

Dining at the



This month we begin a three-part excerpt from *Dining at the White House—From the President’s Table to Yours*, a sizzling new book by former White House Chef, John Moeller. In his book, Chef Moeller pulls the curtain back and dishes out some of the most memorable likes and dislikes of our nation’s top leaders and their families and captures over 100 mouth-watering White House recipes.

The book has won two gold awards; the Independent Book Publishers Association (IBPA) Benjamin Franklin award for Best Cookbook of the Year (2014) and the 2014 Independent Publisher’s (IPPY) Award for Best Celebrity Memoir of the year.

Our three-part series covers Part-1 of the book—The Road to the White House

From his early years Chef Moeller always had a passion for cooking. Eventually, it inspired him to make a journey to France, driven by the feeling that “there was something more out there.” In the first part of the book, *The Road to the White House*, he describes his own culinary journey as a chef, and how this spontaneous visit to France turned into a two-year adventure during which he lived with the local people, worked in the vineyards during the grape harvest, and had the opportunity to gain a deep understanding of the French approach to cooking and its strong connection to regional styles and fresh local ingredients.

This month we join Chef Moeller as he develops his passion for cheffing and pursues his training at the prestigious Johnson and Wales University in Providence, Rhode Island. After a couple of years working in the area he set off on a spontaneous trip to France that plunged him into a new life

living with a French family in the Burgundy Region, working the local grape harvest in Meursault and exploring the regional cuisine.

Dining at the White House—From the President’s Table to Yours

A Taste for the Business

How does a kid from the heart of Pennsylvania Dutch country end up cooking for international heads of state at the White House?

I’ve always had a great passion for cooking. I remember early on, in high school, thinking about taking culinary classes. My parents had bought me an intriguing book called *The Great Chefs of France*, and I believe cheffing is how it was worded. I was wowed by descriptions of the painstaking effort chefs would go through and how they dedicated their lives to producing quality meals. As my own career as a chef developed, I would often think back to that book and I would wonder, What’s the next level? How do I get to that point?

I started my own career at the Willow Street Vo-Tech (now the Lancaster County Career and Technology Center) in Willow Street, Pennsylvania, and then went on to the Culinary School at Johnson & Wales University in Providence, Rhode Island.

On graduation day at Johnson & Wales in 1981, one of my teachers offered us graduates an invitation to join in a trip to Europe. It would start in England, then on to Scotland, Ireland, and Wales, and finally to France. In all, we would spend two weeks traveling.

I’d never been to Europe, so everything was new, and exploring the culinary aspect of it was very intriguing. We ate at a variety of restaurants, and we experienced many new and different things there. Without a doubt, that heightened my interest and laid the groundwork for my work experience in France that was to come later.

Before we headed up north to Scotland, we stayed in London for a couple of days. My first meal in England was at a small local restaurant, and I remember having a mushroom soup. I thought, Oh, my God! I’ve never tasted anything like this before! And I talked to someone at the restaurant, trying to get a little insight. “What was in that? It was so good! Wow, there’s something different here. How can I learn that?” And, tasting some dishes that were different from what I’d ever had back in the States was part of what compelled me, a couple of years later, to say, “I want to go back there and study how they do it.”

As I later learned, it was a combination of cooking and ingredients. Maybe it was just a white mushroom, but it was likely grown in a cave and that gave it a whole different character. In Paris, what they call *les champignons de Paris* (mushrooms of Paris) were also simple white mushrooms, but they’re grown in these old, unused railway tunnels beneath the city. Of course, the conditions are perfect for growing mushrooms, and the flavor that came out of this raw environment of the tunnels was totally amazing.

That concept of how superior ingredients can make such a tremendous difference in the result was a huge influence for me. It has carried over into everything I have done throughout my career, and it’s what still drives me today. I’m very picky with my ingredients, so I go v out and select everything I get. I personally choose everything I cook with.

