Interview with:

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Food Inspired Art
Art Inspired Food
Constitutionally France is secular or ‘laïque’ as they say here. This means that despite the many Catholics, Muslims, Protestants and Jews that make up the greater part of this diverse population the country is technically without a religion. What one learns after living here for any length of time is that the common denominator that binds the people of this country is not a religion but a national worship of food. It is a passion that winds its way through these people like an unbroken thread.

When I first came to live here twelve years ago I had difficulty understanding the depth of feeling the French have for their cuisine and wine. When I asked my French wife about it she looked at me in astonishment. “But of course,” she said “Food is everything. We are what we eat. Food is life and you must celebrate it.” She clearly struggled to avoid placing the word stupid at the end of her last sentence.
Such powerful sentiment soon becomes infectious which is one of the great things about the love of food. I write on a wide range of subjects often related to nature and the environment. Even on such differing subject matter, cooking reigns supreme here. I wrote on a common weed, the dandelion, only to discover that here they make it into wine. An invasion of American crayfish - they flambé them in Armagnac. A pernicious climbing plant - it turns out that fried in butter it is delicious.

You cannot have fine cooking if you don’t start out with fine raw ingredients and the French are blessed with an ancient farming culture and varied geography leading to highly diverse regional culinary traditions. Most prized of the raw ingredients is the black truffle. Recently I went to the tiny village of Lalbenque situated in the Lot department which lies on a limestone ridge between the Dordogne and Lot rivers. For most of the year it is a sleepy, nondescript village but in the months of the truffle season suddenly the town is dramatically brought to life. It has become the premier market town for truffles in the south west of the country. The first day of the season takes on an almost carnival atmosphere with bands, tourists and market stalls. Television cameramen and photographers jostle with one another for vantage points in preparation for the precisely timed first sale.

Even before one arrives one can smell the truffles, a rich earthy smell that permeates the town. The sale is preceded by the arrival of the Chevaliere of the Confrerie du Diamant Noir or Knights of the Black Diamond in their long black capes. This select group of truffle masters inspects the merchandise before the sale begins to ensure that there have been no inferior truffles smuggled in from other countries. The truffles are displayed in small baskets along a bench. This in turn is roped off from the buyers who line up in a heaving mass waiting for the sale to start. Once all is deemed above board a whistle is blown and the rope separating buyers from sellers is dropped. The crowd surges forward and in a few minutes all the carefully displayed merchandise changes hands. Many of the buyers are chefs from renowned Parisian restaurants, pockets bulging with cash. Here any other form of currency is frowned upon and with the starting price this season in the region of twelve hundred euros a kilo one had better come prepared.
No receipts are issued and all the transactions take place quickly and privately so it is difficult to get more than a rough estimate as to the overall value of this trade. Suffice to say that by the time the truffles reach the tables of the chic Parisian and Marseillaise restaurants the price will have quadrupled.

As soon as I heard the background to the truffle story I was hooked and immediately started doing research and making contacts. I was lucky enough to go on a truffle hunt with one of the last trufficulteur still using a pig. Paul Pinsard and his hog Kikinou led me through the oak forest which makes up so much of the landscape in this area. Within minutes the pig had located his first truffle and there were soon more to follow. Kikinou is new to truffle hunting, this being his first season, but he was still successful. His predecessor is famous for having located fourteen kilos of the precious fungi in one afternoon.

Like so many things in this world Kikinou is one of a dying breed, soon to be made redundant by modern high tech advancements such as the Labrador and Cocker Spaniel. Dogs are easier to control than pigs, can be persuaded to jump into the back of a car and have the huge advantage of not being as keen on truffles as we humans are. Each truffle found by the hog generated a discreet wrestling match between Kikinou and Monsieur Pinsard.

One can’t really research such a legendary subject as the black truffle without doing some serious investigation into its cuisine. In this regard I was in the perfect area. At the nearby city of Cahors the Hotel Terminus has been in the Marre family for more than one hundred years and they were in the catering business for one hundred years prior to that.
Menu

Potage parmentier, oeuf poché, lamelle de truffe avec foin de poireaux.
Potato soup with poached egg, truffle slices and leek straw.

Médaillons de Veau sur Risotto de Truffe.
Veal medallion on truffle risotto.

Coulommiers truffé.
Soft cheese with a center of cream, mascarpone and truffle.

Glace à la truffe et sa tuile.
Truffle ice cream with a thin chocolate biscuit.

The accompanying wine list was as thick as a telephone directory and a tour of the cellars after lunch revealed some of the best known wines in France, some dating back to 1876. After a meal like that it is easy to see why the French place such high value on their cuisine.

About the Author

Mike has lived and worked in France for the past twelve years. Although he writes on a broad range of subjects ranging from nature to gardening, Mike has found himself being drawn more and more into the field of food writing. Here cooking goes beyond passion and takes on an almost mythical life of its own. Such feeling is infectious and when embraced, provides a wonderful window both into French culture and the lives of the people that live here.