

# Barbecue *Beurre Blanc*:

A Study of French cuisine as it interacts with the Memphis foodscape

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## **Introduction**

In the 2014 movie *Chef*, which follows the once-renowned restaurant chef Carl Casper as he turns his life around by opening a food truck, the main character goes to a farmer's market with his son and immediately ushers the boy to a booth selling andouille sausage. Hefting the ample sausage sandwich in both hands, the father asks his son if he's ever heard of New Orleans. Percy, the child, responds with a lengthy account of the Louisiana Purchase, and his dad interrupts with, "whatever. I'm talking about the food, the culture. You know? Like this andouille sausage." Unimpressed, Percy asks what the big deal is because "we can get it here," in Los Angeles. Immediately his father dismisses the idea: "not the same. What you have here, it's good, because it reminds you of a whole world of memories you have being there [in New Orleans]. 'Cause I'm telling you, it's like a whole different world."<sup>1</sup>

Therefore a regional food served out of context is only worth the memories its consumer has from that place of origin. This idea expresses a common way in which consumers engage in what anthropologist Lucy Long calls "culinary tourism," through evaluating the food's alleged authenticity.<sup>2</sup> I use the word "alleged" because every consumer's definition of the authentic depends on his or her specific experiences which themselves may have been staged specifically for tourists. That andouille may seem delicious to the boy savoring it in Los Angeles, but it's a mere shadow of its New Orleans counterparts his father has sought out in younger years, even if in that time they were a part of what Dean McCannell calls "staged authenticity."<sup>3</sup> Of course, this conversation paves the way for later father-son bonding when the two do make their way down

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<sup>1</sup> Favreau, Jon (Producer & Director). *Chef* [Motion Picture]. USA: Open Road, Fairview Entertainment, Aldamisa Entertainment.

<sup>2</sup> Long, Lucy. "Culinary Tourism." *Southern Folklore*. 182.

<sup>3</sup> MacCannell, Dean. *The Tourist*. 91.

south to try the allegedly authentic stuff, but it begs the questions: if Percy is never able to go to Louisiana, would the sandwich still be worth eating in Los Angeles, robbed of the “world of memories” his dad so praises? To what extent does that “world of memories” indicate true authenticity? Also, does Chef Casper have the right to dismiss Percy’s historical recount of the Louisiana Purchase from Napoleon? After all, the French influence in andouille sausage is evident even in its name, and keeping this regional history in mind could be as important in understanding it as having experienced its taste from the cobblestoned streets of the Crescent City.

This interaction plays out in the way citizens of Memphis, Tennessee interact with French food. The gritty city has little to do with France, as it reconciles the scars of a heavy civil rights history and celebrates its local NBA team, a Bass Pro Shop and hotel housed in a massive metal pyramid, and churches on every corner. This setting is incongruous with the aristocratic and heavily nationalistic roots of French cuisine; the small plates and snooty accents for which it is known couldn’t possibly exist in the same setting as a barbecue joint serving pork and cheese slathered nachos out of plastic baskets. In addition, according to Louissette Palazzolo, a French woman who moved to this city as a college student, in Memphis, “les Français, on peut les compter sur les doigts,” meaning she knows of only a handful of other French citizens living in town.<sup>4</sup> French culture is simply not a part of Memphis.

However, Memphis does boast a few French restaurants, from the unassuming La Baguette: French Bread and Pastry Shop to the opulent Chez Philippe. They self-identify in several ways, from the deliberate label “French Bread and Pastry Shop” to merely French-inspired, and the demographics of each spot vary with their prices, locations, and menus. Some

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<sup>4</sup> Palazzolo, Louissette. Interview by Julia Hamilton.

locals, such as French Master Chef José Guittierez, would say that there exists not one truly French restaurant in Memphis;<sup>5</sup> however, the 2006 Best of Memphis survey in the *Memphis Flyer* reported that going to Paulette's "is like walking into an old neighborhood restaurant on Paris's Left Bank."<sup>6</sup>

This variation in restaurant style and consumer perception helps illustrate that same conflict Chef Casper brought up with his son in the farmer's market: how does a foreign food represent its culture to those who have never truly experienced it firsthand? In Memphis, French food must present itself for Memphians rather than serve the French. This lends itself to different manifestations of Frenchness as determined by what distinct populations of the city expect of it. Does this mean that Memphians can't truly appreciate French cuisine? What is French cuisine, anyway? Finally, what does all of this mean for the reputation of French food and the cultural competence of mid-Southerners?

The rest of this paper will show that the alleged authenticity of a given cuisine is determined by the perceptions of those who produce it as well as those of the consumers. As the legacy of French cuisine is hugely nationalistic, its Frenchness does not so much consist of a specific list of ingredients and recipes as it does of a general attitude and cultural history regarding food. Therefore, when transplanted into a foreign soil already imbued with its own regional foodways, this cuisine can act as a veritable chameleon as it adapts to the whims of its chef and the tastes, perceptions, and economic statuses of its consumers. A baguette that one chef bemoans for its lack of flavor and texture can at the same time be an exciting foray into a foreign foodway for someone else. Regardless of whether said baguette could exist in its current form at a Parisian *boulangerie*, it satisfies the consumer's perception of the culinary Other and fulfills

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<sup>5</sup> Gutierrez, José. Interviewed by Julia Hamilton.

<sup>6</sup> Branston, John. "Best of Memphis: Food and Drink." *Memphis Flyer*.

her perception of authenticity. Therefore, a single version of authenticity for a cultural cuisine outside of its historical locus may very well not exist, instead shaping itself to the tastes of those who seek it as an escape from familiar life.

I will argue this point by beginning with a brief survey of the pertinent historical points related to the cultural influence of French cuisine as well as its definition. The next section will delineate recent scholarship on culinary tourism and the issue of perceived authenticity, followed by the final section, which will contextualize the previously-stated themes within the current landscape of French food as it exists in Memphis. As I have no formal culinary training and only one month of immersive experience in Grenoble, France, I will make no claims on the quality of the dishes I record nor how they would manifest themselves in France, save through the observations and opinions of more informed interview subjects. I will, however, record what I observe from several restaurant visits as I take on the role of a culinary tourist in my own city.