When we got to France, we students went out for lunch on our own on one occasion, without an organized tour. There were four or five of us, and we just found a restaurant. My French was limited. As I read over the menu, I knew the culinary terms, but I didn’t know much else. I saw *le pied de veau*, and thought, Hmm, a veal dish for lunch. That sounds pretty good. Of course

when the dish came out, it was the feet of the veal. And when I looked at this calf’s foot on my plate, I thought, What the hell am I supposed to do with this? That veal dish didn’t exactly thrill me, but it did kindle an interest: Wow, they do really different things over here! And, that was another of those things that lured me back to France two years later.

In a culinary sense, the rest of the graduation trip was decent but not extraordinary. It was just that mushroom soup that made such a lasting impression. It sparked a kind of “Holy Grail” in my head, something I wanted to be able to recreate, no matter what it took. Unfortunately, I never was able to get back to that restaurant — I can’t even remember where it was — but I got the idea of a different way to make mushroom soup, and I was a happy person.

After we returned from our trip, I worked at a couple of little restaurants and hotels in Rhode Island, but there was always that nagging feeling — something inside me kept urging me to reach for that next level. I felt there had to be something more out there than what I was doing.

It seemed as if something was calling to me, saying, “Yes, if you have the opportunity, go back there.”

By 1983, I was beginning to wonder if it was time to move away from Providence and explore new opportunities. Fueling that restlessness was my good friend and classmate Gerry Quinn, whom I’d known since we attended Lancaster County Career and

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Technology Center together. After we graduated from Johnson & Wales, he had decided to pursue his culinary career in Europe. The firstborn of Irish emigrants, Gerry was able to return to his parents' home and reclaim Irish citizenship. Once he had an Irish passport, he could easily move about the European Union and find work. He began in an Irish restaurant, and soon had an opportunity to work at its sister restaurant in Paris.

Gerry had been urging me for a good while to come to Europe and check out the culinary scene. He kept writing to invite me for a visit or to try working over there. He persisted, and I began toying with the idea. I even started saving up my nickels and dimes and moonlighting to earn extra money, and in six months I had saved enough for a ticket.

Off to France

Finally, in 1984, when Gerry wrote and said, "John, you've gotta come over and give this a try." I decided, Yes. I'm going back. I wanted to see that next level — the things I'd read about in books, the things I'd experienced a little on that first trip to France. I wanted to try to develop something out of that.

Little did I know that it was the perfect time to do so.

And, my previous two-week culinary tour of Britain and France helped me feel adventurous enough to head out on my own with just my backpack, a one-way ticket, and a guide to youth hostels.

Looking back, it wouldn't have worked if I had made an extended European trip right out of culinary school; I wasn't prepared enough. But after working for a while, and taking the trip over there when I was twenty-two, I was more mature and knew a lot more about cooking. I wouldn't have had enough experience to do that the first time around. In fact, the teacher who took us over there in 1981 had said, "If anyone wants to stay here in France and get some more

experience, we could change your ticket. You could go to almost any restaurant here and they'd take you on for a little while. If you want to spend the rest of the summer here, then do it."

Just one person did, and she was back in less than a week. I'm emphasizing the point that if I had stayed, it probably wouldn't have been long before I'd have come back. I wasn't ready to turn a trip like that into a work experience.

At twenty-two, however, I was ready for it: I'd had some education, and could go into a kitchen with a fuller understanding and not be completely green. Most importantly, I had learned the basic disciplines that go with working as a chef in a professional kitchen. If you can show chefs that you know something already, they'll take the time to show you more. All the chefs I worked with were impressed at the fact that I wanted to learn, and they also recognized that I had some learning behind me, so they were willing to add to it.

I met up with Gerry once I arrived in Paris, but found living in the city a bit too expensive. After a week, I took a train toward Nice in the South of France, and decided to stop along the way to explore the countryside. I told Gerry, "I want to see what's going on down there, and I'll be back who knows when."

I got off the train at Dijon, about halfway to Nice, and headed to the local tourism office, where I followed my usual travel routine: find shelter for the night, and then figure out my food for the evening. By the time I located the tourism office and collected some brochures to help me find a campground, it was four in the

afternoon. My French was next to useless, and I needed a place to sit and read the brochures. Literature in hand, I went outside and sat down to have a cigarette. A young man approached me and said something in French. I just looked at him and asked, "Do you speak English?"

