

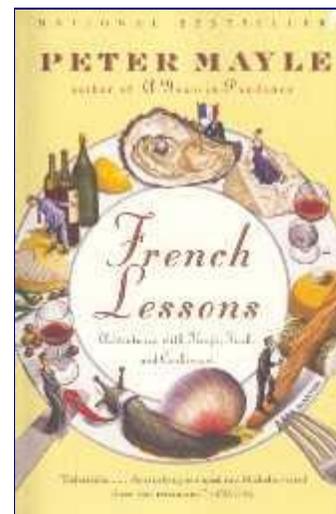
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A READER'S JOURNAL

**French lessons:
adventures with knife, fork, and corkscrew**
by
Peter Mayle

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Open this book and you're in for a fourteen course meal, which if you read it through without stopping, might last as long as a typical Provençal lunch, about

3 hours, and you will consume about five glasses of different wines along the way as you conjure up your "Inner Frenchman" and give thanks "For What We Are About to Receive". You'll discover why Frenchmen were called Frogs by the British during the two World Wars — it was because of their love of eating frogs, something the British turned up their noses on while the French inhaled deeply over the prospect of, as in the chapter, "The Thigh-Tasters of Vittel". Rather than sporting blue noses, the French honor their celebrated chickens in "Aristocrats with Blue Feet". Instead of overdressing for every meal like the Brits, there is a restaurant in the south of France known for "Undressing for Lunch". With cities around the world featuring a marathon run through their streets, Frenchmen converge for "A Connoisseur's Marathon" in various stages of dress and undress annually. Or you might enjoy some bobbing, weaving, and imbibing "Among the Flying Corks in Burgundy". And after stopping for *boudin noir*, or trying to find some, one might opt for "A Civilized Purge" at a health spa known more for its sumptuous feasts than its Spartan fasts.

What qualified Peter Mayle to write about French cooking? Certainly not his upbringing as an Englishman. Here's how he puts it.

[page 3] The early part of my life was spent in the gastronomic wilderness of postwar England, when delicacies of the table were in extremely short supply. I suppose I must have possessed taste buds in my youth, but they were left undisturbed. Food was fuel, and in many cases not very appetizing food. I still have vivid memories of boarding school cuisine, which seemed to have been carefully color-coordinated — gray meat, gray potatoes, gray vegetables, gray flavor. At the time I thought it was perfectly normal.

On his first business trip to France, he encounters food which finally exercises his atrophied taste buds. Even though they enter a restaurant on the *avenues Georges V*, English enough sounding, but inside the scents and flavors were definitely all French.

[page 5] It smelled different: exotic and tantalizing. There was the scent of the sea as we passed the display of oysters on their bed of crushed ice, the rich whiff of butter warming in a pan, and, coming through the air every time the kitchen door swung open, the pervasive — and to my untraveled nose, infinitely foreign — hum of garlic.

His lunch was not without hazard, however, when the French bread arrived. "At the first mouthful of

French bread and French butter, my taste buds, dormant until then, went into spasm." Lucky for him, as he ate his way through the French bread, sea bass, and other culinary delights, he wasn't expected to make conversation with his "elders and betters" and could concentrate on the myriad of delights keeping his palate busy. He was busy discovering "The Inner Frenchman" in himself as the chapter's title proclaims.

As a Cajun growing up in French South Louisiana, my inner Frenchman did not take long to discover because it was there from the time I was born. I think I came out of the womb in mid-July smelling boiled crabs simmering in a pot outside the window. And who would ever attempt to open and eat boiled crabs with one hand under the table? Bon Dieu! Not me. Nor for eating any other food. I was shocked to discover that one hand on the table was considered correct when eating in proper company. I quickly my lost taste for proper company. But not so Peter Mayle. He grew up immersed in it and learned all the reasons why — most of them not discussed in proper company — aloud, anyway.

[page 17] As a boy, I was taught to keep my hands under the table when they were not occupied with knife or fork or glass — a curious habit, my host said, and one that encourages mischievous behavior. It is well known that hands at English dinner parties have a tendency to wander under the table, squeezing a thigh, caressing a knee, and generally getting up to no good. In the best French households, the rule is the reverse — idle hands must be kept on the table. Dalliance cannot be allowed to interfere with food. First things first is the rule, and, during dinner at least, fondling is prohibited.

