



Sidonie Gabrielle Colette
Colettes kitchen delights

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E-book

A HAPPY CHILHOOD

'I was born in a country village where recipes that I've not been able to find in any cookery codex, were conserved like secret recipes of some special perfume or a miracle ointment' – Colette writes in *Prisons et paradis* – 'the dearly loved child of not very well-off parents', who lived in the country among trees and books and who 'never knew nor desired expensive toys'. The village was Saint-Sauveur in the department of Yonne, two and a half hours' drive south from Paris. It was not the rich and prosperous wine-producing area of Burgundy, but a more modest and ordinary area of the region, unpretentious villages of country folk where the succession of the seasons marked the passing of time. Colette's mother, Adèle Sidonie Landoy, known as Sido, grew up in Belgium, but returned to Yonne, the scene of her earliest childhood, to marry the landowner Jules Robineau-Duclos, many years her senior. For him she abandoned her own milieu, 'the warm Belgian house, the basement kitchen with its smell of gas, warm bread, coffee . . .', the piano and violin lessons. As a young bride she entered the large house 'surrounded by the harsh winter of foreign lands'. He was a violent type, a heavy drinker, whose company was the *dive bouteille*. Nevertheless, Sido did not lose heart. She had the dark kitchen whitewashed. This kitchen, together with the refectories, the stables, the garages, the hen-house and the wash-house, was part of the *communs*, the outbuildings annexed to the main house. Here, in this kitchen she put her excellent culinary skills to good use. Armed with a churn, she made butter, pressed cheeses, supervised the preparation of dishes, many of which were Flemish, indulged her whims in jam-making and in the bottling of preserves, made pastry for cakes and sweets with raisins. Once having exhausted her stock of delicious recipes, polished the floors to perfection, taken care of the kitchen garden and watered the garden, she was overcome with the sadness of her isolation and wept. Her husband, seeking to make amends for his brutality and his long absences, made her a present of a small marble mortar which, dull and chipped, would become part of Colette's set of kitchenware at the Palais Royal, and in which Sido mixed peeled almonds with sugar and lemon-peel.

Two children were born of this marriage: Juliette – later described by Colette as 'enigmatic, solitary, with an oddly shaped head, of an attractive ugliness, high cheek bones and a sarcastic mouth' – and Achilles. After eight years of marriage, Sido's husband, whose own family had long since tried to have him declared legally incompetent and deprive him of his civil rights, died. On December 20th, 1865, Sido married Captain Colette, with whom she already had an affair while her first husband was still alive. Born in Toulon in 1829, son of a naval officer, Jules Colette attended the military academy of Saint-Cyr. Assigned to the Zouaves – French soldiers dressed like Arabs – at the age of 26 he was promoted to Captain and, when Napoleon III

entered Italy in support of the Piedmontese against the Austrians, he followed him. In the bloody battle of Melegnano he lost a leg. While being carried off the battle field, he continued to joke and when Napoleon III visited the hospital and asked about the wound, he replied that it was nothing, a mere scratch. He refused medals and, when the Emperor enquired whether there was anything else he would like, he replied: 'Well, yes . . . a crutch, Your Majesty'. There is an episode linked to food, which occurred in the Crimea – Colette tells us in her book *Les heures longues* – that the Captain was always eager to recall.

'One evening, at *frichti*¹ time . . . Oh, we were well supplied with tobacco and also with the means to light a fire, even though we had nothing to cook on one. My batman brings me some salad, I should say fodder, since we'd been without oil and vinegar for two months. "You fool – I say – you've forgotten to dress the salad!" "But, lieutenant sir, you know very well that oil and vinegar are only to be found in Canrobert's tent." "Very well, then what's keeping you from taking this salad to Canrobert? Off with you! And mind you dress it with care, otherwise you'll hear about it!" We all had a good laugh, then I light a cigarette and forget about it. An hour later, who should I see arriving? That idiot of my batman, bearing, as if it were the Holy Sacrament, the bowl of salad dressed with oil, vinegar, salt and pepper . . . I shout "What's that?" "Lieutenant sir, it's your salad." "What salad?" "Canrobert's. I've been to his tent, as you told me to. I told him that my lieutenant had ordered that a well-dressed salad was to be prepared for him." "So? What did he say?" "He didn't say anything, He dressed the salad. And now I'm bringing it back to you, lieutenant sir." Just the time to put on my number one uniform, which consisted of throwing off the blanket and wiping the snow off my backside, and I dashed over to Canrobert. He looked at me with knitted eyebrows, without a word. I managed to stammer:

"I . . . I'm . . . now . . . the salad . . .". He didn't say a word, he just looked at me. Eventually: "Ah! Ah! You are the salad man? So tell me, was it good, my salad?" "I . . . my apologies . . ." "You can go, lieutenant. And most of all, tell people that I prepare a good salad. I set great store by my reputation as a cook."

