

The Telegraph

Majority of French restaurants using ready-made factory food

A hard-hitting television documentary has claimed restaurants in France are increasingly buying in read-made food rather than preparing ingredients from scratch.

By Peter Allen in Paris

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France's reputation for culinary genius has traditionally set the standard to which all other countries aspire. It has always been synonymous with outstanding cooking, with its kitchens as important a part of Gallic culture as its art and language.

Not any more, according to a devastating investigation behind the kitchen doors of restaurants in Paris.

Rather than master chefs and fresh ingredients, restaurants in the world capital of *haute cuisine* are increasingly relying on microwave ovens and deep freezers to feed their customers, it found.

Industrially produced ready-meals, "flavour sprays" and untrained catering staff are all part of an unsavoury mix which is dragging down standards in French cooking, according to a documentary shown on France's Canal+ station at the weekend.

It sought to prove that such deception is becoming increasingly common. Using hidden cameras and even searching dustbins, investigators found numerous restaurants trying to pass off third-rate food as the real thing.

Herve Bouchard, one of the team of investigators, claimed the majority of meals in French restaurants were being made in factories, before being reheated in microwaves.

"The work of a restaurateur is very hard, the margins are poor. There are reasons behind the fact that they resort to ready prepared dishes. But is there a good reason why people should not be told where their food comes from?" he said.

One such factory situated close to Paris and run by the frozen food company Bonduelle employs 850 staff and sells 700 tons of frozen vegetable every day to restaurants.

The industrial nature of French cooking was summed up by a representative of a British frozen food company who told the journalists: "A cook is someone who doesn't have time to cook any more, who just has to manage his staff.

"Us, we bring him solutions. Because of this, at 10am, he can read *L'Equipe* [the daily French sports paper] and drink his coffee."

By law, restaurant managers do not even have to tell customers that they are using ready-made food.

"Today in France thousands of restaurants serve frozen food to their clients without them knowing. In a country with our gastronomic tradition it's a taboo subject," said Olivier Journiat, another journalist involved in the documentary.

The statistics supporting the investigation are extremely disturbing, said Bouchard. In 2007 the French government introduced a *maitre restaurateur* (master restaurateur) award for all those using at least 60 per cent fresh ingredients. This figure now represents just 600 members of the trade, or three per cent.

Bouchard said: "What is striking is that the award has been a complete failure. It's very hard to fight against that trend.

"Instead of employing extra staff restaurants prefer to use ready prepared staff so as to increase their sales. For example a *pot au feu* will cost the restaurateur two euros, he won't have any problems with left over food, or losses, and it's better than paying extra staff."

He said the frozen dish would be sold in restaurants for at least four times that price.

Last week a leading Paris restaurant was found to have used an "essence of truffle" spray to make one of its dishes, sparing the owners from spending up to £1,000 a kilo on fresh truffles.

The documentary meanwhile caused a stir at the weekend, with the newspaper *Le Monde* asking: "Is France still the country of great food?"