

## ***In touch with their food: A Thanksgiving tale from France***

When we confirmed that we were going to live in France for a couple of years, we could hardly contain ourselves, especially because of their well-deserved reputation for excellent food. Even better, we were going to Lyon – the culinary capitol, the very peak of the pinnacle of cuisine. So, soon after we arrived, our new friends invited us out to a restaurant dinner, and we said we wanted to try typical Lyonnais fare.

They commended us for bravery. We weren't quite sure why.

The restaurant they chose was an elegant, cozy reinterpretation of someone's home and buzzed with the evening's normal business routine. We sat at a brief wooden table barely covered with a blue and white checkered tablecloth, and braced ourselves for the best of the best. This was going to be so fantastic we weren't going to want to leave, ever. Then our friends asked us again if we were sure we wanted the typical Lyonnais fare, and translated the local favorites from the menu.

There was bone marrow, pig nose, parts of ears, and andouille. I wasn't fired up about the porcine extremities and marrow scene, but I had bought andouille at the grocery store back home and remembered it as a good spicy sausage. Then I was informed that, au Française, it's actually intestines, very well prepared I'm sure. I grew up in Alabama where *sautéed* means *fried* and *andouille* means *chitlins*. Call them what you want, I don't think I'd like them in either language.

If you're like me, you would look at this menu and opt for "none of the above." No worries though, because they also had brains available, just in case. At this point, we realized that we had committed to something we weren't completely committed to. Breathe in, breathe out. For my part, I passed on the internal organs and went for the bone marrow. My wife ordered the potpourri of pig parts.

What a shocking cultural experience it was to be forced to simply get over the reality that our food had actually been hacked out of a cow or a pig. Even at very nice restaurants, fish are often served with heads attached, plopped on your plate, swimming in the midst of a delicious sauce. Once you get over your fish “eyeballing” you plaintively from their surrounding gooze, you’re fine. You just dissect the meat off, pick up the remaining carcass, and drop it into your emptied salad dish. Nice.

The visceral jolt of having my food ogle back at me emphasized how removed I’d always been from the origin of my food. In the States, everything is carefully distanced from its source for the convenience of the squeamish. We mostly just want our food in discrete nuggets. No details, please.

But the French are quite comfortable with the non-standard parts of animals, and are more in touch with their food in general. The grocery butcher doesn’t hide behind some conveniently placed wall while slicing and hacking, but right upfront in plain view. The cutesie little meat parcels we had become accustomed to (Styrofoam on the bottom, plastic wrap over the top) are definitely not the exclusive rule in France.

Case in point? The local butcher shop, or Charcuterie, which is quite an experience. For our Thanksgiving dinner, we just wanted a Butterball – with a pop-up button. So we ordered two medium birds, and were told to come back in a couple of days to get them.

When we returned, the butcher brought them out, freshly plucked, right out of the farmyard, heads still wagging from the ends of their long necks. “Here,” he said as he calmly extended them out to me. I froze. Was I supposed to TAKE these raw birds? Ewww. Do I just grab them by the necks and sling them over my back like Fred Flintstone?

Fortunately for me, the butcher was a kind young Turkish man. He had obviously seen deer frozen in the headlights at some point in his life, because he knew he had to do something with us to release the mute button. So he graciously asked my wife and me if we wanted to step into the back room for a cup of coffee. Brain now rebooted, I managed a positive response. On the way back, however, we passed every internal organ you could imagine resurrected from your Bio 101 lab, piled into a glistening, viscous heap in one corner of the floor.

In one of my standard daily perversions of the French language, I said something he must have interpreted as, “I’d like to see your biggest cow liver.” So he popped out of his chair and bounced over the glop in the corner, plunged his gloved hand somewhere into the middle of it, and hoisted a gigantic old-blood colored spongy mass (which had its own little fragrance about it). He smiled a wide toothy grin, seemed very proud, and held it up for us to see; like he’d just snagged a salmon from the stream with his bare hand. I managed a weak smile. “Great. I mean, very nice. Maybe not today.”

Going into his back room was like watching sausage being made. Afterwards, you really didn’t want those details after all, because your brain just regurgitates the images whenever you look at, or even think of, sausage – like a mental gastric reflux. His apron was permanently stained with something; it could have been anything. It’s best to leave this as one of life’s little unsolved mysteries.

Most of the back room looked like his apron, complete with some metal chairs and an old black vinyl couch with only the edge to sit on, because the normal sitting part was concave and looked carnivorous, like a Venus fly couch. There was a coffee pot, well seasoned with millions of batches of their thick Turkish coffee. The remains of an equal number of cigarettes were in the ashtrays around the pot.

After some delightful conversation, wicked strong coffee, and more than our usual quota of misunderstandings, we picked up our (freshly beheaded, at our request) Thanksgiving birds on the way out of the door. As yet another kindness, they offered us a handful of Merguez links, a type of French sausage. We were planning to actually eat these, so I was careful not to ask too many questions about them. They looked good and smelled okay, and that's all I wanted to know. They were wonderful.