



## The Last Camembert Cheese Maker

Published on my personal site

If you had to name two elements that lay at the heart of the French food experience, they would most likely be wine and cheese. And the first cheese to come to mind might well be Camembert, which is not only one of the most popular cheeses in France but worldwide.

Given its renown, you'd naturally assume that that this [AOP-protected cheese](#) is being produced by a large number of cheese makers. But you'd be wrong, at least as far as real Camembert goes. Because there is apparently just a single producer of traditional Camembert amongst us.

Camembert must be made in Normandy, from local unpasteurized milk, although it was only a few years ago that large, cheese-making concerns in the area began lobbying the French government for an exception to this. They wanted to be able to either filter or heat the milk for their industrial cheese, and thereby confuse consumers into thinking it was the real thing.

Happily, this cynical effort was thwarted, in no small degree thanks to the tiny but feisty [Comité de Défense du Vritable Camembert](#). Sadly, many of the things that constitute all that's best in French culinary products are under threat from corporate interests, so such action groups are increasingly common.

But what of that last, lonely producer of hand-ladled Camembert? We're speaking here of François Durand, who 30 years ago learned the techniques of traditional Camembert fabrication from the owner of La Héronnière, based in the town itself. François is now the proprietor and still employs the techniques he claims are unchanged since the cheese was invented by Marie Harel in the 18th century. Along with his wife and brother, François transforms the production of the cows from his father's farm via a completely manual process, during which each cheese is handled from 10 to 12 times.



As is typically the case when dealing with a natural process, François reports that each production cycle is a bit different, requiring slightly varying techniques, resulting in cheeses that are never exactly the same—something that gives industrial cheese makers and supermarkets the willies.

Where then does one find this cheese of the gods? Well, you're welcome to visit François and family at the [Fromagerie Durand](#), thereby benefiting from the ability to choose from cheeses in several stages of ripening, as well as taking in a tour of the *fabrique*. Beyond that, Durand's Camembert is widely available in Paris, Nice and Bordeaux, so it's something to keep an eye out for on your next trip to France.



## Of Duck and Jambon-beurre

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When I come across a beautiful old tree being cut down, I experience a visceral reaction that sometimes lasts for days. My approach to French cuisine is much the same. The current openness to ingredients and techniques from other cultures is great. But I remain essentially conservative, in the sense that it pains me when I learn of endangered French culinary traditions.

So, I wasn't at all pleased when a survey announced that the longtime favorite dish of the French had shifted from the classic blanquette de veau to magret de canard. What's wrong with duck breast? Just that a magret is no ordinary filet, since its origin is a duck (or more rarely, goose) that has been fattened by *gavage* for the production of foie gras. That still sounds fine, I can hear you say. Well, maybe not so much.

The problem is that there's nothing traditional about magret de canard. Until quite recently, foie gras was created by small producers, and the ducks were then prepared in a confit. But with the rise of industrial foie gras production, there were simply more duck breasts than needed to meet the primarily regional demand for duck confit. Which is to say, Parisians aren't nuts about it.

What to do with these mountains of duck breasts? Only an industrial solution would suffice and so that's what was put in place, with the meat being shipped to supermarkets and restaurants across France, tagged with the new name. Once the taste for magret de canard was established, the industrial firms that prepare heat-and-serve dishes for mediocre restaurants (may they roast in a horsemeat-ridden hell) soon made this one of their staple items. The result? Blanquette de veau is out and magret de canard is in.

Do I detest magret de canard? Not at all. During my years in Lyon I consumed my fair share, always sourced from a trusted provider and cooked simply at home. Now living in the Nice region, where duck just isn't a thing, I have moved on. So, is this just another lament about the rise of industrial food and the decline of French culinary standards? Almost, but not quite, thanks to the Indice Jambon-beurre.

Each year the Indice sums up the results of its survey to determine the preferred French fast food or, as the authors of the survey awkwardly put it, *produit du snacking*. The jambon-beurre sandwich is a French classic, composed of just a baguette, butter and ham. It sounds simple enough but when created with excellent ingredients it can be a thing of beauty. No surprise, then, that for many years it was the traditional lunch of the French worker, and an essential component of every picnic.