After ten months of marriage, Léopold is born, the smaller of the two 'light-footed savages, bony, with no superfluous flesh, frugal like their parents, preferring rough bread, hard cheese, salad, fresh eggs and leek or pumpkin pie to meat, simple and virtuous folk'. On January 28th 1873, after three days and two nights of labour pains, at 10 o'clock in the evening, Gabrielle Sidonie is born. 'Babies carried so high and slow to come down to the light, are especially dear because they have chosen to settle close to their mother's heart and only leave with regret . . .' Sido will tell her, for whom she will always be Minet-Chéri. Her father, though, calls her Bel-Gazou, which in the Provence dialect means 'good tongue'. Her room is the old doorkeeper's lodge over the carriage entrance, but Gabrielle spends most of her time in the kitchen, where her wet nurse, Mélie, tells her scary stories that make her shudder. She watches her nurse arranging the braised meat in the pan and filling the big concave lid with burning wood or putting a chicken prepared with herbs on the spit in the fireplace and

¹ *Frichti* comes from the German for 'breakfast' and is an Alsatian colloquial form of it (Alsace and Lorraine have alternately been part of France and of Germany for centuries). In military *argot*, though, the word was used to refer to a scanty meal.

thus learns the cardinal rules of traditional cooking. With her nurse, she goes to the baker's to take the cheese gratin to be put in the oven after the day's bread has been baked. The other dishes are baked in the home oven instead, that 'old, antique, country oven, wrought under the blows of a hammer, (that) received patiently prepared stews, the 'osso bucos' that kept all their size and their juices' described in *Prisons et paradis*.

When she succeeds in climbing up onto the wall separating the garden from the courtyard and reaches its flagged top edge, as wide as a pavement, shaded by the lilacs, she decorates it with coloured glass and smooth stones. This place becomes her inaccessible nest, like that of the thieving magpie. On Sunday afternoons she plays at 'when I grow up . . .' with the village children, who are lacking in imagination and only know how to ape her. Their answers are trivial, obvious. 'A kind of resigned wisdom, fear of adventure, of the unknown, hold back the daughters of the greengrocer, the watchmaker, the butcher and the ironer, prisoners in their parents' shops . . .'. Gabrielle, on the contrary, declares: 'I shall be a sailor and on my voyages . . .'. On her plaits, that skim the ground and over which she occasionally trips, she dreams of wearing the beret and blue trousers of a sailor's uniform and to serve on a vessel that ploughs the high seas undaunted, bound for treasure island, where bright shining fruit ripen.

At the age of eight she accompanies her father on his election campaign. The Captain has decided to go into politics with the praiseworthy electoral agenda of public education, to spread knowledge of literature, natural history, physics and chemistry. To this end he takes with him his microscopes and illustrated posters and ends his meetings by inviting everyone to the local tavern to drink mulled wine with cinnamon. On the advice of the innkeeper – a drop of wine can't but do her good – Bel-Gazou drains a glass of that warm and perfumed nectar, toasting '*à la santé*'. Then she puts her empty glass noisily on the table and, with the back of her hand, wipes the moustache left by the Burgundy from her mouth. Satisfied, she adds that '*Ça fait du bien par où se passe!*'. Unfortunately, when her breath betrays the reason for her evening gaiety, Sido forbids Gabrielle to go out with her father again and he decides to put an end to his venture into politics, something which has already cost him the sale of a house to cover his expenses. Abandoning the role of 'advertising agent' for her father, Gabrielle takes on the role of escort for her brother Achille, on his rounds as doctor. She does not attend his first operation – the patient is a well digger with a leg reduced to a pulp by dynamite – but she sees many others and learns the profession. She appears to want to choose the medical profession herself – she has already learnt how to sew cleft lips – but a different destiny awaits her.

The Colette family nucleus includes a long silky-haired tawny dog, which to wash Sido wreathes herself in a large blue-coloured apron, and also a whole tribe of cats. Babou, the vegetarian cat, loves strawberries, asparagus tips and *noir-de-Carmes* melons. The cat called Nanouche knows by the smell when it is time to go and lick the milk froth around the edge of the bucket when the cows have just been milked. The stray pussy-cats, greedy for raw meat, run at the crackling sound of the butcher's wrapping paper, the other cats are greedy for oysters and snails. Then there is also a spider, who each night leaves the ceiling of Sido's bedroom where he lives, in order to come down and drink the chocolate from her cup. It is a simple but magical world.

