

The Good Cuisine, by Françoise Bernard and Alain Ducasse. Ici La Press, June 2002. Originally published in French as *La Bonne Cuisine*. 331 p., \$30.

Pros: France's haute cuisine king and quick'n'easy queen play lively kitchen duet.
Cons: Some recipes get lost in translation.

Last year, peripatetic French superstar Alain Ducasse stormed New York with his extravagant, not to mention exorbitant, cuisine. This year, he is crossing the pond with Françoise Bernard, the doyenne of easy cooking. This culinary Odd Couple teamed up to write *The Good Cuisine*, a "simple to spectacular" study of 52 of the most popular ingredients in France by a master chef and a quintessential French home cook.

Ducasse and Bernard each contribute 2 recipes for every ingredient chapter, then comment on each other's work. The result is a spirited exchange of she says tomato, he says *tomahto*. Bernard, bless her, is the busy cook's advocate. Practicality is her mantra, always with a sharp eye on the bottom line. She objects to excessive fuss and even tries to keep dirty pots to a minimum.

In this book aimed toward home cooking, Ducasse is clearly not offering food as it would be made in his restaurants. But even in these simpler recipes, Ducasse is still a three-star chef. He juxtaposes cooked and raw textures in vegetable medleys, often saucing them with meat juices, and demonstrates an easy way to cook whiting fillets between two plates. He sees nothing wrong with calling for violin zucchini or two kinds of shallots for one oyster casserole. He delights in playing with flavors and techniques in surprising ways. Some of these take courage, like his "Fried Eggs." The eggs are cooked in porcelain ramekins directly on the stove over high heat and then baked. One ramekin developed a hairline crack, but I was too enthralled by the zesty lemon-caper sauce to care. The complexity of Ducasse's recipes ranges from the almost reactionary statement of a simple baked potato lumpily mashed with a fork to foie gras and pigeon drumsticks done up in pastry.

The asparagus chapter says it all. Bernard's fancy-sounding "Milanese Asparagus" is just blanched asparagus under a sprinkling of Parmesan and browned in the oven. So simple it hardly required a recipe, yet delicious. Ducasse's "Parmesan Cheese Asparagus," on the other hand, involved 3 pounds of beef chuck and oxtail cooked separately for a total of 5 hours, the meat ultimately discarded. His Parmesan asparagus came cloaked in rich elixir of beef haunted by the unexpected presence of steeped olives. All this for a side dish? Maybe not on a weeknight.

Ducasse made his first chocolate mousse from one of Bernard's books, and there is clearly a great deal of mutual respect. His collaboration with a home cook confirms what I suspected ever since my first glorious meal at his Paris restaurant: beneath the glitter and gastronomic pyrotechnics lies a perfect roast chicken. In *The Good Cuisine*, he is paying homage to his roots in the food of everyday life, but he can't help trying to elevate it at every turn. For example, Bernard covers her quick yet excellent rack of lamb with parslied bread crumbs, dots it with butter, and roasts it to a crisp turn—respectable for any occasion, certainly Tuesday dinner. Ducasse suggests refining it by making a soft butter-crumbs paste, rolling it out between sheets of plastic, chilling, then wrapping the meat in a perfectly uniform layer. In his own lamb recipe, he bones the loin and covers it

with a thin buttery crust of three citrus zests. Watching Ducasse deconstruct ordinary dishes and put them together again is a marvelous lesson in everyday creativity. His hints for refining technique is the equivalent of an extra-credit course at Le Cordon Bleu. The message seems to be that food does not have to be elaborate to be good, but a little extra effort (and quite a bit of butter) can turn dinner into delight.

Bernard's comments on Ducasse's recipes are mostly pure appreciation, giving an artist his due. However, she does occasionally cross off the more expensive items from Ducasse's shopping list and deem certain steps too cumbersome. Once, she and Ducasse get into an argument over whether shocking green beans in ice water improves color. Neither side gives, and the reader has to decide.

This book does have serious drawbacks, most of which can be attributed to the problems of translating across language and culture. To an American audience, especially those for whom "simple cooking" means five ingredients thrown together in fifteen minutes or less, these two opposite chefs seem cut from the same fluted mold. Bernard, who disapproves of prepared foods, finally acquiesces to canned escargots. Still, her recipe for Escargots Burgundy-style gives directions for starving, purging, and cooking your own garden snails if you like—hardly simple by anyone's standards. Maybe it is the foreign names we associate with high-priced menus, but the fact is, simple cooking to a Frenchman is considered fancy fare here, even easy classics like *steak au poivre* or *coquilles St.-Jacques*. *The Good Cuisine* does contain many truly easy and delicious recipes by both chefs, but it does not help that they are buried under others that reinforce the image of French food as fussy and difficult. Each recipe is rated for expense as well as difficulty, but both can be somewhat skewed for an American audience, given differences in ingredient prices and presumed baseline cooking skill.

