

Exploring the Influence of Geography on French Cuisine

Everybody knows that the heart of the French national image is an admiration of food and its preparation, as national cuisine defines the French more than any other feature. Researchers argue that it is essential to design a special tool for determining the gastronomic identity of France and its regions. The determination of the gastronomic identity of a particular country depends on a broad range of factors, which consist of the dominant elements in the environment and culture of a particular country. In France, geography, climate, and agriculture are the most important environmental factors that influence its gastronomic identity. Besides it, the level of ethnic diversity, traditional values, beliefs, history, and religion occur as the most significant cultural factors that establish a basis for the formation and development of French cuisine. In this way, the specifics of French environment and culture make a significant impact on the gastronomic characteristics of French cuisine¹.

All gastronomies go through a continuous evolution and represent the fusion of traditions, etiquette, and unique ingredients. Classic food and wine examples describe many of the similarities and differences in flavors, textures, components based on geographical or cultural peculiarities of their origins². Due to this, it is essential to understand how environment and culture interact to create an exclusive gastronomic image of France.

The geographer Pitte turns first to the climate and land of France to explore the factors which made an impact on a rich culinary heritage of France. The researcher believes that the dynamic interaction between French culture and landscape was the most significant factor contributing to the formation of French gastronomic identity. The culinary greatness achieved by

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Robert J. Harrington "Defining Gastronomic Identity". *Journal Of Culinary Science & Technology* 4: 2-3 (2005) pp. 129-152.

²

Ibid.

this country is the result of a specific history, which began with the Gauls, who considered food to be central in their political and social lives. Further, climatological and geographical diversity influenced the farmers from various regions of France and encouraged them to enrich the provincial traditions of a particular region³.

Geographer Pitte indicates that French society responded to the rich culinary experiments provided by the diverse landscape of the country in an exceedingly positive manner because gourmandism has never been considered a sin for the French. The Church held an ambivalent position toward praising restraint, pleasures of the table, and condemning gluttony, that is why the monastic communities from all regions of France started producing the great wines. Even Protestant austerity could not deemphasize French appreciation for food. In this way, though the relation between gourmandism and Christian tradition was complicated, the French considered the enjoyment of food to be an integral part of the enjoyment of existence, that is why eliminating gourmandism as the part of French day-to-day life was merely impossible⁴.

Differences in French landscape created the differences in food and preferences. The famous French gastronome and chef once said that ‘French soil enjoys the privilege of producing naturally and in abundance the best vegetables, the best fruits, the best wines in the world.’⁵ French wines are considered to be the regional products closely connected with the soil, which was exceedingly productive, fertile, and rich - a true national treasure. Thus, as a regional division of France was one of the factors which made a significant impact on the national

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Jean-Robert Pitte. *French Gastronomy: The History And Geography Of A Passion*. New York: Columbia University Press, (2002) pp 16.

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Ibid.

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Warren James Belasco, Philip Scranton. *Food Nations: Selling Taste In Consumer Societies*. New York: Routledge, (2002) pp. 41.

cuisine, it is essential to explore the regional differences between the gastronomic traditions of France.

There are 11 different wine regions in France producing nearly 200 wine types. The Languedoc-Roussillon region focuses on blended red wines, in particular on the varieties of Carignan, Syrah, and Grenache. Bordeaux region concentrates on the production of dry red wines, such as Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon, and rustic red wines, such as Cabernet Franc and Merlot. In Rhone Valley, Crozes-Hermitage and Vouvray wines are produced. On the South West of France, the notable type of wine is Cahors, which originated from Malbec⁶.

On the South West, the wines are medium-bodied, with the notes of plum and cherries. Provence is considered to be the most productive region for rose wines, while the Champagne region is the place of origin of champagne made of Chardonnay. Bourgogne region is known for its Pinot Noir wines with the notes of hibiscus, cranberry, and rustic. Beaujolais region produces Gamay wines with rich flavors of peony, plum, violet, and cherry. Alsace region focuses on the production of Riesling wines with smoky flavors, while Corsica region is the place of birth of Vermentino and Sangiovese wines. Jura, Bugeau, and Savoie is the smallest production area, which makes both red and white wines with the pleasurable aromas of cranberries, roses, and cherries⁷. In this way, each region of France has its wine production traditions and recipes.