The slate-roofed house in rue de l'Hospice – today re-named rue Colette – is dark and graceless and looks 'vaguely sinister'. There's an old prison style bolt on the main entrance door and the bell has the ring of an orphanage. Only 'on the garden side does the house wear a smile'. In the kitchen garden 'du Bas', surrounded by stone walls warmed by the sun, there are carrots, lettuce, tarragon, garden sorrel, aubergines, hot pepper and garlic. In summer the smell of the tomato plants blends with that of the ripe apricots. In this tiny earthly paradise there's also an orchard where there are *reines-claude*s plums 'one day green under a dusting of silver, the next with amber-coloured cheeks', tart-tasting peaches, pink pulpy cherries torn to shreds by a blackbird, sorb-apples and *Messire-Jean* pears. It is here that Gabrielle learns the everyday names of the plants and the fruit: the lacquer red cherries with their clear, somewhat acid flesh are the *montmorency*, the curvy-shaped peaches are the *tétons-de-Venus*, the early summer light-coloured strawberries are the *belles-de-juin*, the later ones, juicy and thin-skinned, the *liégeuses-Haquin*. The kitchen gardens, the flower gardens, the courtyards with the pergolas and the espaliered grape vines, separated by a dividing wall, give a certain tone to the village. In the summer months the days are spent here and the washing is done here outside. The children pull out the salad hearts and devour them, pull up the baby carrots and eat them 'spattered with soil', they take the broad beans out of their pods and they shell the sweet young peas and squash them under their teeth with a cracking sound, before going to perch on the sides of the hay wagons parked beneath the shelters. Gabrielle, seated astride the forked bough of the big walnut tree, reads Balzac and listens to the next-door neighbour, Miton, talking to the white-haired dog, whose head is painted red and his behind blue on July 14th, and mother Adolphe, who sings while tying bunches of violets for the church altar. She learned to read when only three and since then has never stopped. At the age of seven she tackles Victor Hugo, Prosper Mérimée, Alphonse Daudet and the *Comédie Humaine*.

The surrounding countryside is made of hills, valleys, meadows, fields, but mostly woods. 'Thick and growing rapidly, they spread in gentle waves as far as the eye can see' and they are an invitation to go wandering. Sometimes, she goes to the woods at dawn, to 'play at being an elf'. She feels an inexpressible state of grace, a 'connivance with the rush of the first breath of air, the first bird, the still oval sun . . .'. Her legs and arms are scratched by the brambles while she gathers armfuls of wild pinks, corn-flowers, chickweed, eats sour cherries and gooseberries, drops down into the ravines where wild garlic flowers, reaches the marshes where mint grows luxuriantly. The smell on her clothes betrays her escapade and her mother is anxious. She reaches a pine wood growing on an island in the middle of a pond and there she lights a fire and cooks an apple, pear or potato stolen from a field and eats them, tasting of smoke and resin. Then she lies down on the ground, feeling 'almost in coma' from her sense of well-being and the desire to do nothing . . .'. In the summertime, wasps and flies are busy sucking nectar from lime flowers and the honeysuckle and 'they make the whole forest hum like an organ. At midday the birds no longer sing, they perch on the branches looking for shade, smooth their feathers and with bright eyes that jump about sit quite still and observe the underwood . . .'. The copses abound in wild strawberries and lilies of the valley, but also snakes, both poisonous and not, that every so often

scare her. The woods of tall straight trees like columns, almost dark at midday, are home to roe deer, pheasants, wild boar and rabbits. Once, while gathering the little oily beech-nuts that pinch the throat and make you cough, she hears a wolf howling. In autumn she goes round knocking down the sweet chestnuts, gathering wild pears, crunching the kernels of walnuts, hoarding sorb-apples, chestnuts and mushrooms. She feels like the 'queen of the world', a sturdy queen, with the high square forehead of a boy, hands full of scratches, a rough voice, braids that almost touch the ground and lash around her like whips when she runs. She has a passionate taste for all she breathes in the open air far from mankind: the trees, the flowers, the animals 'timid and sweet', the water 'stealthy from useless springs . . .', the mushrooms which grow from midnight to dawn and which she 'hears' coming up out of the ground pushing aside the leaves. At home, she boils the chestnuts and crushes them in a handkerchief with sugar so as to make *galettes*.

In winter, 'as soon as the first frost laid down a thin pane of glass on the surface of the water in the buckets, near the pump, I went out to gather the withered sloes that mummy put in some good quality alcohol to infuse' she narrates in *Journal à rebours*.

In *Prisons et paradis*, in the chapter dedicated to child welfare, she describes her snacks, advising them to young mothers for their children.

'A slice of wholemeal bread, the length of a foot, freshly sliced off a 6 kilogram loaf, the crust removed, crushed and crumbled like bran on a well-scraped wooden table, then plunged into fresh milk; a large white cucumber left to macerate in vinegar for three days and a cubic decimetre of pink bacon fat without the lean; a mug of strong cider, drawn from the narrow tube of the barrel . . . What do you think of this menu? It's the menu of one of my snacks as a child. Would you like another?

A crust of bread, warm and sprinkled with flour, the soft part removed, spread inside with butter and raspberry jelly; half a litre of sweet milk curd, quivering, drunk straight from the jar; a bowl of white strawberries.

Third menu: a slice of wholemeal bread, the length of a foot etc. (see above), made thicker by about an inch layer of cold red beans, with a sauce of curdled wine; a small basketful of gooseberries.