### **The Roots of French Cuisine**

The first step in examining how French cuisine adapts to an unfamiliar environment is to understand its history and the major cultural trends that made it what it is today. The food of France is indelibly stamped into its national identity as at once entrenched in the country's foundations, yet constantly evolving to remain a foremost culinary influence of the world. This cuisine embodies both heritage and modern trend setting paired together under a deep pride of being French. As Priscilla Parkhurst explains in her work *Accounting for Taste*:

French cuisine materialized across a tumultuous century of political, social, and cultural revolutions. Cuisine supplied one building block--a crucial one--for a national identity in

the making, for it encouraged the French to see themselves through this distinctive lens as both different and superior.<sup>7</sup>

Although the century referred to in this quote is the nineteenth, France established a reputation for food as early as the seventeenth century with the publications of cookbooks that both codified common techniques and adopted them into the French gastronomic lexicon. Largely under King Louis XIV, about 100,000 of these books were published, establishing a style based on the use of cream, white meats, and other ingredients, but shunning the use of spices that were so popular in other regions.<sup>8</sup> Under the Ancien Régime, cooks created lavish feasts for the king and his court, highly unattainable for any outside the palace walls. Here French cuisine was a phenomenon only for the aristocracy, yet to be claimed by a nation or kingdom in its whole. It was after the French Revolution, when the Ancien Régime fell, that food went from a royal monopoly to a popularly accepted art form.

At this time, Frenchman Marie-Antonin Carême codified these cooking practices and labelled them as French. According to Parkhurst, Carême was not only an accomplished chef and prolific cookbook author, but the progenitor of French cuisine itself, having “enabled the subsequent professionalization of cooking within France as well as its diffusion abroad.”<sup>9</sup> This post-revolutionary country called for a new culinary order that catered to the broader bourgeois public rather than the grand halls of the Ancien Régime, and Carême filled that need, in doing so becoming one of the first celebrity chefs: “the king of cooks and the cook of kings.”<sup>10</sup> Although he practiced his craft for French high society, he reported that in writing *Le Cuisinier Parisien*,

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<sup>7</sup> Parkhurst, Priscilla. *Accounting for Taste: The Triumph of French Cuisine*. 5.

<sup>8</sup> Pitte, Jean-Robert. “French gastronomy faced with globalization.” *Phi Kappa Phi Journal*. 35.

<sup>9</sup> Parkhurst, Priscilla. *Accounting for Taste: The Triumph of French Cuisine*. 10.

<sup>10</sup> Myhrvold, Nathan. “The Art in Gastronomy: A Modernist Perspective.” *Gastronomica*. 15.

“[He] wanted chefs of all classes to be able to profit from [his] work.”<sup>11</sup> To accomplish that task, Carême included alongside his recipes for basic sauces several alternatives that could be easier for the bourgeois cooks who lacked proper kitchens and staffs.<sup>12</sup> He also reported including a glossary of culinary terms in a previous work, *Pâtissier royal parisien*, for the use of younger chefs “deprived of education.”<sup>13</sup> So not only did Carême work to make good cooking economically accessible for the *bourgeoisie*, he also ensured its preservation through instructing the next generation of French chefs.

As he worked to increase the accessibility of cuisine, Carême made sure his public knew it was French cuisine he was working with. In response to critics who accused his dishes of having unfamiliar names, he declared in the introduction to *Cuisinier français* that in fact each label alluded to French nobles, such as “à la Reine, à la Royale, etc.” as well as more the more obvious monikers “à la parisienne, à la française, etc.”<sup>14</sup> In Carême’s words, these names “belong to France.”<sup>15</sup> He also defends the foreign-named sauce “à l’espagnole,” by arguing that, although it may have been adopted from another nation, “we have such perfected it so much that it no longer resembles at all what it was originally.”<sup>16</sup> He mentions a couple other international names, but warns the reader to “know that no foreign sauce is comparable to those of our great modern cuisine...and [he has] met everywhere our chefs occupying the highest positions in foreign courts.”<sup>17</sup> All of these observations built his claim that France alone was “the only country for good food,” an idea that persisted through his culinary successors to France today.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Carême, Marie Antonin. *Le Cuisinier Parisien*. 7.

<sup>12</sup> Parkhurst, Priscilla. *Accounting for Taste*. 64.

<sup>13</sup> Carême, Marie Antonin. *Le Cuisinier Parisien*. 19.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 12.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* 13. Translated by Julia Hamilton.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 13. Translated by Julia Hamilton

<sup>18</sup> Parkhurst, Priscilla. *Accounting for Taste*. 71.

Yet modern French cuisine seems to have little in common with the *grande cuisine* that Carême created. Beginning in the 1960s, what became known as Nouvelle Cuisine deviated from some of *grande cuisine*'s characteristic aspects by introducing lighter menus, lower-fat sauces, ingredients from the cuisines of other cultures, etc. It stirred up plenty of controversy from those who upheld classical French cuisine as a bastion of culture and heritage, but many also welcomed the new style as having freed chefs from the “stubborn bastion of conservatism” that was the Michelin Guide, which, according to food critics Henri Gault and Christian Millau, ignored “the new generation of French chefs who had guts.”<sup>19</sup> However, in the words of Carême's successor Auguste Escoffier, “what already existed at the time of Carême, which exists today and which will continue to exist for as long as cooking itself, are the fundamentals of this art of cookery; they may become simpler on the surface but do not lose their value.”<sup>20</sup> Although Escoffier wrote in 1903 as a fellow architect of *grande cuisine*, he was already addressing concerns about modernizing the old classics, which shows that modern French cuisine is simply the grandchild of classic French cuisine, which chefs have continuously refined since the foundation of France itself. Moreover, like Carême, Escoffier designed his *Guide culinaire* for the next generation of cooks, those who will “in twenty years' time be at the top of their profession in charge of a large organization,” a population not far removed from that gutsy generation previously mentioned by Gault and Millau.<sup>21</sup>

Therefore, French cuisine has had from its roots a top-down trajectory, from kings to the bourgeois masses. As the primogenitors of modern gastronomy, Carême and Escoffier

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<sup>19</sup> Myhrvold, Nathan. “The Art in Gastronomy: A Modernist Perspective.” *Gastronomica*. 15

<sup>20</sup> Escoffier, Auguste. *Le Guide Culinaire*. x.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* ix.