I assumed the siren song of burgers and pizza had long left the jambon-beurre in the *poussiere* but according to the Indice Jambon-beurre, which tracks such things, its popularity reigns supreme, beating out even hamburgers. Apparently, almost two-thirds of all sandwiches in France last year were humble jambon-beurre, to the amount of 2.2 million — per day!



The average price last year was €2.68, with the least expensive being found in Saint-Brieuc, at an average price of €2.20, and Paris topping the list at €3.26. Here in Cagnes sur Mer they go from €3.50 to €4.00, so perhaps the pollsters should cast a wider net. The one shown above clocked in at €3.50, and while the bread was impeccable, the ham and lettuce were tired. The sandwich itself was also rather diminutive, of the mini-baguette variety.

But what can you expect from a bakery that has not one but two of those automated payment monstrosities, complete with conveyor belts? Masked by the excuse of increased hygiene, since employees don't need to handle both bread and money, they're a misguided attempt to introduce the kind of efficiency that harkens back to the Taylor-era assembly line mentality, which is in such opposition to the traditional French approach. Thanks to these evil devices, customers never actually complete a transaction with the employees of this bakery, who no longer hand you your change, or say thanks and goodbye.

Instead they move on to the next customer and abandon you to glumly stare at the machine, waiting for your change to appear. At which point you dig it out and slink off, as if you'd purchased a sex toy in an establishment of ill repute. That stinks.

Luckily, there is a ridiculous number of bakeries within walking distance and I've shifted my allegiance to the one across the street. Where they still hand you your change, and say thank you and goodbye. And they usually smile while they do it. How do you put a price on that? I guess such French traditions will never really die. And I say *tant mieux* for that.





## Long Live the Oeuf Mayo

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In an earlier post I expressed concern that magret de canard had replaced blanquette de veau as the preferred dish of the French. This gloomy scenario was tempered to some extent by a survey reporting that the classic jambon-beurre remained the most popular sandwich in the hexagon, trouncing even the regrettably ubiquitous hamburger. More good news now arrives with the awarding of a prize for the best oeuf mayonnaise, or oeuf mayo, as its adepts refer to it.

The oeuf mayo is yet another classic bistro dish that's on the ever-growing endangered culinary species list. So, it was good to hear that the award is the work of no less than the Association de Sauvegarde de l'Oeuf-mayonnaise (The Association for the Preservation of the Oeuf Mayonnaise). Now in its 15th year, the association was founded, and is still headed by, Claude Lebey, now in his 80s.

What's all the fuss about? The dish can be summed up as one that successfully combines simplicity, healthy ingredients and low cost. Something of a winning formula, when you think about it. But simplicity doesn't mean there's no room for creativity, when it's added to the four criteria that Lebey feels are essential.

First, the presentation must be appetizing and generous. Second, the macedoine is apparently optional but in its absence there must be lettuce or a similar base. The egg itself is critical and in this case size matters. Finally, the mayonnaise must be exemplary: well seasoned, with just the right touch of mustard, and a satisfying texture.

Bertrand Gautreau, the chef of winning Paris bistro L'Auberge d'Chez Eux, which created the winning entry shown above, puts it this way: "It's a typical, simple bistro dish, but when it's well executed it's good and brings happiness."

When asked to explain the success of his own iteration, Gautreau emphasized the vegetables in the macedoine, which are carefully chosen, flavorful and crunchy, as well as the generous size of the bio eggs. He summed the dish up with a philosophical observation: "Simple things are sometimes the best." Indeed.

I haven't come across an oeuf mayo since moving to the Nice region but they were to be found in Lyon, which is something of a living museum of classic bistro dishes. I can still picture the one placed before me in the timeless Café Bellecour, shown at right, which I highly recommended for an old-fashioned bistro lunch (best to reserve for the main room or arrive early).

