

LETTER FROM PARIS | ELAINE SCIOLINO

The French Debate ‘Homemade’

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as culinary artistry.

Instead, in just a few days the law has split restaurateurs, thrown the dining public into confusion and prompted food critics to challenge the government’s complicated, and sometimes contradictory, definitions of what makes a dish truly homemade, or not.

French fries, for instance, can bear the “fait maison” symbol if they are precut somewhere else, but not if they are frozen. Participating chefs are allowed to buy a ready-made pâte feuilletée, a difficult-to-make, multilayered puff pastry; but pâte brisée, a rich pastry dough used to make flaky tart shells, has to be made on-site. Cured sausages and smoked hams are acceptable, while ready-made terrines and pâtés are not.

“This is all a lot of baloney,” said Philippe Damas, the owner of the popular Le Philou bistro in the 10th Arrondissement, who added he had no intention to put the logos on his menu. “It’s an insult. I live on my reputation for preparing and serving the best that is fresh, every day. I predict that in six months this law will be history.”

There is little disagreement here that France ought to protect the integrity of its fine cuisine against the onslaughts of modernity. Last year, for the first time, more money was spent in fast-food chains than in traditional restaurants. At the time of the parliamentary debate over the decree, there were claims that as many as 75 percent of the nation’s restaurants were guilty, mon Dieu, of serving food largely prepared off the premises. Today, there is broad consensus that consumers need to be warned when their boeuf bourguignon has been vacuum-packed with chemical additives, or their escargots à la Bourguignonne made with soy filler and rehydrated garlic.

But the country’s expansive, intuitive love of food does not always dovetail with its persnickety, bureaucratic attempts to guard its reputation.

The new law states that a “house-made” dish must be made on the premises from “raw” materials that have not undergone “significant modification” in advance. Yet the lobbying groups for the frozen and prepared food industries are powerful, so many foods were allowed. They include almost anything that has been frozen, vacuum-packed, peeled, sliced, cut, ground, boned, skinned, husked, powdered, crushed, smoked, salted or refrigerated — as long as it is used in the “composition” of a finished dish.

Thus, frozen spinach and vacuum-packed grated carrots are fine as long as they are mixed with something as basic as a vinaigrette made on-site. (Frozen French fries, however, are excluded, a not-so-subtle swipe at fast-food chains.) Pickled cabbage for choucroute — time-consuming to make — can be bought premade and still figure into a dish defined as house-made.



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Jean-François Le Guillou, top, the chef and owner of La Forge in Paris, is one restaurateur displaying a sign, above, saying that all his dishes are made in-house. Other restaurants note that on their menu, above right. Right, the house-made pâté at La Forge.



Organ meats can be deveined, bled and blanched elsewhere.

Many chefs and commentators find the rules so permissive as to be meaningless, bewildering for the consumer and no guarantee of a better-quality meal.

“Fait maison, phony decree,” declared the restaurant critic J.P. Gené in Le Monde’s M Magazine, calling the law a victory for the frozen-food industry.

Périco Légasse, a food critic for the

weekly magazine Marianne, wrote: “Homemade’ doesn’t mean freshly made. A dish totally prepared with frozen products, even if they come from a Romanian slaughterhouse, can enjoy this happy distinction as it was cooked on-site.”

There are already ratings systems to showcase good restaurants. Alain Ducasse, Thierry Marx and several other high-profile chefs have created a program that allows a restaurant — if it meets certain criteria, including offering cooking from scratch — to display a sign identifying itself as a “Restaurant de Qualité.” More than 1,000 restaurants belong.

The government has created a web page with a 21-page user guide explaining the law and how to use the logos, which can be downloaded, made into stickers and placed on menus. If everything is made from scratch, restaurateurs have a choice: They can post the logo, or the words “fait maison” or simply “maison,” in a place visible to all diners. Starting Jan. 15, a federal agency, the General Directorate for Competition Policy, Consumer Affairs and

Fraud Control, will start inspecting restaurants that display the logos to make sure they are following the law.

But the threat of inspections could be a flash in the pan. To save money over the last six years, the government has moved 560 of the agency’s roughly 3,000 inspectors out of their jobs. Just how inspectors will identify suspect fare or impose penalties has not been worked out.

“They’re laughing softly in the back kitchens,” Mr. Légasse wrote.

At La Forge, a cozy restaurant in the Fifth Arrondissement with orchids on the tables and house-made cassoulet on the menu, Jean-François Le Guillou, its owner and chef, was more forgiving.

“Anything that recognizes the savoir-faire of the chef is good,” he said. “So I’ll put the ‘fait maison’ logo on the door, but not on the menu. It would look silly to have little casseroles next to every item.”

Yet he believes that the symbols are misleading. “You can have a frozen product that’s terrific and a fresh product that’s terrible,” he said.

