

Quest for Quenelle

After I read MFK Fisher's *The Gastronomical Me*, I hungered to visit Dijon where she spent formative years learning about French food and coming into herself as a woman. I wanted to make a pilgrimage of sorts—visit the town, find the street on which she lived, take my photo in front of her apartment. She was my kind of woman—ahead of her time, clear thinker, wonderful writer, and a visionary. After all, she invented the food memoir. Then I saw an Anthony Bourdain episode about the great chefs who hail from Lyon. I wanted to eat in their restaurants and visit the Paul Bocuse Institute. So I did my research, added a jaunt through the Loire Valley, and booked a trip to France with my sister.

We visited specific restaurants just to have their specialty dishes that I had read about—Lyonnais salad and paté stuffed pastry in Daniel et Denise, macarons at In Cuisine, Sancerre wine, mustard from the Maille flagship store in Dijon. We spent Easter Sunday in a medieval mountain village at their annual festival where for a nominal fee, we each bought a glass and then walked among stone structures, sometimes underground, to taste sixteen different vintners' wines.

But it was the pike quenelle that caused me to take notice. As I sipped my initial glass of wine in the Café Comptoir Abel in Lyon a wave of confidence overcame me. I had what others thought a rather far out, nutty idea to make a culinary trip to France all because of female writer. But I did it. The quenelle on my plate was luscious—golden yellow in color, perfectly shaped like a very oversized egg, soft and creamy in texture with a delicate buttery sauce. After my first taste, I realized that I made a dream my reality. I was so far from home and my routine suburban existence, seated in a lovely old wood-paneled bouchon enjoying a dish that I fantasized about experiencing in this particular place. And here I was. By the time we were served dessert, I wondered what else I could do.

The more experiences my sister and I had in France that spring, the more I felt like the Little Blue Engine repeating “I knew I could. I knew I could” while coasting down the mountain. And if I could, then what else? Teach a new course, start an alternative high school, learn to bake flourless chocolate cake, embroider a pillow, produce a documentary?

That question “What else could I do?” stayed with me for the rest of the trip. It opened me up and brought back to life something that lay dormant in me for many years. I had shut down in my second marriage. I sacrificed myself in order to make a pleasant home for my children and my stepchildren. I had convinced myself that it was a small price to pay for the sake of these kids who each had already suffered through one divorce. But the children weren't really children anymore, and we all knew that nothing was actually blending in this blended family.

It was clear when I returned home that things were different. The fault line had expanded, my marriage experienced a tectonic shift that broke us. We were divorced within two years of that trip. Now I live in New York City where I have access to more culinary delights than can be eaten in a lifetime. I travel with friends, and my sister, and my twenty-something-year-old children. We go to Europe, the western US, and up and down the East Coast. I've taken on new courses to teach, learned to embroider, found my voice again. I'm standing on more solid ground.

I know I'm not done shifting. Some days I feel a minor tremor, others a full on earthquake. Frightening at times, but significant. Those dormant parts of myself have resurfaced up through the displacement, and the rumbling has caused me to pay more attention which is exactly the advice MFK Fisher gave us. “We would all be better people if we paid attention to our appetites,” she wrote. My quest for quenelle supports her truth. It took a culinary journey for me to begin my personal one, and what I know for sure now is that I am certain to keep paying attention.