Vengeance

La Belle France et la Bête Noire

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Pity the poor tourist faced for the first time with a French menu! Well, actually, menu means "small, fine, slender, or thin," so perhaps we'd better call it the carte du jour.

First off, it's usually not legible. Most cartes du jour—tricky plural, isn't it)—appear to be hectographed on a slab of leftover jello after they've been hieroglyphed in grapeade by a spastic with a goose quill.

Anyway, you remove your sunglasses (in the blinding glare) and you contrive to make out the letters. (Now you know why it was a Frenchman who deciphered the Rosetta Stone.) And what have you got? Croque-monsieur, anguille sauce verte, asperge, or pissenlit. (No, that couldn't possibly mean "bed-wetting," could it?)

You are désolé (crushed). All you really understand is SERVICE NON COMPRIS at the bottom, which means either that the tip is not included in the price but will be included in the bill OR that the whole concept of service is not understood here. Maybe both. In any case, it's altogether certain that the French which Miss Glotz drilled into you in high school is not going to get you anywhere.

It's a puzzlement. Take betterave. That's a beet, not an Englishman's wife. Try saying coing. That's a quince. (I have quite a nice long list of restaurants where quinces never appear on the menu, and I consult it frequently.) You might think petit pain means "a small ache" and it might, eventually, but on the bill of fare it signifies a roll. (Bread and butter, sometimes even tablecloths and silverware, are extra in France.) And pain d'épice isn't a piece of bread: it's gingerbread. (Try some in Dijon—they put licorice in it!)

Struggling to make out the words in that angular scrawl, and then discovering you don't understand them, you may now be ready to curse-. Try dame (a slice of fish). Or take your mind off it with oursin. Doesn't that sound like a marvelous name for a Parisian perfume? It's a sea urchin.

Watch out for those phrases, common on French menus, which you think you understand. They are traps. Armoricaine is usually misread by Yanks abroad and they are infuriated to get something in Breton style. You may think you're ordering—commander is the French for "order," but it makes you sound a great deal more in control than they really are—anyway, you're expecting an Ameri-
can hamburger. What you get is a neat mound of absolutely rare (i.e., completely raw) beef, sometimes with an equally raw egg on top.

I saw a Texan served boeuf armoricaine once in a posh restaurant down by the quais of the Left Bank. "Son," he said sedately to the waiter, "I've seen cows hurt worse than that get better!"

For dessert, try a tranche plombières (not a sliced plumber, more of a sundae) or pâte à choux (which ought to mean something like sauerkraut, or at least cabbage, but is actually a cream puff). The easiest thing to do, if you're fluent enough in French, is to ask for the pastry tray and point, saying ce true-ci. That's the expression for "this whazziz here" and sounds much more impressive than if you know the exact word, in any case. It might turn out to be a religieuse or a diplomate, both desserts, not people. (By the way, speaking of people and desserts, the French term for a "Napoleon" is mille-feuille.)

Now, I suppose we'd better get back to that croque-monsieur. It really isn't fair to go on with that unbearable suspense, and you'll never guess. It's a kind of sandwich. They didn't teach you that in P.S. 99, did they? No, they were informing you how to ascertain the whereabouts of your aunt's pen. You could starve to death on high-school French.

Take Xeres. No, it isn't that Persian emperor made into meatballs, it's sherry. A meatball is une quenelle. It's feminine. Thought you'd like to know.

They didn't teach you even the easy ones, let alone the especially French terms you don't see even in America even if you spend your whole life in French restaurants. I mean things like merlan (not a wizard in King Arthur stories), pré-salé (nothing to do with merchandising), and langoustines. Go ahead, find an American who speaks French fluently and try him on pain de mie (sandwich bread), beignets (fritters), or petit suisse. Now that sounds like a "little Swiss," doesn't it? Actually, it's cream cheese. That, at least, is what the French call it—the Swiss, naturally, do not. The French haven't heard of "French fried potatoes" or of "French toast," and "to take French leave" is translated filer à l'anglaise so you can hardly expect them to get anything Swiss right.

