THE WAY WE EAT

Mastering A Symbol Of France

By ADAM NOSSITER

PARIS — Beware that basket of limp crust put in front of you. Not all French bread is created equal. So sacred is the classic baguette that French law strictly codifies it, protects it and regulates it.

There are few things more closely associated with France than the baguette, that long crusty stick that announces its nationality like no other bread.

So the mastering of that symbol of Frenchness by Mahmoud M'seddi, an immigrant's son and this year's winner of the Grand Prize for Best Parisian Baguette, is about more than great baking. At a moment when President Emmanuel Macron is taking a toughening line against immigration, Mr. M'seddi's triumph challenges the very notion of what it means to be French.

Ask him whether there was any significance in that his father arrived from Tunisia more than 30 years ago, and he will offer an indignant denial: "I'm French. This is my home."

As a loyal Frenchman, he has absorbed the classic outlook of the French Republic. It is assimilationist and not integrationist; there are no ethnic distinctions, only citizens of France. Mother France subsumes all identities into one.

But Mr. M'seddi, 27, is not the only one to conquer one of France's holy bastions. It is immigrants or their heirs who are propping up the tradition.

Last year's best baguette winner, Sami Bouattour, is also the son of a Tunisian immigrant. Three years ago, it was a baker of Senegalese origin, Djibril Bodian, a two-time winner. Two years before that, it was another Tunisian.

Mr. M'seddi now has the privilege of supplying the Élysée Palace, seat of the French presidency, with the bread of breads for a year.

Deep beneath a Left Bank sidewalk in Montparnasse, inside the work space Mr. M'seddi calls his "laboratory," where Arab pop plays on the radio, his prepared dough metamorphoses into crusty baguettes.

DMITRY KOSTYUKOV FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Mahmoud M'seddi, the winner of the Grand Prize for Best Parisian Baguette.

His bread — rich, crusty and earthy — is clearly superior to its industrial cousins that are the unsavory Paris norm. The dark crust can be smelled from another room. You taste wheat, not chemicals, when you bite into one of his baguettes.

"I see myself as an artist, as a magician," he said. "I take a primary material, and I make something out of it. And I make people happy."

Twelve million people go into a boulangerie, a bakery, every day to buy baguette, the president of the Paris baker's syndicate, Franck Thomasse, said in presenting the award to Mr. M'seddi outside Notre-Dame Cathedral recently.

"Outside of France, it is one of the principal symbols of France," Mr. Thomasse said.

But when the runners-up in the contest were called, one fact stood out. Nearly half had names that were un-French. Immigrants were disproportionately represented.

Still, 1,200 boulangeries close in France every year. The work is hard, and Mr. M'seddi's father, Mohamed, tried to keep him out of it. His father gets up at 4 a.m. to make the bread in an associated bakery.

Paris's mayor, Anne Hidalgo, a Socialist, depicted the bakers as a rebuke to anti-immigrant efforts. "Not only do they not take bread from our mouths, they put bread in," she said.

Energy and "passion" — Mr. M'seddi's word — are the ingredients of his success. He lives in an apartment overhead on the Boulevard Raspail, so he can attend to his bread at all hours of the day and night.

Hours are needed for the fermentation. The precise alchemy of time, temperature and ingredient is closely guarded.

He picks up the dough gently, to transfer it from the machine that divides it into thick cylinders, to the shaper and from there to the oven.

"I do the maximum to preserve it, until it is baked," he said. "You've got to protect the dough, from beginning to end."

On a Quest to Savor Bangkok's Street Food

By MATT GROSS

It was a few minutes after 6 p.m., and Lim Lao Sa, a fishball noodle stand tucked into an alleyway near the Chao Phraya River in Bangkok, had just opened. Rain was falling, hard. Tarps sheltered patrons sitting on red plastic stools at a handful of tables. Fluorescent bulbs cast harsh shadows. Lim Lao Sa's owners — a brother and sister who'd inherited the 60-year-old business from their father — bickered.

My friend Win Luanchaison, a real-estate developer and fervent culinary explorer, and I tucked into our bowls. The quenelle-like fishballs were at once springy and creamy, the rice noodles supple, the broth clear and sure of purpose. It was easy to understand why Lim Lao Sa cooked annually for the Thai princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn. "She eats egg noodles served dry," said Pawita Boriboonchaisiri, the elder sister.

Given all of this — the setting, the food, the feeling that Lim Lao Sa could be washed away in an instant, by a bad mood or even worse weather — I decided that Lim Lao Sa was the platonic ideal of street food. And it was precisely why I'd come to Bangkok.

Last April, the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration made international headlines when it announced the city of more than eight million would ban street food vendors — often considered the world's best — in order to make sidewalks more accessible. The government soon walked back its statement, saying street food would be preserved in Chinatown and the Khao San Road backpacker district, but elsewhere it would be eliminated, the vendors relocated from "vital walkways" to "designated zones and markets." This would happen by year's end. Eventually. Sometime.