Frenchified their food by writing it down and labeling it as uniquely French for the general public and future generations. Their cookbooks are what spread the most up-to-date recipes and practices to their countrymen and advertised them to those abroad as a product of French ingenuity. Even with the influence of non-traditional Nouvelle Cuisine and its others, French gastronomy remains rooted in the Ancien Régime as translated and adapted by its successors. This history gives French food a sort of pedigree, as any restaurant-goer could trace the lineage of his dish back to the influence of King Louis XIV himself. This type of national cuisine does not exist as such in the United States, as it is a nation of immigrants, obviously excepting Native Americans. The first American cookbook, *American Cookery*, was published in 1796, and, although it contained regional ingredients and terminology as well as a nationalistic spirit, many of its recipes, such as “Malborough Pudding” or “Royal Paste” remained “deeply British” according to a 2015 NPR article.<sup>22</sup> We simply do not possess the same level of culinary infrastructure that exists in France.

### **What is French food?**

Now that we've established its prestigious ancestry, what exactly is French cuisine? It is difficult to find a comprehensive list of dishes or ingredients that make up French food in such a way that cumin and turmeric could identify an Indian dish or as guacamole and salsa signify a Mexican menu. Granted, there are some dishes that are seen as iconically French, such as *escargot* or *boeuf bourguignon*, but, translated into English, we find snails and a variation on beef stew. There is little inherently French about these dishes, save their names and ingredients that could be more common in France, but are not so exotic as to warrant a specialty section in an American supermarket. Also, the name *bourguignon* signifies that this dish is native to the

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<sup>22</sup> Bramley, Anne. “New Nation, New Cuisine: The First Cookbook To Tackle 'American Food.'” NPR. org.

Burgundy region, which is one example of the wide regional variation in French food. One may not as easily find *boeuf bourguignon* in Brittany, save in a specialty restaurant, yet we identify it as a wholly French recipe. In addition, the common techniques and ingredients change between Classic and Nouvelle Cuisine. A classical sauce could be made with a flour-based roux while a more modern sauce comes from a cream reduction.<sup>23</sup>

In perhaps the most confounding aspect of this prideful, nationalistic cuisine, it has never entirely rejected the influence of other cultures. As previously mentioned, even in Carême's nineteenth century work, two of his basic sauces bear foreign names: *espagnole* (Spanish) and *allemande* (German).<sup>24</sup> Even though he argued that the French had perfected the foreignness away, this assertion then makes us wonder if a French food that has been in America long enough could be called, after enough time, entirely American. So what does make a restaurant French in a city like Memphis, which knows nothing of France's national pride and supplies its own unique resources?

Opinions on this question vary, but it is my argument that French cuisine is not so much its iconic dishes as it is an attitude and tradition surrounding food and eating. This attitude includes national pride coming from the culinary pedigree as described in the previous section, an understanding of how to properly enjoy the food, a dedication to using the freshest, highest quality ingredients, and absolute allegiance to the skills and techniques necessary to craft a dish. This frame of mind has permeated French culture since Carême's cookbooks and before, and it is what leads Parkhurst to explain that "as an emblem of French civilization, cuisine ranks right up there with cathedrals and châteaux, recognized by citizen and visitor alike as somehow

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<sup>23</sup> Myhrvold, Nathan. "The Art in Gastronomy: A Modernist Perspective." *Gastronomica*. 16.

<sup>24</sup> Parkhurst, Priscilla. *Accounting for Taste*. 73.

intrinsically French.”<sup>25</sup> Under this understanding of French cuisine, the food that identifies as such would manifest itself differently in other regions where the freshest ingredients are not those found in France; therefore, someone returning from a French vacation may find reportedly French menus at home that look nothing like what she saw during her trip, yet enjoy a truly French experience regardless.

One of the earliest and most prominent disciples of French gastronomy is Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, a lawyer, politician, and culinary philosopher who wrote from France in the early nineteenth century, around the same time as Carême, and coined the phrase, “tell me what you eat, and I will tell you what you are.”<sup>26</sup> His work, *The Physiology of Taste*, has never been out of print and is a 500-page work dedicated to all things food, from the individual qualities of specific dishes to the process of digestion to the definition of a *gourmand* versus a glutton. It is this last distinction which defined and continues to define the French celebration of cooking and eating: “Gourmandism is an impassioned, considered, and habitual preference for whatever pleases the taste...an implicit obedience of the rules of the Creator, who, having ordered us to eat in order to live, invites us to do so with appetite, encourages us with flavor, and rewards us with pleasure.”<sup>27</sup> As Carême codified and labelled French cooking practices, Brillat-Savarin defined and celebrated the appropriate manner of consuming the product.

Moreover, Brillat-Savarin makes it abundantly clear that the proper appreciation of food is a uniquely French quality, as “it has no true name except the French one, *la gourmandise*; it cannot be designated by the Latin word *gula*, any more than by the English *gluttony* or the

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 4.

<sup>26</sup> Brillat-Savarin. *The Physiology of Taste*. 3.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 148.

German *lusternheit*.”<sup>28</sup> He even goes on to offer a series of tests designed to sniff out the true *gourmands* in a group by setting out delicacies before them and measuring the strongest responses. It is no coincidence that Brillat-Savarin defined the uniquely French ability to enjoy food at the same time that Carême codified the uniquely French ability to create food. Evidently the appropriate enjoyment of food is an integral component of French cuisine as much as creating the dishes themselves.

However, these dishes must be of good quality, or else a true *gourmand* would never touch them. Once again beginning with Carême, an essential characteristic of truly good food is simplicity and proximity to nature: “every meat presented its own natural aroma, every vegetable its own shade of verdure.”<sup>29</sup> A dish must therefore celebrate the natural tastes of its ingredients without covering them up with other spices or flavors. This also entails finding good, fresh ingredients in themselves or else they will have few natural qualities to enhance. Having attended Paris’s *Le Cordon Bleu* and trained in a Parisian kitchen, Memphis’s Chef Cullen Kent explained it this way:

We [Americans] are now in a big farm-to-table movement. Well they’ve never been *out* of a farm-to-table movement...people are like ‘what the hell are you doing’ if you’re one of those people who goes to the grocery store to buy your vegetables when there’s a market every damn day under a subway line, and the man who planted the seeds picked that and brought it to that market, and it doesn’t cost any more than the one at the grocery store.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 155.

<sup>29</sup> Parkhurst, Priscilla. *Accounting for Taste*. 69.

<sup>30</sup> Kent, Cullen. Interviewed by Julia Hamilton.

Even as I spent a single month studying French in Grenoble, I was struck by my host mother's practice of visiting the neighborhood market two or three times a week for her groceries as well as the prevalence of these markets, two of which I passed by on each weekday commute. This likely seemed particularly unusual to me as a Memphian, as Memphis claims only a handful of farmer's markets that usually take place once a week, but to the modern French as well as Carême's contemporaries, freshness is essential to taste and quality.

