

THE ROMANCE OF FRANCE HAS ITS LIMITS

When my husband and I were dating, I knew within months that he was the one. But two years into our relationship, he was taking a little longer to figure that out, so I came up with a brilliant plan; a ten-day trip starting in Paris, making a loop down through the Rhone Valley and up through the Loire to celebrate the anniversary of our first date. I made reservations at bed and breakfasts, private inns, and even one castle. Each day the sun rose into the crisp blue sky. We traveled the side roads through quaint villages and countryside, dotted with the brilliant colors of autumn. We stopped in local markets and made picnics of Saint-Marcellin, a farmhouse cheese, and paired it with a Saumur Champigny, a lovely burgundy wine given to us by one of our innkeepers. We even listened to Edith Piaf as we drove from one breathtaking vista to the next. Then, with the scene set and Van Gogh's afternoon light draping over us like a warm blanket, I waited for those four simple words, "Will you marry me?" Nothing. Day after day, one Hollywood set-up after the next, I didn't hear a peep.

When I closed my eyes, I could still see the blazing foliage coming toward me at warp speed. Burgundy, crimson, amber and mustard colored leaves blurred together as we zoomed past the backlit trees. We were on hour six of our drive from Avignon to the small town of Le Blanc in the Loire Valley, and despite the enchanting beauty at every turn, I was drunk on flora overload, like a sailor finding his balance on land after a month at sea. I was ready to stop for the night, but we still had a few hours to go.

"How are you holding up? Do we need to stop to feed you?" teased Dan.

Not finding any humor in his questions, I responded, "Very funny. No, let's have dinner in town when we get there. I'm sure there will be a bistro or café open. But, could you step on it? You're driving like an old lady."



Our rented red Citroen gallantly sped through the kaleidoscopic forests, down into the verdant green valleys of wine country. The lines of perfectly placed vines seemed to animate as we raced past vineyard after vineyard. The sun's rays sparkled off the dew settling on the engorged grapes, hinting at the harvest soon to come. And that made me think of wine, which made me think of food, which coincided with my blood sugar dipping below a safe level, whereupon I turned into a venom-spewing psychopath. Hunger and I did not get along. Dan bore the burden of my tirades, as nothing would make me human until I was fed. Like a caged animal, my claws and fangs came out just ready to pounce on any unsuspecting passersby.

Sensing my mood shift, Dan suggested, "Maybe we should stop somewhere, just for a quick snack."

"You think?" I spit back at him.

"Well, you know how you get," he rebutted, trying to sound reasonable.

"No, how do I get?" I bit back.

He knew better than to engage with me at this point, as we drove silently in search of any place for a morsel of anything. But, we were deep in farm country and unless we pulled over and slaughtered a cow, there was nothing to eat. The sun was setting, the sky was going from indigo to black, and if there was a full moon, I suspected the hair on my knuckles would have burst out from my skin.

Just past 9:30, we arrived in Le Blanc, only to find that every restaurant was closed for the night. I could feel the rush of panic rising up, forcing the first few tears down my cheeks. We arrived at our B&B, and although I tried to keep it together, my voice quivered as I asked the owner in my high school French, "*Y a-t-il un endroit ouvert pour le dîner?* Is there any place open for dinner?"

Looking at me with a combination of disdain and pity, Madame Martin answered, "Zere iz nowhere. All cloze at nine."

She hesitated for a bit, sensing I might burst into sobs, and grudgingly continued, "But, uh, maybe I can bring some cheese, some wine. Zat be good?"

I was so overcome I could not speak. Dan stepped in and said, "That would be perfect. *Merci Madame, Merci.*"

As we opened the door to our room, we were welcomed by a light breeze floating in through the floor to ceiling windows that led out to a veranda. The silk drapes undulated like a dancer performing in Madame Butterfly. We could smell eucalyptus and pine mixing with the distant scent of Gitanes wafting up from Madame's kitchen. Dan came up behind me and pulled me close.

For a fleeting moment I was overwhelmed by the romance of the moment only to be shocked back to reality as my stomach continued to growl. Knowing all too well that I was close to the point of no return, Dan whispered, "Just hang on a few more minutes."

"I'm fine!" I snapped.

