

Fixin' Fricassee

Chapter 16

One bite - that's all it takes. One bite of the flaky, buttery, soft, crispy pastry and ZING! My world changes. And then, when the rich, sweet filling hits my taste buds, I become giddy and swoon like a drunkard ready to pass out. So now I know the truth; the French know how to cook.

When I first began my journey through France, I didn't want to stay for long. I was determined to speedily collect the needed data and move on to the next country that I planned to visit during my worldwide excursion. But now, I'm trying to devise a way to lengthen my stay in France. In fact, I now long to navigate my way to each and every restaurant I see. As I trek through the streets of Paris, the capital, the scent of freshly baked bread drifts through the air. Loaves of crusty French bread, chocolate-filled croissants, and buttery brioche call to me and make my mouth water. You know what? The American humans have it all wrong. All their rushing while eating, gobbling while watching the television, eating while driving... The American humans gobble mindlessly and then complain that they are too fat. The French indulge in rich foods, but most are fit and trim. It's because of the way they eat - slowly, enjoying each bite.

But none of this makes any difference to a dog. We hound dog detectives don't have to worry about any of this stuff. We take pride in how fast we can eat. In fact, the classiest dog is the one who can simply suck up his food and swallow—not one bite. I'm in the top class because I'm able to suck up a hot dog and swallow it in 3 seconds flat. I don't use my teeth at all. It's OK for us dogs to do that because—well—I think I heard that we have taste buds lining our throats and stomachs. We get to keep tasting our food for hours. Those poor humans; they only taste things in their mouths. I love being a hound dog.

For the first time in my life, I decide to experience what the French call *haute cuisine*. It's food fit for a king, an elaborate meal of seven or more courses. Before entering the French restaurant, I lift my bionic sniffer to decipher the menu. But it's no use; no matter how hard I try to detect each scent, this is all I see on my eyeball printer: **BUTTER, BUTTER, BUTTER, BUTTER**, etc. It just keeps printing the same blasted word across my eyeballs over and over and over. I bet you don't comprehend why my eyeballs would print *butter* so many times. That's OK; don't feel bad. You're not a shrewd detective like me. Most detectives would be baffled by this and think that their printer is broken, but not me. I'm shrewd and adept—a real crackerjack. It only takes me about 20 minutes for me to decipher what's going on. After blowing my nose several times and wiping my eyes to make sure that my detective devices are perfectly clean and my printer is in top shape, I discern the following: The French must use a lot of butter. Sometimes I amaze myself; I'm really good at this detective stuff.

After I am seated, a plate is set before me—a beautiful sculpture of edible art. I use my powerful mouth to vacuum the plate, and I'm too intelligent to waste a molecule of the food, so I use my tongue to wipe the plate clean. I'm so fixated on the flavor, I hardly hear the dishes that crash to the floor as I lick the plate. Poor, clumsy waiter. Anyway, did I tell you about my amazing tongue? It's one of the fastest tongues around. Yep, I can clean a plate in two wipes. But I give this plate an extra going-over. This is a

fancy French restaurant, so I need to use my etiquette and let the chef know how good his food is.

I'm about to howl for more, but there's no need. Each time I lick up the last bite of food on my plate, the waiter whisks away the plate, bringing me another.

The edible item is placed perfectly on the plate; the color of each ingredient complements the other, and a rich sauce is swirled over the food and across the plate in an artistic way. It's so beautiful that I hate to eat it. But that thought doesn't last long. Soon, I am shoveling the chow into my mouth as fast as possible, swooning between bites. It tastes that good.

Since I am eating when I should be working, I decide to diminish my guilt by examining data as I gobble. I inspect a book that I purchased at the airport; it's entitled *French Etiquette*. Maybe I'll find some clues in the book that'll lead me to the Hope Diamond. I read and chew, read and chew.

I decide to chew rather than vacuum the food up because... Um, I think all these French humans are jealous of me. Everyone keeps glaring at me. I forgive them though; they can't help it if they're clumsy humans. Their human mouths can't vacuum up food like mine can. Don't want them to feel bad, so I try to chew like the untalented humans do.

As I woof down my food (chewing quickly like a squirrel), I encounter a few details in the book I'm reading, which make my boldness wane. The book states:

Etiquette Rule #1: While dining, keep your hands on the table at all times.

Really? My mother trained me to never put my hands or elbows on the table or in the dog bowl. Scrutinizing the other tables nearby, I detect that all diners do indeed have their arms and hands on the table. Reluctantly, I place my left paw in the required position.

Etiquette Rule #2: Never directly take a bite of your bread. This is rude, ill-mannered, and dog-like. Tear off a bite-sized piece to place within your mouth.