In this next passage, Mayle describes the ritual of the Sunday lunch, especially the menu time when thoughts are most focused on food and not idle conversation. This compares favorably with an abominable practice I have observed among Americans. Some people when they should be concentrating on the food they are ordering for this meal, instead talk about bad food they have ordered in other restaurants. I keep a notepad to record the names of such people so that I might never slip and invite them to a dinner in my kitchen. I especially like the metaphor which ends this quotation.

[page 19] In fact, it doesn't matter what you choose. It is those few moments of anticipatory limbo that are special. For five or ten minutes, conversations are muted, gossip and family matters are put aside, and everyone in the restaurant is mentally tasting the dishes on offer. You can almost hear the flutter of taste buds.

Mayle tells of a French martinet, Fabrigoule, who gives impromptu homilies on bar stools about French and their love of food, saying "the religion of the French is food. And wine, of course."

[page 23] In this case, I happened to agree with him. You don't have to be particularly observant to notice that restaurants in France consistently attract larger audiences than churches, and I said so.

At that, Farigoule pounced. "Eh alors?" he said. He cocked his head and nodded encouragingly, the patient professor trying to coax an answer from a terminally dim student. "How do you explain this? What could be the reason, do you think?"

"Well," I said, "for one thing, the food's better. . . ."

"Bof!" He delivered his most withering look, holding up both hands to ward off any further heresy. "Why do I waste my time with intellectual pygmies?"

In "For What We Are About to Receive" we attend a truffle ceremony which involves a church, where the two religions of the French are neatly mingled, food and the church. In the French Quarter of New Orleans, I am always amazed to find queues of tourists waiting to be seated in Café du Monde while we natives simply walk past the line and enter one of the other entrances, find an empty table and sit down. Our version of *laissez-faire* is to let those who must, queue.

[page 28, 29] I'd been told to bring a truffle with me, and I checked to make sure that the precious foil-wrapped lump was safe in my pocket. Suddenly, there was the sound of iron grating against iron, followed by the regular hollow clang of the bell, causing alarm

and temporary deafness among a flock of pigeons that erupted from the belfry. I felt the pressure of the crowd, like a huge animal, pushing me closer to the steps of the church. Then the doors were opened. With as much decorum as they could manage while jockeying for positions with a good view close to the altar, the members of the congregation nudged and jostled their way inside. The French have never taken to the Anglo-Saxon habit of the orderly queue, which they consider far too inconvenient for everyday use.

Like Mayle I had trouble making omelettes that were "more than scrambled eggs with pretensions." So I was pleased to find instructions for the perfect omelette.

[page 37] Lunch continued, as did the omelette lesson: A new pan must be seasoned two or three times with oil to seal the surface. Before putting in the eggs, the pan must be preheated until it is hot enough to make a drop of water bounce. The pan must never be washed after use, just wiped with a paper towel. On these basic points there was general agreement.

If you want to make a friend in France, the thing to do is confess your ignorance on some subject, preferably food, and you will be entertained for hours by your table mate in a café who will soon be assisted by half of the patrons to enlighten you properly.

[page 46] As I've often said, there is nothing a Frenchman likes more than a self-confessed ignoramus, preferably foreign, who can be instructed in the many marvels and curiosities of France. I think it must be part of the national psyche, a compulsion to educate and thus to civilize those who have suffered the misfortune of being born in a less privileged part of the world. It happens all the time in Provence, where I have received free tuition in subjects as varied as the skinning of red peppers, the extinction of rats, the treatment of ailing plane trees, the training of truffle hounds, and the correct way to administer a suppository (*doucement, doucement*).

If the proper way to insert a suppository is *slowly, gently*, the proper way to eat a frog leg is neither slowly or gently, as Mayle is properly instructed by his neighbor after he simply eats the frog leg and puts it down. "'No, no,' he said, 'Suck the bone.' He lifted one hand to his lips and bunched his fingertips into a bouquet, 'It's good.'" This reminds me of the way my friend Mickey ate the squirrel bones in my dad's sauce piquante. He would simply push one end of the squirrel leg into one side of his mouth and a barren and properly sucked bone would appear on the other side!

