A REPORTER IN FRANCE

THE FINEST BUTTER AND LOTS OF TIME

WHEN I went to France this summer, after an absence of more than a year, I was pleased to find that, for the first time since the end of the war, my Parisian friends had stopped griping about the black market and rationing and were again discussing, passionately and at great length, the heady mysteries of *la grande cuisine*, which, next to women, has always been their favorite topic of conversation in times of content. Once more, with the air of brokers divulging something hot in the market, they were confiding to each other the addresses of good restaurants.

The finest restaurant in France, and perhaps anywhere, it was agreed by my always well-informed friends, is not in Paris. If I wanted to have the epicurean experience of my life, they assured me, I would have to go to Vienne, a town of twenty-three thousand inhabitants in the Department of Isère, seventeen miles south of Lyon, at the confluence of the Rhône and Gère rivers. There I would find the Restaurant de la Pyramide and its proprietor, the great, the formidable, the one and only M. Point.

"Ah, Fernand Point!" said one of my French friends with a deep sigh. "The greatest epicures in France and Navarre sing his praises. His *gratin d'écrevisses* reaches perfection. The yearbook of the Club des Sans-Club awards him the mark of Excellent—its highest. I once had a *volaille en vessie* there that . . ."

"Point's hors d'oeuvres alone are worth a trip from New York," someone else said. "He calls them hors d'oeuvres but they are a meal in themselves—and what a meal! There is a pâté . . ."

"Last year at Point's I had the best lunch I've had since Escoffier left the Ritz," a third gourmet friend told me. This friend is a man of seventy-four years and three hundred and twenty pounds, and he has spent most of the former in increasing the latter with good food. "In short, you *must* go to Point's restaurant."

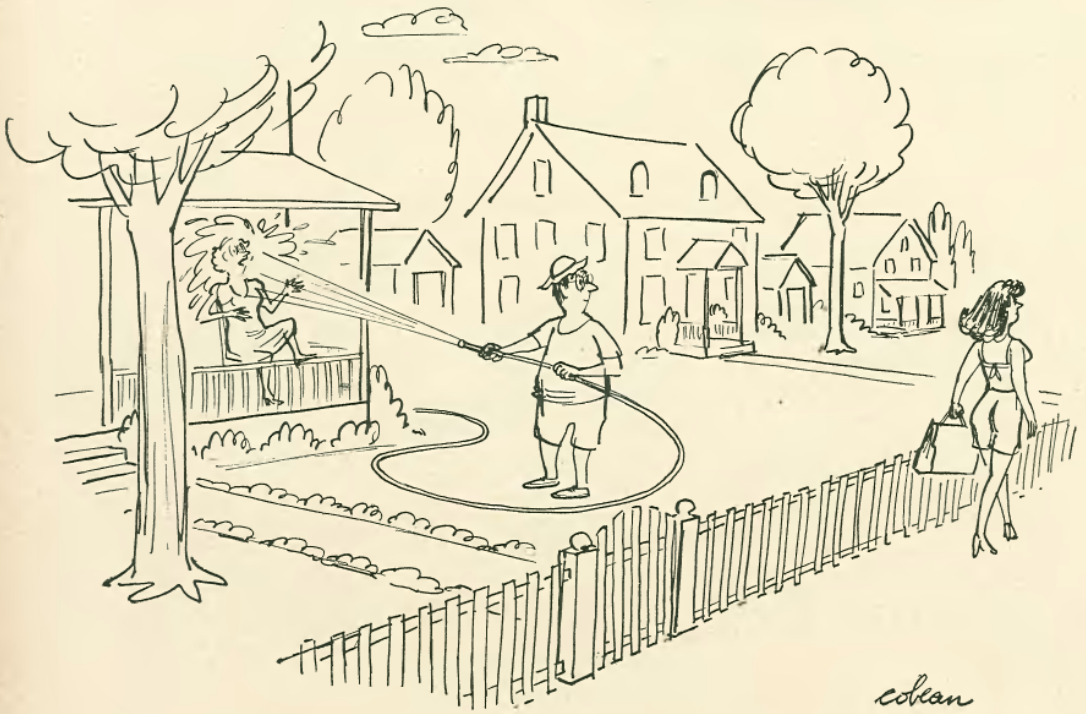
I objected mildly that I wasn't much interested in the show places of *la grande cuisine*. Since the disappearance of the black market, France's restaurants have returned to their prewar standard, which is, by and large, the best in the world. I could see no reason, I said, for patronizing fancy establishments when there is such an astonishing number of small restaurants all over the country where one can get a delicious omelet, a succulent veal stew, a fine cheese, and a bottle of honest *vin du pays* for less than six hundred francs, or something under two dollars.