However, it is not enough to put fresh vegetables on a platter and give them the attention of a *gourmand*; the dish must have been prepared with the techniques and discipline of a properly-trained chef. Chef Guitierrez of Memphis's River Oaks Restaurant described his time in the kitchen with Paul Bocuse in Paris as a military experience: "They break you down, and they rebuild you as a machine that can take crap, take sweat, is very focused, and do what you have to do."<sup>31</sup> Why is it so intense? According to Chef Kent, who also trained in a Parisian kitchen after culinary school, "that's like asking Nick Saban why football is the way it is at Alabama...it's that serious over there. It's SEC football, is what it is."<sup>32</sup> The French defined the language of the kitchen, as can be seen with such vocabulary as *chiffonade*, *roux*, *sauté*, and other cooking terms that have no English equivalent. Chefs must understand this vocabulary and carry it out. This is why, even at Memphis's L'Ecole Culinaire, the basic curriculum begins with a foundation in French mother sauces and techniques.<sup>33</sup> To cook well is to cook French.

Therefore, a well-crafted, fresh French dish can go anywhere in the world, adapt to that setting, and become a genre of food with unique characteristics even as it retains its Frenchness. Going back, as always, to Carême, Parkhurst explains that "in contrast with other cuisines

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<sup>31</sup> Gutierrez, José. Interviewed by Julia Hamilton.

<sup>32</sup> Kent, Cullen. Interviewed by Julia Hamilton.

<sup>33</sup> Johnson, "Sleepy." Interviewed by Julia Hamilton.

defined not by technique but by product, Carême’s French cuisine is not tied or rooted in a particular place,” and the same can be said of the modern food of France as it continues to follow his founding model.<sup>34</sup> The only missing element in foreign soil would be an understanding of the French culinary pedigree as mentioned in section one, but as Carême and Escoffier’s techniques make up the foundations of professional cooking techniques, that history is embedded in the dish’s preparation even if its consumer is unaware of it. So it is not missing at all, but fundamentally entwined in proper French cooking. French cuisine becomes a sort of blank slate, ideal for studying the tastes and culinary influences of a city largely unfamiliar with it. While a Mexican restaurant, for example, can be expected to serve a menu that includes tacos, quesadillas, and other iconic plates, a French restaurant menu varies widely according to its chef, customers, and location. It is through this cultural lens that we can study its relationship with a city with such a strong existing culinary identity as Memphis, Tennessee.

### **Culinary Tourism and Authenticity**

The final two subjects to discuss before moving on to the topic of French food specifically in Memphis are those of culinary tourism and authenticity. Until this point, I have largely discussed the definition of French cuisine and the perception of what is French from a historic and cultural point of view centered in France. This section aims to address some of the common ways through which those outside of a certain culture interact with its cuisine rather than how the culture represents itself to its members, both in the home of that culture and abroad.

As Memphis has relatively few native French citizens, it follows that most Memphians who have experienced France firsthand did so as tourists, which scholar Dean MacCannell, author of *The Tourist*, defines as “sightseers, mainly middle-class, who are at this moment

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<sup>34</sup> Parkhurst, Priscilla. *Accounting for Taste*. 71.

deployed throughout the entire world in search of experience.”<sup>35</sup> This definition does not specify a length of time, a manner of traveling, or a specific agenda, save to “experience.” Therefore, even though I spent a month with a French host family in Grenoble while enrolled in a local university, I was just as much a tourist as a couple who may pop up to Paris for the weekend to see the Eiffel Tower, the Louvre, and other well-known landmarks. Both of us seek the experience of France, even if our basic intentions for travelling appear different at first, and in the end both of us bring back unique memories which in turn inform our individual definitions of France and Frenchness.

However, the touristic experience is usually maligned as being utterly fabricated or mystified. We use the word “tourist” derisively to denote superficiality, and many visitors to unfamiliar places take great care to interact with their surroundings like the locals lest they be discovered as tourists. MacCannell categorizes the “they are tourists, I am not” mentality as a touristic one in itself, for “touristic consciousness is motivated by its desire for authentic experiences,” and these authentic experiences must be inherently non-touristic.<sup>36</sup> So we call ourselves travelers, visitors, students, anything except “tourist” even as we perform as such and interact in spaces of what MacCannell calls “staged authenticity.” This term stems from touristic locations’ awareness of their visitors’ desire for the authentic and using that to fabricate settings specifically for them. These settings exist in varying stages of proximity to the fabled “back stage,” or the ultimate setting closed to outsiders from which things are run.<sup>37</sup> Examples of the back stage include kitchens, work rooms, homes, and other traditionally non-glamorous places that symbolize the utmost in authenticity, yet more and more become subjects of tours and

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<sup>35</sup> MacCannell, Dean. *The Tourist*. 1

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* 101.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* 99.

visitation as cities capitalize on them as being true and real.<sup>38</sup> So the more a tourist seeks realness, the further he plunges into layers of staged authenticity designed to imitate intimacy and local experience.

Clearly, this idea of artificiality being to a large degree inescapable is distressing for the tourist in search for authenticity. As MacCannell states, “the dialectics of authenticity insure the alienation of modern man even within his domestic contexts. The more the individual sinks into everyday life, the more he is reminded of reality and authenticity elsewhere.”<sup>39</sup> So we wish to augment our everyday lives with fresh experiences, and when we find that these experiences were in some way false, it feels like a betrayal, having unsuccessfully breached the frontiers of familiar experience. As the familiar becomes mundane, the authentic must be new and unique in comparison, and we continue to seek it out as a break from the normal, as unattainable as it may be. Then we bring these experiences back home as souvenirs, and they become our definitions of that culture or place as separate from our daily lives, as Other, much like that “world of memories” Chef Casper glorified to his son in the movie *Chef*.

Back at home, once enough time has passed from a trip, memories grow insufficient as souvenirs, and tourists desire to again experience the Other just as they experienced it in their travels. Seeking out the exotic food from those travels is one way to relive those experiences in a familiar setting. Alternatively, those who haven't been able to travel can seek out the food of a different culture in a similar endeavor to escape from the daily to the exotic, something television chef Alton Brown illustrated in an episode on Thai food when he instructed his viewers, “put away your passport and prepare to navigate via culinary compass!”<sup>40</sup> Scholar Lucy Long calls

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid. 98.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. 160.