At any festival in France one is plied with alcoholic beverages at all times of the day. Here Mayle warns of the seductive effect of alcohol for breakfast. One will likely miss any chance for being sober the entire day.

[page 51] Alcohol with breakfast is dangerously pleasant. My first experience of it had been some years before as a guest of the mayor of Bouzy, a village in the Champagne region. There had been two different wines to accompany the food, and politeness obliged me to sample them both. They were cool and invigorating, slipping down easily despite the earliness of the hour, and I was in a happy haze by 9:00 a.m. Lunch — and more wine, naturally — had been served just in time to prevent a return to sobriety, and I ended the day in disgrace after falling asleep at dinner. Since then, I've done my best to stick to coffee in the morning.

For the chicken with blue feet festival, Mayle ended up in the small town of Bourg in France. By the luck of the draw my mom and dad were from a small town in Louisiana named Bourg. Mayle writes, "We spent what was left of the afternoon exploring Bourg." (Page 69) I think it would only take about five minutes to explore my parents' home town of Bourg.

Until I read this next passage, I never knew of any famous Frenchmen with my first name, Robert. I can only say I would have preferred to have gotten Normandy instead of England if I were the son of William the Conqueror. Robert *Sieur de Normandy* has a certain cachet, n'est pas? Mayle is wandering through the countryside of Normandy in search of the annual Livarot cheese fair after his friend Sadler had been named a *chevalier de fromage*.

[page 87] This region of France, padded with green fields, rich in cows and apples, steeped in cream and Calvados, was the home of the warriors who invaded England under William the Conqueror. (A man who, despite his aggressive behavior, was evidently a caring and generous father. When he died in 1087, he left Normandy to his eldest son, Robert. To another son, William Rufus, he bequeathed England. Luckily for the boys, there were no inheritance taxes in those days.)

After reading this next passage, I am considering adding a new Matherne's Rule which says, "Only sit on the best cheeses." Of course, it applies to other things than cheeses, only stain your tablecloth with the best wines, only bump into the most buxomy movie starlets, etc. Which reminds me of the fun we had recalling the episode when my previous wife, in a hurry to get to the Ladies Room in a Las Vegas Casino, ran into Sergio Franco and didn't know it was him until later. "Who was that I bumped into?" she asked me later. "Sergio Franco. I imagine he's asking right now the same question about you," I replied. Enough digression, let's return to the story of the sat-on cheeses:

[page 104] It is rare for me to return home after one of these celebrations without a few accidental souvenirs decorating my clothes. This time, my wife pointed out that in the heat of the moment I seemed to have sat on, or in, some Livarot. My trousers had suffered. In fact, I doubted they would ever recover.

Fortunately, madame who presides over the dry cleaner's shop in Apt is a true artist. Wine, sauce, gravy, oil, butter—none of these has ever resisted her attentions. But even she was impressed by the smears of well-entrenched cheese. Too polite to inquire exactly how they had come to be there, she asked instead what kind of cheese it was. When told it was Livarot, she nodded thoughtfully and offered to clean the trousers for nothing. It was a challenge to her professionalism, she said. Moral: Only sit on the very best cheeses.

Enough of the ridiculous, now a sublime description of the snail. We should note in this time of political correctness that snails are not hermaphrodites but instead are serial bisexuals — they have a feature they can use to turn into whichever sex they wish. This is a feat which allows them, as Woody Allen once pointed out, "to double their chances of a date on Saturday night." Here is Mayle's report on the physiology and culinary aspects of the snail.

[page 105] An adult snail in prime condition has a top speed of just over four yards per hour. He is a gastropod, making his stately progress through life on a single muscular, self-lubricating foot. He has two sets of horns; the upper set equipped with eyes, the lower with a sense of smell. He (or just as often she) is also a hermaphrodite, having the remarkable and doubtless useful ability to change sex as the occasion demands. The snail is a curious but harmless creature; its great misfortune, in France at least, is to be considered a delicacy.

The difference between domesticated snails and wild snails? Well the wandering spirit of the latter can cause problems for human consumption if they happened to have eaten the flowers of the nightshade plant, some hemlock herbs, or poisonous mushrooms, which may be deadly. Luckily snails can survive for months without food, apparently their body consists mostly of nutrition for themselves, sort of a camel which is mostly hump. Maurin clues Mayle in on the intricacies of snail preparation, its *toilette*.

