

## TREU GRITS

The recent review of Thai cuisine in this space was met with such a effusive swell of apathy that a review of French food seemed the inevitable encore. French cuisine being our idea of the queen of foreign dining and so influential on the diet of strip mall dwellers--witness the role of croissants in fast food joints--it's high time we passed judgement.

It's been said that the secret history of the world is that the French would take over places and then the British would conquer them in order to be able to get something decent to eat. But that was said by another and hence lesser writer, so why should I bother to mention him. This is a fairly competitive field, you know and I have to be ruthless. Unless, of course, Ruth comes crawling back on hands and knees. Which used to be a lot of fun, but I digress.

Actually there seem to be three kinds of French restaurant in Southern California. The traditional kind features vellum menus with punchline prices, the kind of atmosphere that suggests you should be impressed with yourself for just being there, and a cuisine based on smothering everything under heavy sauces loaded with cholesterol and subtleties (or perhaps it was subtitles--it's hard to read these calligraphy menus.) They usually have names involving proper names and odd words like "Ce'st", "Chez" and "Bleu". (Example: Chuck E. Chez)

Then there are the newer places specializing in Nouvelle Cuisine which, like so many "New" things--be they Journalism, Politics, Nixon, Wave, or York--is a total flop. Old hat is old hat, spell it Nouveau Chapeau if you please. If you took the New Math and never learned a cuisine from a cosine you know what I mean, albeit in a vague and fragmentary sort of way. These places have the same names as the perfumes you're always seeing copies of.

There are also a legion of foreign French restaurants that do some sort of Franco-American fusion, perhaps beans and francs. They are called things like "Le Petit Francais" and offer "cuisine tridundante" such as "French Dip Sandwich avec Au Jus Sauce."

The first type is the funniest, because they actually speak French and lay on all the traditional national color, such as hysterical chefs and surly waiters. They will look down their Gallic noses at you and suggest that you order escargot. Just try to get any French toast or French fries from these guys, much less the famous postcards, kisses, or ticklers. They will sneer at your

pronunciation (or spelling) of idiotic words like "ratouile", "boillabaise", or "bourgenon." They also smirk at more common French words like "ouupon".

Don't be intimidated by this (or by any representative of a culture given to talking through their nose, fighting with their feet, and making love with their mouths). A little-known fact about the French tongue is that it cannot be pronounced correctly by anyone. This affords Frenchmen cheap amusement and a sense of superiority otherwise almost impossible for them to come by, while their own patently absurd pronunciation goes uncorrected because most people feel unqualified to tell them they are garbling their own language. You might as well tell the Italians they don't know how to run their own government.

There are other secrets of the French tongue, but they are totally inappropriate to a decorous restaurant review, as witness the lurid conclusions to which your febrile mind has already jumped. This column is for the education of the consumer, I should remind you--not the entertainment of the febrile-minded.

There was no sneering at the REVOLT table, of course. The heaping helpings I received had platoons of subservient waiters helping with the heaping, their service excellent, if not excruciatingly obsequious. Aside from my personal animal magnetism, I attribute this to the fact that they seemed to think I was reviewing for a major dining card publication. It was a mysterious misapprehension, which I finally traced to the business cards I'd printed up and handed around when I arrived. I've found in the past that this sort of thoughtful preparation saves a lot of time, embarrassment, and tedious necessities such as paying the bill.

Escargot, which I assumed to be flotsam or some other form of ex-cargo, turns out to be snails. Well, *outré* IS a French word--probably meaning something like "Totally gross". There's a bit of mystery as to where the snails come from. Do they just snatch them off downspouts, garden fresh, or raise them on little slime ranches? They keep us in the dark on such matters, which is probably just as well. Most of us already know they use pigs to hunt for truffles (especially the clerks at Nordy's candy counter after my recent understandable fracas there) but even a pig won't fetch a snail for you. Even a lawyer would hesitate. So we didn't sample the truffles that showed up on the desert cart, chocolate coated so as, no doubt, to cover up the pigtooth prints. Fortunately the threatened snails never appeared, though I noticed a cockroach nipping along the wall at one place. Enough to knock a few stars off their rating, but at least nothing to leave a trail of slime down your throat

and munch up the leaves of your nasturtiums. Not even the French would fry a roach to get attention. Snails and frog legs are about as freaky-deaky as they care to stoop. Though God only knows what's in some of those sauces.