

FOOD AND CULTURE: FRENCH CUISINE

Fact Sheet



Traditional Foods and Dishes

French cuisine varies widely based on the region, but fresh fruits, vegetables, meats, fish, and cheese are common ingredients that are used nationally.¹ Some popular food items are²:

- Croissant - a flaky buttery pastry are typically consumed for breakfast with butter and jam
- Croque-monsieur - a dish consisting of a baked ham sandwich topped with cheese
- Coq au vin – a braised chicken dish with lardons and mushrooms
- Bouillabaisse – a fish stew, ingredients vary depending upon the fish available
- Crème Brulee – a dessert with a custard base and hard caramel top

Food as a Celebration

An estimated 88 percent of the people in France are Catholic.³ This means Christmas is an important holiday. Caviar, oysters, and foie gras (goose liver) are celebratory dishes that are consumed during the holidays in France.²

France's traditional gastronomic meal is a tradition, and an essential part of the culture. The meal follows a specific order: aperitif (alcoholic beverage served before a meal), starter, main course (meat/fish and a vegetable), cheese, dessert, digestive. These meals are shared with friends and family and last about 3 hours. The social connection during the gastronomic meal is just as important as the food.⁴

UNESCO added France's traditional gastronomic meal to their Intangible Heritage list in 2010.⁵

Traditional Eating Patterns

- The French traditionally eat 3 meals per day⁶
 - le petit déjeuner (breakfast)
 - le déjeuner (lunch)
 - le dîner (dinner)
- Breakfast is usually eaten around 8:00am, lunch around 1:00pm, and dinner after 8:00pm.⁶
- Lunch and dinner typically consist of 3 courses.⁶
- Meals are enjoyed slowly. French people spend approximately 2.5 hours per day eating meals.⁶ This is more time than any other country.⁷
- Meals are social and consumed with family or friends.⁴
- Wine is generally served with dinner.⁶
- Snacking is limited. Aside from afternoon tea or an aperitif, only 15 percent of French people consume snacks very often.⁶

Traditional Health Beliefs

France has the longest life expectancy in the western world. They also have low rates of obesity, despite their focus on food. The theory behind this is that French people are able to mentally separate the pleasure of eating from concerns about health and guilt about potential weight gain.⁷ Even with this positive diet-health relationship, the French have some unusual traditional beliefs:

- Turning a baguette upside down was believed to invite famine into the household. The history behind this superstition is that bakers refused to sell bread to the king's executioners. When the king forced them to do so, the bakers reluctantly gave the bread to the executioners upside down as a sign of disrespect.⁸
- Enjoying a meal with others is an important aspect of French culture; however, it was believed that hosting a dinner party for 13 would result in bad health. This superstition is thought to be tied to The Last Supper⁹

Current Food Practices

The current French diet is changing from traditional food practices in a few ways:

- Young people eat 16 percent more meals outside of the home than they did 30 years ago⁶
- People spend approximately 20 percent less time cooking than they did 30 years ago⁶
- Today only 56 percent of the population consume wine regularly or occasionally.¹⁰

Although some habits are changing, many French dietary practices remain the same. Compared to the typical American diet, French portion sizes are smaller, and French people seek less variety in their cuisine.⁷ They value quality, and at a national level they are actively promoting their culinary heritage in a number of ways:

- Creating the National French Food Program, whose goals are the following¹¹:
 - To promote access of quality food to everyone
 - To educate people about food and where it comes from
 - To develop a high quality food supply
 - To promote French food and culinary heritage
- Adopting the Nutri-Score system, which provides the following¹²:
 - A five color labeling system indicating the nutritional value of foods
 - A straightforward method to help people make healthier choices and limit their intake of foods that are high in calories, saturated fats, sugar, and salt.¹²

References

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