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The end is thigh for the imported frog business

By Craig Copetas
March 26 2002

Long ago, when French frog ranching was legal, the plump beetles and therapeutic waters around the spa town of Vittel produced the tastiest amphibians in the world. When the government outlawed the trade 25 years ago, frozen and packaged imported frogs jumped in.

Josette Pouchucq wants to put the slime back in the frog business. Along with the 60 other ruling members of the Brotherhood of Frog Thigh Tasters, Pouchucq leads the struggle to restore "la grenouille" to glory by persuading the government to put fresh French frogs back on the table. Resplendent in the green robe and yellow sash of the Thigh Tasters, Pouchucq flourishes a broiled frog leg of unknown origin and says: "We prefer the frogs we eat to be French."

It's a gastro-political affair fraught with economic dilemmas, environmental bugs and frog rustlers. The domestic population, which feed on insects and are important for pest control, had been dwindling since the French first started to saute the critters in the 11th century. In 1977, the Ministry of Agriculture and Fishing banned commercial harvesting of frogs.

The argument boils down to a battle between environmentalists, who like their frogs wallowed in mud, and diners, who prefer them slathered in white wine. France consumes 42 per cent of the European Union's production, while the kitchens of Belgium and Luxembourg cook a further 44 per cent of the total. French frogs can be hunted only for personal consumption.

According to government figures, the French now eat a mere

Frog's leegs

Josette Pouchucq, in the official garb of the Brotherhood of Frog Thigh Tasters, wants to put the slime back in the frog business.

Picture: BLOOMBERG

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70 tonnes of domestic frog legs. Herpetologist Andrew Blaustein, the frog man at Oregon State University, greets that appetising statistic with suspicion. A leading expert on global amphibian populations, Blaustein says it's impossible to gather reliable figures on the sale and consumption of frogs. "People in the frog trade don't want to talk," he says. "Our most up-to-date research shows that Asia exported more than 200 million metric tonnes in 1995."

Pouchucq sniffs at the numbers. "If we could eat only French frogs," she argues, "we would not be buying foreign frogs."

Depending on their size, it takes between 10 and 18 kilograms of frogs to turn out 450 grams of stripped frog legs. A plate of 20 or so foreign frog legs costs around €9 (\$A15) at your average amphibian bistro. Some say frog tastes like chicken; in fact Indonesian and French frogs alike taste like frog. And all dissolve in the mouth like soft rubber.

Still, not all frogs are created equal - particularly for the 20,000 people and six tonnes of Asian frogs scheduled to swarm into Vittel during the last weekend of April for the brotherhood's 30th annual frog-eating festival, the world's largest frog-eating jamboree. Pouchucq says that frog eaters from Belgrade to Quebec arrive most eager to grill, poach or schnitzel the 200 kilograms of free-range French frogs caught for the event in Rene Clement's lake.

In these parts, the late restaurateur Rene Clement is known as the last of the great Lorraine frog ranchers. Back in 1952, Clement moved into a stone house on the banks of the Saone River, looking to raise crayfish. The water was too brackish for shellfish, so he turned to frogs. "The frog is like a woman," Clement told the local newspaper 20 years ago. "Only their thighs are good."

In 1971, Clement founded the brotherhood. He supplied Vittel with 150 kilograms of legs for the first festival. The bash grew at such leaps and bounds that the ban forced the brotherhood to recruit emigre frogs to meet the demand. The chef for years told all who would listen of his anger over French politicians forcing him to eat foreign frogs.

"It's all true and embarrassing," rues 75-year-old Pierrette Gillet, a brotherhood member and daughter of an Ourche Valley frog rancher. "Frogs became a business for poachers."

Vincent Bentata, a frog investigator at the Ministry of Environment, says the Thigh Tasters are "dreaming" to think France would legalise commercial frogging. "The government is dedicated to protecting frogs," Bentata says. "You get caught, you get fined €10,000, and we confiscate your vehicle."

Licking the sauce off her thumbs over a dinner of apparently Indonesian frogs at the Hotel d'Angleterre, Gillet wistfully remembers the ponderosa days. She would track herds of so-called green and mute frogs as they hopped across the mountain streams and misty prairies that stretch south from Lorraine and into the rich hunting grounds of the Loire Valley.

Sometimes, she ventured forth at night and, blinding her prey with a flashlight, whacked them over the head with a club. "The mute frogs are harder to catch because they have no larynx," Gillet explains.

The only croaking in Jakky Ferdinand's nearby frog and butcher shop comes from the crows perched atop the trees outside. For Ferdinand, the black market is the one place to find a sustainable supply of French frogs - yet he won't deal with rustlers because it's against the law.

"All of my frogs are Indonesian," he grouses. "I'm waiting for 100 kilograms to arrive for the festival and I can't tell you how much the shipment will cost. The Indonesians know the French will pay anything for a frog."

"We French love our frogs," adds Elizabeth Simonin, who insists she will sell only French frogs at her Le Comptoir delicatessen when the tadpoles of Lorraine turn into frogs this season. A kilogram of French legs will retail for between €30 and €36. Are they skillet-legal? It's best not to ask.

Food historian John Mariani says French peasants ate frogs as a means of jumping through a loophole in Catholic Church law: "Meat was forbidden during Lent and the church didn't view frogs as meat," Mariani says.

The French royalty living at Versailles began referring to those who lived in swampy Paris as frogs. Outside France, frogs lacked the international respectability afforded other French delicacies.

Then French chef George Auguste Escoffier delighted the Prince of Wales with a plate of chilled bull frog legs in London's Carlton Hotel. Escoffier called his creation "Les Cuisses de Nymphes", or The Thighs of the Dawn Nymphs. The year was 1908. French frogs were now sexy and in trouble.

The 1977 crackdown on commercial harvesting forced French buyers to travel behind the Iron Curtain, where a motivated huntsman twitching for hard currency could bag 800 Communist frogs a day. One by one, the frog-producing countries began imposing export quotas, finally leaving unregulated slicing and dicing in the hands of Vietnam, China, Taiwan and Indonesia.

Back at the table, Gillet comes clean and says it's darn hard for a first-time frog eater to taste any difference between a fresh French mute and a frozen Bengali bull. "The secret of perfect preparation is the sauce, even if a few toads end up on your plate," she says.

-Bloomberg



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