Moments later, Madame entered our room with a tray of all of God's best gifts; a glorious chunk of Curé Nantais, one of the valley's best raw cow's milk cheeses, a slice of country pâté with cornichons and Dijon mustard on the side, a cluster of local purple grapes, a bowl of fresh raspberries, a classic French baguette, and a bottle of Sancerre. Like a prisoner being given her first meal after freedom, Madame could see the gratitude on my face. She smiled, half laughing to herself as she said, "Bon Appétit," and left us to feast.



Tears of joy streamed down my cheeks. I never had a meal that was simpler or more satisfying. As we popped the last grapes in our mouths, I exhaled in relief, finally sated. Dan quietly asked, "Are we better now?" I smiled lovingly, shook my head "yes," and then licked the last morsel of pâté off the knife as I curled up next to him, hoping against hope that he would see that this was another perfect moment to propose. But he

still hadn't read the memo.

—Excerpted from *GETTING SAUCED—How I Learned Everything I Know About Food from TV*

MUSHROOM & PROSCIUTTO PINWHEELS

I discovered the joy of working with puff pastry late in life. It can be used for so many things—turning your chicken stew into a potpie, making a quick apple galette, or creating the classic Baked Brie en Croûte. If you want to be a hero, you can certainly make your own, but really, who has that much time? You can easily find puff pastry sheets in your local grocery freezer section.

I first made these simple pinwheels when I found some leftover pizza toppings in my fridge. It's a great hors d'oeuvre and you might want to think about doubling the recipe because they'll be gone nearly as soon as you set them down.

INGREDIENTS

1 sheet frozen puff pastry

Flour for rolling out pastry

2 tablespoons olive oil

$\frac{1}{4}$ cup prosciutto, diced

$\frac{1}{2}$ shallot, diced

6 mushrooms, diced

2 cloves garlic, minced

$\frac{1}{4}$ cup Parmesan cheese, finely grated.

1 egg, beaten

Salt and pepper to taste

PREPARATION

Preheat the oven to 400 degrees. Defrost the puff pastry sheet as per directions on the box.

In a skillet, heat olive oil. Sauté prosciutto and shallots for two minutes, add mushrooms and garlic, and continue sauté for three minutes. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Turn off heat and mix in half of the Parmesan cheese. Set aside.

On a floured surface, roll out puff pastry, keeping rectangular shape, just enough to thin out a bit.

Spoon out mushroom mixture on top of pastry. Using an offset palette, spread mixture until the pastry is covered with a thin layer, leaving $\frac{1}{2}$ inch border without mixture on one of the shorter sides.

Wet your finger with water and run it down the border.

Moving from the other end, roll up the pastry. Pinch the border to seal closed.

Using half of the beaten egg, brush it over the pastry roll. If the pastry has warmed up too much and is very soft, place the roll in the refrigerator for 20 minutes.

Remove roll from refrigerator. Cut 16 slices, as if you were cutting a Toll House cookie roll, and place slices on a greased baking sheet or Silpat. Brush slices with the other half of the egg wash. Sprinkle remaining Parmesan cheese on top of each piece.

Bake for 15 – 20 minutes until golden brown. Let cool for five minutes before plating.

FRENCH HARVEST SOUP

I'm proud to say, this was my first televised recipe. We did a "crew favorite" episode on *Emeril Live*, and this recipe was my contribution. One fan from California gave me this rave review on the website, *"Her current employer may have to make space for her at the counter to showcase her cooking expertise! This recipe is WONDERFUL and easy! I added some beets to the mix and it gives the soup a deep pink color—and tastes just as delicious. A hearty soup to enjoy on a cold day. I'm glad we had leftovers—we couldn't get enough of this wonderful soup!"*

INGREDIENTS

1 large yellow onion, skinned and quartered

1 large sweet pepper

1 large bell pepper

1 head garlic, cut in half

3 ears corn

1 large tomato

2 yukon gold potatoes, halved

$\frac{1}{4}$ cup olive oil

3 cups chicken stock or bone broth

salt and pepper

1 tablespoon adobo sauce (chipotle)

1/2 pound gruyere cheese, thickly grated

12 bread croutons

2 cloves crushed garlic

PREPARATION

Preheat oven to 375 degrees.

Place onion, peppers, garlic, corn, tomato, and potatoes on baking sheet. Generous brush with olive oil and season with salt and pepper.

Roast for approximately 45 minutes until al dente. Skin should be broken on peppers and tomatoes. Peel off skin when cool.

Chop vegetables into large chunks. Place in pot and add enough chicken stock to almost cover vegetables. Add adobo sauce. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Bring to boil, then simmer for 20 minutes.

