

ALAIN PASSARD BELIEVES menus are written by nature. “You can’t call a tomato a tomato in January,” he says. “It’s a counterfeit.” The chef of L’Arpège, a three-Michelin-star Paris institution, is revered for his hyperseasonal *dégustation légumière*. Diners book weeks in advance to sample his exquisite menu of a dozen vegetarian dishes, like a vol-au-vent filled with fennel, zucchini flower and eggplant, in *vin jaune* sauce.

In 2001, when this former *rôtisseur* (meat cook) chose to forgo red meat and refocus his menu around fresh produce, he shocked the restaurant world. Parisians were incredulous that leaves, stalks and bulbs could be worthy of an epic feast. But 15 years later, vegetable-focused cooking has become a perfectly viable concept in France. From bastions of haute cuisine to neighborhood bistros to corner cafes, vegetarian and vegan dishes are readily available, and gluten-free options are proliferating as well. Reservationists have even started asking about dietary requirements. This amounts to a sea change in a country where a meal without meat was long seen as a form of deprivation.

Passard’s vegetable conversion has proved prescient. In the years since, he has instilled his eco-minded principles in a new generation of chefs who now run some of France’s most talked-about restaurants—Mirazur, David Toutain, Saturne and Le Servan, to name a few. Like most of Passard’s disciples, Bertrand Grébaut, chef at Paris’s one-Michelin-star restaurant Septime and at seafood bar Clamato, does not banish meat entirely, but he finds that for his peer group the ratio has changed. “We cook more vegetables and less animal protein. Look,” he says, scanning the Clamato menu, “one-third of the dishes are vegetarian.”

Vegetable-heavy menus were not unheard of in French cooking. Alain Ducasse introduced one almost 30 years ago at Le Louis XV, in Monaco. At the time, he sold fewer than two such meals a day; now as many as a quarter of his customers order from that menu. In 2014, concerned by the health and environmental costs of meat consumption, the legendary chef removed the meat station from his signature kitchen in the Plaza Athénée in Paris—and promptly lost a Michelin star. It took Ducasse 15 months to make the gastronomic case for vegetables, grains and sustainable seafood, but the restaurant regained its third star this year.

The inclination to eat less meat has been part of American dining culture for years now. What took the French so long to be convinced? “In France, vegetables are considered less noble than animal protein,”

says Agathe Audouze, who in just three years has grown her gluten-free and vegetarian Café Pinson into a mini chain with multiple Paris locations. “When you’re raised like that, it’s hard to change.”

“The French balk at the unfamiliar,” agrees Angèle Ferreux-Maeght, the owner of the chic Paris takeout counter and catering service La Guinguette d’Angèle. The great-granddaughter of influential art

Cultural mores have evolved too. Signaling one’s food allergies and aversions was once seen as rude. “Ten years ago, guests didn’t mention their allergies,” says Thierry Marx, chef of Camélia and the two-Michelin-star Sur Mesure in the Mandarin Oriental, Paris. “They just left something on the plate.” Today, the Camélia menu clearly indicates vegetarian and gluten- and dairy-free options as well as dishes containing nuts.

These changes have come about for multiple reasons, going back to the mad cow scare. A growing obesity crisis and the state of the environment are the main factors, but there are positive motives, too. French chefs are fired up about the possibilities of ingredients like einkorn, sprouted lentils, quinoa and buckwheat. “Our palate is broader now,” says Stéphane Jégo of the celebrated Paris bistro L’Ami Jean, whose menu he recently recalibrated to include more vegetables. “We used to be much more constricted.”

Another explanation of the shift may surprise readers: “We don’t like to admit it, but we adore America,” Audouze says. Case in point: Charlotte Rouah, the founder of Paris-based Juice It, started her company after discovering organic juice bars in New York. “I could get a fantastic variety there,” she says. “Not in Paris.”

As the French have taken to clean and green eating, they’ve also made it their own. “I could never forget classic cooking,” says Romain Meder, the executive chef of Ducasse’s retooled Plaza Athénée restaurant. Several traditional methods such as curing, grilling, smoking and roasting in a salt crust are newly relevant. “To make a vegetable a star, you have to concentrate the flavor,” says Ducasse, “make it tender or crisp, create a surprise, seek out its essence.”

There are also innovations—playing up bold tastes and lively acidity, for instance, which are the antitheses of refined Parisian style. Jégo says he doesn’t blanch asparagus anymore, opting instead to grill it. “It’s not as pretty,” he says, “but you keep more of the flavor.” This kind of simpler preparation

is in line with the recent arrival of raw juices. In fact, Jégo has collaborated with Rouah and Juice It to create his own zippy blend of apple, carrot, beet, lemon and ginger, which he serves in a shot glass as a palate reviver.

In the end, what the French are wary of is extremism. Most chefs remain unabashed omnivores, and even Ferreux-Maeght, who mainly eats vegan and gluten-free, rejects going overboard: “You shouldn’t be too much of a purist,” she says. “We aren’t ready to give up pleasure for well-being.”



THE SHIFT

PLATS DU JOUR

As green juices arrive in the land of steak frites, French chefs are introducing a bounty of vegetarian, vegan and gluten-free dishes.

BY JANE SIGAL

ILLUSTRATION BY PATRIK SVENSSON

dealers Aimé and Marguerite Maeght, she serves organic, gluten-free and vegan juices, Buddha bowls and desserts from her year-old storefront near the Place des Victoires.

Ducasse protégé Christophe Moret, the chef at the Shangri-La Hotel, Paris, points to another stumbling block. “Customers thought they would be hungry after eating,” he says of the monthly “100% Green Dinners” he serves at the hotel’s La Bauhinia restaurant. But he found that once they experienced one dinner, they were eager to reserve tables for the next.