

SESSION 2: MILK, MAN, CULTURE AND SOCIETY

Presided by Catherine Baroin

What It Means to Be “Aubrac”

MICHEL BRAS Cuisinier, Laguiole, Aubrac

There are strong bonds which link man with his native land, with the familiar landscapes, the summits, the springs which sculpt their way across the pastures, the villages which evolve slowly, or those that die, hamlets in the lee of the immobile rock or hidden in the beech woods dreaming of the past. Whatever education and life may bring later on, each in his own way, every child has his native land – a country of his own – in his flesh, in his blood and in his conscience.

Each person derives both his qualities and his faults from his upbringing; his liveliest instincts, his most acute feelings, his engrained habits, his most deeply-rooted prejudices, his most trivial superstitions – all of these are rooted in the land where he grew up.

One's native land illuminates one's conscience.

Milk in Aubrac

is embedded in this land's long history. Pliny the Elder already noted in his Natural History (Book XI, Chapter XCVII) the high esteem Romans had for provincial cheeses that came from Gévaudan and Lozère.

Milk was the companion of my entire childhood.

So pure, so gentle, yet so full of vitality. In this remote country prey to desertification, it is what obliged me to rise early. With my tin canteen in hand, off I went to a farm at the other end of the village to get milk still warm from the last milking.

Milk was gentle,

even reassuring, both for children and for us as adults. I think of my children when young, nose buried in a corner of their blankie, that piece of fabric mended time and again, soiled with milk spurted from the bottle. The sourish smell of milk was an odor the children were so fond of that tactics had to be invented to wash it from time to time.

That same reassuring odor that I also found in my uncle's pantry. Milk was stored in a basin in that cold, damp room. Sometimes, in an enamel basin, there was milk that had been heated and was now put to rest, to relax. The next day the precious film on the milk was collected with a skimmer.

Milk has been a companion in all our travels.

After discovering it in Argentina, *dulce de leche* found its place in our cupboards and then in our cooking. In Afghanistan, *chiryakh*, iced milk, or *chirpira*, a sort of preserved milk, affected us in a similar way as the film over milk does here at home. Not to mention all the dairy sweets India has to offer, powerful expressions of regional identity.

With a friend, how lucky we were in Jalsaimer to go behind the scenes and witness the making of *rasgulla*, – *syrupy white balls from Rajasthan*. As well as the joy of sharing a *lassi* to douse the fire of a spicy treat...



Milk is an integral part of my cooking.

As a young chef, I was fascinated by all those mothers, my own mother, who always had something left over to eat that offered exceptional delicious moments. I long asked myself about the cook's precise role. Time did its work.

How I love to share my in-laws pound cake in which butter has been replaced by milk skin. Smooth as can be. A cake full of sweetness, mother's baking.

Milk is a whole symbol.

More White Gold than an opaque, nutritious white liquid.

More bliss than food substance.

Today, milk is etched on my memory. It bathed my entire youth, it has enabled me to travel, it has offered me so much happiness. Never has it betrayed me.

biographie

He was born in Gabriac, in Aveyron, France, in 1946. He attended grammar school in Espalion, a stone's throw from the family hotel and restaurant "Lou Mazuc", in Laguiole. He was fascinated by both Aubrac and cuisine. Right out of school, his mother introduced him to local culinary traditions, and their collaboration continues.

No outside training, no going through the ropes, Michel Bras has been self-taught, letting his intuition guide him. He studied culinary literature with a passion, taking inspiration from such great thinkers as Saint-Augustin, Lamartine, Saint-Exupéry, Ernest Renan and Francis Ponge, amongst others. He walked the trails, gathered, nibbled, pondered and mediated, and finally found his own culinary path.

He and his wife Ginette decide to follow this route all the way and set up their restaurant in the middle of the natural landscape. And so they opened Le Suquet in 1992 in perfect harmony with the light, stone and vegetation of the Aubrac plateau.

This goal has never left them, guiding them in making this incredible place between heaven and earth a reality, a place where a crazy idea became a reality: to offer a moment to contemplate nature, truly, totally, sincerely, and to share the natural environment that is offered up before us.