Pour strained veggies into crock. Add broth to fill crock leaving $\frac{1}{2}$ " to the top of lip. Place croutons on top and cover with grated cheese.

WHAT MOTHER NATURE REALLY INTENDED

"I wouldn't eat that if I were you. That's a poisonous one."

Ed, "The Fungi," grabs my arm just before I reach some white mushrooms at the base of an enormous oak tree. They look just

like the ones I usually buy at Stop and Shop.

“Those are Amanita Phalloides, otherwise known as Death Caps. Nasty suckers.”

Contemplating my near demise, I wince as I follow behind him, traipsing my way through this damp northern California forest.

“Did you know there are over 10,000 species of fungi that produce mushrooms? You got your poisonous ones, your edibles, and of course, my favorites, the magic ones.”



Ed is a big burly guy with a full beard that seems like it hasn't been trimmed since the summer of Woodstock. He lives in an RV, currently tucked away in the woods, complete with a full kitchen, bathroom and probably a big bag of weed stashed somewhere behind the driver's seat. He seems to be the point person for a collection of mushroom zealots that scour the forest floor in search of these little earthy treasures. I'm scouting this hunt to see if it will make a good segment for our show, *"Emeril Live."* Thanks to Ed's enthusiasm, I can tell

it will.

“Aha! Here they are!” he gleefully announces.

Ed reaches down toward the bottom of a beautiful Douglas fir tree, digging up some glorious golden mushrooms.

“Smell this. It’s got an almost fruity aroma,” he insists. “It’s a chanterelle.”

He hands me a delicate, yet cold and firm mushroom that I actually recognize. I’ve mostly seen it in its dried out and travel weary form at Dean and Deluca’s for \$24.00 per pound.



“Just inhale. Chanterelles are best cooked. Raw ones might upset the old tum-tum.”

Again, here’s another warning about the toxins that seem to surround me.

“You’re sure smelling is okay?” I ask to make double sure.

“Yes, a good whiff of chanterelle never hurt anybody.”

He's right. The mushroom does have a fruity smell—almost like an apricot. I had no idea that this meaty and fragrant fungus was what a chanterelle should really be like.



This isn't the first time my eyes have been opened to the value of having something fresh from the earth. My television infused culinary education has not only treated me to a backstage pass into some of the great kitchens in the country, but it has also given me an opportunity to meet some of the most passionate farmers, foragers, and food enthusiasts. It always amazes me how much depth of knowledge they have about a single crop or about the minerals of a certain terroir or where in a vast sea you can find that big tuna that would much prefer to keep on swimming. But more than anything, it's those memorable bites of tasting something in its purest form that makes you realize this is the way Mother Nature intended it to be.

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THE RAMBUTINI

When it comes to weird fruit, don't judge a rambutan by its cover. These fruits— that frighteningly remind me of telescopic images of the coronavirus—have been here far longer than this awful plague. If you've ever wandered around your local Chinatown markets, you'll see them right between the longans and the mangosteens.

But when you get past their ugly exterior and delicately slice around their hairy bellies, you'll be treated to a delightfully light and sweet orb that's perfect for this martini.

INGREDIENTS (makes 2)

3 rambutans, skins and pits removed

4 ounces of Empress Gin

$\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon ginger syrup

2 teaspoons lemon juice

lemon strips or a twist for garnish

cucumber slice for garnish

ice

I like using Empress 1908 Indigo Gin for this cocktail because it has a great balance of botanicals and the indigo color turns a light violet with the addition of the lemon.

To peel rambutans, make a $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch slice around the belly of the fruit. Twist and gently squeeze the skin and the fruit should pop out. Remove the pit and rough chop the fruit.

Muddle the fruit in the bottom of the shaker. Add the gin, ginger syrup, lemon juice, and ice. Shake vigorously. Pour into martini glasses and garnish with a slice of cucumber and lemon strips.

BAO TODAY, GONE TOMORROW

You can tell a lot about a country by what people eat for breakfast. Here in Brooklyn, it's all about the rough and tumble bagel and a schmear. In France, how can you start the day without an elegant croissant and café au lait? In Japan, how about some healthy steamed rice, miso soup and grilled fish to get your engine going?

To me, there's no place like Singapore to challenge your notion of what constitutes a satisfying breakfast. As a myriad of cultures mix and mash together, it's hard to say which one has the strongest hold on people's morning habits. For me, it was always a toss up between kaya toast and eggs or Char Siu Bao. Both are delicious and as unhealthy as can be imagined.

