

Lesson 17

Leave It to Cleaver

EVERY WEDNESDAY and Saturday the Bergerac organic market, or *marché bio*, encircles the Église Notre-Dame. The church's elegant spire is the pin that fixes the city to the map. Bergerac is full of contrasts. On the one hand it's a tourist destination with a fascinating mix of architecture, and on the other it's a workaday town with peeling plaster and a crumbling infrastructure. The view you get depends on the weather. On a cloudy day the town seems dingy and depressing. On a bright day it looks charming and cheerful.

Today the sun poured freely into the city center, painting the buildings with gold highlights and cobalt shadows. Scores of colorful food stalls spiraled out from the church to the main parking lot, spreading onto the sidewalk that borders the ancient lanes of the *vieille ville*, the old town.

Parking on market days is *très difficile*. Your best bet is to drive around to the north end of town and squeeze between a Renault Clio and a Fiat 500, often parking halfway over the curb. While the police are lenient on market days, the residents are not. You must never—*jamais!*—block someone's

garage access or impede a motorist's progress. The offended party will have your car hooked up to a tow truck before you can say *bonjour*. Locals are acutely aware of these rules, even as they park in the oddest of spots.

Sara and I left the car on the curved corner of an intersection—normally a *non-non*—and walked south to the bio. The sky was a deep and cloudless blue on the Wednesday after the Bodega. We carried shopping bags and wore straw hats against the intense rays of the July sun.

“What are we looking for?” I asked Sara.

“Something for tonight. I was thinking a turkey roulade with grilled courgettes, along with those yummy duck-fat potatoes we had at the Bodega. We can use up the duck fat we already have in the fridge.” She stopped at a crowded stall and bought a kilo of fingerling potatoes.

The market stalls in this part of France are a feast for the eyes. Bins of bright red radishes contrast with pure white leeks laid side by side with their curly white roots entwining. Cartons of stubby orange carrots lie beside luscious bunches of deep green parsley. Endive bulbs live next door to bonbon tomatoes, and boxes of haricots verts cozy up to crates of fresh green mâche. Charming handwritten signs, displaying the names and prices, wave insouciantly from various boxes.

I looked up and found Sara standing in front of a butcher's truck, examining a skinless creature that hung upside down from the top of the window.

“What is it?” I asked.

“*Lapin*. A rabbit. What if I made a delicious fricassée instead of the turkey roulade? Rabbit is such a classic.”

I hid my horror. A whole rabbit? Really? With the head still on it? I tried to dissuade her. “Isn’t rabbit stew a winter dish? You know, for the long cold nights in December? It’s so hot right now.”

“Naw, it’ll be cooler by tonight. Let’s go for it.” She pulled a wad of euros from her purse. The butcher rolled the rabbit in paper and placed it in a bag. While I love to watch Sara cook, I wasn’t sure this was an operation I wanted to observe.

The sun had arced around to the far side of the house. The light from the shaded courtyard came through the windows to give the kitchen a cold cast. Sara stood with a chef’s knife in her hand. A skinny pink body lay on the cutting board, positioned horizontally under the halogen track lamps. She placed the blade of the knife against the rabbit’s neck. Using the heel of her hand she shoved down hard. Crunch. The blade cut deeply, but the head stayed on.

I was standing back against the kitchen door with my hands over my face. I peeked through my fingers. “Did it come off?”

She felt around the rabbit’s neck and peered into the gash made by the knife. “I’m not sure I found the space between the vertebrae.” She repositioned the knife and got ready shove it downwards. Her hands were shaking.

“Everything okay?” I said, squinting through my fingers.

She stood staring at the rabbit, both hands on the knife. “I can’t do it. I can’t. It looks too much like a cat.” She looked at me imploringly, her lips mouthing a silent *s’il te plaît*.

“Oh, jeez. You want *me* to cut the head off a cat? Can’t we just bring it back and have the butcher do it?”

“M-O-M!” she yelled, quickly casting me as the weak, ineffective parent, which in this case was accurate. “Mom, the head won’t come off!”

Eileen came in from the salon. She looked at Sara, then at me, then at the rabbit. She took the knife from Sara and set it on the countertop. “Step aside,” she said, pulling a heavy cleaver from the knife rack.

Sara and I backed slowly towards the bedroom door. Eileen raised the cleaver, using both arms for maximum force. Sara slipped around the corner and pulled me into the bedroom. We closed the door and waited for axe to fall.