[page 119] He started with the nutritional news that snails are good for you, low in fat and rich in nitrogen. But — a warning finger was wagged under my nose — precautions

need to be taken. Snails can thrive on a diet that would put a man in hospital; they are partial to deadly nightshade, equally deadly mushrooms, and hemlock. Not only that. They can eat huge quantities of this fatal salad — the equivalent of half their body weight in twenty-four hours.

It wasn't the best moment to hear this, as I was halfway through my first dozen. My laden toothpick stopped in midair, and Maurin grinned. With these, he said, you risk nothing. They are cultivated snails, raised in an enclosed park and unable to wander; or, as he put it, to indulge their *humeur vagabonde*. Problems only arise with wild snails, who can roam the fields at will, gorging on those deadly pleasures, but even these creatures can be rendered safe and delicious. All one has to do is starve them for fifteen days. At the end of the fast, each snail is carefully examined for ominous signs, then washed three times in tepid water before having its shell brushed in readiness for the oven. This is known as the *toilette des escargots*.

Peter Mayle is an intrepid journalist, writer, and male, and to prove it, he will go to any lengths for a chance at a story. He had heard many good reports about Club 55 over the years, "A place of great charm" with simple food and boats at sea to watch as you eat. "It sounded delightful. But it was a long drive from home, and the thought of the summer traffic on the coast — often a solid, throbbing clot from Marseille to Monaco — had always put my wife and me off." All till one hot morning in July when Bruno called and uncovered an unconscious fondness Mayle had for handkerchiefs, which changed everything about the long trip to Club 55. Bruno, the silver-tongued devil knew how to motivate his friend by dangling the Festival of the Chicks in front of him, a circadian feast for the eyes during the sunny days of summer.

[page 127] Bruno began his phone call on a literary note. "Still pretending to write?" he said. "What is it this time?"

I told him I was doing research for a book that would include sections on fairs and festivals connected with food and drink, the more unusual the better. Frogs, I said, and truffles. Blood sausage, snails, tripe. That sort of thing.

"Ah," he said, "festivals. Well, there's a good one down here, as long as you don't mind a little bare flesh. The *fete des nanas*.

"You mean. . ."

"Girls, my friend, girls. Girls of all ages, many of them wearing not much more than a handkerchief. A glorious sight on a sunny day. Better come soon, before the weather turns chilly and they put their clothes back on."

Somehow, it didn't sound like an event that would have an official place in guidebooks or calendars of cultural highlights, but it did seem worth a visit. I have known Bruno for many years, and his judgment in these matters is impeccable. "Where does it happen?" I asked.

"*Cinquante Cinq*, every day, except if it's raining. I don't think the girls like getting their sunglasses wet. You really should come and do a bit of research. Never have so many worn so little. The food's nice, too."

In the "Connoisseur's Marathon" we learn that running a marathon can actually be more than sweating, grunting, gasping for breath, chugalugging water from a bottle while trying to maintain your pace. Leave to the French to put fun into a marathon. This is one marathon that I, for the same reason as Mayle's wife, would like to see.

[page 143] I have never associated running with fun, and certainly never with alcohol. The earnest, joggers that one sees shuffling through their paces on city streets or along country lanes show all the signs of joy you would expect to find in torture victims—eyes glassy, mouths gaping, faces clenched, sweat and suffering oozing from every pore. Their minds are undoubtedly more concerned with chipped metatarsals and the horrors of chafed nipples than with the pleasures of a glass of wine. To me, running has always looked like a joyless and painful business, a hobby for masochists.

Mayle doesn't drink wine, it's more like a concomitant to his corkscrew practice sessions, a skill he required often during the various festivals he attended in the course of writing this book. As he prepares himself for this curiously titled festival, he muses over his experiences with previous festivals, how his hopes rose up as he drove to a fair site only to find a muddy field or village square empty of human souls. With his sporadic luck, how could he lure his wife along on another boondoggle?