"Ah, but Point's restaurant is not a show place," my old friend said. "It is a temple for gastronomes who know that *la grande cuisine* must be well orchestrated, that it must be surrounded by careful details, ranging from the temperature of the dining room to that of the wines, from the thinness of the pastry shells to that of the glasses, from the color of the fruits to that of—"

"All right," I said. "I'll go."

"But it's not a question of whether or not you will *go*," my friend said. "The question is will M. Point let you eat in his place? He has thrown out American millionaires and French ex-Ministers when he didn't feel like serving them. Only last week, a friend of mine called M. Point long distance and asked him to reserve a table for the next day. That, of course, was a mistake, because M. Point usually insists on being notified at least three days beforehand. My friend gave his name—a *very* important name in French politics, I assure you. Ha! M. Point pretended to be totally unimpressed and kept saying, 'Would you mind repeating the name?' Before long, my friend had lost his celebrated poise and could only mumble that he was being recommended by M. Léon Blum. And what do you think M. Point said to that? He said, 'And who is M. Blum, if I may ask?' "

My friend chuckled. "But I think I can help you out with an introduction. I have a British friend, M. Piperno, who happened to be among the Allied troops that liberated Vienne, and I'll have him give you a letter that will open all doors to you. Any friend of M. Piperno's is treated royally at Point's. But be sure to call M. Point well in advance to reserve your table. And for heaven's sake, don't think of ordering your meal! You don't order at Point's. *He* tells *you* what to eat."



A few days later, I received a note from my friend enclosing an amiable letter of introduction from a Mr. T. H. Piperno, and decided to put in a person-to-person call to M. Point without delay to reserve a table for lunch some day the following week. Finally, after some misunderstandings involving Point's name, my name, and the name of a girl, Denise Something, who had a lovely way of yawning and seemed to be the long-distance operator in Vienne, I got hold of a man with a high, querulous voice who said yes, he was

Point, and there were no tables available for the next week—or the next two weeks, for that matter. I quickly said that I was a friend of Mr. Piperno's. M. Point's voice abruptly dropped several notes as he said "Oh!" Then he precipitately told me that I might come any day I liked, absolutely, it would be a pleasure, and how about tomorrow? And in whose name should the table be reserved? I began to spell out my name, but M. Point must have got restless, because he said not to bother with the name—there would be a table. He hung up forthwith, without a goodbye.

MY friends in Paris had urged me to prepare myself for my monumental lunch by eating only extremely light food, and very little of it, during the preceding twenty-four hours, and I was hungry and cross when my overnight train pulled into Vienne early the following morning. A gentle rain was misting down upon the green trees of the town's miniature boulevards and blurring the outlines of the narrow streets bordered by old houses and small, dark shops. I set out for the nearby Grand Hôtel du Nord, where, again on the advice of my friends, I had engaged a room. "You'd better plan to spend the night," they had said. "No use trying to rush away. You have to relax after a meal at Point's." There were only a few people on the street—pale, stockingless girls who were carrying small lunch boxes, and shabbily dressed men who looked as though they surely had never lunched or dined at Point's.

The Grand Hôtel du Nord was, despite its name, an unassuming establishment that did not indulge in such extravagances as elevators, a bathroom on every floor, and warm water after nine in the morning, but my room was clean and the comforter on my bed was filled with eiderdown. I had a pleasant view of two sides of a square—on one flank the town museum, on the other the Café du Commerce et des Voyageurs and its clients, all of them, I was sure, busy in lively discussions of politics, soccer, and the high cost of living. I washed up, read a newspaper I had bought at the station (politics, soccer, and the high cost of living), and finished my interrupted sleep. When I awoke, it was getting on toward twelve o'clock, and nearly time for me to present myself at the Restaurant de la Pyramide. As I stepped into the street, I was stopped by a young man wearing a raincoat and a beret and carrying a pipe. He smiled at me like a Fuller Brush man, asked my pardon for his presumption, and informed me that he was Jean Lecutiez, an archeologist who had been sent to Vienne by the Ministry of National Education to dig up the ruins of the houses, temples, aqueducts, baths, and assorted monuments that the Romans left there two thousand years ago.

