French Eat Both Frozen Meals & Fine Cuisine

ELAINE GANLEY,Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — In France, eating is supposed to be an art. Foodies from around the globe flock to the world's gastronomic center to discover the true meaning of fine dining — a convivial sharing of dishes, lovingly prepared, which capture the imagination, the taste buds and the essence of the land.

Enter reality.

The Europe-wide uproar over horse meat being sold as beef has exposed a labyrinthine network of companies and countries that trade the meat used in packaged meals. And even the French, it appears, head to the microwave at night after work to zap frozen meals created in far-off factories.

Up to 41 percent of French expenditures for meals go to factory-prepared dishes and frozen products, France's national statistics agency said in a 2008 report.

"Tell me what you eat and I will tell you what you are," gastronome Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin famously wrote 165 years ago in his treatise on taste.

Today, the French are caught in a contradiction: The pleasure of eating good food still defines them but their busy lives increasingly determine what they eat.

France set the standards long ago and upholds them today with coveted Michelin stars for top chefs and annual "taste weeks" devoted to cultivating a discerning palate for its children. In 2010, the French gastronomic meal was declared an "intangible cultural heritage of humanity" by UNESCO, the U.N.'s cultural arm.

Deep pockets will still get diners a quality meal at even no-star restaurants, but at home or at work it's another story. Gone are the two-hour lunches. Traditional bakeries stand in as sandwich shops while supermarkets provide industrially-prepared meals.

"The French need prepared dishes because women work. We don't have time to cook. It's really a change in lifestyle" that began in the 1970s, said Pascale Hebel, director of the consumer affairs department at CREDOC, a research center.

Hebel said France has the highest proportion of households in Europe with working parents and "these markets are growing."

"When you have an adolescent at home, you have to leave something to eat, so you leave a prepared dish," she said.

Indeed, the youth of France are propelling this trend, less eating at home, snacking more and relying more on fast food, experts say. Even still, French snacking between meals is more than two times less prevalent than in the United States, according to a report by Celine Laisney, who monitors trends for the French Agriculture Ministry.

Supermarkets — where up to 70 percent of food spending takes place — are also making traditional open-air markets and specialty food shops seem quaint.

"From the moment you have big supermarkets, you have a completely different, new relationship between eating and food," says leading food sociologist Claude Fischler.

"There is a sort of anxiety over ... products transformed by industry. At the same time, these transformed products, we eat them more and more," he said. "They're omnipresent. That's how we shop. We use kitchen time for other things."

Horse meat falsely labeled as beef has turned up in prepared foods across Europe with a French company, Spanghero, at its epicenter. The company denies that it purposely mislabeled meat it bought from a Dutch trader and repackaged in Luxembourg. A Romanian company says it provided the original horse meat and labeled it as such.

The horse meat scandal will have an impact on sales of prepared foods, but likely only in the short term, experts told The Associated Press. Unlike the mad cow disease crisis in the 1990s and the bird flu crisis in the mid-2000s — which led to extended drops in beef and chicken sales — the horse meat found in lasagna and other prepared dishes does not pose a health risk.

"It's a matter of disgust," said Fischler. "You've been eating something you were not aware of."

Yet horse meat, which is much cheaper than beef, has been eaten happily for decades by some in France who appreciate both the savings and the taste.

Claude Verhoye of Paris says she treasures her memories of eating horse.

"When I was young, every Sunday my grandmother made a horse roast," said Verhoye, 64, standing in line at the horse butcher at a Right Bank market. "My daughter rides horses and says you shouldn't do this. I rode horses, too, and it doesn't stop me. I never feel guilty."

Genevieve Cazes-Valette, a marketing professor at the University of Toulouse who is also a food anthropologist, said while the French need quick meals during the workweek they keep alive the old culinary traditions on the weekends.

"In reality, we are into two types of meals," she explained. "During the week, you eat anything ... Then there is a clear return to pleasure, both at the market, during the preparation and in the degustation" over the weekend.

In addition, the pleasures of eating and sharing a meal are not reserved for the elite in France but are treasured by all, a universality that may help keep the French food tradition alive despite the pressures of modern life.

In her 2012 report, "The Evolution of Eating in France," Laisney predicts that new eating profiles will emerge. She says it will not be unusual to see — even within the same French citizen — someone who can move easily between factory food and

great meals, depending on the day of the week, the time of year and their professional and family constraints.

So despite the horse meat scandal, French pride in their cuisine remains a constant.

"The French continue to think their cuisine is reliable and of better quality than many others," said Cazes-Valette. "In addition, I think it's true."

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