



Photography instructor George Tuck prepares "poulet vallee d'auge," a French dish which he has adapted to American tastes.

Photos by Mark Billingsley

Professor looks to Paris cuisine for ingredients of good cook

By Mary Fastenau

If cooking styles were to find partners in art forms, American food would be paired with stick men drawn in crayon while French food's partner would be a classic, detailed oil painting.

Yet, just as an aspiring crayon artist can someday learn to work with oil paints, American food has the potential to improve, according to a UNL journalism professor who has attended a cooking school in Paris.

George Tuck said he began his crayon drawing type cooking when he was seven or eight years old, continued cooking through Boy Scouts and began learning the strokes of the master chefs during a year of study in Europe.

He said he had always dreamed of going to a cooking school and when a faculty development grant allowed him to spend from August 1977 to July 1978 in Europe, he decided to take advantage of the situation.

IF YOU WANT to learn to cook, Paris is the best place to be, according to Tuck, because it is the "hub of food." "If you want to learn about deep sea fishing, you go to the deep sea," he said, "but if you want to learn about cooking, you go to Paris."

It is not only a difference in skill, he noted, but also a difference in emphasis. For example, he said the traditional French family spends a lot more time and money on food, up to 30 percent of their disposable income.

"For the French, cooking is an act of creation," he said.

In America, an "abbreviated amount of time," is spent on food, he explained. Tuck said if people go out for entertainment here, food is usually included on their way to something else, where in France dining out is considered entertainment in itself.

In French restaurants, he said, some of the dishes are not prepared until they are ordered. For example, if you would order a dessert soufflé, it would take 45 minutes to prepare.

HE SAID he and the other students were advised to visit various restaurants to compare styles of preparation.

In Paris, Tuck said, there are not fast food chains. There are stands along the sidewalk selling sandwiches and crepes and cheaper restaurants, but the number is not comparable to the United States.

"Even in the crummy el cheapo restaurants, the food was pretty good," he said.

In contrast, Tuck said, "If we didn't have McDonald's, Colonel Sanders, Burger King and Wendy's, many Americans would starve to death."

He admitted that the French are beginning to use more convenience foods. But he wanted to learn the artistic and traditional way of cooking.

Tuck chose La Varenne, a cooking school which he said had the reputation of being the best in Paris, "the center of cuisine."

THE SCHOOL has established its reputation by showing students the classic way to prepare dishes and also variations, Tuck explained. He added that some cooking schools will show only one method of preparation, inferring that is the only way it can be done.

About 2,000 people went through La Varenne in the past year, he said, but only 300 of those went six weeks or longer.

The school is divided into four different levels, with each level assigned a certain number of weeks. All four levels add up to 36 weeks, Tuck explained. He said he took the introductory course which lasts six weeks.

The first course, he explained, is followed by two 12 week courses and a final six week course which is similar to graduate school.

Most people do not have the time to take six weeks of the school, he said, so they take a week or a weekend at a time.

OTHER THAN tuition, all the students have to provide is an apron and three specific knives. He said the knives are one of the secrets of French cooking. They are made of carbon and always are extremely sharp. A sharpening stone goes beside every cutting board, he said.

The majority of people who take classes at La Varenne are Americans, Tuck said, and 90 percent of the people are aiming for a career in food preparation.

He said there were seven people in his class, including a girl from Uganda, a home economics teacher from California, a female free-lance writer from Washington D.C., a doctor's wife and a student from California.

According to Tuck, knowledge of the French language is helpful, but not necessary. He said the classes are based on demonstration and practical experience. The chefs demonstrate and then the class members practice what they have observed.

ASSISTING THE chef was a "stagiaire" who acted as translator and assistant. Tuck explained that the stagiaire would help the chef for 30 weeks and receive six weeks

free instruction as payment.

During the practical experience part of the class, the students divided into teams and each group prepared a section of the meal, he explained.

The French are much more logical in their food preparation, he said. He said they cut vegetables so that they will cook the fastest and can dice an onion without shedding a tear.

They also have different standards for judging their food, Tuck noted. For instance, he said in America, omelettes are cooked until they are dry, but in his first lesson, he learned to cook omelettes so they were "drooling," which is the way the French like them.

Tuck said that after learning the basics he feels confident tackling just about any recipe.

THERE ARE some problems after leaving the school, he admitted. After he finished the class he moved to Germany where he had a small apartment. A two-foot round coffee table was the only place he could prepare breads and pastries. He said he would have to get on his knees to knead the dough and end up with piles of flour resembling snowdrifts. He said he had to use a wine bottle for a rolling pin.

Since returning to the United States, Tuck said he has not had a lot of time to cook. He said this bothers him because cooking is an acquired skill, which needs to be practiced to be perfected.



Tuck prepares an economical mushroom omelette.

Photo by Mark Billingsley