The easiest thing to do is just to order something with a sauce. Whatever it is, you won't recognize it, in any event. They can even do something à la mode de Caen with the lining of a cow's stomach that tastes divine. It's delicious—merely think of something else while you eat it. (I have used this system with great success on cenelles au beurre noir and tatou tartare as well.) The disguises can be pretty elaborate: for instance, sauce Mornay consists of sauce Béchamel with a couple of kinds of cheese and some cream added; sauce Chivry starts out with sauce veloutée and goes on from there; sauce diable doesn't really get devilish until you add the brandy to the Worcestershire; and so forth.

I cannot undertake to fill you in completely on a restaurant vocabulary in a language in which pommes are both apples and potatoes and lait means both milk and egg white, but here at least are the real troublemakers: hors-d'oeuvres—literally meaning "out of work"; can be anything from a few scroungy slices of tomato and some limp salami to a whole buffet on wheels. pâte-maison—"homemade paste," a meat paste that can vary from the truffled pâté to the offal of pâté (dog food).

WORD WAYS

The February issue of the New York Times Book Review contained a splendid article on the art and science of French cooking in which the author, Mrs. H. Canoe, transformed SORES, ORANGE, with this ladder:

Mrs. H. Canoe, alternative to PAVER, PAAR, PAAP, PAAR, PAAR.

Mr. Darlington has achieved SORES, ORANGE, with this ladder, CRUM, glands of or cracklins.

Take your
huitres—oysters; wonderful, but who can pronounce the word?

œuf sur le plat—"egg on a plate" (fried).

cuisines de grenouilles—frogs’ legs.

quenelles de brochet—pike (fish) meatballs.

trouite au bleu—could mean "a conscripted trout" or one cooked alive; at least it starts alive!

moules marinière—steamed mussels.

beuf à la mode—pot roast (but without ice cream on top).

cog au vin—hopefully, the chicken (not the rooster, coq) stewed in wine (ducks, canards, are usually cooked in blood).

pommes vapeur—boiled potatoes.

epinards—spinach.

purée de fèves—mashed beans, not to be confused with pois pour fève (tit for tat).

tarte aux fraises—strawberry pie.

tarte aux framboises—raspberry pie.

tarte tatin—fun to sing to the tune of the "William Tell Overture," but you can eat it, too.
ananas (au kirsch)—pineapple (with liquor).

pêche melba—a dessert named after the opera singer, but be careful of pêche (peach), pêche (fishing), and pêché (sin).
cendrier—ashtray (but don’t try to smoke before or while eating: in some places they get positively violent!).

service compris—I leave a small tip (pourboire, "to drink").

café filtre—coffee made in an ingenious machine that fits on top of the cup and enables you to get cold coffee and yet burn your hand.

Garçon! jah vou-DRAY day tessenGOES and, ah, ewn boo-TAY ee duh Coke, s. v. p. Ah, mayr-SEE!

FROM SOBER TO DRUNK

The February, 1968, issue of WORD WAYS presented a word ladder, transforming SOBER into DRUNK in 18 steps. Readers were asked to improve on this ladder by shortening it.

Mrs. Harriet B. Naughton, in Old Saybrook, Connecticut, has submitted an alternative ladder which does the job in only 13 steps, and is unusually meritorious in confining itself to very simple words: SOBER, SABER, SAVER, PAVES, PALES, PAILS, PAINS, PAINT, PRINT, PRINK, DRINK, DRUNK.

Mr. Darryl H. Francis, a college student in Hounslow, Middlesex, England, has achieved the ultimate in shortness with this 9-step ladder: SOBER, SORED, CORES, CORNS, COINS, CRINS, CRINK, DRINK, DRUNK. In this ladder, CRINS are kinds of heavy silk obtained by taking a substance from the glands of a silkworm, and CRINK is a verb meaning "to make a thin, metallic, or crackling sound."

Take your pick!