Silence.

We opened the door a crack. Eileen stood there, arms raised, tears streaming down her face.

“What’s wrong, Mom?” said Sara.

“I can’t.”

Sara looked at me.

“I used to have a little Dutch bunny,” said Eileen. “His name was Wabbit.”

“Rabbit?” said Sara.

“Not Rabbit. *Wabbit*. You know, ‘You cwazy wabbit?’” She

lowered the cleaver. “I just can’t.”

Sara and I ventured cautiously back into the kitchen. Eileen suddenly jerked back, let loose a tortured yell, and down came the guillotine. WHACK! —the head shot off the table, bounced against the lower cabinets, and rolled to a stop at our feet. On its face was a strangely serene expression, as if nothing at all had happened. Eileen was sobbing. She pushed past us, ran into the bedroom, and slammed the door.

I turned to Sara. “It’s okay, sweetie. Start cooking. She’ll be all right.”

I followed Eileen into the bedroom, sat next to her, and put my hand on her shoulder. She lay face down with a pillow over her head, shuddering from the mental image of a decapitated childhood pet.

Her voice was muffled. “Wabbit.”

I went back into the kitchen and poured two glasses of rosé. I paused, and poured a third. “Here,” I said to Sara, and headed back to the bedroom.

Two hours later, out on the terrace, the table was set, the candles lit. Eileen’s eyes were still swollen and red. I uncorked a bottle of pinot noir. Sara brought out dishes of fingerling potatoes and carrots, both roasted in duck fat. Duck fat is considered by some to be a “healthy fat” because it lowers your unhealthy cholesterol. Others disagree. Who cares? You’ll never taste anything better.

“Sorry, Mom,” said Sara. “I shouldn’t have asked you to do that.” She brought out three dishes plated with lapin à la moutarde, rabbit with mustard sauce, and placed them on the table.

“No one ever said being French would be easy,” I said, pouring the pinot. Eileen and Sara nodded as if I’d just said something profound.

Eileen stood up. “Here’s to dear, departed Wabbit.” We clinked our glasses. “Rest in peace, old friend.”

The three of us ate our meal by candlelight, serenaded by a lone cicada. The gentle breezes of a warm July evening mixed the scent of lavender with the aromas of the roasted vegetables and rabbit fricasée. The creamy mustard sauce went perfectly with the fresh fingerlings.

We talked about the differences between French and American cuisine. We expressed our gratitude for the embarrassment of riches found at the outdoor markets—the juicy ripe fruits, the bountiful vegetables, the interesting meats and cheeses.

And then we talked of *pétanque*. This was a game we would need to learn if we hoped to become part of the village. An informal tournament was only two days away.



LAPIN À LA MOUTARDE

Rabbit with Mustard

Lesson learned: Have your butcher cut the rabbit up for you, or at least remove the head! Brown the rabbit well in the skillet—it ensures that your stew will have a deep, complex flavor.

—Sara

- 1 three-pound rabbit, cut into 12 pieces
- 1/3 cup Dijon mustard
- 2 tablespoons vegetable or olive oil
- 4 ounces lardons fumés
(or 4 slices thick-cut smoked bacon, diced)
- 18 white pearl onions, peeled
- 2 teaspoons fresh thyme leaves, roughly chopped
- 1/2 teaspoon chopped fresh rosemary
- 1 bay leaf
- Salt and freshly ground pepper to taste
- 2 cups dry white wine (we use Bergerac sec)
- 1/3 cup crème fraîche

1. Place rabbit in a medium bowl and toss with mustard until it is thoroughly coated. Cover and refrigerate at least two hours or overnight.

2. When ready to cook, heat oil in a large high-sided skillet over medium high heat. Add lardons and cook until golden and crispy; remove with a slotted spoon and reserve for later. Add onions to skillet and cook until golden, stirring occasionally, about 8 minutes. Transfer onions to a small bowl using a slotted spoon, and add rabbit pieces to skillet. Cook rabbit until nicely browned, 5–8 minutes per side.

3. Add thyme, rosemary, bay leaf, salt, pepper, reserved onions, and wine. Bring to a boil, cover, and cook at a low simmer until rabbit is tender, about 40 minutes. Stir in crème fraîche, and adjust seasoning with more salt and pepper if necessary. Serve over roasted vegetables, mashed potatoes, or pasta. Sprinkle reserved crispy lardons over top.

Serves 6

 Photos and printable versions are at www.beginningfrench.com