"Yes," he replied. "Do you have an extra cigarette?"

I shared a smoke with him, and we chatted for a few moments. I found out that he lived nearby, so I held up a brochure and asked if he knew where the campground was. He nodded. "How do you plan to

get there? It's at least a forty-five-minute walk. Are you traveling by yourself?"

"Yes, I'm alone. I just got off the train fifteen minutes ago."

"Then why don't you come along with me? I'm meeting some friends at a café downtown, and when my girlfriend gets off work, we're going to eat. You're welcome to join us, if you like."

When we arrived around seven o'clock, the little back-street restaurant in the middle of Dijon was empty. The regular dinner crowd wouldn't arrive till later. We ate couscous and did our best to communicate in an awkward mix of English



and French. After a while, another customer arrived and took a table directly across the aisle. I did a double take when I noticed his T-shirt, which was printed with a picture of a horse and buggy. Underneath was the slogan paradise is for lovers — paradise, pennsylvania. I asked him if he spoke English. When he said yes, I asked, “I’m curious: have you ever visited that place on your T-shirt?”

“Oh, yes!” he replied. “My wife has friends in Harrisburg. We were there a year ago. We traveled through Lancaster and stopped in Paradise — do you know this place?”

“Yeah! That’s where I’m from — I grew up there!”

As we talked, he became part of our table’s conversation, and once we’d all finished our meal, our new acquaintance — Jean-Marie — asked, “What are you guys doing tonight?”

We had no plans, so he invited us to his house for a drink. We walked two or three blocks to his place and continued our conversation over glasses of red wine. When my companions spoke French, I could barely follow along, but after an hour or so, Jean-Marie turned to me and asked in English if I had plans for the weekend. I explained that I was just touring the country and had no plans at all.

“Tomorrow evening, a friend and I are driving down to the Jura Valley, on the Swiss border, to meet my wife and children. The family has an old chalet in the hills there, and I’d like to invite you to join us for the weekend.”

Of course I agreed, and we arranged to meet the next day. On Saturday we drove down to the village of St. Laurent, not far from Lausanne, Switzerland, where I met Jean-Marie’s wife, Catherine, who was an English teacher, and her parents, who were teachers, also.

Other friends joined us, and we spent a joyous weekend in the French countryside savoring great food, drinking great wine, and visiting with great company. Late Sunday evening, the conversation turned to me. Everyone wanted to know what I was doing in France.

I explained that I was a chef by trade, and had worked for a few years in America. I had come to France at the urging of my friend in Paris, and was now checking out opportunities to work in French restaurants. They listened to my story, and then resumed their French conversation. After a few minutes, they turned back to me and Jean-Marie said, “Well, here’s what we can offer you: we have an extra

bedroom back in Dijon, and you’re welcome to stay there as long as you’d like.”

He told me that in August the local university would be offering special classes to help foreigners learn to speak French — and he volunteered to use his connections at the university to get me into the upcoming program.

“The first thing we need to do is to get you to learn French,” he said. “We don’t want you to feel obligated, but the offer’s there if you want it.”

Knowing that fluency in French would help me to find work, I accepted, and just like that, this backpacking tourist became a language student at the University of Dijon, with a place to live and a whole new routine. For the next month I’d go to school every day, and on weekends Jean-Marie would either take me back to see the family at Jura Valley or to visit one of the little villages just south of Dijon.

Making a French Connection

With a smile and a gesture, Jean-Marie would say, “Let’s go find something to eat,” and off we’d go, driving into these little villages where he grew up. Here were his roots — and his old friends, who were all very interested in meeting his new American friend. That meant I found myself invited to nearly everyone’s home. I learned a lot about local food and drink as we went from house to house tasting great dishes prepared by wonderful, down-to-earth people. Until I went to this region, I had never tasted Merguez, the red spicy sausage flavored with North African spices. These were thin sausages (like breakfast links in the States) that were made locally using lamb or mutton and typically served with couscous. And everyone had his own variation on how to make a salad; it was pretty much a point of honor to recognize the distinct characteristics of each household and how they prepared their salad dressing. (The basic ingredients are mustard, shallots, and vinaigrette. To this day, I still use the basic recipe of the region for my own salad, and it’s included later in this book.)

