



BODY & SOUL

How the French go vegan: beefless bourguignon, chickpea meringues

Chef Clarisse Flon tells Tony Turnbull why she wants to revolutionise French cooking

Tony Turnbull
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French Chef Clarisse Flon has launched a vegan restaurant in London
MELANIE JOHNSON

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If you want to feel like a second-class citizen, try being a vegetarian in France. The bafflement on waiters' faces when my daughter points out that, no, she can't eat beef "even though cows only eat grass" is a perennial highlight of our holidays. Last year I had a lengthy email exchange with our family-run hotel, explaining that she wouldn't eat meat or fish. And what did madame serve her on the first night? Coq au vin.

So what it must be like for a vegan I can only imagine. Perhaps that explains why the 25-year-old French chef Clarisse Flon has launched her vegan restaurant, the Forty One, in London instead of in her home town in the French Alps. "You can find a few vegan cafes in the big cities now, but French people are very strong-minded, and most of them just don't understand veganism," she tells me. "They are big meat and dairy eaters and it is just so alien for them."

Whenever she visits home, she feels she is letting her family down. "I've been vegan for five years, but every time I see my family they ask me, 'Why are you doing this, why are you still vegan?' You explain it, but it doesn't get through. My mother will cook beef bourguignon and she'll say I can just pick out the mushrooms. And every time I tell her, 'It doesn't work like that.'"

Flon was already working in London as a pastry chef and battling a chronic digestive illness that caused her to be regularly treated in hospital when she decided to cut meat and dairy from her diet. She found herself so revitalised that she launched her own catering company, the Sunny Spoon, specialising in vegan French patisserie that she would sell in markets around east London. "No one else was doing anything similar and I liked the challenge," she says. "I tried a lot of vegan foods and cakes, and I have to admit most of the time I [was] disappointed. I'm just really fussy and I have very high expectations. Blame it on my French roots and years of work in very hard kitchens with very demanding chefs."

Vegan food is often joyless, she concedes, but with their glossy chocolate glazing and neatly piped "buttercream", her praline and chocolate millefeuilles and salted caramel, hazelnut and chocolate domes could grace the shop window of the smartest patissier.

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She's dismissive of clean eating as an Instagram trend and has no problem with using refined sugar, recoiling with impeccable French disdain at the idea of sweetening a cake with beetroot or dates. "Oh God, no. If you want to eat a brownie, just eat a brownie." But with a classic patissier's emphasis being on butter, cream and eggs, there have clearly been compromises — and "a lot of failed cakes" along the way. For butter, she uses margarine — some brands, she says, work much better than others, Vitalite being her favourite. It doesn't impart the same richness to her pastry, but makes a surprisingly decent icing. For her crême patissiere she uses oat milk and cornflour instead of eggs to give it the right consistency, and her chocolate ganache is made with coconut or hazelnut milk in place of cream.

The most unlikely replacement, and one that you can barely believe when you taste it, is chickpea water instead of egg whites. Whipped to soft peaks with sugar and cream of tartar, it makes a delicious meringue topping on her best-selling lemon tart. She also uses it to aerate her génoise sponge.

It has not been the flavour, but the texture that has presented the greatest challenge, Flon says. "I have to use agar-agar instead of gelatine in my panna cottas and mousses, for example, and it is much less forgiving," she says. "Just lg too much and it will be set solid."

Despite her training as a pastry chef, Flon is more interested in the savoury offerings at her new restaurant, she says. "I don't have a sweet tooth, I'll take savoury over cake any time of the day."

She takes her inspiration from all over, including her mother's beef bourguignon, minus the *boeuf* of course, which makes for a delicious pie served with mash and gravy. There's also a "smoked salmon" salad with finely sliced carrot that has been marinated in seaweed, liquid smoke and sesame oil for two days. "The seaweed gives a fishy taste, and it really confuses people," she says.

She wants to show that veganism isn't about missing out. "I love the flavour of smoked salmon. I've always loved the taste of meat, so I still want to enjoy those flavours," she says. "I just want to create an alternative so that people can see veganism is not just raw cakes and salads. It can be good food too."

Café Forty One is at La Suite West Hotel, London W2 (lasuitewest.com)

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