Kaya Toast and very soft-boiled egg



Kaya toast is simply toasted white bread slathered in coconut paste AND butter. It's usually served with a soft-boiled egg that isn't quite soft-boiled. The egg is simply placed in the bottom of a pot, boiling water is poured over it and then it's immediately removed. The whites have barely congealed and the yolk is runnier than water. And it's disgustingly delicious. You crack the egg open in a small bowl, add a squirt of soy sauce and a dash of white pepper, and let the toast suck up all that yummy goodness. And of course, you must wash it down with some Kopi tarik, a.k.a. "pulled coffee," a local coffee mixed with sugar. The brewed coffee is poured repeatedly from

one container to another using a strainer to give it a rich taste and extra thickness. It's served with sweetened condensed milk just in case the sugar didn't sweeten it enough for you.



But my true favorite start to the day is a Char Siu Bao. On almost any corner, there's a small hawker stall with a steam box offering these delicate treats—roasted barbeque pork encased in a light, doughy pillow. It's sort of their version

of a jelly donut except it's savory and not fried. Actually, it's nothing like a jelly donut.

On the corner of Jalan Besar and Maude Street on the outskirts of Little India in Singapore—should you ever find yourself there—is an unassuming storefront that prides itself on its traditional homemade baos. Piles of huge wooden steam racks stack one upon another, cranking out hundreds of baos a day. I'd share the name of the place, but everything is written in Chinese and my Cantonese is wanting.



Of course, there is no lack of opinions about pork buns. And back here in the states, I've been on a mission to find something that rivals those I guiltily consumed in Singapore. Most dim sum joints here in New York offer their version of

char siu bao, often simply listed as steamed pork buns on their menus. The Nam Wah Tea Parlor on Doyers street has a very respectable one, but I do find the balance between bun and pork to be a bit off, the bun overwhelming the filling. The Mei Lai Wah Bakery on Bayard Street has a baked char siu bao. The baking adds a light, soft brown crust to the bun and there's a balanced pork to bun ratio.



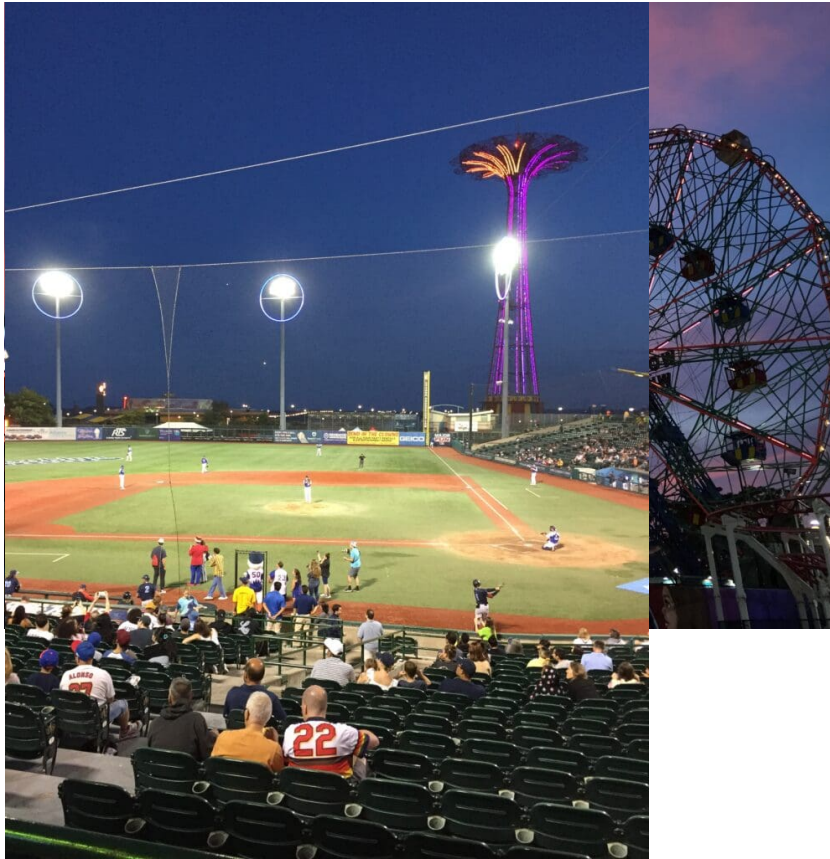
Mei Lai Wah Bakery

But hands down, Tim Ho Wan in the east village has THE best-baked buns. There's a nice, sweet, buttery crunch as you bite into it, and their char siu is spot on. It's not surprising considering they call themselves the "dim sum specialists," having originating from Hong Kong. And it's not hype. They've got locations all over the world, including Singapore where I first sampled my first baked bao. Thankfully, nothing is lost in translation.



