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The French Baguette



Photo by [Sergio Arze](#)

The French *baguette* is a generic word for things long and thin – stick, rod, etc. Hence *une baguette magique* – the stuff of children’s stories and adult illusions.

The most important baguette, of course, is the one we eat. The French consume them in their billions each year.

In late November 2022, a UNESCO multinational gathering endowed the French baguette with inclusion in its list of phenomena having an ‘intangible cultural heritage’. The French industry had been developing its case for five years. The French baguette now seemingly acquires a mystical character.

There are only four ingredients (mandated) in the ‘tradi’ baguette – flour, water, salt and yeast. The embedded mystique comes from the skill and commitment of the artisan baker. Such talent is celebrated each year (albeit with a metropolitan bias) with the baguette competition amongst the Parisian *boulangeries* – the ‘Grand Prix de la baguette de Tradition Française de la Ville de Paris’. It was initiated in 1997 by the then President Jacques Chirac (previously sometime Mayor of Paris).

Alas, the ‘tradi’ baguette is a marginal affair. One draws here on the weekly *Le Canard enchaîné*. *Le Canard* has an estimable regular column (*conflit de canard*) where it persistently dissects unfavourably the French agricultural and food sectors.

French agriculture and its food industry is predominantly an agro-industrial complex – merciless and unrepentant. The *paysan* and the artisan are diminishing breeds. *Le Canard* claims that only 20 % of the billions of baguettes consumed are of an artisanal character.

More, as reported from the industry, roughly 400 *boulangeries* have been disappearing each year. (Now raging energy prices is threatening the trade itself.)

The ‘tradi’ baguette is the tree that hides the forest. The industrialised baguette is now standard fare. This is the culinary equivalent of Gresham’s Law (‘bad money drives out good’). Hard yakka (Australian slang but apposite) has been naturally vulnerable to a marketplace dominated by profit-hungry corporate or co-operative giants offering easier options in the form of pre-mixed materials to bakers and where the customer may be none the wiser and/or indifferent.

And the recipe?

The base is ultra-refined flour. The important minerals and fibre are gone whereas the refining enhances the sugar content as a by-product. The complementary dependence on quick-rise yeast adds further to the sugar content and to the glycaemic index. Then there’s the additives – ascorbic acid (to inhibit oxidization), glycerol monostearate (to inhibit blistering of the crust), soy lecithin (to prolong shelf life) and more gluten (to reduce fermentation and kneading time and to improve the look).

Then there’s the salt. The flavourless flour requires heaps of it. The authorities have been trying since 2002 to reduce the salt content. The reigning limit is 18 grams per kilo of flour but even that figure, established by compromise, remains generally honored in the breach.

There is nothing intangible about the material character of the industrial baguette.

In March 2022, when the UNESCO application was submitted, the head of the candidature Support Committee, Senator Catherine Dumas, claimed that “France is known overseas for its *savoir faire* and lifestyle, on the terraces, for its cuisine, but also for the baguette. With it, France has shown that it also has a *savoir faire* both popular and simple”. Dumas claimed that a little of the French DNA was in this simple breadstick.

Rather, the French DNA has evolved and it is now resident in the industrial baguette. It is found in *boulangeries* on the corporate feed and (in degenerate form) in the hypermarket aisles and a fridge stocked with frozen processed food packages.

It is perhaps not unexpected that President Emmanuel Macron would jump on the bandwagon. His popularity quotient is flaccid. In Washington DC on December 1 (he wasn't there to tell his hosts to stop destroying Europe), Macron praises this bedecked product thus: “In these few centimetres of knowhow passed from hand to hand there is precisely the spirit of French *savoir faire*. It is something unmistakable”.

Under his new Party banner, *La République en marche*, Macron's Presidency since 2017 has gone nowhere. His 'start-up nation' is still on the starting blocks. Rebadged as *Renaissance* in 2022, Macron's Presidential coalition has demonstrated no revival, but rather the dogged persistence of a brutal and tired neoliberalist agenda. Macron desperately needs positive symbols as diversion – bread (literally) and circuses (his self-promotion antics at the World Cup).

The 'tradi' baguette is real, and rightly a national treasure. But its heralding as the embodiment of current France has more than a whiff of charlatanry, indeed chicanery. Is this rather a magic wand waved over the reality of a landscaped drenched in pesticides, herbicides and chemical additives? Adult illusions indeed. At the least, the threat to good health demands that one acknowledges explicitly the underlying hypocrisy.

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