting

beneath the vines to demonstrate that we would be out of sight.

~~I grabbed a bunch and joined him in the shade. The grapes were sweet, juicy, and sun-warm. We stuffed ourselves. Only after we couldn't face the prospect of eating another grape did we realize that we had stained our hands, lips, tongues, and shirtfronts with telltale blackjuice.~~

During subsequent trips to Neyron-le-Haut, we grew more daring and more adept. Our targets expanded to include the farmer's *pêches de vigne*, or vineyard peaches, planted there because the short trees helped shade the vines. Short trees also meant easy pickings for young boys. The peaches had red flesh, fuzzy red skin, and a small freestone center. They were very sweet, with a slight taste of the grapes that they were protecting. They sold well at the market. If we got caught pilfering them, we would be in a lot of trouble.

In June, Roland spotted a cherry tree that was loaded with large, black *bigarreaux*, or Bing cherries. These rare treats posed a problem we hadn't faced with the low-growing *pêches de vigne*. The cherries dangled well out of reach. Furthermore, the trunk of the tree was as smooth and straight as a flagpole, making climbing impossible. We contemplated our predicament.

"Crouch down," I finally said to Roland.

"Are you crazy?"

"Crouch down. I'll get on your shoulders."

"You *are* crazy."

"No, if I stand on your shoulders, I'll be able to reach that limb." I pointed to the first branch, a good six or seven feet above and bending under the weight of tantalizing fruit.

Roland shrugged and said, "Don't blame me if you break your neck."

"Then don't ask me for any of the cherries."

He looked longingly at the branch. "Get on," he said, squatting.

I stood behind him and placed a foot on one of his shoulders.

"Put your hands up, so I can hold on to something," I said.

I counted off a mental one, two, three, and hopped with my other foot on his shoulders.

Roland's shoulders provided a shaky platform, but I lunged for the branch, grabbed it with one hand, and wildly flung my other hand around it. I hung there, summoning my strength. When my breathing slowed, I swung sideways, wrapping one leg and then the other around the limb.

Which left me with two problems. One, I was hanging upside-down. Two, the cherries were out toward the end of the limb, well beyond my reach. I began to inch outward. The branch bent. I extended my fingers. Suddenly, I heard a crack, and the entire branch broke from the trunk. I fell to the grass on my back with the loaded branch on top of me.

It wasn't the most graceful of landings, but our mission had been accomplished. We picked and ate as many cherries from that branch as we could. Then, while Roland pulled the downed branch into the bushes to hide our wrongdoing from the farmer, I rubbed some of the remaining cherries on the tree trunk to hide the white wood where the branch had been.

Now that we had perfected our cherry-picking technique, more or less, there was no question that we would launch a return raid. Cherry season in France is short. We came back a few days later.

"Up you go," said Roland.

"No," I said. "I did all dirty work last time. It's your turn."

Roland smirked. "Nothing to it," he said.

He was still in the tree when a nearby bush rustled. Before I could turn to see what caused the noise, a gun roared. Roland screamed, dropped from the tree, and began running, holding a hand over the fleshy part of his behind, the recipient of a couple of salt pellets. We ran off to a small stream, where he sat in the cool, running water to melt the salt and soothe his burning *derrière*.

PAPA'S CAREER as a sous-chef wasn't much more illustrious than Roland's and mine as petty thieves. There is no doubt that his oversized heart was in the right place. But the careful, deliberate temperament of a woodworker was testing Maman's patience in a busy kitchen. Maman assigned him easy tasks, such as preparing the simple first course of sliced tomato salad or anchovy fillets in oil.

Oblivious to the hectic pace around him, Papa took his time and went about his assignment with the age-old meticulousness of a skilled *ébéniste*, arranging each anchovy fillet in a forty-five-degree grid on a plate and stacking perfectly sculpted slices of tomato like a deck of cards.

"Give me those," Maman said, butting him aside, spreading tomato slices onto the plate, and coating them with her mustard vinaigrette. "Customers are waiting. We have to get these out there. *Vite! Vite!*"

Papa stood there wearing the face of an overgrown dog that knows he has disappointed his master terribly, but who, for the life of him, cannot fathom how.

But Victor Pépin came into his own in the quiet, shadowy realm below the kitchen. Papa's hobby—his love—was bottling his own wine, serious business at Hôtel L'Amour. I never thought of wine as something apart from food. When my brothers and I reached the age of six or so, Papa began adding little red wine—about a teaspoon—to our water glasses, until the water was slightly pink. That made us more a part of the family, since we "drank" like everyone else.