DAVID RAMA TERRAZAS MORALES FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

The Thai government is trying to relocate street vendors to "designated zones," but the change is coming slowly.

I wasn't going to take a chance. If Bangkok's ad hoc restaurants were threatened, I had to go before it was too late. Last year I flew to Bangkok for a week of eating street food.

Pretty much immediately, I learned that street food was a term with many definitions.

"For me, street food is only a cart," said Duangporn Songvisava, known as Bo, who with her husband, Dylan Jones, runs the restaurants bo.lan, which received a Michelin star in December, and Err, which serves rustic drinking food with a focus on quality ingredients. When she was young, Ms. Songvisava, now 37, remembered, as many as 20 carts would line up outside her school to sell snacks on sticks to students. "They have, like, the moo ping — grilled pork on a stick, barbecue — the sausage, the fishball. It just fills you up before you have dinner." Some were pushcarts, others bicycle-based, but all were mobile and ephemeral.

"In the old days when someone wants to open a cart or a stall, they know how to cook," she said. "The idea was, you're a good cook — maybe you should make some food for other people, for a living."

Now, Ms. Songvisava said, profit margins rule. "They just buy everything from the factory, use industrial processed food," she said.

Ms. Songvisava was telling me this over beers at Talad Saphan Phut, a night market that she considered a sad remedy for Bangkok's street food woes. It was here, at a lonely parking lot, that the city had relocated vendors from the slated-for-destruction Flower Market, on the theory that loyal customers would follow.

In a quiet little neighborhood were alleyways full of food vendors who had been relocated off the main street. We ordered bowls of noodles — yen ta fo, pink rice noodles in broth with wontons and fishballs, and bamee moodaeng, ribbony egg noodles with roast pork — and watery rice porridge studded with bits of duck or nuggets of coagulated blood, and sweet braised pig's foot, and bags of all kinds of fried things. As we crowded around folding metal tables and accentuated our treasures with chilies in vinegar, or ground dried chilies, and cracked open Thai craft beers, it all felt deliciously normal — the kind of Bangkok street-food life I'd always imagined.

Today, more than a year after the crackdown, Bangkok's street-food vendors and aficionados have grown accustomed to constant change. Talad Saphan Phut, the market where I'd talked with Ms. Songvisava, shut down in December, and the street-food-centric Sam Yan neighborhood is being redeveloped by Chulalongkorn University, whose projects have already displaced vendors in numerous areas. Street food in Bangkok has always been defined by mobility and ephemerality, but this is something new.

"Precariousness is the new status quo," Chawadee Nualkhair, a blogger, known as Chow, wrote via Facebook.

Street food is a long way from its demise. For every tale I heard of police clearing vendors away, I found a bamee moodaeng stall making its own noodles or heard the late-morning call of a wandering vendor selling curries and fermented rice noodles.

Pursuing street food remains an eye-opening way to discover a city like Bangkok.

Clockwise from above: pastel de papa; planting in Chahuaytire, Peru; chips; one of the hundreds of varieties of potatoes in the Andes; the market in Calca.

In the Andes, The Exaltation Of the Potato

PHOTOGRAPHS BY GUILLERMO GUTIERREZ CARRASCAL FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

By MADHUR JAFFREY

CHAHUAYTIRE, Peru — Gumercinda Quispe is a descendant of Peruvian Incas and here, high in the Andes, more than 3,800 meters above sea level, she has prepared a nourishing, spicy potato soup, quacha chuño.

She has made it with both fresh potatoes and chuño, the dried, hard white potatoes prepared using an ancient preservation process, which includes soaking them in an icy stream, stomping them by foot to remove the skins and drying them in the sun.

Potatoes are a staple in Peru, the land of their birth. They come in every texture and color: reds, blues, purples, yellows and pinks, sometimes ringed with two colors when sliced open. The texture of some varieties can be changed by putting them out in the sun for a few days before cooking them. This turns them softer and silkier. Some are shaped like a puma's paw; others, an alpaca's nose or a cat's claw.

Native to the Andes in Peru and northwest Bolivia, potatoes were domesticated more than 10,000 years ago. And yet new varieties are being discovered all the time. Potato banks — like the one in the Pisac region of the Andes that stores seeds for 1,300 varieties — are always searching for new varieties, as are dozens of creative Peruvian chefs on the lookout for wild and unusual indigenous ingredients.

Freeze-drying the potato for chuño was just one method used to increase its life after harvest. Walking was the chief mode of transportation for most ancient Andean peoples; they could easily carry dried potatoes with them and make a stew with herbs, chilies and water from a stream whenever hunger called.