So now I can rest easy knowing that on any given morning there are baos in abundance a mere subway ride away. I've even seen them in Trader Joe's freezer case, though I fear that is just way too convenient and dangerous. Of course, I can always lighten up the most important meal of the day and do as the Mexicans do. Chilaquillas anyone?

ONE LAST GASP OF SUMMER



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And the place for all of that is my beloved Coney Island. Over

the years it has managed to revive itself without losing its tacky, old school charm. Even though they've installed insane new rides that seem to threaten to hurl you into the ocean with one push of the wrong button, you can still go to Nathan's and get fries that have probably been soaked in the same oil they've been using since 1945. Don't get me wrong, aged oil has its charms.

After the grease has fully coated my intestines, my hubby and I walk down Surf Avenue to catch a Brooklyn Cyclones game. They are our home minor league baseball team affiliated with the New York Mets. For twenty-five bucks we can sit behind the plate, watch a very quick game because no one ever seems to get on base, and look out at the landmark parachute jump that my parents used to ride. But the best parts of the game are the quick entertaining breaks between innings. Last Friday night they featured a dance by The Pacemakers, a senior citizen version of the Dallas Cowboy cheerleaders with walkers, a race between a bottle of catsup, relish and mustard mascots sponsored by Nathan's, (catsup won), a toilet plunger toss, and a guy who proposed to his girlfriend only to be mortified when she said no and started screaming expletives at him. This is the local flavor of Brooklyn that I love. Not to mention the greasy knish I ate on the way out of the ballpark, walking as quickly as I could to beat the rush to the boardwalk for the final fireworks display of the season.

And it did not disappoint. Although I can still smell the smoke in my hair from the falling ash, there's nothing better than being right under the fireworks as they blaze against the sky. As their cascading sparks reach back down to kiss the beach, I snuggle with my husband to stay warm from the cool ocean breezes. I can feel autumn trying to sneak its way in, but here in Brooklyn, all we have to say about that is "fuhgeddaboudit."

ROASTED TOMATO SOUP

It's harvest time, so that means the neighbors have way too many tomatoes to know what to do with them. So, being the lucky recipient of their abundance, I'm putting this year's bounty to good use with this creamy roasted tomato soup. There's nothing better than making tomato soup from fresh garden ingredients.

Wait, oh yes, there is one thing better—creamy homemade garden tomato soup with a grilled cheese sandwich. Gotta go – I've got some sandwiches to make.

INGREDIENTS

1 dozen ripe plum tomatoes (or whatever tomatoes you have from the garden)

1 onion, thickly sliced

1 head of garlic

$\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon red pepper flakes

1 Tablespoon olive oil

2 cups of chicken stock

$\frac{1}{4}$ cup heavy cream

salt and pepper to taste

FOR GARNISH

$\frac{1}{4}$ cup grated Parmesan

fresh basil leaves



PREPARATION

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Place aluminum foil on the bottom of a baking sheet.

Slice a $\frac{1}{2}$ " thick cross in one end of each tomato. This will make it easier to peel the tomatoes once they are roasted. Wrap a small piece of aluminum foil around the base of the garlic head to hold it together.

Place the tomatoes, onion slices and foiled garlic head on the baking sheet. Drizzle all with olive oil and season with salt and pepper. Using your hands, gently massage the oil and spices to cover all sides of the vegetables. Place in oven and roast for 30 minutes.

After thirty minutes, turn the vegetables over and roast for an additional 30 minutes. Allow to cool.

Peel the skin off of the tomatoes and discard skins. Pressing the base of the garlic head, squeeze the roasted garlic out, discarding the skin. Place the tomatoes, onions and roasted garlic in a dutch oven. Add the chicken stock and red pepper flakes. Re-season with salt and pepper. Bring to a boil, then lower to a simmer for forty-five minutes, stirring occasionally. Allow to cool down.

Using an immersion blender, puree the soup. When you're ready to serve, reheat and add the cream.

Pour into bowls and garnish with parmesan and basil leaves.