[page 143, 144] While practicing with my corkscrew one evening, I thought about other trips I'd taken to attend events in unfamiliar parts of France, and how often they had been exercises in blind optimism. There is a date and there are a few sketchy program details provided by a volunteer organizer — the mayor's wife, the captain of the fire brigade, the local butcher — but that's all. You have no idea, until you get there, whether you're going to find a festive crowd filling the streets or three men and a morose dog sitting by themselves in the village square.

This was in a different league altogether. Faxes flew; information arrived. Nothing was too much trouble for the marvelous Madame Holley, who works for the regional tourist board. And then one morning, a fax arrived that made my wife suddenly realize there might be more to running than she had thought. If I had no other plans, said the invitation from Madame Holley, perhaps I'd like to stay at the Chateau Pichon-Longueville.

I could see a gleam in the wifely eye at the idea of a chateau weekend. "I don't think I've ever told you," she said, "but I've always wanted to watch a marathon."

Of course, it helps if the Chateau happens to be in the middle of the Bordeaux wine region. Manicured vineyards everywhere with a curious rosebush at the end of each row. Are wine growers rose fanciers also?

[page 145, 146] Leaving the impeccable gardens, we found ourselves waist-deep in equally impeccable vines. Pichon has about seventy acres of them, with a rosebush at the end of each row acting as a decorative health warning system. Bugs and ailments attack roses before they attack vines, so the *vigneron* has a chance to see the problem and treat it before any serious damage is done to the grapes. And there they were, little jewels, dense purple clusters of Cabernet Sauvignon, hanging from vines that had been struggling in the dry, sandy soil for thirty or more years. "Vines must suffer" is a phrase you hear frequently in Bordeaux. And I think there must be a local law against weeds. We looked for one as we walked through the rows of vines. We might as well have been looking for the proverbial needle.

What can you say about a race event where Bordeaux wine instead of water is delivered to the tables in six-packs and the dancers are boogieing to Aretha Franklin belting out RESPECT during the run up to the race day?

[page 149, 150] The four girl singers are firmly settled in the groove, fedoras abandoned, hair swirling, hips jerking, arms swooping forward with each clap, wailing their *doowops* and *uh-huhs* and *oohs* behind the lead singer. Aretha would be proud of them. One of the waitresses is overcome by an attack of rhythm and boogies toward the table, a large tureen of pasta balanced precariously on each hand. The runners are up and dancing, and it's anarchy on the grass — the bump, the jump, the grind, the Medoc foxtrot, the marathon shuffle, the cardiovascular quickstep. The tent seems to be swaying. The tree in the middle is shaking. I never knew that the final preparations for an athletic event could be this much fun.

The morning after such an event is a nightmare for a writer, one born without a photographic memory, like Mayle who was trying to make sense of his notes from the day before.

[page 151] Poor, crumpled, wine-stained scraps they were, as usual. I always find it difficult to make intelligible notes when I'm enjoying myself, possibly because my hand is often holding a glass when it should be holding a pen. The result is a series of manic scribbles that have to be translated in the sober light of morning. If only someone would give me a photographic memory for Christmas.

Here we see Mayle at his best, under difficult circumstances, like a war correspondent the day after a major battle, a day in which staying alive was a higher priority than taking legible notes. He reveals to us the secret of the Connoisseur's Marathon is the costumed dress of the majority of the runners, resembling a horde of Mardi Gras maskers doing a 26 mile second line in New Orleans with free gourmet wine for everyone, delivered in six packs.

[page 152] When we reached Pauillac, it looked as though the wardrobe department had been hard at work on a Fellini movie. The town was swarming with freaks—men and women with Day-Glo wigs, taffeta tutus, religious robes, convicts' stripes, false body parts, horns, chains, tattoos, purple legs, red noses, blue faces. There were even one or two dressed in shorts and running vests.

One memorable country scene burnt itself in Mayle's memory and he shared it with us here. It was an impromptu, al fresco, free-style, performance art by its French masters.

[page 153] Glancing behind me, I was treated to a tranquil and picturesque scene. A line of runners, at least a dozen of them, was strung out along the riverbank, their backs to the road. Undeterred by the passing crowds, they had chosen to ignore the discreet and very adequate toilet facilities provided, preferring instead an open-air performance. Marathon or no marathon, a true Frenchman will always find time for the pleasures of the *pipi rustique*.

