

Gout de Terroir -Taste of Terror

Cynthia Morris

In the French super market, the cooler filled with tiny discounted chickens lured me in. It seemed like a good idea, a cheap and tasty way to feed a dozen hungry twenty somethings. I heaped my cart with them, a pile of carcasses with little feathers still stuck to the pink skin.

Driving through the Burgundian countryside, the green fields and windy roads infused me with a sense of well-being. Here I was, in France, shopping at French markets, cooking in a French chateau. It was my dream to live and work in France, even if it meant I had to be a cook to do it.

I'd taken the job for the adventure and the free ticket to Europe. My reputation was built on preparing spicy and flavorful world cuisines. Vegetarian cuisines, that is, certainly not French and certainly not meat. I figured I could fake my way through the braising and roasting and slicing of meat with the aid of the explicit and diagrammed instructions in the Joy of Cooking. My job as the on-site chef for a hot air balloon company was a challenge. The duties included cooking for the crew, a restless pack of British young bucks. We would travel to Switzerland in a week. There I would prepare fancy finger food that would be strapped to the sides of the balloons that cruised over the Swiss Alps. As a vegetarian I didn't really know how to cook meat. It had been 13 years since I had eaten or cooked meat and I was winging it with the Joy of Cooking.

In the round kitchen, I unpacked the bags of groceries. The crew would be starving, and I had a few hours to whip up a pleasing meal. We'd have the chickens, some green beans and roasted potatoes. I lined the little darlings up on the huge table. Little feathers stuck out along the skinny wings. Was it okay to leave the feathers on? Wouldn't they have taken them off if they weren't meant to be there? The French way of cooking is very different from the American way. In France, everything is presented in its real form. Whole carcasses hang in butcher shops. Photos of horses frolicking line the horsemeat stalls in markets. Americans like the illusion of neat meat, all safe and wrapped in plastic, far removed from the butchering process.

I imagined a nasty smell when the feathers started burning in the oven along with the meat. When I tried to pluck them, they stubbornly resisted. The skin pulled but didn't release the tiny feathers. I left them on. I rubbed butter over their little bodies, and stuffed herbs and garlic under the skin, placed them on a rack and roasted them.

At the table piled with platters of chicken, potatoes and green beans, a dead silence overtook the rowdy gang as they chewed and chewed and chewed. Soon the taunts started rippling down the line. Where'd you get these rubber chickens? Don't you know you don't buy cheap meat? I hadn't tasted the chicken so I did not know it was bad. It looked good, browned skin crispy and glistening. But it wasn't good, and the rubber chickens were the death of my reputation as a good cook.

Now I was the prey, open and vulnerable to their attacks. The pack of hormonally charged British lads ripped through my confidence in a matter of days. The rubber chickens exposed me to a season of taunts and abuse. My colloquialisms, my manners, my looks and my naïveté all took hits from the bawdy, rude and entirely masculine ways of the crew. My ego was as picked over and decimated as the chicken corpses. It was worth it though, right? To be in France, cooking from French fields, in a French chateau, in my charming kitchen, I could handle it, right?

I stuck it out, practicing my French and learning how to cook meat in a foreign country. My food tasted different. The gout de terroir was for me a taste of terror. I never knew if the food would be good or bad. It's a tightrope walk, cooking and serving food you have not tasted. I made it across, my sanity and ego only bruised, not broken. I was

happy to return to my own gout, my own terroir, with the valuable lesson: don't buy cheap chickens.