Fourth menu, for the winter and autumn: mushrooms gathered wet in the woods and sautéed in butter for a few minutes; some boiled chestnuts and an apple. The chestnuts can be replaced by pork cracklings.

Would you like a menu for the snacks of July and August? Here it is: large mouthfuls of warm bread (crust only) dipped in the froth of a jam, strawberry, cherry, apricot, jam of any fruit in season!'

Other times, the bread is spread with 'cornelian cherry, small scarlet red fruit, good for jams', as she tells us in *La fleur de l'age*. Or instead Mélie prepares a delicious *flognarde* for her, accompanied by a red jam or puts apples to cook under the embers. In autumn, without letting her mother know, Gabrielle drinks the walnut oil the farm hands who work on Colette's farms bring, straight from the bottle.

Not yet six years old, she starts school, in a black pinafore and little button-up boots. The school building is old and crumbling and the two classrooms indescribably ugly and dirty. The pupils take it in turns to arrive before school starts in order to chop the wood, bring the logs in to the classroom and light a fire.

Every child has with him a foot-warmer full of coal and ash which he puts under his feet and on top of which he also rests the potatoes, chestnuts and apples to be eaten during the break. The smoke and carbon monoxide are slightly suffocating *and make the children sluggish and often sleepy. But not Gabrielle who, like the main character in *Claudine à l'école*, is rather unruly: 'I feel a sort of repressed unruliness boiling up inside me . . .'. She is good at French and music and undisputed ringleader. As soon as she can, she drags her school friends off to play marbles and to climb trees. When it snows, she gets permission to leave a bit earlier. She makes snowballs from the soft fresh snow and devours them by the biteful. 'It's good, it tastes of dust a bit' she says. In springtime, she eats the buds from the lime trees, rubbery with a smell of resin. 'At the beginning of March is the time, there's nothing better' she declares.

She adores all ceremonies, religious and civil, weddings, first communions, traditional feast days, anniversaries marked by a particular flower, cake or symbolic object such as Easter eggs.

'The period and the region were both frugal – she writes in *Ces dames anciennes* – and infringements were permitted only when there were big wedding celebrations, baptism or first communion luncheons. On these occasions massacres of small game were committed. As for me, I have always remained loyal to a simple soup of milk and sugar, salt and pepper, a knob of fresh butter and slices of toasted bread thrown into the soup-tureen just before serving'.

Nevertheless, the occasional food excesses partly offset the day-to-day frugality and make it easier to face. At wedding breakfasts, folk gorge themselves with hen *au blanc*, stewed rabbit or hare. To help digestion, between one dish and another they soak a sugar lump in the wine, which they then drink before going back to eating their fill.

'Where do I get this raging taste for country wedding banquets from? Which of my ancestors has handed down to me, through such frugal parents, this kind of religion of sautéed rabbit, a leg with garlic, eggs soft-boiled in red wine, served in the barn (on tables) covered with rough cloth sheets resplendent with the red rose of June that has been pinned there?' the heroine of *La maison de Claudine* asks herself.

Weddings last several days. The celebrations begin with the *trempeée* to the health of the bride and groom, during which the glasses of the guests, who line up before the newly-married couple to give their good wishes, are filled, clinked, emptied. They continue with the parade of stewed dishes, jugged hare, leg stewed with garlic, eggs poached in red wine. The men challenge one other to drink a bucket of white wine and to gobble up a whole leg of mutton, then they dance till dawn. Gabrielle gets a sensual pleasure from these wild gigantic parties with their exorbitant gastronomy. She would not miss one for all the world.

'The menu was quite simple but really good. However, between the pike in *mousseline* sauce and the dessert – ramparts of Savoy finger biscuits, a 'torrone' (kind of nougat cake) topped by a quivering candy floss rose – my memory is a blank. Because, thanks to a taste of champagne, I suddenly fell into a deep sleep, that sudden sleep that, at table, overcomes exhausted children' she writes in *Noces*.

On Palm Sundays, which once marked the return of Spring, the people of Saint-Sauveur take a cake in the shape of a ring, a *gateau cornu*, to the church to have it

blessed. The cake of the poorer people is made with a bread pastry, that of the richer one is a brioche, but both have three or six horns, intended to ward off the Devil and to remove temptations.

'Yesterday and the day before – Sido writes to her daughter from Châtillon – was St. John's day, but here it's not like Saint-Sauveur, where we celebrate by eating various types of *galettes* for eight days. Do you remember? And the cheese *galette*? The Palm Sunday one was delicious and I've never eaten anything similar since we left Saint-Sauveur'. The tradition of the *galette* with fresh cheese, cream, butter and eggs is kept up still today at Saint-Sauveur. The cheese used is called 'fras' – from the Latin *fractus* – which in the local dialect means a savoury pie made with flour, eggs and butter and filled with cheese, spinach, potatoes or pumpkin. It is the Burgundian equivalent of the *quiche lorraine*, without the lard and ham. 'Her arms looking as though sleeved in white cloth told us that she had just prepared the pastry for the *galette*' Colette writes of her mother intent upon kneading the dough for one of the foods that she herself will pursue throughout her life. Her preference for cheese-based dishes – she has always criticised the Parisians' preference for meat – is also due to her weakness for this food.