Mayle's next stop was "Among the Flying Corks in Burgundy" and his note-taking became "stained scraps of paper, covered in a visible degenerating scrawl" as he tried to keep track of some 27 white wines he had tasted that day. His nearby imbiber did much better, getting 59 wines.

[page 178, 179] We rather lost track of the reds, but I noticed that a neighboring chevalier, showing superhuman professionalism, was continuing to take notes. He reached a grand total of fifty-nine wines before his aim faltered and he started writing on the tablecloth and giggling.

As Mayle winds down his marathon of fourteen courses through the festivals of France, he divulges as a parting shot, the background to the famous Michelin travel directory in "The Guided Stomach". I had my first set of Michelin Radial tires on an MG TD I bought in 1972, and I wondered back then, "How did a company known for its fancy automobile tires end up making the Michelin Guide?" Now, some 38 years later, I find the answer in a book about eating and drinking — it is a story about how the rubber hits the road.

[page 208] It was 1900, the year of the first Michelin guide to France . . . It is a pocket-sized volume, this first edition, of just under four hundred tightly set, busy-looking pages, and it was given away to owners of *voitures*, *voiturettes*, and even *velocipedes* by the brothers Michelin. They had created the removable pneumatic tire in 1891, and the guide was their way of encouraging motorists to wear out as much rubber as possible by extending their travels throughout France.

The *Guided Stomach* portion of the Michelin Guide was to come later, as there were no food establishments listed in the first editions of the Guide. Getting there alive back then seemed more important than getting there well fed.

[page 210] Readers of that first guide were invited to write to Michelin with their comments, and they could hardly fail to have been impressed by the fund of technical and geographical information contained in the little book. But how many of them, I wonder, wrote in to ask that burning question so close and dear to any French heart at any time, but even more so after a hard day on the road. What's for dinner?

Because although hotels were listed, restaurants weren't. The guide was, after all, intended to be a survival manual for motorists driving primitive machinery that frequently broke down. A man whose valves and grommets were giving him trouble could hardly be expected to give much thought or attention to a menu. Heretical though it may sound, in those early years, mechanics were more important than chefs.

As we wend our way to the end of this guided tour of Mayle's psyche, we follow him and his wife to one of the establishments still alive and cooking since that original 1900 guide. It is a hotel and restaurant in Avignon, Hotel d'Europe.

[page 222, 223] Looking through the pages of the 2000 edition, you will find 116 establishments that were recommended in the original guide a hundred years ago. One of these monuments happens to be the Hotel d'Europe in Avignon, not far from us, and we thought it would be interesting to see how it was holding up under the weight of all those years.

In fact, the hotel was doing brisk business long before the Michelin brothers discovered it. Built in the sixteenth century, it was acquired by a widow, Madame Pierron, who opened her doors to travelers in 1799. Bigwigs of every description came to stay: cardinals and archbishops, princes and statesmen, even Napoleon Bonaparte. History doesn't relate whether Josephine came, too, but it seems he had fond memories of the place. When he was fighting in Russia, surrounded by officers complaining about the discomforts of war, he showed little sympathy.

"Sacrebleu!" he is reported to have said. "We're not at Madame Pierron's hotel."

In this famous hotel, Mayle toasted all of us, including you, dear Reader, as collectively we constitute Monsieur Tout le Monde.

[page 224] It had been a lovely evening, and it marked the end of a certain stage in the preparation of this book — the end of that leisurely, enjoyable, and often well-fed process that I like to call research. A toast seemed appropriate.

We drank to chefs, particularly French chefs. And then we raised our glasses again to that unsung hero of the table, custodian of the nation's stomach, and seeker after gastronomic immortality, wherever he can find it: Monsieur Tout le Monde. Let's hope he's with us for another hundred years.

The "Last Course" is like the famous toast, "The King is dead. Long live the King." The next step is for Monsieur Tout le Monde, Mr. Everyman, the intrepid traveler in each of us, to walk in Mayle's footsteps through the muddy field, don a Day-Glo wig for the marathon, dodge the flying corks of Burgundy, and sleep in the Hotel d'Europe where Robert Brown and Elizabeth Barrett spent their elopement. Today the Book, tomorrow the World!