<sup>40</sup> “Your Pad or Mine: Pad Thai.” *Good Eats*. The Food Network: EA0920.

this act “culinary tourism” and defines it as “the intentional, exploratory participation in the foodways of an Other, participation including the consumption...of a food item, cuisine, meal system, or eating style considered as belonging to a culinary system not one's own.”<sup>41</sup> The key term in this definition is “Other,” which could refer to the touristic experiences previously mentioned or to simple differences in “national or cultural identity, region, time, ethos/religion, and socioeconomic class.”<sup>42</sup> Again we see that the essential pursuit of tourism, culinary or otherwise, is to leave domestic familiarity in favor of the authentic Other, something “not one's own.”

Long follows this definition with an examination of how restaurants and producers present their foods to consumers, and she found five basic strategies through which they negotiated with customers: “framing, naming or translation, explication, menu selection, and recipe adaptation.”<sup>43</sup> Each of these strategies includes some manner of manipulation either through a restaurant's decoration, menu layout and terms, ingredients, etc., in order to both intrigue and ensure the comfort of the culinary tourist, as producers must “adapt their presentations to their understanding of their audience's culinary aesthetics and experiences.”<sup>44</sup> This practice hearkens to MacCannell's staged authenticity and also illustrates the negotiation between chef/restaurateur and culinary tourist, exotic and familiar, authentic and fabricated.

With these relationships in mind, studying French food in Memphis becomes inextricably linked to these questions of authenticity and perception. Since the city has so little experience with France, its cuisine quickly becomes Other both through national or cultural identity and socioeconomic class, for the obvious association of France with foreignness and for the tendency

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<sup>41</sup> Long, Lucy. “Culinary Tourism.” *Southern Folklore*. 183.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* 188.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* 189.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* 184.

of French food to be served in expensive fine dining establishments. A Memphian who goes out to eat for a special occasion at the Peabody's Chez Philippe may be interacting with his Other both through eating an unfamiliar smoked trout and apple crepe as well as in paying \$80 plus a tip to do so. At the same time, Chez Philippe caters to this diner's expectations of authentic Frenchness with its French name, lavish decor, and prix fixe menu. Yet this is by no means the only representation of French food in town, with other versions serving different menus with unique decorations elsewhere. Ultimately these manifestations of Frenchness differ according to the touristic settings each restaurant sets up according to the expectations of authenticity their clienteles bring to the table.

### **French Cooking to Meet Expectations**

In these last sections I will examine three prevalent approaches of French and French-trained chefs as they present their food to the Memphis public, how this public interacts with said food, and the sorts of restaurants that spring from these relationships. These approaches include fulfilling Memphians' expectations, evolving from Memphians' tastes, and taking the role of an educator. Each of these shapes everything on the premises, from the menu to the decor to the clientele that visit them.

The first approach, to fulfill public expectation of what French cooking should be, is best described by Chef Cullen Kent of Café Society, a restaurant which Kent explained serves a little of everything, but notably French and Belgian country food. A characteristic of the restaurants under this category is that they identify as French-based or French-inspired, with characteristically French menu items alongside others like gourmet hamburgers or pizzas. When asked how he has to adapt his French offerings for Memphis, he said, "you have to Americanize something so they recognize it as French...you have to make it fit their perception of what French

food is like, not what real French food is.”<sup>45</sup> After I asked him for an example of what “real French food” would be, he described a typical Sunday dinner in France: roast chicken, potato purée, haricots verts, and a fruit tart. In trying to serve that as a French dish, he gets the response that it “obviously can’t be French food because it’s not fancy enough..because it’s just mashed potatoes and roast chicken,” and in response chefs have to exoticize it, or “frou-frou it up, especially with what [they] call it.” At this point, Michel Leny, the original owner of the restaurant and current manager, chimed in with two words: “make believe.”<sup>46</sup>

What Chef Kent experiences at Café Society is that his customers often do not perceive his food as adequately meeting their expectations of the culinary Other. It is too similar to their daily fare, and therefore cannot be authentically French. So he has to “frou-frou it up” by changing the name and presentation of his dishes. Lucy Long identifies this technique, called “menu selection,” as a common one in ethnic restaurants; however, she explains it in the context of a Korean restaurant simplifying the names of unfamiliar dishes for inexperienced customers, whereas Chef Kent must complicate his for customers who consider themselves more sophisticated than inexperienced.<sup>47</sup> In other words, the Korean restaurant renames its food to make it seem more familiar than Other whereas Kent must rename it to make it more Other than familiar. Long also describes this technique in the context of American regional festivals that use such terms as “old-tyme” to exoticize and celebrate familiar foods like Chef Kent does, but in the case of the festival, consumers enter the setting with the understanding that they will be celebrating an otherwise mundane dish prepared in an new way or unfamiliar context. At Café

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<sup>45</sup> Kent, Cullen. Interviewed by Julia Hamilton.

<sup>46</sup> Leny, Michel. Interviewed by Julia Hamilton.

<sup>47</sup> Long, Lucy. “Culinary Tourism.” *Southern Folklore*. 190.

Society, eaters expect unfamiliar dishes and are disappointed if their dinners aren't exotic enough.

In addition to the exotic, it is a perception of authenticity that shapes the disaccord between Chef Kent's opinion and his customers' expectations. When I asked him and original owner Leny what makes French food French, Leny responded, "the word French, I mean, they know how to cook. That's all it is," and Kent added that "anybody can make a beef tenderloin at \$20 a pound taste real good, but it takes somebody that knows how to do it to make a tongue taste good, or uh, what else--blood sausage! liver, heart." Here he confirms that the definition of French cuisine is not its stock dishes, but the manner in which they are prepared. For a brief example of this attitude, I think of a moment when I was eating dinner at Café Society, and a customer very nearly offended his waitress by asking if the fish were kept frozen. Kent also spoke often of "French grandma" cooking, which he compared to Memphis's own Soul Food, as the two cuisines often use similar ingredients such as pork neck bone versus lamb neck bone, pinto beans versus white beans, and other "real peasant ingredients." He was adamant about defining French authenticity humbly, as the regional poor man's food, or "peasant ingredients cooked correctly."

However, he reported that French authenticity often meant foie gras and other delicacies to his customers. He says that "a lot of times people will come from France after they've spent two weeks in France on a vacation, and they ate in three restaurants while they were over there, and they want to tell you what French food is like, and you're like, yeah, you ate at a café next to Notre Dame that was catering to people like you." Kent finds that his customers' definition of authentic French cuisine is a product of the staged authenticity of a touristic setting, while his experiences at *Le Cordon Bleu* and in a Parisian kitchen granted him access to the holy "back

stage” of authenticity. However, he considers offering real French fare to be futile against these diners’ certainty that their France was the real France--elegant, exotic, and wholly unique from their domestic lives.