'A plate of white cheese, well-peppered, makes a meal for me just as much as a pumpkin pie or leeks au gratin. A crushed tomato, a large onion, stuffed with fat or lean are a match for any rare chop' she reveals in her book *De ma fenêtre*. Other times, the flavour of some simple food like the red beetroot, salted, peppered, sprinkled with oil and vinegar, can be improved if you rest it on the hot embers on which a truffle has first been put . . .

'The red beetroot can draw benefit from the warm perfumed bed of the truffle. Sprinkle it with olive oil, salt it just slightly, pepper it and accompany it with a white celery. And the vinegar? Use it, if you must, but use wine vinegar, which is sweet' she advises in *Prisons et paradis*.

'There's nothing for supper this evening . . . What can we have?' Sido asks the family what they would like, knowing already that no-one will offer her a useful suggestion. The Captain chooses raw aubergines and tomatoes with plenty of pepper, half a glass of wine and coffee with lots of sugar, her son, Léo, - who throughout his life will eat only small fancy cakes, syrups and fondant – wants a fruit brioche to dip in a large bowl of hot chocolate, Achille wants marinated red cabbage, Gabrielle asks for a milk soup, seasoned with sugar, salt, pepper, a knob of fresh butter and two 'rafts' of toasted bread thrown into the soup just before serving. This doesn't seem like a real meal to her mother and so, on her own initiative, she adds some slices of shoulder of mutton *en musette*, - the name comes from that for the nosebag of fodder of the same shape that was hung on a horse's head – cooked slowly on a corner of the big stove or some *rouelle de veau aux carottes et aux girolles*, stew of mutton or veal with carrots and gallinacean, left to deposit its juices in the black cast iron pan, in which two sugar lumps have been thrown to attenuate the acidity of the sauce and render the meat tender and oily. It is one of the tricks that 'were handed down by word of mouth at solemn celebrations, such as the baptism of a first-born or a confirmation. They escaped from lips unlocked by the wine during wedding banquets: it was in this way that my mother learned how to cook a *boule* of hen's meat, the egg-shaped bullet sewn

up in the skin of the boned hen'. How can we now retrieve again 'the secret of that *boule*, with the large round slices in which the black eye of the truffle and the green seed of the pistachio shone?' she wonders in *Prisons et paradis*.

The family supper sometimes ends with apple jam, left to caramelize in a clay pot, having a special flavour that the writer will search for in vain for the rest of her life. But then many of the culinary stratagems passed on to her readers by Colette were learned from her mother. Among these, there is also the secret of the perfect cooking of an *entrecôte Bercy*, cited in a dialogue in *Chambre d'hôtel*.

' - Her cooking is top quality. Mushrooms in *poulette* sauce, *entrecôte Bercy* . . . - '.

'In order to cook the *entrecôte* well "a thick-bottomed frying pan is needed, of a good sized diameter, to be kept for this use: place it on pure dry gas. When the pan base is red-hot, throw in your chop, your steak and they will let out loud shrieks. They will instantly darken and form a thin outer crust that holds in the blood. If they begin to stick to the bottom of the pan, pass a slice or the prongs of a fork under them. But only turn the meat once' she suggests in *Marie-Claire*. All that remains is to salt, pepper and serve with butter.

Sido is a follower of Charles Fourier and applies his rules of life in the kitchen, too. She does not make her children eat what they don't want to, she respects their tastes, which she takes steps to form from early infancy, according to the principles of gastrosophy. They must learn to 'read a dish', to pick out the ingredients. The look and the colour must please the eye, the crackle of fried food or biscuits should caress one's ear, the aromatic herbs should excite the nose . . . Fourier advises five meals a day, light and varied, based on fruit, vegetables and white meat rather than red. And although it is important not to take the pleasure out of eating, given that it plays an important healing role, one should exercise moderation and rationality in the use of dishes chosen to satisfy one's greed impulse.

Prayers are not said in the Colette household and not even Christmas is celebrated, even though Sido goes to Mass taking the dog with her, who, to the dismay of the parish priest, growls when the moment comes for the elevation of the Host. Sido also has her daughter baptised and allows her to attend catechism and have her First Communion.

'It will seem strange to you that my childhood Christmases were without a Christmas tree, without the candied fruit hung there and the fairy lights. But don't be too sorry for me. The night of December 24th was for us in any case, in our own silent way, a celebration . . . We did not have black pudding nor a white one, there was no turkey stuffed with chestnuts but just the chestnuts, boiled and roasted, and Sido's masterpiece, her white pudding spiked with three kinds of raisins – Smirne, Malaga, Corinthian – stuffed with candied melon, thin layers of citron and little cubes of orange.