Though wine is not the integral element of French cuisine, it is the essential part of French gastronomic identity, that is why it was critical to focus on the contrasts between 11 different wine production areas of France.

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Ibid.

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Ibid.

Besides the differences in wine, regional diversity of France also made a significant impact on the national cuisine. Writers on dietetics and natural history of France typically include information in their works on how foods were prepared and eaten in a variety of regions. For instance, pike in the Ile-de-France was boiled and eaten with a special German sauce made of melted butter, peppery vinegar, and mustard. In Saintonge, the squid was cooked in ink and eaten with the sauce made of spices, verjuice, and butter. In Bordeaux, the sea anemone was the central element of regional cuisine, that is why the citizens of Bordeaux washed it many times and fried it lightly in a pan. People in Toulouse added garlic sauce almost to each dish, while people in the Languedoc cooked eggs in olive oil and cooked salted sea bream⁸. Though all of these regions have a set of peculiarities in cooking traditions, the cuisine of Provence and Gascony should be given special attention.

As for Gascony and Provence, the cooking of salting goose to be either served in a cabbage soup or roasted, boiled, and served with mustard is traditional. Besides it, Gascons also love to cook onion sauce with mustard, cucumber salad with raw onions, and meat eaten with pomegranate juice. Inhabitants of Gascony and Provence are the only people in France who consume raw peaches with wine and raw leeks with honey⁹. All of these contrasts and similarities in French national cuisine and geography of wine create the image of diverse and unique French gastronomic identity, which was significantly influenced by the regional diversity of France.

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Jean-Louis Flandrin, Philip Hyman. "Regional tastes and cuisines: Problems, documents, and discourses on food in Southern France in the 16th and 17th centuries." *Food and Foodways*, (2010) pp. 227-228.

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Ibid.

Environmental factors are exceedingly important in the evaluation of aspects which influenced the formation of French cuisine. The geographical location of Provence made grapes, lemons, olives, capers, fish, figs, oranges, saffron, land turtles, and pomegranates more accessible for the inhabitants of Provence than for any other citizens of France. However, geographical and climatic factors cannot provide a comprehensive explanation of certain taste preferences or cooking habits of the French¹⁰. Due to this, it is essential to explore the cultural landscape of France.

Though inhabitants of the Languedoc ate adult goats, this type of meat was rarely eaten anywhere else. This fact can be explained from a cultural, not geographical perspective. According to the researchers, it was caused by the different types of husbandry and contrasting gastronomic preferences, which influenced French cuisine in the 16th and 17th centuries. Due to the different husbandry types, people in the Languedoc did not eat veal - the best-butchered meat type eaten throughout the France. Cultural peculiarities also influenced the love of Gascons to eat onions, garlic, and raw leeks, that is why such food tastes cannot be explained from the environmental perspective¹¹. In this way, the differences in lifestyle and husbandry among various regions in France influenced regional cuisine, making a great contribution to the formation of French gastronomic identity.

Social differences as the part of French culture also made an impact on the national cuisine. The connections between the individual, the city, and the state promoted a gastronomic culture with an emphasis on expensive ingredients, high quality, and originality. With the

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Jean-Louis Flandrin, Philip Hyman. "Regional tastes and cuisines: Problems, documents, and discourses on food in Southern France in the 16th and 17th centuries." *Food and Foodways*, (2010) pp. 226.

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Ibid.

development of French cities, French cuisine became politically and culturally prestigious, as meals were becoming the means of government. Food became the main way of asserting French exclusivity and cultural hegemony, that is why food as the part of French national identity helped the country to dominate the European diplomatic scene¹². As French food became associated with government authorities and monarchs, it got called ‘haute cuisine - the cookery of the elites’¹³. However, with the explosion of restaurant culture during the Revolution, the French gastronomic tradition was democratized, that is why French cuisine was no longer about fancy restaurants and expensive ingredients¹⁴. In this way, thanks to the cultural development, the idea of aristocratic French cuisine was democratized and became more accessible for the people from all over the world.

Diffusion was one more significant aspect that influenced French cuisine, especially in the early nineteenth century. The beginnings of tourism expanded the horizon of opportunities for some of the most famous French chefs, who started working in luxury hotels, where they served not only for the wealthy aristocrats but also for the members of the French middle class and foreign visitors, who came to France, seeking an exceptional gastronomic experience. Thanks to such luxury hotels and other touristic establishments, French chefs ultimately built an aura around the French cooking traditions, and this atmosphere was appropriate for international audiences¹⁵.