To accommodate for this, he offers a dinner menu with entrées priced between \$22 and \$35 that includes such fare as a “filet of dry-aged beef,” “sole meunière,” and “crème brûlée.”<sup>48</sup> The lunch menu is somewhat more accessible, with entrées from \$12 to \$16 that include more familiar offerings such as a “black angus burger” and a “kobe beef hot dog du jour,” alongside an “eggplant and goat cheese roulade.”<sup>49</sup> Clearly the dinner menu suggests a more serious environment, one marked by white tablecloths, folded cloth napkins, glass vases with flowers, and sparse decorations upon off-white walls. During a two and a half hour-long dinner there, I observed an entirely white clientele for that evening, ages 30 and older, save myself and one young couple who ordered champagne and appeared to be celebrating a special occasion. The waitresses wore all-black uniforms with their hair tied up, and Chef Kent sat with me twice in a white chef’s jacket and a baseball cap. Generally, reservations are encouraged, especially on weekend evenings.

The setting is evidence of Chef Kent cooking to the expectations of his customers. The ambiance and especially the prices do not evoke sentiments of a humble “French grandma” establishment or what Kent claimed to be its local counterpart, a soul food restaurant. He chalked up much of the pricing to overhead expenses that come with the tablecloths and glassware as well as the cost of more expensive menu items that middle-class Memphians expect from him, such as the highest-selling pieces of meat: beef filets. I asked if he thought it would be possible for cheaper “French grandma” cooking to sell in Memphis without the nice setting, in the way

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<sup>48</sup> “Dinner Menu.” *CafeSocietyMemphis.com*.

<sup>49</sup> “Lunch Menu.” *CafeSocietyMemphis.com*.

that tacos can be sold out of trucks or pulled pork with plastic cutlery, but he responded negatively. In New York City, Chicago, even Atlanta, he had confidence it could be done if it hasn't already happened, but Memphis is "finicky." Finally, Kent described it this way: "if you think that you're supposed to wear a tuxedo to the ball, and you're going to wear a tuxedo to the ball. And it's hard to make people understand that there's another side to French food which is just sit down at a table with a big group of people to break bread and have a wonderful time."

Other examples of this approach can be found in the Memphis restaurants Café 1912 and Paulette's. While I was unable to interview their owners or chefs, I saw in them several similarities to Café Society in price, clientele, and presentation. Paulette's dinner entrees run from \$20 to \$32, and it calls its food "American, French and Southern,"<sup>50</sup> while Café 1912 offers entrees from \$17 to \$30 and identifies as "a casual midtown Memphis bistro with...a French inspired menu."<sup>51</sup> After spending one dinner in each establishment, I observed majority white clienteles, mostly aged 30 and older. Café 1912 also offers a special menu for its annual Bastille Day dinner, which this year included the entrees grilled quail and white beans, "*Cailles Grillées avec Cassoulet*," and trout with cream sauce over risotto, "*Truite, Sauce Nantua*," as well as two appetizers and a dessert with French titles and English descriptions. The prices on this menu were comparable to the standard menu, which was also available for those not interested in *la fête nationale de France*.

These trends illustrate the effect of a specific population in Memphis: those that expect sophistication out of French cuisine to match the touristic setting they either experienced abroad or, for those who haven't traveled, assume exists there. This gives rise to restaurants that use semi-prestigious titles like French-based or French-inspired in order to cater for this touristic

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<sup>50</sup> "About Paulette's: Cuisine." *Paulette's Restaurant*. Facebook.com.

<sup>51</sup> "About: Café 1912." *Cafe1912.com*.

mindset but also retain the freedom to offer familiar crowd-pleasers to those who just want a good meal. They play up their Frenchness enough to claim a piece of France's culinary pedigree and keep enough American touches to stay accessible. One somewhat amusing example of this combination is Café 1912's Bastille Day decorations, which featured what appeared to be recycled red, white, and blue Independence Day garlands as close-enough substitutes for the blue, white, and red of the French flag. However, there are other French and French-inspired restaurants in Memphis that present themselves differently, such as Chez Philippe, which serves meals over twice the price of Café Society, or La Baguette, which serves its croissants on paper plates over a counter. Now that I have described the practice of crafting a restaurant to meet certain expectations, I will next examine the practice of evolving with those expectations to create a new cuisine.

### **Evolving from Memphis Tastes**

\_\_\_\_\_ After having trained with renowned Chef Paul Bocuse, French Master Chef José Gutierrez came to America at age 21 in order to force himself to learn English, as he was already fluent in French and Spanish. Unsatisfied with the Texas kitchen where he ended up speaking only Spanish, Gutierrez examined his job offers from kitchens all over America and took the only one where it was confirmed nobody would be able to communicate with him in Spanish or French: Chez Philippe in Memphis. Therefore, counterintuitively, Memphis has a lack of cultural representation to thank for bringing this renowned French chef to town.

At 23 years old, Chef Gutierrez was given free reign with the menu at the Peabody's upscale restaurant, and he began with such dishes as veal sweetbreads--incidentally, an appetizer I was served at Café Society--but "nobody was ordering the stuff."<sup>52</sup> Like Chef Kent, Gutierrez

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<sup>52</sup> Gutierrez, José. Interviewed by Julia Hamilton.

came up against set expectations of his food and had to adapt. However, whereas Kent's customers found his food to be not Other enough, Gutierrez's clientele balked at dishes that seemed so exotic as to be unpalatable. Kent felt the need to exoticize his food to meet perceptions of Frenchness while Gutierrez was somehow *too* French. The chefs' contrasting experiences likely stem from having different clienteles, as Chez Philippe is significantly more expensive, drawing the set tastes of a wealthier audience, notably those staying in the Peabody Hotel where the restaurant is located. The current executive chef Andreas Kisler reported having more hotel guests than native Memphians as customers, except for special occasions such as anniversary dinners and wedding proposals.<sup>53</sup>

Nevertheless Chef Gutierrez had to interact with the local landscape to make Chez Philippe successful, saying "I thought I would need to educate the people, but they were like 45 years old, they don't need me...I realized that the one that needed to be educated was not my customers, it was me."<sup>54</sup> He went to dinner parties with other Peabody employees to verse himself in Memphis food like "bread, grits, hushpuppies," and he came out with new dishes such as "scaloppini with fettuccine and barbecue *beurre blanc* sauce" and "hushpuppies served with shrimp *provençale*." In 1990 he was named one of the best new chefs in the country by Food and Wine magazine, credited with merging "the American South with Southern France."<sup>55</sup>

Here, Memphis's influence on French gastronomy facilitated the creation of an entirely new cuisine, one which Gutierrez referred to as Avant-Garde. I asked him whether he would have been able to cook the original French menu in other cities, and he replied, "it would have worked out, but I would have missed the opportunity to learn about southern cooking. That to me

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<sup>53</sup> Kisler, Andreas. Interviewed by Julia Hamilton.

