

OPINION

Delicious French way of life stands up to hateful attacks

By **Georganne Brennan**

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Mastioucha Peres, 30, from Paris, lights candles during a gathering that marks one year after the attacks on Charlie Hebdo satirical newspaper, in Paris, France, Thursday, Jan. 7, 2016. It's a year to the day since an attack on the French satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo launched a bloody year in the French capital. Tensions in France, under a state of emergency since a wave of attacks on Nov. 13, have

France is a second home to me, and the attacks in Paris in January and November of last year were attacks not only on the people of Paris and on French culture, but also on people around the world. Those who, like me, hold French culture dear.

A powerful part of that culture is the passion and the joy accorded to food and the pleasures of the table, and on Jan. 14 that passion and joy were honored by Anne Hidalgo, the mayor of Paris, at a ceremony in the Hotel de Ville, the city hall. There, to all 84 of the Michelin-starred chefs of Paris, she awarded the *médaille* Grand Vermeil, the city's highest honor.

As one of the more than 80 foreign journalists invited to attend, I witnessed the affirmation of the value of food and the culture it represents, one that refuses to be intimidated or shamed by violence.

“The honor bestowed upon us by the capital of France calls for an even more widespread responsibility on our part,” said chef Alain Ducasse, whose restaurants hold a total of 19 Michelin stars, in an impassioned address to the journalists before the ceremony. “We must uphold gastronomy as a humanism that creates a link between people ... because it is the only activity that touches all the vital aspects of human beings: health, culture, the economy, the social sphere and the environment. We are all, whether (Michelin-) starred or not, highly active in carrying forward this dynamic,”

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I admit I was awed by the heavily gilded room where the ceremony was held, with its ceilings and walls of delicately painted frescoes, gleaming parquet floors and sparkling chandeliers. But more than that, I was awed by the resiliency of a city and a country that has seen war, revolution and bloodshed for centuries and again in recent months, yet continues to celebrate gastronomy in its widest sense. This gastronomy, as the mayor of Paris was to say in her address, welcomes the dialogue of cultures, honors the link to the land and its food producers, and fiercely respects the liberty to create, to share and to reinvent.

The salon, which the mayor said was the same one where France’s Second Republic was proclaimed in 1848, gradually filled as the cream of Paris’ gastronomic world, almost all dressed in their chef’s whites, came to take their place on the stage set at the far end of the room. After an introduction by Ducasse, who spoke for the gathered chefs, the mayor took the podium.

Proud, almost defiant, the petite, dark-haired mayor spoke passionately about her city and her people, declaring that Paris – free, festive, loving its life and its pleasures, open to others and to the world – was the Paris that was attacked. Gastronomy is at the heart of the French *art de vivre*, and the Michelin-starred chefs of Paris, she stated, represent the embodiment of the French love of life and food. Each chef was called, one by one, to receive a medal.

At the close of the ceremony, we were invited into an even grander salon for a reception. Nine of the chefs had been invited to prepare a sampling buffet, all accompanied by Champagne. Young men and women in whites and toques attended the reception tables, deftly assembling small cups of cubed raw scallops topped with sea foam and black caviar, of lime gelée with citrus cream, and of white chocolate mousse with roasted salsify batons.



Lunch at Maison Plisson on Boulevard Beaumarchais in Paris demonstrates the importance of the table in French culture.

Photo: Georgeanne Brennan / Georgeanne Brennan

The next morning, well before dawn, I was at Rungis International Market, Paris' huge wholesale food market, a city unto itself, staffed by 12,000 people. For more than 800 years, it was located at the center of Paris at Les Halles, "the belly of Paris," until it was moved in the 1970s to a suburb just south of Paris.

As I walked through the long pavilions of raw product, from hanging carcasses of Charolais cattle to wild pheasant and Bresse chickens, from pristine vegetables and fruits, to cheeses of every size and description, I was bearing witness to France's respect for exceptional product, no matter how humble. An entire hall, the *triperie*, is dedicated to offal, the bits of the animal that have all but disappeared from the markets and tables of America, yet appear in both the simple and grand markets and restaurants of France. I have a particular nostalgia for kidneys, sweetbreads and liver because when raising my young family, I relied on these exceedingly inexpensive pieces to create memorable dishes.

It is not by chance that in 2010 UNESCO inscribed the Gastronomic Meal of the French onto the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, noting, among other points that such a meal "emphasizes togetherness, the pleasure of taste, and the balance between human beings and the products of nature."

Learning about food and where it comes from is considered an essential part of French education. The national school curriculum includes multiple units on food and its origins. French school lunch is a sit-down, three-course affair, including a cheese course. Each year, there is a national *Semaine du Gout*, or week of taste, held throughout France, where taste education and the celebration of food welcome all members of society.

People stand next to banner reading "je suis Paris", "I am Paris" on the Place de la Republique during a gathering that marks one year after the attacks on Charlie Hebdo satirical newspaper, in Paris, France, Thursday, Jan. 7, 2016. It's a year to the day since an attack on the French satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo launched a bloody year in the French capital. Tensions in France, under a state of emergency

At 20, as a student in Aix-en-Provence, I discovered the French relationship to food. My roommate and I, between classes, haunted the daily market, seeking out whatever we could afford and cooked it on our two-burner hot plate in our coldwater walk-up. A few months after my arrival, on a cold day in November, I married my California boyfriend in the *hotel de ville*. Seven years later, we bought a farmhouse in Haute Provence, and moved there with our little girl. Our son was born the following year, and I brought him home in a wicker basket with a straw-filled mattress, lined with white lace that a neighbor had made for him.

Although we moved back to California shortly thereafter, we kept our place in Provence, returning year after year. The people along our tiny country road became my extended family, with whom I've shared countless meals, celebrations and mournings.

Thus, it was with profound pride and joy that I witnessed the celebration of the food of Paris and France earlier this month. It was with even greater pride and joy that I saw the cafes and restaurants, cheese shops, bakeries, butcher shops and *bar-tabacs* of Paris bustling with energy and enthusiasm for a way of life that reveres the human spirit and celebrates it with good food, shared with friends and family.

San Francisco shares with Paris its enthusiasm and respect for food and culture in all its diversity, a culture that celebrates life rather than demeaning it, as terrorist attacks are meant to do. We need to face terrorists and those who would spread terror as resolutely as they or risk the loss of what makes us who we are, we who care and share.

Georgeanne Brennan is an award-winning cookbook author who frequently writes about France. Her book "Food and Fetes of Provence: A Culinary Journey" will be published by Yellow Pear Press in September.

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