A visit with Mr. Le Guillou to a vast outlet of Metro, the German-owned wholesale food giant, in Paris helps explain what all the fuss is about. Among its many fresh and prepared foods are vacuum-packed pouches filled with blanquette de veau, paila, hake fillets in a sauce with chives, and beef tongue in a piquant sauce. Promotional “menus of the month” help restaurateurs cut costs even more. (This month’s Metro menu offers cartons of individual portions of spinach and goat cheese quiche as a starter, skinless Atlantic cod with a potato gratin as a main course and a frozen raspberry cream cake for dessert.)

Restaurant customers appear to be divided over the new law. At brunch on Sunday at La Favorite in the Marais, Kateryna Berezovksa, who works at a music management company, praised the initiative. She recalled her disgust when she discovered that the deep-fried mozzarella sticks she had ordered at her favorite tapas bar came out of a vacuum package.

“I saw the chef dump the McCain mozzarella sticks into a deep-fryer,” she said. “I never went back there again.”

At a nearby table, Elodie Carpentier, a college student, said the law wouldn’t change anything. “It’s much ado about nothing.”

Some diners found larger meaning in the initiative. “There is hypocrisy throughout our lives today,” said Catherine Berger-Lefebvre as she dined with family at La Forge. “This will help eliminate the lies.”

Hubert Jan, an official of the French restaurant and hotel union U.M.I.H., has lobbied hard over the years to gain recognition for good chefs. He said the law unfortunately focused all the attention on ingredients rather than on the quality of cooking.

“It’s obvious this decree was not written by chefs,” he said.

Now You Taste It, Now You Don’t

When beloved dishes fall off menus, some diners fight back.

By JULIE SCELFO

I can’t recall the exact date a few years ago when I ate my first ciabatta egg sandwich at Seersucker, in Carroll Gardens, Brooklyn. But I remember precisely how great it tasted and made me feel, which is why I ate it again and again at every possible opportunity.

It was an upscale version of the corner deli standard: fresh scrambled eggs with smoked country bacon and aged New York Cheddar, tucked into a warm, crusty Balducci Bakery ciabatta roll lightly smeared with a delicate homemade ketchup called tomato jam. All love, no greasy afterburn. The sandwich even helped save my marriage when, amid the stress of a home renovation, my husband herded our three small children, two bikes and a stroller several miles, bought a sandwich to go and delivered it to me on Mother’s Day morning, still wrapped in foil and piping hot. (Hooray! Together another year.)

Then one day, after settling into a table at Seersucker for brunch, I discovered that the menu had undergone a makeover and my beloved ciabatta sandwich was gone. No amount of pleading for a special order would bring it back.

I had suffered a setback all too common in this age of restless chefs and novelty-seeking diners: the discontinued dish.

There are many good reasons why restaurants cast off their classics: Chefs tire of making the same things over and over. Costs rise. Banh mi (or crudo or kale) go in, then out of fashion. But diners like me, left with nothing but memories and longing, often have a hard time letting go. (When Seersucker closed its doors a few weeks ago for what its owners say is a temporary hiatus, the loss barely registered, my grieving already intense.)

After JCT. Kitchen & Bar in Atlanta killed off its bacon, onion jam and blue cheese burger last June, one devotee created a Bring Back the JCT Burger page on Facebook, illustrating it with a stock photograph of an angry crowd, arms raised, in front of billowing black smoke.

“This ain’t right! It was my favorite in town!” a visitor posted. Another pleaded: “I came all the way from Hawaii only to be disappointed! Bring it back!”

Twitter is awash in protestations about spiked menu items, like one from Mathew O. Brooks of Fredericksburg, Va., who sent what he describes as “an immediate and despondent” tweet to Panera with the hashtag #unrequired last fall after the chain revoked its steak and white Cheddar panini.



CHANG W. LEE/THE NEW YORK TIMES



“It has gone unanswered,” Mr. Brooks lamented in a Facebook message.

The Num Pang Sandwich Shop in Manhattan received what might be the world’s only love letter to the mahi-mahi sandwich after replacing it in January with what one customer, Rick, thought was a “boring” salmon version. “I am deeply saddened and highly depressed,” wrote Rick, who lived across the street from the restaurant’s East 12th Street outlet. “I’ve been eating about two or three of your mahi-mahi sandwiches per week. They were the greatest and made me a happy man.”

At Sotto, a trattoria in Cincinnati, it was not the diners but the staff who had a hard time saying goodbye when the beloved porchetta bruschetta was terminated in February.

“Porchie. Always a treat to be around,” a server, Sarah Temples, eulogized the appetizer during a mock funeral held by employees. “He was a true friend that made strangers feel comfortable in his presence. When people saw him they would fall in love.” (Ms. Temples also sketched a tombstone, with this epitaph: “Here lies Porchetta Bruschetta with his friends grain Dijon mustard and shallots.”)