"I happened to be visiting my friend the desk clerk of your hotel as you came in, and I saw on the registration blotter that you were a writer," M. Lecutiez said. "Right away, I told myself that I would make it my business to take you around." I tried to protest, but he said, "Oh, don't worry—no bother at all. My two colleagues will carry on with the work. There are three of us archeologists here—a very old man, *un homme mûr* [a mature man], and myself." M. Lecutiez prodded me energetically with the stem of his pipe. "You must realize, Monsieur, that Vienne, the old Vienna Allobrogum, was the capital of the Allobroges in the first century B.C. Julius Caesar established a colony here. Later, the Romans went up north and founded Lugdunum, which eventually became Lyon. Naturally, the people in Lyon don't like to hear this, but it's true—"

"I'm sorry," I said. "That's wonderfully interesting, but I have a luncheon engagement at . . ."

M. Lecutiez ignored this interruption. "Vienne, like Rome, is built around seven hills," he went on as he grasped my arm and relentlessly walked me away. "They are Levau, Mont Salomon, Mont Arnaud, Mont Pipet, Sainte-Blandine, Coupe Jarret, and Mont Saint-Just. I'll take you up on every one of them. Now, this afternoon we're going to start with—"

"It's almost lunchtime," I said. "How about an apéritif? Then I'll really have to run for my appointment."

"Thank you, I never drink," he said. "Would you like to see the pyramid?"

"Ah," I said. "That's exactly where I'm going. I'm lunching at Point's."

"The restaurant, *je m'en fiche*," said M. Lecutiez. "I mean the real pyramid, which for hundreds of years was commonly, and erroneously, thought to be the grave of Pontius Pilate. There is nothing like it anywhere. Come, it's no distance at all." As we crossed the street, a wild bicyclist almost ran us down, but M. Lecutiez seemed not to notice. "It was the great French archi-

tect Delorme who first stated that the pyramid dates from the fourth century and was the domed center of the spina, or longitudinal center wall, of a Roman circus, where chariot races were held. Now we turn here, and *voilà!*"

There before us, an island in the middle of the street, was the pyramid, a monument, perhaps fifty feet high, that looks like a giant metronome. Its square base is pierced by four arches. The thoroughfare it stands in is one of those drab, deserted side streets that one sees in so many small French towns.

"Excavations undertaken in 1854 by Constant Dufeu proved Delorme completely right," M. Lecutiez went on, hardly pausing for breath. "We are indeed standing in the middle of what was once a vast Roman circus. It was a big arena, fifteen hundred feet long and . . ."

On the other side of the street, set in a ten-foot wall, was a gate, and beside it a black marble plate inscribed in red letters "FERNAND POINT, RESTAURATEUR."

". . . and the chariots must have come from over there," M. Lecutiez was saying, pointing up the street. "They would pass right where we're standing, and then—"

"It's been a tremendously instructive talk," I broke in, "and I am most grateful to you, but I must go." M. Lecutiez looked at me with a hurt expression, but I walked firmly across the street toward the gate in the wall. On the left, the wall connected with a decrepit three-story building that looked as if it should have been condemned long before the Renaissance; on the right it joined a house that was considerably newer but seemed rather run-down and in need of a coat of paint. The rain had stopped and the sun had come out, but even under these favorable conditions the exterior of M. Point's temple for gastronomes presented an unprepossessing appearance. I walked through the gate and found myself suddenly, without any transition, in another world. I was in a garden with clean gravel paths, green lawns, beds of flowers, and a terrace shaded by old maples and chestnuts and covered with white tables and wicker chairs still wet from the rain. The courtyard walls of the building that I had thought should have been condemned were completely cloaked with ivy, which blended admirably with the beautifully landscaped grounds. To my right was a two-story house—the one that from the front I had thought was run-down. Its garden side was immaculate. The frames of its wide windows were freshly painted, and the whole building looked

as clean and spruce as a Dutch sugar house. I walked up three steps, scuffed my shoes on a mat, opened the big door, and entered the hall of what seemed to be a handsome country residence. On the wall were paintings and an old print of the pyramid, bearing the caption "Un Monument Antique, Vulgairement Appelé le Tombeau de Pilate."

A man in a white jacket approached from the rear of the house, greeted me cheerfully, and took my raincoat and hung it on a hanger in the hall, as is the custom in French homes. I said I wanted to see M. Point, and was ushered into a small, pleasantly furnished salon. The walls were hung with paintings and mirrors, a gold pendulum clock stood on a buffet, and a large glass-topped table sat in the middle of the room. On the table were champagne glasses and a half-empty magnum of champagne, and behind it was standing a huge man. He must have been six feet three, and weighed three hundred pounds. He had a longish, sad face, a vast double chin, a high forehead, dark hair, and melancholy eyes. I couldn't help thinking that one of M. Lecutiez's sybaritic Roman emperors had come to life. He wore a comfortably large suit, and a big bow tie of black silk ornamented with a flowery design, like those the eccentric citizens of Montparnasse and flamboyant Italian tenors wore in the old days.