Another problem is complexity under the guise of simplicity. Each recipe takes no more than a page, some so short that they look like a tiny hors d'oeuvres on a big white plate. This is accomplished by stringing the ingredients together like a beads on a necklace and by packing terse instructions into a single jammed paragraph, a bold capital letter delineating each step. A short-looking recipe can thus involve a surprising number of complications. (It was also hard to keep my place in the dense recipe format and stir at the same time.)

This extreme brevity is hard for someone accustomed to the "Cooking for Dummies" style of recipe writing currently popular in America. Even advanced cooks who do not need much hand-holding might be confounded by *Good Cuisine's* cryptic instructions, confusing culinary syntax, many copy errors, and few indications for doneness. I managed to avoid disaster during testing, but only by filling in the blanks. For example, we are instructed to bake Bernard's parsleyed loin of lamb the second time "for a few minutes." Some steps, like pureeing Ducasse's delicate pea soup with garlic bread fingers, are left out entirely. (One can never be sure, however. It's possible that the blanched radish leaves and snow pea pods are supposed to be left intact, making the whole thing look like swamp sludge. There is no description of the desired result.) Ducasse's more unconventional instructions in particular need more lucid translation for the home cook, even if it means exceeding one page.

Be warned that metric conversions are not always accurate. Bernard's chestnut-stuffed turkey translates a 3-kilogram bird as 1 ½ pounds rather than 6 1/2, which is still a difficult size to find in this land of 18-pound Thanksgiving giants (too big for French

ovens). Fortunately, weights are given in both pounds and kilograms, so when in doubt, double-check the math.

Finally, the 52 most popular ingredients in France are not necessarily popular, or even common, here. The seafood section is especially alienating for a West Coast cook with limited access to dogfish, hake, whiting, and langoustines. With the help of a good fish store or reference book, the recipes are still useful with local substitutes. The good thing is that I will know what to do with a guinea hen if I ever come across one, and I can dream about having to decide between black-legged or yellow chicken bought directly from the farm. Just imagine, French cooks argue about different types of mussels.

But while too-literal translation can cause a comedy of errors, we adventurous home cooks should not give up. Like travel, encounters with foreign cookbooks pay off in proportion to the effort to overcome communication barriers. The reward in *The Good Cuisine* is learning about two French views of *la cuisine bourgeoise*, with good prospects for some spectacular meals in the bargain. Plus, it isn't every day that we can have motherly advice and a three-star chef stirring up the pots. *Vive la différence!*

Test Notes: While Americans have developed a taste for fish over recent decades, many are still intimidated by the idea of cooking one whole. Here Bernard demonstrates how truly simple yet stunning a stuffed whole fish can be. Ducasse would never settle for less than a gilt-head bream, but given the limitations of the best fish market in my neighborhood, I made do with a glossy, pink-flecked New Zealand snapper. I also incorporated all of Ducasse's suggestions except for the deglazing, so as not to disturb the fish's repose. Snuggled in my oval earthenware dish on a mushroom bed lined with tomato and lemon, the fish burst out of the oven like a ray of Mediterranean sunshine on the seashore.

Françoise Bernard's Sea Bream With Mushroom Stuffing (*Dorade farci aux champignons*)

Serves 4. Preparation time: 45 minutes. Cooking time: 50 minutes.

Ingredients:

1 sea bream, about 2 ½ lbs. (1.2 kg), scaled and cleaned
6 tablespoons milk
½ cup (60 g) white bread crumbs
4 tablespoons (50 g) butter
7 oz. (200 g) button mushrooms, trimmed and sliced
1 shallot, chopped
1 egg yolk
4 tablespoons chopped parsley
Salt and pepper
Strip of bacon, optional
¾ cup (15cl) dry white wine

Preheat the oven to 375°F (190°C). Ask the fishmonger to scale and clean the sea bream. If you are going to do it yourself, boil it for 1 minute first, rinse well, and pat dry with paper towels. Heat the milk and add the bread crumbs. Sauté the mushrooms and shallot in half of the butter over medium-high heat. Squeeze the milk out of the bread crumbs. Mix the bread with the egg yolk, parsley, and mushroom mixture. Season with salt and pepper to taste. [I would also season the fish on all sides.] Stuff the sea bream and sew the slit with kitchen string—or simply wrap the string around the fish 3 or 4 times—to keep the stuffing in place. You may also cover the slit with a thin strip of bacon before tying to prevent any stuffing from falling out. Place the sea bream in a baking dish, pour on the wine, and dot with the rest of the butter. Bake for 30 or 40 minutes, then serve directly from the baking dish.

Note by Alain Ducasse: Cook this dish to perfection by choosing an earthenware baking dish and filling it with slices of button mushrooms. The mushrooms will add moisture, which will make the fish juicy. A few slices of lemon and tomato will add a little touch of acidity and fresh flavor to the cooking juice. Deglaze the dish with a bit of chicken stock, a few drops of olive oil for a smooth finish, and some arugula leaves for a tart, peppery flavor.