Brushing Off a French Stigma That Doggie Bags Are for Beggars

By AURELIEN BREEDEN

LYON, France — Fabrice Moya, a chef with a boyish grin who opened a restaurant by the same name here 12 years ago, has no problems with doggie

C M Y K

"We've always been used to letting people take what they haven't finished," he said on a recent morning in his kitchen, where several of his cooks were chopping carrots and filling buckets with chickpeas for the day's lunch service.

But it rarely happens — one doggie bag per week at most, out of 500 customers, he estimated. They were much more likely to take home what was left in their bottle of wine.

"What's important is to cook well," Mr. Moya emphasized, and an empty plate will follow. "If you do it with passion, people will

That is not to say nothing is ever left behind. Though the French remain resistant to taking leftovers home, a small movement is afoot to change attitudes. It has been encouraged by difficult economic times, rising consciousness about food waste, and an environmentally minded younger generation that is more familiar with takeout culture.

As part of a wider drive to cut down on food waste, the authorities in the south-central region that includes Lyon started a campaign last month to promote the use of doggie bags in local restau-

Though Lyon is not the only city in France to try such a campaign, its reputation as a culinary capital gives the drive a special resonance.

'Our consumer study showed that while most consumers — a large majority — favor encouraging this custom, most really hesitate to ask because they are afraid of looking stingy," said Elisabeth Manzon, who directs food projects at the government agency running the campaign in the Rhône-Alpes region. "They are ashamed.

The agency formed a partnership with restaurants like Mr. Moya's, as well as with companies and unions in the food and waste industries, providing free fliers and stickers for download on a devoted website.

In an attempt to rebrand the doggie bag in a more positive light, it is using the term "gour-



MARLENE AWAAD FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Yoann Blanc, owner and chef of La Tête de Lard, a typical "bouchon" Lyonnais restaurant, showed off his form of a doggie bag.

met bag" instead, with the tagline: "It's so good, I'll finish it at home!'

One flier shows a sketch of a man raising his hand in a restaurant to ask for a doggie bag. The caption reads: "Who said I was a cheapskate? No, I'm just an ecogastronomist!"

Still, there is a long way to go to overcome French prejudices about taking home leftovers, rooted in history and culture.

Jean-Pierre Corbeau, a sociologist and professor emeritus at the University of Tours who specializes in food, said both upper and lower classes traditionally shunned the idea.

For the working classes, leaving food on one's plate was a waste; for the bourgeoisie, it was a sign that you were wealthy enough not to scarf everything

But for some, the French are merely turning their noses up at something they used to do much more often.

Jean Terlon, vice president of the food branch of UMIH, France's main union in the food and service industry, and a promoter of the gourmet bag campaign, said the custom used to be more common in the mid-20th

"They didn't hesitate to ask for leftovers from an unfinished dish," he said of people in his childhood. "It was something that used to be done, and now the French are struck by snobbery, and they don't ask anymore."

But Mr. Corbeau, the sociologist, said this early version of the doggie bag was often used in a family setting, and was sometimes geared toward poorer segments of society, a context that helps explain the negative connotations.

"You might be perceived and stigmatized as a poor person looking for a handout," he said, recalling how people would ring

at the door for a small donation of food when his grandmother organized big meals. "It was a premature doggie bag, for beggars."

Even today, taking leftovers home conflicts with France's attitude toward eating out, and the general impression that the doggie bag is more of an American phenomenon — a result of supersize portions. "Contrary to the image we

have of France, the country of gastronomy, where people supposedly spend all their time at the restaurant, people don't eat out that often," said Anne Lhuissier, a sociologist at the French National Institute for Agricultural Research who has studied eating habits and food consumption in France.

She noted that the French spent more time than their European neighbors on preparing and eating their own meals. "And when they do eat out," Ms. Lhuissier said, "they relish it."

Dining out is thus a rare experience, to be enjoyed in situ, not bundled up in plastic foam containers and reheated in the microwave.

"If you are dealing with finer things, things that are tastier, then maybe you have more appetite, and more pleasure in finishing your plate," said Thibault Narmand, who owns a cozy bistro with his wife, Faten, in Lyon.

Other chefs, including Mr. Moya, seemed to agree. Few opposed the idea of the doggie bag in principle, but they emphasized that if portions were well sized, if the dishes were tasty and if the dining experience was enjoyable, then there should be no need to take anything back home.

"If all your tables are leaving with doggie bags, you have a quantity problem in your plates," said Wilfried Champin, the headwaiter at Tapeo, a Spanish-influenced restaurant that overlooks the Saône River in a sleek new

mall in Lyon.

As a customer in other restaurants, Mr. Champin is sometimes taken aback by how foreign the concept seems to his colleagues in the catering industry. "Once a restaurant owner looked at me and asked, 'Why on earth would I do a doggie bag?'" he said.

Some chefs mistakenly fear that they will be legally responsible for food poisoning from a spoiled doggie bag, a worry the

campaign wants to dispel. Others insisted that the doggie bag was a solution to a problem that barely existed here. If the authorities really want to tackle the problem of food waste, they should look elsewhere, they said.

Households and manufacturers account for a much larger portion of food waste, which the European Parliament voted two vears ago to halve by 2025. The **European Commission estimates** that while 100 million tons of food is wasted annually in the European Union, only 14 percent of that is from the catering sector.

Even Ms. Manzon admitted that the end goal of her agency's campaign is to reduce waste altogether, not to promote the doggie bag, per se. "Certainly we want to encourage the gourmet bag, but the main message we want to convey is that, if the plate can be finished, it's better," she said.

Indeed, finishing one's plate is something of a French institution. In Lyon, at La Tête de Lard, a traditional "bouchon" restaurant that serves regional dishes like potato or macaroni gratin. the chef and owner, Yoann Blanc, said he jokingly chides his customers that if they don't finish their main dish, they won't get any desert.

In many ways, the doggie bag was much better in theory than in practice, and certainly remained alien to some.

Outside Brasserie Georges, a stalwart of traditional French cuisine in Lyon, 21-year-old Arthur Pascal lit a cigarette after an afternoon meal with his family. He knew all about doggie bags, and liked the idea.

"But I rarely ask for one," he admitted, because it just is not something you do. The only time his family did ask, they returned home with meat bones — not for them, but for their dogs.

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