I introduced myself and we shook hands. I gave him Mr. Piperno's letter. M. Point read it casually and shook hands with me again. "Sit down!" he commanded with a magnificent gesture. "For the next few hours, this house will be your home. I'm delighted you came early. Gives us a chance to talk and drink champagne. Quiet, Véronique!" On a chair beside him, a precisely clipped brown poodle was making hostile noises. "Véronique belongs to the family," he said. "We also have a nine-year-old daughter, Marie-Josette. *Enfin!*" He filled two of the champagne glasses and said, "*A votre santé.*"

We drank. "I like to start off my day with a glass of champagne," M. Point said. "I like to wind it up with champagne, too. To be frank, I also like a glass or two in between. It may not be the universal medicine for every disease, as my friends the champagne people in Reims and Epernay so often tell me, but it does you less harm than any other liquid. Pierre—our sommelier—and Mme. Point and I go to the champagne district every year to buy. And, of course, to Burgundy, too. Last week, we visited a great friend, the Marquise de la Tourette, the proprietor of one of the great Hermitage vineyards." M. Point filled the glasses again. "*Ah, quelle grande dame!* She won't sell her wines in the commercial market. You have to be her friend, and you must literally force her into selling the stuff. She is over eighty, and every day she walks from her château to the church and back. Permit me to drink the health of the Marquise de la Tourette!"

While we were solemnly drinking the health of the Marquise, a man wearing a beret and the light-blue overalls and apron that are the uniform of France's winegrowers and sommeliers came in. He had a shrivelled face that looked as though it had been chiselled out of a piece of seasoned wood.

"Ah, Pierre," said M. Point. "Monsieur, this is Pierre Chauvon, our sommelier and a great connoisseur of that ever-new miracle, wine."

The old man scratched his head under his beret with his left hand as he gave me his right. "*Allons, allons, Chef!*" he said, embarrassed but quite pleased. "You know a lot about wines yourself, and Mme. Point knows even more. Ah, I assure you, Monsieur," he said to me, "Madame is *épatante*. She is *très, très forte*. When we go to the vineyards and taste the wines, the winegrowers always look at her first. She's better than I am, and I certainly know my business." He smiled, revealing a few side teeth and almost none in the front. "Unfortunately, Madame always gets hungry around noon, and once you've eaten, your taste and judgment aren't reliable any more. I don't eat when we're out. Mustn't make a mistake, eh, *Chef*?"

"Everybody calls me '*Chef*' here," M. Point explained to me. "Never '*Patron.*' They just won't forget that I used to be my own chef in the kitchen. Now I merely supervise things there, and my wife takes care of the clients in the dining room. Well, Pierre, why don't we show our friend the cellar? Nothing to be ashamed of, is it?"

M. Point led the way out into the hall, around a few corners, and down a stairway into a big, brightly lighted wine cellar with earthen walls. It was cool, and the dirt floor was as clean as much sweeping could make it. All along the walls were shelves on which bottles were stacked horizontally. Tacked to the lower-left-hand corner of each shelf was a small label giving the place of origin and the vintage of the wine. In the center of the room was a

table covered with baskets of fresh fruit—enormous pears, Calville apples, lush peaches, and aromatic *fraises de bois*. A roster of the wines in the cellar hung on one wall. It listed two hundred and nineteen names, in four columns. Glancing at random down the second column, I saw Richebourg '42, Romanée-Conti '35, Corton Charlemagne '38, Les Grands Echézeaux '42, Hermitage '98, Romanée-Conti '43, La Tache '43, Hermitage la Cour Blanche '06, Clos de Vougeot '37, Vosne-Romanée '93, Corton Charlemagne '42, La Tache '37, Romanée St. Vivant '40, Pouilly '40, Montrachet '29, Richebourg '29, Chambolle Musigny '21, Hermitage Blanc '70, Marc de Bourgogne '29, and Vire Chapitre '26.

"What a mess!" said M. Point, waving at the chart. "We've always mixed them up—don't know why. Anyway, it's not a bad selection. We have all the great vintage years of Château d'Yquem, back to 1908, and a lot of the fine years of Château Margaux and Château Lafite-Rothschild. You can see we're crowded in here. I had to rent a place down the street for Pierre to keep his champagnes in."