<sup>54</sup> Gutierrez, José. Interviewed by Julia Hamilton.

<sup>55</sup> Sekules, Kate. "A Selective Guide to America's Super Chefs." *Food & Wine*.

would be the biggest mistake of my life.” This location was integral to his development as a young chef, and French cuisine provided the base with which he expanded into a nationally-recognized realm. As Gutierrez remarked, “the French are the best from taking all the cuisines from all over the world and make something new,” something that he demonstrated himself in Memphis. He was able to create his own Other and market it both locally and nationally at a high price. This is where French cuisine demonstrates its reliance on local ingredients and foodways, backed up by professional techniques and an appreciation for cooking rather than a set list of recognized dishes.

Today Chef Gutierrez owns and acts as executive chef for a restaurant in East Memphis called River Oaks. He reported leaving Chez Philippe in order to open a new place that was more accessible to Memphians than his previous restaurant, which he called “grandiose.” At River Oaks, Gutierrez no longer serves his old avant-garde Southern Nouvelle Cuisine, instead opting for a bistro setting with standard American, Italian, and French fare with lower prices compared to Chez Philippe, but still in the \$20-\$30 range. The current executive chef of Chez Philippe and the Peabody as a whole, Andreas Kisler, is an Austrian man who cooks according to his own style, although he reported continuing to use a French influence due to Chez Philippe’s reputation.

Thus far there have been two approaches to French cooking in Memphis: Kent’s “frou-frouing” of French food to fulfill Memphis’s expectations as well as Gutierrez’s creation of Southern Nouvelle Cuisine from Memphis’s existing culture. Both had to adapt their menus for the region, one meeting existing perceptions of what is French to fabricate the desirable Other and the next evolving from present foodways to be an Other for French and Southern Americans alike. Though neither Chef Gutierrez nor Chez Philippe still claim to serve Southern Nouvelle

Cuisine, its legacy continues in the reputation of the restaurant as Memphis's premier fine-dining establishment, or at least the most expensive. According to Chef Kisler, another restaurant in this price range or higher could not exist elsewhere in Memphis, as even Chez Philippe relies on the Peabody's infrastructure to survive. However, there is a final approach to French food in Memphis that aims to be accessible for a larger population, and these restaurants display a theme of educating their customers rather than cooking to their expectations or giving them a new cuisine.

### **French Food as Cultural Education**

This third genre includes the least expensive French food in Memphis as well as the restaurants that are most devoted Frenchness. While Kent called Café Society "French and Belgian country food" and Chez Philippe combined French and Southern influences, restaurants such as La Baguette: French Bread and Pastry Shop and Tart identify themselves as wholly French, either through the name, as with La Baguette, or through a menu devoted entirely to croissants, quiches, and Croques Monsieurs, without a hamburger in sight.

Open since 1976, La Baguette is one of the oldest French restaurants in town, and it's often the first that comes to mind if a Memphian seeks French food. However, according to Louise Palazzolo, one of the original owners of the restaurant, the food has gone through many changes since she and four other investors started the enterprise in order to bring "de très bon pain" to Memphis.<sup>56</sup> Having come to Memphis from France as a student, Palazzolo and her friends decided that what they missed the most about France was the bread, and so they opened up their own bakery to supply it. They imported steam-injected ovens from Paris as well as French bakers and pastry chefs in order to do the job. Memphis's lack of French resources and

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<sup>56</sup> Palazzolo, Louise. Interviewed by Julia Hamilton.

culture is especially apparent here, as Palazzolo had to import not only equipment, but people as well. She reported having no need to adapt the menu for her customers' tastes, nor having to change any of the names in order for them to understand, for, in her words, the clientele was composed of Americans who had "beaucoup voyagé" and therefore understood what was being served. Interestingly, it seems that in the beginning La Baguette fit more in the first category of French restaurants, those that meet customer expectations, albeit with little tension between what the restaurateurs saw as French and what the customers expected. Granted, those interviewed to this point have been chefs while Palazzolo did none of the cooking, so perhaps she simply wasn't aware of the recipe adaptations as an owner, but the pastry chef who worked there at the time, Guy Pacault, has since passed away.

In any case, Palazzolo and the other investors sold the bakery after ten years in order to spend their time on other endeavors. According to Palazzolo, ownership has since changed hands multiple times, and the pastries have changed accordingly. Although its website describes the restaurant as having the same pastry recipes created by French chefs since its inception,<sup>57</sup> Palazzolo described the pastries currently served as heavier and sweeter, adding that the pastries in her time were more natural and fresh.<sup>58</sup> Chef Gutierrez also shared an opinion on La Baguette during his interview, calling it "shameful," as the restaurant allegedly tries to make so much that they don't give the dough enough time for the yeast to properly ferment, and they cook too many loaves at a time, which results in tasteless bread.<sup>59</sup> In short, neither Palazzolo nor Gutierrez, both natively French, consider current day La Baguette to be properly representative of authentic French pastry, having changed too much in Memphis's hands.

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<sup>57</sup> "About Us." *LaBaguetteMemphis.com*.

<sup>58</sup> Palazzolo, Louisette. Interviewed by Julia Hamilton.

<sup>59</sup> Gutierrez, José. Interviewed by Julia Hamilton.

However, a longtime employee of La Baguette today, called Ms. Lorraine by her staff and customers, referred to the food there as “running neck-and-neck with France.”<sup>60</sup> She reported never having traveled to France, but nevertheless enjoys being a sort of ambassador for the pastries, there to explain what they are to customers who may not understand them. Indeed, during a couple stretches of two to three hours at the restaurant, I watched Ms. Lorraine and her staff explain apple chaussons, baguettes, croissants, ciabatta bread, quiches, and other offerings to several customers on a regular basis. Instead of framing their food so as to make it seem more exotic, as Kent reported at Café Society, La Baguette serves its food on paper plates with plastic cutlery and styrofoam cups, and most prices are well under \$10. Much more than the two previous categories of restaurants, La Baguette exhibits here the techniques Long described in *Culinary Tourism*, such as menu selection. For example, pastries are renamed so as to be better understood: *Pains au chocolat* are served as chocolate croissants, *pains aux raisins* are called raisin danishes, etc.