Jean-Marie’s friends enjoyed showing me how they made their favorite cocktails, especially the kir, for which Dijon is famed, and which is named after Félix Kir, formerly a longtime mayor of Dijon. This cocktail is made from a

measure of crème de cassis — a specialty of the Burgundy region — topped with aligoté (a regional white wine). Kir was very popular in France long before it showed up in America, and it seemed everyone had his own way of making the cassis — the sweet blackcurrant liqueur — and each one would insist, “Here, try this,” “Taste that,” “Eat some of this,” or “Drink a little more.”

In September, when the family returned from holiday, we started a new routine. I had completed the summer language classes, and my friends encouraged me to stay on to attend the university full time. (I ended up studying French there for two full semesters.) Full-time classes wouldn’t start until October, but the family went back to work and school right away. Like a typical French family, they all came home every day at noon for a ninety-minute lunch break. Since I had time on my hands, I took it upon myself to prepare lunch and have it ready for them when they arrived, thus becoming the “private chef on duty.” Jean-Marie’s wife, Catherine, was particularly thrilled at this arrangement, since it had always been her duty to race home from teaching school, turn on the stove, and fix lunch. Their custom was always to have a big, hot lunch, then make a lighter supper, often from leftovers, perhaps with a soup or a salad.

For lunch, I would serve meals such as vegetable potage — a potato and leek soup — medallions of pork, or a whole roasted chicken. A favorite of the family was a skillet platter made up of small steaks seared and mixed with vegetables.

A couple of blocks from the house was a small neighborhood market that operated most days of the week. Catherine would leave a few francs on the table when she headed out in the morning and say, “Buy whatever you like.” It was a great experience for me to go down to this sidewalk market and discover the fresh produce of the region and practice my French haggling with the vendors.

Les Vendanges in Dijon

For two weeks right before the semester began, I had the opportunity to work les vendanges (the grape harvest) in the wine country south of Dijon. I was a grape picker in Meursault, south of Beaune, an area especially known for its white wines.

What an experience! For two weeks I lived with a large crew of harvesters in a grape farmer’s barn. We were up every morning at 6:45,

and gathered quickly for a petit déjeuner of croissants or pain au chocolat with café au lait or espresso. The women who prepared the food would also hand us a piece of baguette from which we made sandwiches for later in the morning. We had to be in the fields by seven o’clock, but we’d take our first break around 8:30. Sandwiches and wine starting at 8:30 in the morning — what a life! Then it was back to cutting grapes till noon. Lunch was a big meal, and we didn’t return to the fields till 1:30. The workday lasted till 5:30 or 6:00 each evening, when we’d come in for supper.

Back at the barn, we showered, freshened up, and sat in the dining hall for a feast of country cooking complete with all the wine we could hold. An apparently endless supply of local wine flowed from bottles with no labels. After two fantastic weeks, I returned to Dijon and the family, ready to start my first semester of French at the university.

The entire experience of living on that farm with everyday working-class French people was great, too. It added to the joy of being there, instead of sitting in a hotel room or on a campus. Tons of kids went to the same school I did — The University of Dijon — but all they did was go to class, come out, and speak English with their pals. I was living with a French family, and I was out in the streets seeing what was really going on. All of that just enhanced the whole experience.

About the Author

Chef John Moeller is a member of an elite corps of chefs who have served in the White House preparing très soigné cuisine for three Presidents, First Families, and their guests, including world leaders like Tony Blair and Nelson Mandela, and for famous guests like Julia Child and Sophia Loren. Over the course of his 13-year career in the White House, he focused on creating unique and one-of-a-kind dishes that featured his trademark use of fresh, seasonal ingredients inspired by his classical French training with an American twist.

To learn more about Dining at the White House visit diningatthewhitehouse.com

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