He pointed to a section of the shelves at my right. "How do you like our cognacs?" They were impressive—cobweb-covered bottles of eighty-year-old Otard and *hors-d'âge* Camus, along with batteries of gin, Scotch, apéritifs, and liqueurs. M. Point slapped his stomach. "Before the war, I refused to serve cocktails. Now they bring their own bottles if I don't serve them. My God, after a couple of those concoctions your palate can't distinguish an 1899 Château Mouton-Rothschild from 1949 fountain-pen ink! What's that you have, Pierre?"

The sommelier was examining a small bottle of the sort in which wine-growers send samples to merchants and restaurateurs. "The new Moulin-à-Vent," he said.

"We buy many wines by the barrel—*la pièce*," M. Point said, "and Pierre 'works' the wine, draining it from one barrel into another three times a year. The dregs remain in the old barrel. Pierre knows what he's doing. He wouldn't make a *soutirage*—as the process is called—while a south wind is blowing. The wind must be from the north. Right, Pierre?"

"*Bien sûr, Chef*. I make three *soutirages* a year—in January, March, and September. Each barrel of Burgundy contains two hundred and twenty-five litres, and each barrel of Beaujolais two hundred and eighteen litres. When the

wine is ready, I bottle it myself in my workroom. I've always done it. Had my own *bistro* in Lyon and would go to Burgundy three times a year to buy wines. Those were nice times, before my wife—" He stopped and scratched his chin. "Ah, why warm up those old stories? I'm happy here now. I'm sixty-seven, and I hope to stay here until I die."

"*Allons, allons, Pierre!*" M. Point cried, and his high-pitched voice almost cracked. "What kind of talk is that? Go on, tell me how the wine is."

Pierre uncorked the sample bottle and took a big mouthful of the wine. He let it roll over and under his tongue, closed his eyes, and made a gargling sound. Then he spat on the floor. "It'll be all right in three years," he said with authority.

"Good!" M. Point took my arm. "Let's go up to the kitchen and give some thought to your lunch."

THE kitchen was large and cheery, with a white-tiled floor and walls. Copper pots hung from hooks on the ceiling, and silver trays were stacked on broad white tables. The ranges and slicing machines were so highly polished that they looked brand-new. M. Point told me that coal was used to cook everything except pastry, which was baked in an electric oven. At the rear of the kitchen were four refrigerators. Through their glass doors I could see hors d'oeuvres and butter in the first, rows of dressed chickens in the second, fillets of beef and veal tenderloins in the third, and potatoes, bunches of white asparagus, and other vegetables in the fourth. The room was a busy place. Cooks and apprentices were washing vegetables, cutting meat, mixing sauces, and doing various other chores, but there was a total absence of haste or nervousness.

A plump and elegant gray-mustached man in a spotless chef's outfit joined us and was introduced to me as M. Paul Mercier, the *chef de cuisine*. "Do you like chicken, Monsieur?" he asked me. He picked one up from a nearby table. "All of ours come from the region of Bresse, the best in France for poultry. Each is tagged with a silver label and a serial number. We store them in the refrigerator for four or five days after getting them, but we don't freeze them. They do a lot of freezing in America, don't they?"

"*Malheureux, malheureux!*" M. Point exclaimed, clasping his hands in deep unhappiness. "Of course they do a lot of freezing. It's such a hot country they have to, I am told. But you can't expect to get a good piece of chicken from a freezer. Here we keep everything just above the freezing point." As he talked, his eyes roved over the kitchen, taking note of every bit of activity. "The main thing about cooking is to see to it that only the very best ingredients are used, and used as they should be. When you are interested in *la grande cuisine*, you can't think of money, or you are licked from the start. And you have to go out yourself and get the ingredients. At six o'clock this morning, M. Mercier himself went to Lyon to buy the very freshest strawberries and asparagus he could find in the markets. And butter, naturally. How can anybody expect to cook well without using the finest butter? *Du beurre, du beurre, du beurre*, I keep telling my men—that's the secret of good cooking. And time, lots of time."

I noticed that the bustle in the kitchen had subsided and that most of the undercooks were listening to M. Point with hushed attention. M. Point solemnly raised his right hand and proclaimed, "*La grande cuisine* doesn't wait for the client. It is the client who must wait for *la grande cuisine*." He stopped and looked around the kitchen. "*Allons, mes enfants!*" he said, clapping his hands. "Let us go back to work." Ushering me through a doorway, he took me into a small courtyard. "I want to show you our aquarium," he said. The aquarium consisted of two square tanks. In one I saw a couple of dozen brook trout swimming around, and in the other a number of crayfish. The water in each tank was kept fresh by a flowing faucet. M. Mercier joined us. "Are we going to serve Monsieur a trout?" he asked. "*Au bleu*, perhaps?"

