

French cuisine turns a new page

A collection of Philippe Mouchel's recipes hints at influences beyond Europe, writes **Justine Costigan**.

WHEN Philippe Mouchel began working for his mentor, Paul Bocuse, in 1976, he had no idea the job as a commis would not take long to take him around the world. But his decision to go to Japan to work in Bocuse's new restaurant set him on a path that would define his life and career. When he took his first nerve-jangling trip on a plane to Japan in 1978, he was only 22.

Working in Japan, Hong Kong and Australia, Mouchel took the recipes he learnt as an apprentice in regional French kitchens and adapted them for his new customers, introducing new influences — including those of Tomoko, his Japanese-born wife — along the way.

In *More than French* — Mouchel's new book written with author and food writer (and former Epicure editor) Rita Erlich — his rise is told in recipes, stories and photographs. For anyone familiar with his Australian restaurants (including Paul Bocuse at Daimaru, Langtons, The Brasserie at Southbank and now PM24 in Russell Street), Mouchel's passion and attention to detail is instantly recognisable.

But getting a recipe to the page is harder than it looks. Like the chef under whom he did his apprenticeship, Mouchel is not one for writing them down. Chef Gerard Gavroche, of the Michelin-starred Le Grand Cerf in Evreux, used to show his apprentices and chefs how to make something once and then expect them to repeat it. In *More than French*, Mouchel writes: "I'm the same now. I don't always have time to write new recipes out in full, so when I'm cooking dishes, I expect the apprentices to ask questions about what I'm doing and why. It's the only way to learn."

Erlich describes recording the

Raymond Mouchel's french onion soup

MOUCHEL'S father, Raymond, like many from Normandy, had no interest in wine. He never drank it, preferring instead to drink and cook with cider, the local tippie. His onion soup is lighter than many versions — the cider gives the soup freshness and its acidity cuts back the sweetness of the onion. It is essential to use a good-quality apple cider, such as the Irish brand Magners, the Australian Bress or a French cider from Normandy, such as Pere Jules. Mouchel's father usually used beef stock but veal or chicken will do.

INGREDIENTS

80g butter
800g brown onions, peeled, halved and finely sliced
1.8 litres beef stock
500ml apple cider
1 bouquet garni
Salt and pepper
Sourdough baguette, sliced (allow two or three thickish slices per bowl)
180g comte or gruyere cheese, grated

METHOD

Heat a large, heavy-based pot (an enamelled cast-iron pot is ideal) on medium, melt the butter and add the onions. Stir for a couple of minutes until the onions start to soften, then turn the heat to low. Cook until the



onions are golden and melting, stirring often. This may take up to 45 minutes.

- Add the stock, cider and bouquet garni. Bring to the boil, then simmer for 30 minutes. Season with salt and pepper.
- While the soup is cooking, toast the slices of baguette.
- When the soup is ready, discard the bouquet garni and heat the grill until hot. Ladle the soup into large, oven-proof bowls. Add the slices of toasted baguette then sprinkle generously with cheese. Place the bowls under the grill until the cheese has melted and is lightly browned.

Serves 6-8

recipes for the book as "cooking tennis". Mouchel would get up at 4am or 5am to write and then email the recipes one by one to Erlich.

She would test the recipes and then discuss ways to adapt them for the book. Recipes for 12 people would be rewritten for six; three-page recipes would be reworked to fit on one; substitutes for ingredients diffi-

cult to find in Australia needed lengthy discussion.

Making the dishes at home, Erlich says she began to understand the way Mouchel's "flavour mind worked". She says, "It's interesting cooking someone else's food. Lots of his dishes have three components and they are all crucial to the flavour base; they're not just garnishes."



And, naturally, many of the recipes became Erlich family favourites: rabbit rillettes, Mouchel's tarte tatin and french onion soup made with cider were all dishes friends and family wanted more of.

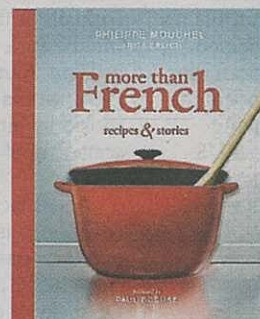
Every Monday, on Mouchel's day off, the pair would meet to work. "We didn't always talk about the book," Mouchel says, "but we always talked about food." From these roaming conversations emerged the history of Mouchel's career, a story told briefly and modestly throughout the book.