Seeing that we did not recognise the traditional Christmas Eve, our party went on longer into the tranquil vigil, with the hum of spread out papers, the turned pages, the fire onto which we threw some small green wooden boards and a handful of salt, that crackled and burnt on the embers . . .

Nothing more? No, nothing. None of us wanted more and no-one complained about having too little', the writer recalls in her book *De ma fenêtre*.

After having spent the evening in silence, reading and playing dominoes, when the chimes of the white marble pendulum-clock announced midnight, the pudding made its appearance on the table, preceded by the sweet smell of the boiling rum sauce covering it. With it the adults took a glass of white *frontignan* wine or a small glass of Cassis (a blackcurrant liqueur) specially prepared for the occasion. (Colette will write later that the staggering of the drunken hens, 'hesitant, chirping and striking up guardsmen's tunes', to whom Sido used to throw the remains of the pressed fruit soaked in alcohol, were a sight to be seen). The children drink a cup of China tea, permitted only on this occasion since it keeps them awake. At New Year presents are given, these, too, are very simple: a dozen oranges, a handful of dates or exotic fruit, 'soaked in faraway suns', bought in Auxerre, where Sido goes every six months to buy spices, tea, sugar loaf, jams, chocolate, cinnamon, vanilla, nutmeg, raisins, candied fruit, rum, black pepper and olives. The giving of gifts takes place after the ceremonial distribution of bread to the poor. This is a moment Gabrielle looks forward to all year. When, at dawn, the *garde champêtre* announces the arrival of the new year, she jumps out of bed with tears of impatience and is off to see the baker who deposits mountains of bread outside their entrance. Together with her brothers, she hands it out to the poor and the tramps who ring their doorbell. When the queue of the needy dies down, she licks the flour on the crust of the large round loaves.

In 1890 the Colette family moves out of Saint-Sauveur. The wrench is dramatic. On June 15th the furniture is sent to auction and to the best bidder go the beds, the wardrobes, the mirrors, the chandeliers, the pictures, the art objects, the works of Voltaire, Goethe, Schiller bound in leather and with gilt decoration. Gabrielle saves her adored Balzac, but suffers on seeing the objects of their private life displayed in public. The family goes to live in Chatillon-Coligny, in the department of Loiret, where their son has his practice as a doctor.

Nostalgia for her childhood will lead the authoress to transform the village of her birth into myth. She will return frequently with her memory, hardly ever in reality.

'I know, the house and the garden live on, but what does it matter if the magic has left them, if the secret has been lost – light, smells, harmony of the trees and birds, murmur of human voices suspended from death – that opened up a world I am no longer worthy of?' she writes in *Sido*. There's no sense in returning. The house of my birth has lost its meaning for ever.

A GOURMAND'S LIFE

Backstage at the Music Hall

Novels, essays, articles, theatrical adaptations, film dialogues, lectures, even the text of a ballet, *The child and the sorcery*, with music by Ravel . . . Colette writes all kinds. Her mother gives her a lecture: 'Being asked to write articles is flattering, but it takes up your time and occupies your imagination. It's a waste of talent, which could be used for something more ambitious'. But there is a pressing need for money. 'I have to eat though!' she replies. The books do not bring in much money and, in any case, it is her husband, Willy, who has the monopoly on them. So Gabrielle decides to take up an activity which her mother disapproves of even more: the stage. 'If I can't make enough to live on with my best-sellers, then I'll do it with stage shows!' she declares. The earnings are immediate and substantial, sometimes the net takings are a thousand francs an evening. 'Good heavens, what a lot of money!' is Sido's reaction.

On February 6th 1906, in the pantomime *Desire, Love and the Chimera*, she plays the part of a faun and, straight after, in *Gipsy*, she turns herself into a gipsy. She is nude beneath the rags and the critics are quick to point out that it is morbid curiosity that brings the audiences in. The following year her role is even more daring. In the pantomime *The Flesh*, she remains with one breast bare after a fight with her lover. It's a scandal and a success. It goes on tour to Avignon, Marseilles, Toulon, Nîmes, Bordeaux, Rennes, Brussels . . . She feels stunned, exhausted, but happy at the same time. 'After all – she says – dancing nude or laying yourself bare in a novel is not that different'. A niece, seeing her photo in a magazine, remarks: 'But you can see absolutely all of Aunt Colette!'. Sido is lost for words.