"I haven't decided yet," M. Point said. He turned to me. "So often our clients ask for what they call 'difficult' things, with long and fancy names. People don't know that the most difficult and also the best dishes are the simple ones. What did you cook for your family on your last day off, Paul?"

"A *choucroute*," M. Mercier said.

"There you are. Here is a great chef, who can cook a chicken in champagne with truffles the like of which has never before been tasted, and what does he cook for himself at home? A *choucroute*—cabbage, delicious soft ham, Alsatian sausage, and very young potatoes—and what could be better?" He swallowed, and I found myself swallowing, too. My stomach was gnaw-

ing. "But it takes experience. What looks easier to make than a *sauce Béarnaise*? Butter, egg yolks, chopped shallots—nothing to it, is there? But years of practice are needed before you can do it right. Forget to watch it for a single instant and it's gone, finished, lost. Everybody thinks he can fry eggs, and I suppose anybody can, but to fry them so they are soft and mellow throughout, not burned on the bottom and raw on top—*that* is art, my friend. Isn't that right, Paul?"

"Absolutely," said M. Mercier.

"Absolutely. Now, Monsieur, let us return to the salon and think seriously about your lunch."

In the hall, we encountered a slim, middle-aged, efficient-looking woman in a gray tailored suit, who was carrying an order pad under her arm. M. Point introduced her to me as his wife, Marie-Louise. She smiled at me briefly and then whispered in M. Point's ear. "Madame *who*?" he said. "No, no. Tell her we have no table. I don't want her. She smokes before dessert. The last time she was here, she even smoked after the hors d'oeuvres." He escorted me into his salon. The magnum was empty, and he called loudly for another. It was quickly brought in an ice bucket by a frightened young waiter. M. Point watched the youth sternly as he worked out the cork and stopped the flow of foam by pressing a silver spoon over the mouth of the bottle. "A little trick," M. Point said. "Metal will stop the flow. Don't pour yet, Marcel. Always leave the bottle open in the ice bucket for a few minutes." A drop of champagne had spilled on the tabletop, and the waiter, before leaving, carefully wiped it away with his napkin. M. Point nodded in approval. "So many otherwise good restaurants in France don't teach their personnel the importance of the attention to detail that makes for flawless service," he said. I saw Mme. Point greeting four guests, and a waiter or two scurrying by in the hall. In a minute, a boy in a white apron put his head in the door and said that a M. Godet was calling from Lyon about a reservation, and would M. Point—For some reason, this seemed to infuriate M. Point. He shooed the boy away, went to the door, and announced down the hall in a loud voice that he was about to have a glass of champagne and that he would be grateful if the world would leave him in peace for a few minutes. Then he shut the door, came back, and sat down.

"Too many people," he said. "Vienne is halfway between Paris and the Rivie-

ra, and everybody wants to stop over to break the monotony of the trip. Not many Vienne people come here; most of my clients are from the outside world. It's been that way ever since I opened the restaurant, twenty-six years ago, when I was twenty-six years old." He poured us each a glass of champagne and looked thoughtfully into his. "I was born near here, and I always wanted to cook. My father was a chef. A very good chef. He made me start from the beginning—washing dishes, waiting on tables, peeling potatoes. It's quite important to peel them right, believe me. Then I learned to cook vegetables and make soups and things like that, and after that I went to Paris. Remember Foyot's? Ah, they had a great *saucier!* He taught me a lot. And for a long time I worked at the Hôtel Bristol. I came back home in 1923 and bought this place with my savings. It was just a shack and a few trees then. In time, Father and I added the second floor and a new kitchen, the wine cellar, and the terrace. We had the garden landscaped and bought the adjoining lot. Father died a few years ago. All this time I was doing the cuisine myself, always learning, always trying to improve a little, always eating well. You've got to love to eat well if you want to cook well. Whenever I stop at a restaurant while travelling, I go and look at the chef. If he's a thin fellow, I don't eat there. I've learned much about cooking, but I still have far to go."