Well, I'm not sure what they have against dogs. Dogs are great—that should be obvious—I'm a dog. (They should be so lucky.) Still, I take the loaf of French bread out of my mouth. I'm not sure why they make the bread into the rounded shape they do if they don't want you to stuff it into your mouth. The round end of the loaf fits my mouth perfectly. Whatever.

Etiquette Rule #3: Never gobble your food. It is mandatory that you eat slowly. Certainly, do not stuff more food into your mouth until you have thoroughly chewed and swallowed what's already in your mouth. Taste each morsel; chew slowly.

There they go again with the slow eating. These humans feel so inadequate that they can't stand to see my adept eating maneuvers without being jealous. Poor, uptight, huffy saps.

As I read this rule, I have one fork sticking out of my mouth, and the other forks sit on my plate, equipped with the next portion of food, waiting for me to shovel it in. I thought that's why they provide three forks. Seems like my strategy is more logical. But, OK. I slow my chewing.

Etiquette Rule #4: Use the correct fork for the correct course. The largest fork is for the main course; the middle-sized fork is for salad, and the smallest fork is for dessert.

Come on. You gotta be kidding.

Etiquette Rule # 5: Never, Never, NEVER READ WHILE YOU EAT! Think only about your food. Are you a beast or a civilized human being?

I decide to ignore this question. Looking up, I see that several waiters are huddled together in the far corner of the room; they are all glaring at me. Sheepishly, I close my book.

That's when I see him. He thinks he's hiding behind that huge menu. Grrr... I can't take this anymore. That disheveled coat, that flattened hat, that stupid fake mustache—I'm gonna get that diamondnapper this time!

I leap into the air like a speeding bullet. I'm flying, flying, flying... Plop. I land in a French lady's pudding. That's OK. One swipe of the tongue to clean my face, one swipe of the tongue to clean hers, and I'm off again. The ignorant diamondnapper is too busy devouring his cream puff to even notice he's being pursued. This time, I give it a better launch. Using the pudding lady's bouncy bench, I jump; I jump higher; I jump even higher - Ziiiiing... I'm flying through the air with greater speed. My ears are flat against my face; my bionic nose is aimed right at the diamondnapper. I'm a rocket. I'm about to make contact with that lizard-licking loser when he looks up from his meal.

Aaaaaahhhh! The diaper-brain diamondnapper screams.

And just like that, he's gone. Bang! My nose hits the back of his chair. Ouch. Food is soaring through the air. Forks are flinging left and right. (One waiter is pinned to the wall with the forks.) Spoons are twirling; champagne is flooding the floor; one lady's wig is twirling on her head. But I'm perseverant; I don't let any of this discourage me from pursuing the thief. Shrewdly, I jump on the table and make an announcement, "Everyone stay in your seats; I'm an adept detective. And that guy with the fake mustache is a thief!"

Silence. The customers and waiters all turn and look at the thief who is up against the wall, out of his mind with fear, quivering in that rumpled coat of his. Then, everyone turns and looks at me. Grrrrrr... Daggers are in their eyes. The customers all stand. Their hands form fists. Stomp. They take one step toward - me. Huh?

"I'm glad I have your attention, you kind and friendly French citizens," I choke out. My face feels burning hot.

Stomp. Stomp. They're getting closer.

"You want to stomp that-a-way. You want to get the diamond thief!"

I guess they don't get it because... well... all I can say is...

Aaaaaahhhh! Now, everyone in the whole restaurant is chasing me - over and under tables, around the coat rack, through the lobster tank. (Well, only I went in there.) Shrewdly, I leap into the air and take hold of the chandelier. Aaaaaaaahahaaaaaaa... I beat my chest. I'm Tarzan swinging through the jungle. I'm so great. I swing across the room, over everyone's head. Bang! I kick in the kitchen door. Now I'm James Bond.

Apparently, the chef has been so fixated on his creation of fricassee that he doesn't even know what's happening in the other room. He's busy concocting his next yummy dish. Smash! I fling myself to freedom, only to collide with the chef's huge pot of fricassee.

Obviously, the French do indeed take their food seriously, because I'm now cornered at the chef's stove; the chef is looming over me. He has tightened his grip on his butcher knife and is raising it in the air, claiming that I have ruined his fricassee. And,

if I don't remake the fricassee, he'll call the police - not for any thief but for me. I guess the French care more about their fricassee than they do diamonds. Anyway, I don't see the diamondnapper anywhere in the place. Guess he got away. So I'm stuck making this fricassee. I sure could use some help.