In 1909 she produces and stars in her own play about open couples, *En Camarades*. It receives poor reviews: the voice is not melodious, the recital is unnatural, the acting stiff, the face lacks expression. To console her, her friend Missy, whose eating habits are somewhat eccentric, eating neither eggs, nor fish, nor pork, nor tomatoes, nor cheese, nor sweets and often confining herself to nibbling at the white rib of the lettuce and the lower part of the chicken legs, takes Colette out to dine *Chez Palmyre*. 'She lavishes motherly care on us, she gives us gifts, she gives us fruit and has small beef steaks cooked for Missy', Colette writes about the owner of the premises, a meeting place for homosexuals, 'long-haired men and short-haired girls'. The character of this female inn-keeper, friend of Toulouse-Lautrec, and the

description of the inn occur again and again in the book *Backstage at the Music Hall*.

'It's ten o'clock. They've smoked so much in the Semiramide bar this evening that my apple jam tastes vaguely of *Maryland* . . .

Semiramide is cooking a tremendous pot of boiled meat that will be the base of the Sunday menu.

- Fifteen kilos of beef, my dear, and the chitterlings of six chickens! That will be enough, won't it? At lunch I'll serve it as a starting dish, at dinner with a side salad. Then, we'll have consommé ad nauseam'.

While she eats, the writer watches the unemployed actresses and the revellers of the neighbourhood dancing. 'So what? I find it more beautiful than a ballet' she says.

In the pantomime *Pan*, Colette, who has never been afraid to show herself in scanty costumes and to do things that are not done in respectable theatres, wears an even shorter skirt than usual, but it is in the sketch *Rêve d'Égypte* (*Dream of Egypt*) that the scandal explodes. The writer plays the part of a mummy gradually unwound from its bandages by Missy. Explicit allusions to lesbianism shock and exasperate the audience who cause such a commotion that the police intervene. The manager cancels further performances and the show is shut down.

Also the 'behind the scenes', the interminable rehearsals, the hasty meals in squalid station cafés, come together in the book *Backstage at the Music Hall*, in which some chapters are about her fellow actors and actresses in revues.

'Those who are in a hurry and have to come back here by eight, don't go very far away. A veal stew, looking pale on a bed of spinach, or a slice of fish of doubtful freshness, awaits them at the inn on the corner . . . '.

The actor Gonzalez lives in poverty and is perpetually hungry, but he hides the situation, not wanting to lose dignity, and with some excuse he takes himself off when the others go to eat.

'At Tarascon he disappeared while we tucked in to the lard omelette, the lukewarm veal and the horrendous chicken, returning as they served us coffee tasting of acorns . . . '.

Colette takes pity on him.

'At Lourdes station I buy two dozen small hot sausages: - Come on, people, don't let them get cold! Quick, Gonzalez, before they take them away from under your nose. Take these two before Hautefeuille grabs them, he's fat enough already! -'

A young actress, nicknamed Scrap, prefers to diet.

'The mere thought of a meal makes her feel sick. I can see her now sitting at a pavement table with a serving of lukewarm veal before her, which she doesn't even touch . . . There were peas, too, smelling of damp dog . . . '.

The theatre world she frequents offers an opportunity to meet Carolina Otero, known as *La Belle Otero*, star of the Folies-Bergères, who invites her to one of her female dinners, unfailingly preceded by a game of bezique.

'The true gourmand feast – the writer declares in her book *My Apprenticeship* – is not dinner with starters, first courses, a roast. On this point Mrs Otero and I were in perfect agreement. A *puchero*, with beef, a trotter, bacon fat, boiled hen, *longanizas*,

² *Maryland* is a type of tobacco, grown in the state of the same name in The United States.

chorizos, vegetables, a heap of *garbanzos* and of corn on the cob, now here's a dish for those who love food . . . I have always been fond of eating, but my appetite was nothing compared to Lina's. Her majesty melted, replaced with an expression of sheer sensual pleasure and innocence. The splendour of her teeth, her eyes, her shiny mouth was that of a young girl. Beauties who can stuff themselves without loss of their beauty are rare!'. The *gourmande* has found someone who eats more than she does. The *puchero*, which is rather like our mixed boiled meat dish with vegetables, with the addition of *longanizas*, large black sausages, *chorizos*, these, too, pork cold cuts, and *garbanzos*, chick peas, that is, is truly a dish for large appetites.

At the age of 35, Colette plays the part of *Claudine* on stage. 'A difficult role – her mother says – but since you are also the authoress you're in a position to play it '. For the occasion, Latinville invents the Claudine ice-cream and a pastry-cook and confectioner in Rue du Bac creates a Claudine cake. When friends come to see her, Colette offers them a leg of lamb '*de onze heures*', where the number does not indicate the time of the invitation to eat it, but the cooking time. 'It is so very tender that you can eat it with a spoon' she says, contentedly. One day she confides her dearest wish to her friend Marguerite Moreno: to be able to eat her fill. Food is truly the leitmotif of her life. Meal times, essential and never to be given up even on the most varied occasions, are a fixture in her everyday life, never changing, even when days are taken up with writing, mime shows, family duties and social duties. Simple food, like that outlined in *A porté de la main*.