Dried potatoes in Peru come in many forms. They can look like pebbles — hard and smooth, in white or purple. They can look like large gravel, with different colors. But they can also be soft, tasting and smelling as funky as fermented bean curd or ripe cheese. Each has a different flavor and texture.

An Inca guide in the Andes still hikes carrying dried potatoes and llama jerky, essential ingredients for a soup he considers a part of his cultural inheritance.

Potatoes are given superb treatment all over the region. At the Sumaq Hotel in the town of Aguas Calientes, there is pastel de papa, a meltingly soft potato cake with layers of thin-sliced potato, bacon and cheese.

Papa a la Huancaina, which originated in the town of Huancayo in the central highlands and is considered by many to be Peru's national dish, is everywhere, including the cafeteria at Machu Picchu. Boiled, sliced potatoes and boiled, sliced eggs are placed on top of lettuce leaves with some olives strewn about, and dressed with a Huancaina sauce that brings the dish together. Its main ingredient is the long, aromatic orange chile, aji amarillo.

Another favorite dish is causa. Like lasagnas, causas are layered terrinelike dishes, generally served cold.

Instead of pasta, potatoes — mashed and seasoned with an aji amarillo paste, lime juice, olive oil and salt — are the most important element in a causa. They can provide one, two or even three of the layers in the dish. The other in-between layers could include seafood salad, vegetable salad, chicken salad or, as in the Amazon region, pork-and-onion salad made with the addition of the fiery, round charapita chile.

Whichever way it is served, causa is always soothing — and refreshingly delicious. For the hotter regions of Peru, it is just as cooling and satisfying as Ms. Quispe's warming soup is in the Andean mountains.

Discovering a Sweet Way to Put Off That Long To-Do List

By JULIA MOSKIN

Procrastibaking — the practice of baking something completely unnecessary, with the intention of avoiding "real" work — is a surprisingly common habit that has only recently acquired a name.

Medical students, romance writers, freelance web designers: Almost anyone who works at home and has a cookie sheet in the cupboard can try it.

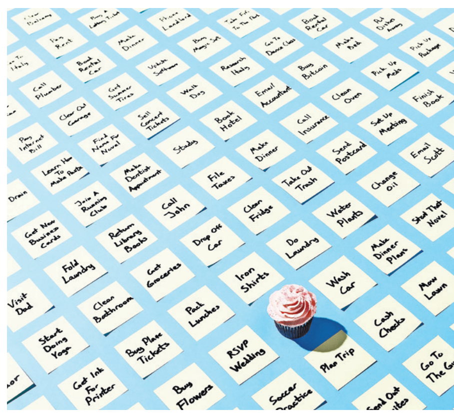
"I started procrastibaking in college as a way to feel productive while also avoiding my schoolwork," said Wesley Straton, a graduate student in New York. "Baking feels like a low-stakes artistic outlet."

Some procrastibakers like to make long, slow recipes that break up the entire day, returning to their spreadsheets or study guides in between steps like proofing, chilling and rising.

"My personal favorite time suck is baking macarons," said the author Jessica Cale.

Procrastibaking is also a hashtag on Instagram, where #procrastibaking posts seem to proliferate just before annual rituals of anxiety like exam weeks, Tax Day and Election Day.

"The kitchen gets a mighty workout in March and April," said Renee Kohlman, a freelance writer in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. (Canadian income tax filings are due on April 30.) "I know I should be at my desk, calculating how much I spent on internet and groceries and gas, but somehow I find myself at the counter, measuring out yeast and flour to make cinnamon buns," she said.



JENS KRISTIAN BALLE

The best practices are still being established, but any recipe that requires leaving the house to buy ingredients is not in the spirit of procrastibaking. A shopping trip destroys the fantasy that the baking is not an interruption of the work. That's why recipes like "kitchen sink" cookies, which use whatever ingredients are on hand, are ideal.

Mia Hopkins, a Los Angeles writer of romance novels, said procrastibaking is her way out of writer's block — especially pie, because it is stimulating to the senses. "You can bake an entire cake without touching anything," she said. "With a pie, you squeeze the dough, you slice the fruit, you crimp the crust," she said.

Many professional bakers also procrastibake. "I used to beat myself up over it, but I don't anymore," said Erin Gardner, a cake decorator in New Hampshire. "I think it's part of my creative process, and I just need to submit to it."

Inventing stunning new ways to shape chocolate flowers and stack cake layers is an imperative for Ms. Gardner, who contributes to The Cake Blog and who occasionally competes on the cutthroat cake-show circuit.

When she is procrastibaking, she sticks to the recipes she can make without thinking, like cookies and brownies.

"Maybe I'm like a professional athlete," she said. "We can't just get out there on the floor and start playing and be at the top of our game. We have to warm up, stretch, do our drills."