M. Point leaned back, reached into the drawer of a table behind him, and pulled out a leather-bound book with a gold inscription on its cover: "F. POINT, LIVRE D'OR." "I started keeping this on the restaurant's tenth anniversary, in September, 1933," he said. He handed it to me. On page 1 was a short note, "*Quel excellent déjeuner!*," signed by the Aga Khan. "He really knows how to eat well," M. Point said. A couple of pages on, the Fratellinis, France's most famous clowns, had written, "Today we have eaten at Lucullus's," and Colette had written, "The trout was rosy, the wine was sparkling, the pâtisserie went straight to my heart—and I am trying to lose weight! This is definitely the last time I come here—*on ne m'y reprendra pas!*" Farther along there was an unfinished sentence by Léon Blum: "*Si j'en trouve encore la force après un tel déjeuner . . .*," a drawing by Jean Cocteau, and an observation by Curnonsky (the *nom de table* of Maurice Edmond Sailland, who in 1925 was elected Prince of Gastronomes by a group of Paris newspapers): "Since cooking is without doubt the greatest art, I salute my dear Fernand Point as one of the greatest artists of our time!"

Nothing was entered from January, 1940, until September 2, 1944. On the latter date, someone had written "*Premières Troupes Alliées—Merci 1000 Fois!*" over an excited, illegible signature. Below was the exclamation "*Vive la France!*" and the signatures of, among others, the Abbé de Pélissier, F.F.I., and Lieutenant Colonel H. C. Lodge, Jr., and Carl F. Gooding, "American jeep driver." Several pages beyond, I came upon a pasted-in letter, dated December 3, 1946, and typed on the stationery of the War Office (Room 900), Whitehall, London S.W. 1. It read, "Mr. Fernand Point: I have the honor to inform you that His Majesty the King has approved the award to you of the King's Medal for Courage in the Cause of Freedom, for your good services in France . . ."

I asked M. Point about the letter. He shrugged and took the *livre d'or* away from me and threw it back into the drawer. "No time for that," he said. "Time for lunch. If you will go into the dining room, I'll step into the kitchen and see what can be done. I've thought it all out."

AT the entrance to the dining room, I was taken in tow by a cheerful headwaiter, who led me to a table. Mme. Point came up with the order pad still under her arm. She gave me a long, speculative glance—the kind of glance that wives so often give their husbands' drinking companions—and then she smiled and said that she hoped I would have a nice lunch. She went off, and I looked around the dining room. I had the feeling of being in a comfortable home in the country. The room wasn't so small as to give one a sense of being cooped up with a lot of other people (there were perhaps fifteen or twenty other clients), and not so large as to give a feeling of mass production. There were pretty white curtains on all the windows, and on every table was a vase of fresh flowers. In the center of the room stood a long buffet covered with stacks of big, ivory-colored plates, piles of silver and rows of glasses, and against one wall was a grandfather's clock. When I opened my white napkin of rough linen, it turned out to be almost the size of a small bedspread, and exhaled the fragrance of fresh air and of

the grass on which it had been dried in the sun.

A waiter placed one of the ivory-colored plates in front of me, and another waiter served me the first hors d'oeuvre, an excellent *pâté campagne en croûte*. French cooks are generally expert at baking an extremely light, buttery dough called *croûte*, but never before had I eaten *croûte* that almost dissolved in my mouth. When I had finished, the first waiter replaced my plate, fork, and knife with clean ones, and a third waiter served me a slice of *foie gras naturel truffé* embedded in a ring of *crème de foie gras*. The ritual of changing plates and silver was repeated after each hors d'oeuvre—hot sausage baked in a light pastry shell, accompanied by delicious *sauce piquante;* a pâte of pheasant; crackling hot cheese croissants; fresh asparagus (which M. Mercier must have bought in Lyon that morning), set off by a truly perfect hollandaise sauce. A bottle of wine—an elegant, airy Montrachet—was brought in an ice bucket; the waiter filled my glass half full and gave it a gentle swirl to spread the bouquet. It was a great show and a fine wine. The last hors d'oeuvre was followed in person by M. Point, who informed me that I had now completed the "overture." "The overture merely indicates the themes that will turn up later," he said. "A good meal must be as harmonious as a symphony and as well constructed as a good play. As it progresses, it should gain in intensity, with the wines getting older and more full-bodied." Having delivered himself of this pronouncement, he returned to the kitchen.

