La Baguette

by Tony Beckwith
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A few years ago, Lillian and I were in Paris for a week. We stayed at a small hotel in the Marais district and spent our days exploring the city on foot. Late one morning we were strolling through the Tuileries Gardens when we came across a vendor selling hot dogs. But these were unlike any we had ever had before. They were served in a fresh baguette that was warmed by sliding it onto a heated metal spike. The vendor squirted mustard or a sauce of his own making into the cavity created by the spike, then inserted a warm sausage. *Voila!* A French hot dog, a most delicious street snack.

The baguette is an iconic symbol of France, known all over the world as a token of the Gallic way of life. Many countries have long had their own version of this most distinctive type of bread. When I was a child in Montevideo, we always had a loaf of "French bread" in the house. My brother and I would wait until my mother was out of the kitchen, then we would break off both ends of the loaf while it was still warm. After scooping out the soft interior crumb we packed the "elbows" with cold butter from the fridge. Then we pressed the crumb over the opening to seal in the butter and ran off to hide in the garden and consume our forbidden treat. By the time we reached our hiding place, the butter would have melted slightly. Every bite of warm crunchy bread packed with cool butter was a blissful experience I have never forgotten. Worth every moment of the scolding that inevitably followed.

The history of the baguette dates back to the early nineteenth century and offers insights into French culture and cuisine. Before then, French bread was usually baked as a round loaf made with sourdough. But the shape made it awkward to store and transport, so bakers experimented and came up with the long, thin loaf we know today. They came to understand that a longer, thinner loaf created a greater crust-to-crumb ratio, which yielded a tastier, more satisfying product. These innovations contributed to the nationwide popularity of the baguette in the 1930s, and it came to epitomize the French Resistance during the Second World War. Hampered by food shortages and rationing, bakers were sometimes forced to use inferior ingredients, but they kept making baguettes that—like fish & chips for the British—were a symbol of French cultural identity that provided comfort during the Nazi occupation.

In the late 1960s I was driving across France, on my way from Madrid to London. The back seats in my trusty Renault 4 folded down to make a comfortable space where I planned to sleep when the time came. At the end of the first day, already deep in the French countryside, I pulled off the road into a field and parked. There was no one around and there were no buildings in sight. At my last stop a few miles back I had picked up a *jambon beurre*, a baguette stuffed with ham and butter, and a bottle of red wine. As the sun went down, I enjoyed my simple dinner while sitting on the ground with my back against a tree. I then slept soundly until I was awakened by an odd movement: my car was swaying gently back and forth. The windows were steamed up, so I wiped them and peered out. It was barely light, and I could just see about a dozen cows grazing in the field around me. One of them was standing right beside me, and as she moved her head from side to side her body leaned against my car, causing the swaying motion that had roused me from my slumber. I started the engine and slipped away. Not far down the road I came to a village with an open café. I ordered a large cup of *café au lait* and noticed that a batch of freshly baked baguettes had just been delivered. I bought one and broke off little chunks. As I dipped each crusty piece in my coffee, I was filled with a profound sense of appreciation for *la baguette*, the daily bread that France has given us for so long.