Papa had an extensive but circumscribed knowledge of wine, knowing in depth only the Beaujolais. Bourg-en-Bresse, Neyron, and Lyon are at the end of Burgundy and the beginning of the Côtes du Rhône. This is the country of the Beaujolais; Lyon, crossed by two large rivers, the Rhône and the Saône, is known to the locals as having three rivers, the Rhône, the Saône, and the Beaujolais. Papa could differentiate in one whiff between a Mor-gon, a Juliéna, or a Brouilly, all growths of Beaujolais, all made from Gamay grapes. At the restaurant, we served generic wines from specific areas, young wines of good quality. These were our *vins de comptoir*, the wine served by the glass at the counter when the regulars came in for their morning *p'tit blanc* or their afternoon *p'tit rouge*, a little white or a little red. To this day, my preferences still run toward young wines, ten years old at the most, rather than old, pricey wines.

Papa bought wine in barrels from the small farmers. He went to the farms himself to taste the wines and buy, provided he found the right price for the quality he was after. For whites or roses, he usually bought a *quartaut*, which holds about 50 liters. For reds, he often bought a *feuillette*, holding 100 to 110 liters, or, if he found a really good deal, a *piece*, which is about the size of a U.S. barrel and holds 210 to 220 liters. Back in his cellar, he lovingly transferred the wine to bottles, an operation that seemed mysterious and sacred. Papa drew some of the wine through a glass syringe, poured it into a stemmed glass, examined it for clarity, sniffed it, and, finally, tasted. Although a conventional wine taster would spit the wine on the floor before proceeding to sample another wine, I never saw Papa waste even a sip.

To draw the wine out of the barrels, he used a piece of rubber tube attached to a stick of wood and inserted the apparatus into the barrel through the bung hole. The tube extended to just above the level of the sediment in the bottom, so only the clear wine would be drawn. Papa never discarded that sediment. Maman used it in the red wine sauces she served with beef or chicken dishes, much as she had done when preparing *mou* during the war.

On my first solo outing to draw wine from the cask, I followed Papa's example by positioning my head below the level of the wine. In this awkward posture, I placed the rubber tube in my mouth and breathed in some air. Nothing happened.

"You have to suck harder, Tati," said Papa. He smiled and gave Roland a nudge.

I tried again. Once more nothing happened.

"It's not working," I said.

"You're not trying hard enough. Roland can do it."

~~The gauntlet had been dropped. I inhaled mightily.~~

A gush of wine shot from the end of the hose directly into my eyes and mouth. Sputtering and blinking, I spat out the wine and jammed the hose into a bottle.

The cellar echoed with Papa's belly laugh.

But his laughter soon stopped.

"No, no, Tati, like this," Papa said, taking my hands in his thick fingers and tilting the bottle so that the wine ran down the inclined neck in a gentle flow. "You must never let the wine fall on itself in the bottle and create foam. That will disturb the clarity."

After we filled them, we stopped the bottles with corks that had soaked in an almost boiling mixture of water and wine for fifteen or twenty minutes. Then we waxed the bottles. Papa showed us how to dip about an inch and a half of the tip of each corked bottle into the melted wax; red wax for red wine, yellow or green for white. With a swift movement of his wrist, he created perfectly formed caps on the top of the bottles.

When it came time to uncork his wines, Papa held the bottle flat, parallel to the floor, with the waxed tip above a saucer. Using the rounded side of a teaspoon, he tapped gently as he rotated the bottle, until the wax cap crumbled and fell into the saucer. He then opened the wine with his corkscrew, smelled it in the bottle, and poured it gently into glasses. The corks were precious and never discarded.

Instead of being sealed into standard bottles, the wines were put in pint-size *pots*, slender green bottles with thick glass bottoms that are particular to the Lyon area. Roland and I placed the *pots* in metal baskets and topped them with the corks.

When we had finished drawing the daily quota—about ten baskets—we sulfurized the barrel so the wine wouldn't spoil. Igniting the end of a little greenish yellow stick of sulfur attached to a piece of metal wire, we lowered the stick into the bung hole and sealed the hole. The fire "ate" the oxygen left above the wine, and after the fire died, the wine was perfectly preserved until the next day, when the barrel was opened again.

From his outings to the farms to the final pouring, Papa savored all the rituals of wine. It was a pleasure he wanted to pass along to his sons. Pouring us each a glass, he held his up. I did likewise, imitating his posture.

"Take a little wine in your mouth and let it spread over your tongue. Just taste it."

I did as instructed.

"Now," he said, "chew it, just like a piece of bread."

There seemed to be a breach in logic here. But I did as instructed. Nothing bad happened.

"This is the hard part," he said. "Open your mouth a little bit and form your lips into an 'O' like you are going to whistle."

I shaped my mouth as instructed.

"Good. Now suck some air through the wine to allow it to breathe. This will let you taste it and feel its bouquet."

What it did was force a great deal of the wine up into my nose. I sneezed and sputtered, spraying a fine mist of wine.

Papa shrugged. "Not bad for a start. Perhaps you shouldn't breathe in so hard the next time."

I was hoping there wasn't going to be a next time.

On my second attempt, I inhaled the mouthful of wine deep into my lungs. For a few instants, I was unable to breathe. Several minutes of coughing followed.

Eventually, though, I got the knack and was ready to show off my newly mastered skills to my peers.

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