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Jean-Robert Pitte. *French Gastronomy: The History And Geography Of A Passion*. New York: Columbia University Press, (2002) pp 21.

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Amy B. Trubek, *Haute cuisine: how the French invented the culinary profession*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, (2001) pp. 4.

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Jean-Robert Pitte. *French Gastronomy: The History And Geography Of A Passion*. New York: Columbia University Press, (2002) pp 21.

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The promotion of French champagne in the late the nineteenth century also expanded the touristic opportunities both for the French and the international tourists coming to France. The consumption of champagne became associated with membership within social classes. Champagne became an integral component of a massive culture, a central element of bourgeois society. The traditions associated with wine and champagne production and consumption became a part of French cultural capital, what increased the international interest to France¹⁶.

Along with the increasing interest in champagne and wine, the level of attention to French cuisine also became higher. French chefs started publishing their recipes, while gastronomic critics started attending their restaurants to write some critical reviews. Such popularization of French cuisine transformed 'haute cuisine' into the gastronomy of the nineteenth century, popularizing French culinary traditions and globalizing its area of influence. Such emphasis on cuisine in France made French national cookery prestigious both at home and abroad. The constant cultural diffusion enriched French cooking traditions with new patterns of tastes and flavors, while critical reviews of gastronomic specialists from all over the world polished the mastery of French chefs¹⁷. In this way, cultural diffusion was the aspect that transformed 'haute cuisine' into the popular, world-known, exclusive national French cuisine with an ability to respond to individual tastes of each person.

Distance decay is the last factor that influenced the gastronomic identity of France. France is blessed with many geographic peculiarities which provide it with a broad range of

Jean-Robert Pitte. *French Gastronomy: The History And Geography Of A Passion*. New York: Columbia University Press, (2002) pp 21.

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Guy, Kolleen M. *When Champagne Became French: Wine and the Making of a National Identity*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, (2007) pp. 5.

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Priscilla P. Clark. "Thoughts for Food, I: French Cuisine and French Culture" *The French Review* 49, no. 1, (1975) pp. 33

ingredients that are difficult to be found anywhere else. Besides it, the country is surrounded by two bodies of water, such as the Mediterranean sea and the portion bordering the Atlantic Ocean and the English Channel. Mountains separate France from other countries, what made the cultural invasion of France merely impossible, as the Alps and the Pyrenees represent a natural source of protection for the country. The central portion of France is made of rivers and streams, which nourish agricultural lands and maintain the regions in their culinary experiments. In this way, the geographical location of the country carries out two important functions. On the one hand, it protects the country from foreign invasion, allowing France to work on its own cultural and national identity. On the other hand, it still provides France with the necessary connections with other countries, such as Spain or Switzerland, Italy or Germany, encouraging tourists from these countries to visit France and explore its gastronomic experiments¹⁸.

Thus, France is located in an optimal geographical area, which makes this country easily accessible from each part of Europe, but still protected. Thanks to such geographical peculiarities, France enriched its culture and mastered the art of culinary, which became the central part of the country's national identity. Besides it, a significant regional variety of France helped the country to create a wide range of cooking traditions. The majority of areas get the names of the foods prepared there, what encourages gastronomic tourism and emphasizes French proficiency in cooking.

In conclusion, the French gastronomic identity was formed and developed under the influence of many factors. Environmental aspects, such as climate, geography, and regional division of France, made an impact on French cuisine, as well as on the traditions of wine consumption and production. Each region of France is a unique component of an exclusive

18

French culture, having its traditional food and favorite flavors in the wine. Cultural development of France transformed its national cuisine into an integral part of the country's international image. French food became the measure of prestige, but after the Revolution, it was democratized and became accessible to all social classes. Cultural diffusion that started in the early nineteenth century made French cuisine internationally famous, transforming the tradition of champagne consumption into the component of mass bourgeoisie culture. Finally, the optimal geographic location of France provided it with the essential natural resources, thus protecting from the cultural invasion, but still making the international contacts available. In this way, French national cuisine was influenced by the four factors, such as regional division, cultural landscape, diffusion, and distance decay.

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