Arriving in Japan as interest in French cuisine exploded, Mouchel became a member of a loose community of French chefs whose restaurants, many of them in international hotels, inspired a deep and abiding local interest in French food and wine.

The influence went both ways. After arriving in Japan, Mouchel began to adapt his French recipes, reducing the amount of cream and butter and using lighter cooking methods. Mouchel says the expats learnt a lot from their time in Japan, including the emphasis on beautiful presentation.

"It was an opportunity to reflect on cooking," Erlich says of writing *More Than French*. But for Mouchel, the experience inspired only admiration. Holding the heavy book, which includes more than 100 recipes, he smiles and says: "I'm just amazed Rita could cook all that."

More than French: Recipes & Stories, by Philippe Mouchel with Rita Erlich, is published by Slattery Media Group. \$65.



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Cocotte of pork belly and vegetables

THIS began as a Japanese dish of pork neck and braised turnips that Mouchel's wife, Tomoko, cooked at home. Mouchel liked the flavours and wanted to replicate them but because pork neck is difficult to prepare in advance in a restaurant, he instead used pork belly. The dish is quite similar to a pot-au-feu. The pork belly benefits from being cooked twice: the meat is brined then cooked and rested before being cooked again to crisp the skin. The vegetables are cooked separately in the cooking broth and reheated in a cast-iron pot, known as a cocotte. The vegetables come together as a delicious assembly of shapes, colours and melting textures, with the pork skin offering a contrasting crunch. A tip: buy a piece of pork belly with more meat than fat and start preparing it two days before you intend to eat it because the pork needs to be brined.

Brine

INGREDIENTS

- 4 litres water
- 400g salt
- 125g sugar
- 5 bay leaves
- 1 sprig of rosemary
- 1 small bunch of thyme

METHOD

- Combine ingredients in a large saucepan. Bring to the boil, stirring to dissolve salt and sugar.
- Allow to cool, strain through a fine sieve and refrigerate.

Pork and vegetables

INGREDIENTS

For the broth:

- 1kg pork belly
- 1 onion, peeled
- 3 cloves
- 1 head of garlic, unpeeled
- 2 carrots, peeled and left whole
- 1 leek, halved lengthways and washed well
- 2 celery stalks
- 20 black peppercorns
- 1 large bouquet garni (bay leaves, thyme sprig, parsley stalks, tied with kitchen string)

For the vegetables:

- 12 baby turnips, peeled and washed
- 12 baby carrots, peeled and washed
- 1 daikon (Japanese radish), peeled, cut in half lengthways, then into 2cm slices
- 12 radishes, washed
- 2 young parsnips, peeled and diced
- 3-4 silverbeet stalks, cut into 5cm lengths
- 10-12 asparagus spears

For the pork:

- 50g butter
- Fleur de sel, or salt flakes

METHOD

To brine the pork:

On day one, place the pork in the cold brine (recipe left) and soak overnight.

For the broth:

On day two, drain the pork and rinse well under cold water. Place in a large pot, cover with water and bring to the boil. Skim any impurities from the surface. Stud the onion with the cloves and add to the pot, along with the garlic, carrots, leek, celery, peppercorns and bouquet garni. Turn down the heat

and simmer for about three hours. The pork is cooked when a knife inserted into the meat meets no resistance. Allow to cool a little, then remove the pork from the broth. Place it in a large dish, cover with plastic film and place another dish on top to weight it lightly (this gives the pork a flat surface and makes it easier to cut). Refrigerate. Strain the broth and discard the vegetables. Refrigerate the broth.

For the vegetables:

On day three, cook the vegetables one at a time in the broth, until they are just tender. Set broth and vegetables aside.

For the pork:

Preheat the oven to 170 degrees. Cut the pork into 12 pieces. Melt 20 grams of the butter in a non-stick pan over medium to high heat and add the pork belly, skin side down. Cook for a few minutes then place the pan in the oven for about 15 minutes. The skin of the pork should be brown and crisp — if not, put the pan back on direct heat. While the pork is cooking, melt the remaining 30 grams of butter in a large cast-iron pot over low heat. Add the vegetables and a few tablespoons of the broth. Slowly cook, shaking the pot occasionally, until the liquid has reduced and the vegetables are tender and nicely glazed. Allow at least 10 minutes. To serve, place the pork, skin side up, in the centre of a warmed platter. Surround with the vegetables and sprinkle with the fleur de sel.

Serves 6



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