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# A French Feast From a Political Pot

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BESANÇON, France

MORELS speckled the forest floor. For a lavish meal with family and friends, Françoise Branget, a deputy in the National Assembly from the Doubs region, sautéed those earthy black mushrooms with Bresse chicken, the king of French fowl, and the pungent “vin jaune” from the nearby Jura district.

For Ms. Branget, this was not just a feast. It was a celebration of her campaign to unite deputies on the left and right in a national cause: the promotion of French gastronomy.

Earlier this year, she asked her colleagues to contribute a favorite recipe from their regions. The result is “[La Cuisine de la République: Cuisinez Avec vos Députés!](#)” (“The Cuisine of the Republic: Cook With Your Deputies!”), a culinary tour of France recorded in a 295-page album of recipes, history, humor, braggadocio and nostalgia.

“It is our national responsibility to cook and to eat well,” Ms. Branget, a deputy from the center-right party of President Nicolas Sarkozy, said as she washed sand from fat, spongy morels at her kitchen sink. “There are no political parties around the dinner table. By creating this book, male and female deputies are defending their regions and carrying out their political mandate.”

One could hardly imagine an American member of Congress making such a proclamation. But food is so much a part of France’s identity that the government led a successful campaign last year to win United Nations recognition of the French meal as a national treasure. Elected deputies can rise and fall on the extent to which they protect the terrains of their grape growers, the subsidies of their milk producers, the clean water of their oyster cultivators and the rights of their recreational hunters.

Most of the recipes in the book (published only in France, by Le Cherche Midi) date back years, even generations, and can be labor-intensive and time-consuming and can involve hard-to-find ingredients. Hearty wins over light: cagouilles charentaises from the southwest (petits gris snails, parsley, garlic and wine), a garlic-and-cream-filled gratin dauphinois and a challenging version of pork head that requires careful cutting out of the throat. Photographs of the smiling deputies as well as observations and advice from some of the 177 who participated give the book an intimate feel.

The book’s first recipe, a hare by Étienne Blanc of the Ain region, is the most daunting. Its starts

with “aging” the dead animal in the open air for several days. Then comes a five-day process that includes carefully saving the blood, the organs and head while cutting up the meat, and making a classic pot-au-feu with a wine-based marinade, cooking and reheating the dish over three days.

“I found this recipe for hare in an old cookbook dating from before the Revolution,” Mr. Blanc wrote. He did not say whether he ever tried to prepare it himself.

Other recipes are more straightforward, reminders of the past and more specifically of poverty, when the French had to make the best out of very little. The “cacasse à cul nu” (potatoes, onions and a slice of pig’s skin), for example, is described as “traditionally a dish for the poor in the Ardennes.”

Still others are journeys deep into French history. According to legend, “creusois,” a simple cake with butter, egg whites, sugar, flour and powdered hazelnuts, was originally translated from a 15th-century parchment found in a monastery in the region of Crocq.

Then there is a large stuffed chicken, “Belle Gabrielle,” by Cecile Dumoulin of Yvelines. It is a complicated dish involving carrots, turnips, onions, leeks, lard, dried ham, sausage, chicken livers and gizzards, eggs and crème fraîche, named after Gabrielle d’Estrées, a mistress of King Henri IV who was installed by him in a town in Ms. Dumoulin’s constituency.

As for the elected aristocrats of the French Republic, they know how to dine well, too. Deputies, who have a private restaurant with a view of the Eiffel Tower, organize themselves in food clubs like the Parliamentary Club of Friends of the Table and the more down-to-earth Friends of the Pig. And several times a year, deputies sponsor tastings to celebrate their regions.

In choosing recipes, though, deputies’ intentions were more personal than political. “It reminds me of my childhood memories, the pleasant scent that emanated as it cooked,” Jean-Pierre Abelin of La Vienne wrote about his butter galette, which he said was baked on Sunday morning and eaten after Mass.

Of picking mushrooms for his mother to prepare in her restaurant, Jean-Pierre Marcon of the Haute-Loire wrote, “Pleasure becomes, at that instant, an act of love.”

Grandmothers were particularly celebrated.

Some deputies stressed instinct over precision. In relating his recipe for eggs en meurette, François Sauvadet, a deputy from the Côte-d’Or, warned, “If it at first seems easy to make, you must know that it remains an affair of intuition.”

Seventy-two of the 111 female deputies (who make up about 18 percent of the Assembly) chose not to participate in the cookbook project. Nor did two former deputies who hope to win the Socialist Party nomination for next year’s presidential election: Martine Aubry, the head of the party; and Ségolène Royal, the party nominee who lost to Mr. Sarkozy in 2007.

The presidential hopeful François Hollande from Corrèze, Ms. Royal's former partner and the father of their four children, by contrast, related with gusto and a long explanation a recipe for "farcidure grillée du pays d'Egletons," a potato-based dish with many versions that looks like a latke crossed with a Spanish omelet. He also defined it as women's work, which may not help him with the women's vote. "Voilà how for so many years on end women fed their families with almost nothing" except this "farcidure," he wrote.

Ms. Branget, who is known for her excellent cooking, said that, since becoming a deputy in 2004, she spends little time in her kitchen. When she does, she moves like a dancer around its six-burner stove and two ovens. She washed the morels more than a dozen times ("I have a horror of sand," she said). She peeled the stems of white asparagus, scrubbed small round potatoes, rinsed strawberries and flung butter, oil and liquid from the morels into an iron casserole for the Bresse chicken. In an hour, dinner was served.

"Oh la la!" she exclaimed. "There's the perfume of the land in these morels. It's so sympathique!"

Morels have a romantic place in her life. She said she tasted them for the first time in a small auberge one Sunday in June with the man she would marry. In her book, she included a 1927 ode to the mushroom, titled, "To you, Morel!"

"Cooking is in our soul, but in political life, politics intrudes, and there's never enough time, never enough," she said. "These recipes — they're testimony to our small pleasures, our contributions to history."

*This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:*

***Correction: September 21, 2011***

An article last Wednesday about "La Cuisine de la République, Cuisinez Avec Vos Députés!" ("The Cuisine of the Republic: Cook With Your Deputies!"), a cookbook by Françoise Branget, a deputy in the French National Assembly, containing recipes from her fellow deputies, erroneously included two politicians among the current deputies who did not contribute to the book. While Martine Aubry and Ségolène Royal did not in fact contribute, they are former deputies.