Although Palazzolo and Gutierrez do not consider La Baguette’s current menu to be anything like what they would eat in France, and therefore not authentically French, I saw multiple customers walk in expressing enthusiasm to try what they deemed to be an exciting foreign food. I remember one group in particular that appeared to be a teenage girl, her mother, and her grandmother, wherein the oldest led her granddaughter directly to the pastry case and asked, “isn’t it exciting?” For these Memphians, La Baguette directly fulfills their perceptions of Frenchness and gives them an accessible outlet to engage in their culinary Other in a welcoming environment. Employees like Ms. Lorraine commonly greet them by name, which

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<sup>60</sup> Lorraine Hunt. Interviewed by Julia Hamilton.

she says “makes them feel warm.”<sup>61</sup> Out of Memphis’s French restaurants I have described to this point, it is one of the most deliberately French-framed settings, even as serves as its own brand of Southernness, which manifests itself in the low prices, humble decor, and relatively sugary, heavy fare.

The employees at Tart must also educate their customers, although in a more polished environment. The offerings at Tart feature more dishes and entrees than pastries, and the prices are closer to \$10 to \$15. These features along with its location in midtown Memphis bring in a slightly different clientele, described by its chef “Sleepy” Johnson as people in their 20s, “hipster-ish, or wealthier middle-aged people. Kinda know the finer things in life.”<sup>62</sup> Yet although it brings in different customers, Johnson described similar experiences as Ms. Lorraine in having to explain the food, such as the *croque monsieur*. He describes it as a “ham and cheese sandwich,” saying “it’s not that they’re scared of it, they just don’t know. Some of the words are intimidating...it’s a very educational experience to eat here.” Also upon spending several hours here on two different mornings, I saw customers asking for explanations of the *clafoutis* and the *croques monsieur*, and one of the Tart’s opening reviews praised the food despite needing help understanding and pronouncing the *salmon rillettes*.<sup>63</sup>

Like Ms. Lorraine, Johnson has never been to France, and his perception of the authentic French is grounded in the Memphis landscape, having studied at Memphis’s L’École Culinaire and worked for a time at Chez Philippe. He mentioned a few ways in which he changed the menu to be more accessible for Memphians, such as not serving rabbit tureen because “here it’s like--why are you killing the bunny?” and offering the croissant breakfast sandwich, their most

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<sup>61</sup> Lorraine Hunt. Interviewed by Julia Hamilton.

<sup>62</sup> Johnson, “Sleepy.” Interviewed by Julia Hamilton.

<sup>63</sup> Smith, Christopher. “A Visit to Tart.” *Memphis Flyer*.

popular item, “something you’d never see in France.” La Baguette also offers croissant breakfast sandwiches in several combinations of egg, bacon, turkey, cheese, etc. Over the course of several mornings in Tart’s offsite pastry kitchen with their French pastry chef Denis Savouray, he took great care to show me the proper method of rolling croissant dough, baking the pastries, and choosing the best ingredients. Twice he plucked a pastry off the shelf and had me eat it while pointing out the effects his baking techniques had on every aspect of the pastry, here taking on a similar role of educator as that embodied by Ms. Lorraine and Chef Johnson. However, he also expressed disappointment several times in what he saw as deteriorating quality even in his own pastries as a result of Memphis’s lack of resources and French culture, much like Gutierrez and Palazzolo looked down on the current state of La Baguette.<sup>64</sup>

There is no mistaking that Tart and La Baguette are different restaurants. This can be seen simply by buying an almond croissant and a small coffee in both establishments and contrasting them. At Tart, the pastry is served in an individual wicker basket, the coffee comes in its own small French press with a pre-warmed mug, and it all costs about \$8, while the La Baguette croissant comes on a paper plate, drizzled liberally with sweet almond icing, with drip coffee in a chipped mug, and it all costs about \$4. However, both feature an order-at-the-counter system with cheap to reasonable prices, deliberately French menus, and a theme of being ambassadors of French cuisine despite their unique ways of preparing it. Moreover, their customers are more likely to buy the food for its alleged Frenchness, while the customers at restaurants like Café Society and Chez Philippe could just as often go solely for some good food, like a hamburger, rather than any sort of cultural affiliation.

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<sup>64</sup> Savouray, Denis. Interviewed by Julia Hamilton.

## Conclusion

Several times in the course of this research, I have found myself affectionately labelling certain situations and interactions as “so Memphis.” Even while studying a culture that seems utterly foreign to a city such as this, Memphis’s influence on its representation is impossible to ignore, even beyond the simple details of the food preparation and reception I have already described. The chefs and restaurant owners I interviewed were remarkably accessible, with Chef Kent replying to my email in less than a day and a nationally-known *Maître Cuisinier de France* like Chef Gutierrez inviting me to his restaurant after I sent him a Facebook message. Moreover, most of the chefs had worked in each others’ kitchens, held dinner parties together, or at least knew of the others’ work. Michel Leny, who had been a hairdresser in Belgium before becoming the original owner of Café Society, regularly gives Chef Gutierrez haircuts.

This type of community and accessibility would be unheard of in a culinary Mecca like New York or Los Angeles, somewhere where ample cultural representation would likely allow French restaurants to express their Frenchness with little regional interference. It’s just an example of Memphis’s small-town vibe even as it contains over half a million inhabitants. Every chef ended his interview with suggestions of other colleagues to speak with and offers to try their food. This is what allowed me, as a 20 year old first-time researcher, to be able to enter into a culinary community of which I was previously utterly unaware.

This is what has shaped Memphis’s three negotiations of French cuisine: a dedicated, accessible community working in a mid-sized city with strong tastes and expectations. Although each of the restaurants I’ve listed identifies in some way as French, it is likely that one would not find in France a La Baguette or Chez Philippe as they exist here. Memphis has forced French food, with all of its national pride and strict authority, to wrestle with Southern foodways and

what Southerners want French food to be. Those that have come out the other side are the restaurants I have described thus far as having catered to Memphis's definition of French food, created a new cuisine, or educated Memphians using Southern versions of French dishes. In this city, French cuisine is not a window into a new culture, but a mirror that reflects upon this place and its entrenched tastes, which are both frustrating and innovative for French chefs and make this research not "so French," but ultimately "so Memphis."

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