Most chefs and restaurateurs say they consider diners’ feelings carefully before making menu changes.

Michele Mazza, the executive chef at Il Mulino in New York, says he hasn’t altered the menu since opening in 1981 because he is certain that it would hurt business. “For me it’s important to be very constant,” he said. “If I don’t have the Dover sole or the osso buco,” customers “won’t come in.”

Alfred Portale, the executive chef and co-owner of Gotham Bar and Grill in Man-



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hattan, has for years wanted to overhaul his tuna tartare, having tired of its towering presentation, but he and his business partners, including Bret Csencitz, worry that regulars would be upset. “We would have a mass uprising,” Mr. Csencitz said. “It would just be mayhem.”

Michael Lomonaco, the executive chef of Porter House New York, experienced an uprising of sorts two years ago after replacing a popular oven-roasted herb chicken with a grilled version for the summer. Allen Grubman, the entertainment lawyer and a regular customer, tasted the new chicken and immediately summoned the chef to his table.

“He called me out in the dining room and dressed me down,” Mr. Lomonaco recalled. “He said, ‘I eat in all the best restaurants in New York and you have the best roast chicken,’ and he gave me arguments why I shouldn’t take it off.”

Mr. Grubman said that he doesn’t fully remember the details of that conversation, but that his devotion to the original recipe is justified. “It was moist, it was crispy on the outside, it tasted very, very fresh and it’s rotisserie chicken, which is my favorite,” Mr. Grubman said. “It’s perfect.”

Mr. Lomonaco considered the matter overnight, reinstated the dish and hasn’t disturbed it since.

Other chefs have learned to give in just a little. At Picholine, on the Upper West Side, Terrance Brennan euthanized an acclaimed dish, tournedos of salmon with horseradish crust, about 10 years ago. “I was so sick of salmon I didn’t eat it for two years,” said Mr. Brennan, who had cooked the dish at three previous restaurants. “I couldn’t even look at this special marble

Terrance Brennan serves Barry Winograd the tournedos of salmon with horseradish crust (bottom left), which is no longer on the menu at Picholine. Top left, the ciabatta egg sandwich from Seersucker in Brooklyn. The restaurant is now closed, but a recipe for the sandwich can be found at nytimes.com/dining.

plate we used to serve it on.”

But fans of the dish, like Barry Winograd, who has eaten at Picholine more than 1,100 times, according to the restaurant’s records, began calling in advance to request it. “If we want something in particular, we just tell them, and they have it for us,” said Mr. Winograd, who ate the salmon in March for his 62nd birthday.

At Gotham Bar and Grill, requests for fettuccine with tomato, basil and Maine lobster Bolognese, from Mr. Portale’s opening menu in 1985, can send staff members scurrying. “If we have lobster stock in the refrigerator, we can put the sauce together quickly, but we don’t always have fresh pasta,” Mr. Portale said, “so we send a food runner to Whole Foods.”

To minimize off-the-menu requests, chefs employ a variety of psychological tactics. “When people come in and say: ‘Oh, my God! I can’t believe you took the salmon off,’ I tell them if you give us a few days’ notice we’ll make it for you,” Mr. Brennan said. “That kind of gives them a sense of relief. Then they forget about it and order whatever else.”

Sirio Maccioni, who has genially presided at Le Cirque for decades, taught his staff a diversionary technique: quickly offer a replacement from the current menu. “You don’t say no. You say, ‘I don’t have that today’ and get them to try something else,” said his son Marco Maccioni, who now runs the restaurant with his father.

Indeed, when I visited Seersucker and was informed that my ciabatta egg sandwich had perished, I ended up ordering a poached egg atop a mound of toasted barley and hazelnuts, served in a languid pool of vegetable broth. The crunchy grains were studded with juicy gems of roasted mushroom; the broth was delicately seasoned and precise.

The chef and co-owner, Robert Newton, declined to respond to my calls and emails asking why the sandwich had been cut. Only when I cornered him in person did he explain that he had changed the menu to suit his evolving interests, the same reason he would later close Seersucker and open a spinoff, Wilma Jean, down the block. (Mr. Newton, who is also an owner of Nightingale 9, said he hoped to eventually reopen Seersucker in a new spot.)

“Chefs that really want to be chefs don’t really want to do the same thing day after day, after day, year after year,” he said.

I was mad for a while. But lately, another strong emotion has been tugging at my soul: a deep craving for a mouthful of nutty, toasted barley with egg and broth that I’ve tasted only once, and can’t wait to savor again, hopefully at Wilma Jean or Seersucker or whatever place Mr. Newton opens next.