

Savoire FAIRE

We visit France's Savoy region to meet a chef doing exactly the right thing

Ahh, the Savoy region! The Alps! The skiing and hiking! Pastures of green! All that and we haven't even started talking about the region's famous dishes. Raclette! Fondue! Tartiflette!

"Pff!" says chef Raphaël Bonne with a classic French sound of dismissal. "Fondue is Swiss, raclette never existed as a cheese and tartiflette was developed for tourists!"

Bonne runs La Bergerie de Raphaël in the tiny French hamlet of Vallandry, 1,600m above sea level – right at the point where the pines start shrinking on their way up to the tree line in the Vallée de la Tarentaise. "Are you going to see that guy with the deck on the ski slopes?" asked an envious-sounding friend in Paris, a question I found curious as the Bergerie isn't the only establishment in town with a deck. Once I met Bonne and tasted his cuisine, however, it was very clear that this guy was *that* guy and his deck was *the* deck.

Along with the Swiss fondue heist, Bonne explains that the potato-, reblochon- and bacon-based tartiflette is a bastardised version of an old Savoy dish called pela. His devotion to Savoyard cuisine is legend in the area. Bonne came to professionally freestyle ski and ski jump 30 years ago, quickly moved into the kitchen and now has an encyclopedic knowledge of the region's cuisine and its history.

"I try to recreate the old recipes that Savoyard grandmothers used to make," he says, citing pela, a buckwheat flour pasta called crozet and the grated potato, bacon, dried fruit and crème fraîche marvel, farçon.

Bonne's cuisine is heavily based on tradition – he spends much of his time reading old recipes – but he also makes well thought-out steps toward modernity. In a 'soup' with tiny local escargots, spinach and a hint of cream, each ingredient has its moment in your mouth.

But it's tasting his sauces where I really begin to understand. Bonne is the self-trained son of a saucier and there are several sauces bubbling away in pots at any given time in his kitchen.

"Instead of putting butter and flour in a wine sauce to thicken it, I'll do a straight wine reduction and flambé it," he says. "When it's reduced to 30 per cent of what it was, I'll add a sugar syrup to thicken it and give it flavour, but only enough syrup to give the sauce a sheen." Syrup? "Yes," Bonne says simply, explaining that sweetness in savoury dishes is a Savoy classic, but to the outsider, the syrup just sounds like a sweet and sticky bad idea.

Silly me. In the kitchen, he and Charlène Guillet, his second de cuisine, are continually tasting his sauces for flavour and seasoning (a mark of a good chef) and I try a spoon coated with a wine and blackberry sauce. What stands out is the savoury – the deep taste of the wine and herbs – while the fruit and sweetness simply underline those essences. Everything is better as a result.

These winks at local customs and respect for regional flavours are backed up with a commitment to local products. Bonne is part of a culinary group called the Académie du Goût et Traditions Culinaires de Savoie and as such, gets a large amount of his food from nearby producers.

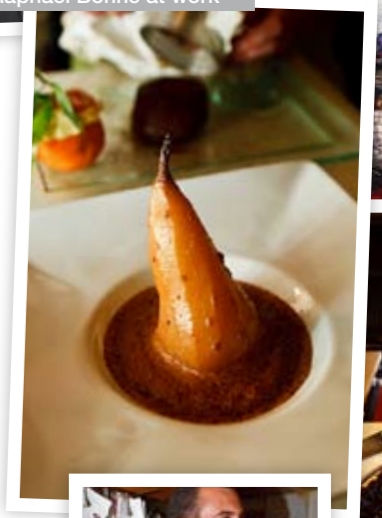
Bonne also presents a jug of génépi – Savoy's famous liquor made from the herb that gives the drink its name – that knocks the socks off of its competition. Normally talkative about the origins of his products, Bonne goes quiet about this one. I prod and he opens up, but just a bit. "Very, very local," he says, and I let it go there, hoping he'll break it out again the next time I come back.



La Bergerie's rustic exterior



Raphaël Bonne at work



Regional delicacies set for the tables