

BON APPETIT

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From mid-September to the second week in October we were traveling again in Europe, revisiting places and friends in Denmark, Germany, Switzerland and France. This time, as on occasions before, on returning home and reading through the daily trip diary, we noted that historic spots, chateaus, museums and cathedrals got only brief mention, while when, where and what was eaten at every meal is described in minute detail down to the last green peppercorn.

Invariably, the one aspect of travel abroad that never fails to impress is the attitude of nearly all continental Europeans toward food and the whole business of food purchase, preparation and service, at least in the countries just visited. There is a universal expectation that meals should be unhurried and that food be of good quality, freshly cooked, entreatingly prepared and well served. About the only possible complaint is that after dawdling enjoyably over dessert, fruit, cheese and coffee at the end of a two-hour meal, trying to get the check sometimes is often a frustrating experience to impatient Americans. However, unlike in America, it is difficult to get a really bad meal in any of these countries. In the homes of friends, "family meal" eating is always a joy and memorable experience. Even in the smallest hotel, village inn or roadside restaurant, the food is not only excellent but the proprietors take great pride in preparing, serving and surprising you with their own distinctive dishes.

The average European housewife may use the continental imitations of our supermarkets on occasion (although, even in these, the quality and variety of fresh foods available far surpass our own), but she is much more insistent on shopping each morning for the daily fare at her favorite, small neighborhood bakery, pastry shop and butcher, or browsing through colorful open market stalls for vegetables, fruits and sea foods. To Danes, cheese kept in the house for more than one day is hardly worth eating. The Italians want their fish still flapping and their mussels still squirting; the French, their long loaves hot from the oven and their mushrooms handpicked from the forest; and the Swiss are particular about everything.

The continental European is just as discriminating when he dines away from home, and his respect for good food translates into respect for those who know how to prepare and serve it. As a result, from the humblest busboy and downy-checked kitchen apprentice to the efficient waiter, maître-de and solicitous proprietor, the attitude is not one of annoyance or enduring a servile job but one of interest, enjoyment and pride. Food preparation and service is an established and honored profession, and the competition to excel and move upward in the pecking order is keen. Judging from the number of small

restaurants, family hotels and country inns, the ultimate goal of most young husband-and-wife teams in the food service industry is to own and manage a small establishment of their own and eventually achieve star rating in the Michelin.

Another observation that impresses is that food is served uncluttered—except for a decorative sprig of cress or parsley—and in reasonable portions. Inflation is everywhere. Costs are high, thrift is essential, and most Europeans cooperate in playing "clean plate." In contrast to the prodigious amount of waste and leftover characteristic of American eating habits, not much uneaten food finds its way back to European kitchens. It could be that this preoccupation and concern about food is a reflection of European history. Its peoples have endured so many disasters and experienced hunger so often as the countless wars, plagues and famines swept over them that respect for food, eating and eating well have become ingrained characteristics.

So, our advice is to get off those convenient buses and avoid those group meals, hotels and included tours. Strike out on your own in a small rental car and follow the byroads instead of the Autobahns, Autostradas and Pelages. At any rate, if you enjoy gourmandizing with your travels, try the cured salmon and mustard sauce in Copenhagen, the deep fried wedge of Camembert covered with strawberry preserves in Hellerun, the wild raspberries flamed in brandy in Hanover, the veal sausage and spatzli in Bern, the cheese fondue in Neufchatel, the fried perch fillets in Murten, the truite au bleu in Astano, the *zuppa de pesce* in Brindisi, the broiled swordfish in Reggio Calabria, the spaghetti and truffles in Perugia, the *moules* in Villeneuve les Avignon, the lamb shanks with thyme and rosemary in Fontvielle, the escargots in Avalon, the Belon oysters in Chartres, and the forest crêpes in St. Germain en Laye. You'll soon learn to play "clean plate" too.

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