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Where's the Best Boeuf?

In Burgundy, bien sûr! We went in steaming hot pursuit of the finest version of France's classic beef stew, one spoonful at a time

By RATHA TEP

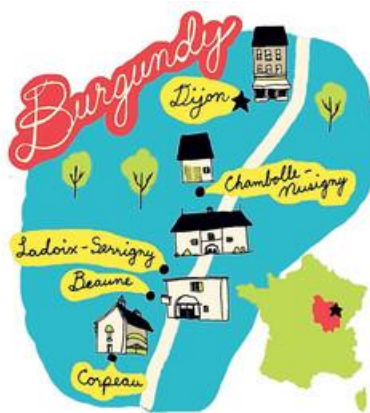


Michel Joly for The Wall Street Journal

DIG IN | So much more than meat and potatoes at Auberge de la Miotte in Ladoix-Serrigny, France.

THE CLASSIC FRENCH beef stew is back en vogue.

Boeuf bourguignon—the dark, rich, deeply flavorful concoction of beef that's been slow-simmered in red wine until just shy of falling-apart tender—was showered with love in the 1960s, when it was a regular on the dinner-party circuit. In recent years, as several high-end chefs have opened casual bistros, the rustic dish has resurfaced on restaurant menus across the U.S. It's also causing a stir in its homeland, where stellar tradition-bound versions share the spotlight with innovative riffs that incorporate unexpected cuts of beef and eyebrow-raising supporting players.



Mike Byers

The beautifully complex beef stew takes its name from the region in east-central France whence it originated. With its beef, wine and mushrooms—all abundant, local ingredients—it is as much an expression of Burgundy's terroir as are the area's famed Pinot Noir and Chardonnay grapes. While a fish dish cooked in Burgundy wine and titled "a la Bourgogne" appeared in 1742 in the third volume of the "Nouveau Traité de la Cuisine," the first printed recipe for a similarly named beef stew whose sauce is flecked with bacon, sautéed mushrooms and butter-glazed onions is widely believed to be the version presented in legendary chef Auguste Escoffier's seminal 1903 cookbook "Le Guide Culinaire."

More elemental iterations of the stew have been around for ages. "Simple versions of beef simmered in red wine go way, way back, probably to the ancient Greeks," said Anne Willan, founder of renowned California-based

More[Boeuf Bourguignon Recipe](#)[WSJ Test Kitchen: Pressure Cookers](#)

French culinary school La Varenne, which used to have a Burgundy location, and co-author with her husband Mark Cherniavsky of, most recently, "The Cookbook Library," a survey on the history of the cookbook. "In any wine-growing area, it is a natural instinct to cook dark red meat in red wine," she said.

As for boeuf bourguignon, the dish is commonly classified as a *plat paysan*, or peasant dish. Lore has it that poor but resourceful French cooks used to braise tough, cheap cuts of beef in wine to make them tender and moist—a conceit whose accuracy is up for question. "Before the 19th century, farm laborers below the level of landowner would have eaten meat of any kind very rarely, except for a small amount of pork," Ms. Willan said. Beef and veal were rare indulgences typically reserved for grand occasions like patron-saint feasts or weddings.

More likely, it was winemakers with some means, rather than destitute peasants, who frequently ate boeuf bourguignon. "For some time, vintners would put pots of the stew over the fire while they worked the vineyards," said Eric Claudel, chef of Le Chambolle, in Chambolle-Musigny, and a boeuf bourguignon enthusiast. "But it wasn't until Escoffier came along that the dish was codified with exact ingredients and proportions." And then came Julia.

Photos: The Best Boeuf Bourguignon in Burgundy



Michel Joly for The Wall Street Journal

Boeuf bourguignon at Auberge du Vieux Vigneron

Were it not for Julia Child, my happy hunt for the region's most satisfying iteration of the stew might never have transpired. America's collective intrigue with boeuf bourguignon can be nearly single-handedly credited to the food legend whose 1961 tome "Mastering the Art of French Cooking" held rhapsodic praise for the stew that she encountered when living in France. "Carefully done, and perfectly flavored, it is certainly one of the most delicious beef dishes concocted by man," she wrote. Ms. Child's cooking show "The French Chef" debuted in 1963 with boeuf bourguignon as its first subject, catapulting both Ms. Child and the stew into the spotlight. The version that she promoted is roughly the same as the one encountered in cooking magazines and at restaurants today, with sautéed mushrooms and brown-braised onions prepared separately so they don't lose their integrity from stewing.

Before it gained ground in America, the stew had already been fairly ubiquitous in the region of its origin since the early 20th century. Beef bourguignon can now be found at practically every turn in Burgundy, where it is more common in casual spots than fine-dining restaurants. When chef David Zuddas ran the Michelin-starred Auberge de la Charme in the town of Prenois, in Burgundy, he never would have considered serving boeuf bourguignon, he said. Now the dish figures prominently on the menu at his less formal restaurant, DZ'Envies, in Dijon, the region's capital. The bistro offers fall-off-the-fork-tender beef cheeks that have been slow-cooked for five hours.

A more robust version appears on the menu of Ma Cuisine, a tiny bistro in the beautiful, walled city of Beaune. The establishment serves a boeuf bourguignon worthy of its sublime wine collection. Chef Fabienne Escoffier turns out a rich beef stew studded with smoked bacon, pearl onions and braised mushrooms

enrobed in a chestnut-colored sauce whose flavor hints at the full-bodied Burgundy she cooks with.