Whenever I think back to that lunch, I feel contentedly well fed; the memory of it alone seems almost enough to sustain life. The next course was *truite au porto*, which, the headwaiter told me, had been prepared by M. Point himself: brook trout boiled in water to which vinegar, pepper, salt, and bay leaf had been added, and then skinned, split in half, and filled with a ragout of truffles, mushrooms, and vegetables. With it came a sauce made of butter, cream, and port wine. It was a masterpiece; I was by then entirely willing to take the word of my friends in Paris that Fernand Point is today France's greatest chef. The trout was followed by a breast of guinea hen with morels, in an egg sauce; a splendid Pont-l'Evêque; strawberry ice cream, made of *fraises de bois* that had been picked the day before; and an array of pâtisserie. M. Point had chosen as a wine for the guinea hen a rich, full-bodied Château

Lafite-Rothschild '24. And at the end of the meal, with my coffee, there was a Grande Fine Champagne '04, the taste of which I still remember vividly.

LATER, M. Point sat down at my table. The smell of good coffee and good cigars and the sound of soft, relaxed conversation drifted through the room. M. Point acknowledged my praises with the casual air of a seasoned virtuoso who had expected nothing else. "We always strive for near-perfection," he said. The inevitable bottle of champagne in its ice bucket was whisked up to the table by the headwaiter, and two glasses were filled. "Of course, I know that there is no such thing as perfection. But I always try to make every meal"—he closed his eyes, searching for the right words—"*une petite merveille*. Now, you won't believe it, but I gave a lot of thought to your lunch. I said to myself, 'Maybe he should have a *sole aux nouilles* instead of the *truite au porto*.' I decided against it. It might have been too much, and I don't want my clients to eat too much. Only in bad restaurants is one urged to order a lot. *Enfin*, you are satisfied."

I said he could probably make a fortune if he opened a restaurant in Paris. He nodded glumly. "My friends have been telling me that for years. But why should I leave? I belong here. My men like to work for me. We have thirteen men here in the dining room, and eight cooks and two pâtissiers, under Paul Mercier, in the kitchen. Many of them have been with me for over ten years, and some have been here a lot longer than that. They don't quit, as they do in Paris. Look at Vincent, here. He's been with me for twenty years—or is it twenty-one, Vincent?"

The headwaiter filled the glasses again and gave the champagne bottle a twirl as he replaced it in its bucket. "Twenty-one, *Chef*," he said.

"You can't get rid of them," said M. Point. "I could throw Vincent out the door and he would come right back in through the window. No, *mon cher ami*. Point stays at the Pyramide." He lifted his glass. "Let us drink to the Pyramide!"

"To the Pyramide!" I said.

WE drank a considerable number of toasts afterward—to France; to the United States; to Escoffier; to Dom Pérignon, who put the bubbles in champagne; and to the memorable day when M. Point prepared his first *truite au porto*—and it was with a feeling of light-headedness and supreme

contentment that, late in the afternoon, I paid my bill (which came to no more than the price of a good meal in a good restaurant in New York), bid farewell to M. Point, and went out into the garden. It had rained again, but now the sun was shining. The earth had a strong smell of mushrooms and flowers. I headed back to my hotel. At the corner of the Cours Président Wilson, I ran smack into M. Lecutiez. He was talking to an unworldly-looking patriarch, who I presumed was the oldest of the three archeologists, but M. Lecutiez introduced him to me as *l'homme mûr*, the mature man. He said goodbye to his colleague and seized my arm with great enthusiasm. "I've been waiting for you!" he said, waving his pipe happily. "We've got lots of things to do. We still have time to climb at least three of Vienne's seven hills."

I said that he must excuse me, because I was hardly able to make the Grand Hôtel du Nord, having just had lunch at M. Point's.

"M. Point has a very interesting place," M. Lecutiez said.

"Interesting?" I said. "They say it's the best restaurant in this country. It's the most remarkable—"

"Oh, I don't mean that," M. Lecutiez broke in. "I don't give a damn about the restaurant. I care only for antiquities, you know, and M. Point has plenty of them buried under his place. When they landscaped his garden ten years ago, they came across a couple of first-class Roman sculptures. I wish we could take over M. Point's place and start digging in earnest. I'll bet there are any number of marvellous relics under his wine cellar."

—Joseph Wechsberg

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I read a story in the *New Yorker* about a boy who, instead of becoming a priest, got married, or at least fell in love or something. And the emptiness and futility and nothingness of the world once more invaded me from every side.—*"The Seven Storey Mountain," by Thomas Merton.*

That's our famous big twenty cents' worth.

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ANTICLIMAX DEPARTMENT

[*Helen Worden in the Herald Tribune*]

He spent the first five years of his life in the home of his grand-uncle, John Wesley, the founder of Methodism. In his later years he lived with Tom Paine, whose pamphlets sparked the American Revolution. He is an ancestor of Gerard Lambert, the Listerine producer.