France Wants ‘Homemade’ Back on the Menu

SYLVIE CORBET, Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — Waiting for boeuf bourguignon in a charming French bistro, it's hard to imagine that the chef's main job could be to press buttons on the microwave. But frozen and pre-packaged meals have become so common in restaurants that lawmakers want customers to know what they're getting.

A new law would let restaurants label a dish "fait maison" — homemade — only when it's made in-house from fresh ingredients. Supporters say the law could create jobs by encouraging a return to traditional restaurant cooking.

At a time of economic crisis and with high restaurant taxes, though, more and more French chefs are tempted to resort to pre-packed food to cut costs.

"There are price consequences, and consequences on service," said Bernard Auboyneau, owner of Bistro Paul Bert in in the trendy 11th arrondissement of Paris. "It's obvious that industrial or prepared food can count on an astounding future."

Gastronomy is officially a national treasure: UNESCO put French cuisine on its World Heritage List in 2010. But France is also a champion of industrial food, with companies specialized in dishes that can be prepared quickly and look homemade, once the plastic wrap is peeled away.

Thierry Laurent, a chef at Paul Bert for 14 years, is proud to cook each dish in the purest French tradition.

"All day long there is something on the fire," he said as a pot of tete de veau bubbled away in the kitchen.

A survey by restaurant federation Synhorcat last year found 31 percent of French restaurants use at least some ready-made dishes.

"The real question is: are you ready to pay more for better quality?" said Kelly Mignard, a 22-year-old student. "In some cases, the answer is 'yes', but maybe not for everyday lunches."

Daniel Fasquelle, a parliamentarian who pushed for more regulation, thinks the new law is still too lax. "Sadly, a place can call itself a restaurant and not cook one single dish in its kitchen," he said.

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