Ms. Escoffier (no relation to Auguste, but daughter of celebrated local chef André Parra), proves the art of perfecting boeuf bourguignon to be a delicate balancing act. Unlike her father, who marinated his beef in wine for up to 48 hours, Ms. Escoffier said she skips the soak but slow-simmers for longer than her father did. "If you take 10 chefs, you get 10 different boeufs bourguignon," she said.

Who wouldn't want to verify such a claim firsthand? I wound up and down the roughly 40-mile Route des Grands Crus through the Côte d'Or, bordered by Dijon to the north and the town of Santenay to the south. I stopped to taste several versions of boeuf bourguignon, some of which seemed lackluster, with ho-hum sauces and ingredients that didn't jump out. I also found a handful of unforgettable meals. I learned that the best creators of boeuf bourguignon respected tradition, but still played loose with the foundation, using different cuts of beef like ultra-tender cheek, omitting flour or using wines other than Burgundy.

Hunting down the very best boeufs bourguignon in Burgundy is a terrific excuse to soak up the region's character as well as glimpse some of the world's most fabled vineyards, including Chambertin, Richebourg and Romanée-Conti. It's also an excellent gateway to pears poached in red wine and crème de cassis, another local specialty worthy of a whole other story.

Burgundy's Five Best Boeuf Boîtes

The Futurist

DZ'Envies



Michel Joly for The Wall Street Journal

Boeuf Bourguignon at DZ'Envies

Burgundy isn't all bucolic vineyards and cow pastures. In the case of DZ'Envies, outfitted in an orange-and-white color scheme and stocked with iPad wine lists, it can be downright hip. Chef David Zuddas earned a Michelin star at the inventive Auberge de la Charme in Prenois—then chucked it all in 2008 to open this modern bistro, primely positioned across Dijon's covered market Les Halles. Mr. Zuddas's haute makeover of boeuf bourguignon includes an intensely winy sauce that's less viscous than most, and beef cheeks that practically melt in the mouth. The super-sharp Opinel table knives were a charming but unnecessary touch. *12 rue Odebert, Dijon; dzenvies.com*



Michel Joly for The Wall Street Journal

The dish at Ma Cuisine

The Gold Standard

Ma Cuisine

This 16-year-old bistro, just off Beaune's busy Place Carnot, embodies the best of Burgundy. Co-owner Pierre Escoffier takes care of the front of the house, deftly offering suggestions from the epic, well-priced 25,000-bottle collection, while the chef—his wife (and Ma Cuisine co-owner)—Fabienne darts in and out of the kitchen. Her boeuf bourguignon is the standard-bearer, with moist, succulent beef and a lustrously thick sauce that benefits from four to five hours of slow-simmering, liberal heapings of bacon, pearl onions and mushrooms and a side of buttery mashed potatoes. *Passage St-Hélène, Beaune; 33-03-8022-3022*

The Cozy Charmer

Le Chambolle

On a narrow, winding path in the quaint village of Chambolle-Musigny, Martine and Eric Claudel's cozy, split-level bistro is the kind of place meant for stumbling upon on a cold, drizzly evening. The large stone fireplace is regularly stoked, and Ms. Claudel single-handedly greets and serves all the patrons. Mr.



Michel Joly for The Wall Street Journal

Le Chambolle's boeuf bourguignon adheres to tradition.

Claudel's boeuf bourguignon adheres to tradition and stars paleron, a French shoulder cut that takes beautifully to braising. "It maintains itself well, and doesn't disintegrate when cooked," he explained. Intensely smoky bacon flecks the stew, which is plated around a tumble of noodles. *25 rue Caroline Aigle, Chambolle-Musigny*; restaurant-lechambolle.com



Michel Joly for The Wall Street Journal

It's a hearty, hefty affair at Auberge de la Miotte.

The Elder Statesman

Auberge de la Miotte

Diners looking for a slice of old Burgundy should make their way to this former hunting lodge in the tiny village of Ladoix-Serrigny, set behind an imposing archway and courtyard lined with stacked wine barrels. The restaurant's atmosphere harks back to another era: Seating is around long communal tables and the floors are large stone slabs. Fully aware that boeuf bourguignon is the type of rustic stew that tastes even better the next day, chef-owner Catherine Maratray cooks hers over the course of two days before serving it with roast potatoes. It's a hearty, hefty affair, with three huge pieces of beef and coarsely chopped carrots bathed in a rich and deeply flavorful sauce. The expansive wine list, created by her wine-broker boyfriend, has surprising finds and modest markups. *4 rue de la Miotte, Ladoix-Serrigny*; *33-03-8026-4075*



Michel Joly for The Wall Street Journal

Auberge du Vieux Vigneron

The Twist

Auberge du Vieux Vigneron

Sleepy Corpeau doesn't have all that much going for it besides its proximity to Puligny-Montrachet—and third-generation wine-maker Jean-Charles Fagot's boisterous restaurant, housed in a 19th-century building that belonged to his great-grandfather. Regarded for his ridiculously thick 10-ounce entrecôte steaks that he cooks over the dining room's wood-burning fireplace, chef Sylvain Ferré serves a classic boeuf bourguignon as well as what he calls "Escarboeuf." He tops the latter with plump escargots—another food associated with Burgundy—flambéed in cognac over tender beef cloaked in a dark sauce made with a 2010 vintage Burgundy from the owner's nearby estate, served

with crisp hand-cut fries and a zucchini and eggplant ratatouille. It's a luxurious take on the dish, and the escargots added a pleasing element of earthiness. *Route de Beaune, Corpeau*; aubergeduwieuxvigneron.com

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