'Gourmandise is more modest, but also more profound. Basically, one has to make do with little. This morning, for example, I received airmail from the country . .

- I can feel my mouth watering already! -

- No, it is certainly not what you think, the gluttony of which I speak has its roots in country living. It's about a twelve pound loaf of wholemeal bread, with a thick crust and the soft inner part the colour of grey linen, compact, homogeneous, smelling of fresh rye, and a roll of butter made the previous evening which exudes buttermilk under the blade of the knife, a perishable butter, not churned but pressed by hand, rancid after two days, perfumed and short-lived like a flower, a luxury butter . . .

- What, a canapé of butter! -

- Sure, but perfect. -

And then the bacon fat, just as rustic, in which “ a great virtue resides, it harbours a special taste . . . “, also used to flavour soups. And the chestnuts, praised in the book *De ma fenêtre*.

'With their stupendous white flesh they are a providential complement to smaller meals!

Delicate bread brought by the cold season miserly with lentils and dried beans, you abound when all else becomes rare, when the earth withdraws into itself. Boiled chestnuts – in salted water – peeled, freed from their second skin and their little inserts, mashed into a homogeneous paste with castor sugar, pressed into little flat cakes with the aid of a fine cloth are a simple and healthy gift, a complete dessert when served with some red jam. A bit dry? No, because in the meantime you will have uncorked a bottle of sparkling cider or one of a fairly sweet white wine'.

At the end of March 1913, Colette, now forty and six months pregnant, stars in her last stage mime show, *The Night Bird*. Her fellow actors make a fuss of her and spoil her, they bring freshly filtered coffee to her dressing room, together with aerated bread, soft and light, bought specially for her. And when she wants a cold drink . . .

'I recall that, hindered by a pregnancy, I had become tired of the music-hall and I frequently went to spend pleasurable evenings in Musidora's dressing room. I had known Musidora since late childhood . . . In keeping with the star she was, she reigned in her dressing room papered in pink and white, furnished with an upholstered walnut divan and a wicker armchair. I was forgetting the most important piece of furniture: a large earthenware jar from the south containing that inoffensive drink called *frênette*, sparkling and always renewed, prepared by the woman who was her dresser. The wicker armchair, a large glass of cool *frênette* in my hand, were my prize as a privileged person,' she writes in *Nudité*.

But her physique is no longer compatible with the role of actress. So she changes direction and tackles new experiences in order to describe things that few readers are able to do. She boards an airship, goes up in a hot-air balloon . . . Nevertheless she does not forget her cuisine and she has her photograph taken at a laid table while slicing bread and preparing the anchovy paté. She goes to court to follow trials, 'launched into the ponderings of an amateur detective on the types of men who take the lives of their fellow men'. She analyses the psychology of the accused, reports the defenders point of view, describes the behaviour of the witnesses and the spectators. Between one article and another, she writes *Mitsou*, a love story between a variety actress and a young officer, published in May 1919. It is 'the Great War dressed up for the stage' she comments. Proust weeps reading the letter that the lieutenant writes to Mitsou before leaving for the front and the tale of their farewell at the restaurant. The letter that accompanies the dispatch of a copy of his latest novel, *Young Girls in Flower*, just published, contains the dedication: 'To Madame Colette, in the tender and enchanted memory of Mitsou'. These are the days between the armistice and the signing of the peace treaty.

Madame Willy

Colette had arrived in Paris in 1893, as Willy's wife, married at Châtillon on May 15th. Her husband's real name is Henry Gauthier-Villars and he belongs to the famous dynasty of publishers of scientific works. Unrepentant libertine and adorer of adolescents, he is the black sheep of a practising Catholic family respecting lent and the Friday fast. For their son they would like a marriage of convenience, an alliance of patrimonies. Colette is without a dowry and they do not attend the ceremony, a ceremony which takes place quietly. The wedding breakfast is simple, but *très bon*. In Paris they go to live in Willy's dusty dark bachelor flat, full of old newspapers, yellowed with age, files and pornographic postcards, at number 55, Quai des Grands-

Augustins. The only things that are new are the pots and pans, never used. In the morning, the two of them cross the Pont Neuf to go to a creamery where they have hot chocolate and a rather hard croissant. At lunchtime they eat in a brasserie, while evenings they are often to dinner at acquaintances' of Willy's.

Some months later, they move to 28, Rue Jacob. The kitchen is over the landing, the walls of the rooms are covered with thousands of diamond-shaped confetti, stuck there by the previous tenant. In the evenings, after the concerts or the theatre, Colette dozes swinging her legs, a lemon sorbet wakes her and brings her back to life. Sometimes, in the gloomy flat, where the stove remains lit from September to June, sadness overcomes her. To fight this, she devours huge quantities of bananas, 'like a monkey', as well as heaps of bonbons and other sweet things. Nevertheless, being used to the substantial food of Burgundy, her health declines and she develops a sickly complexion. It is only when she goes to visit Willy's family in the country, where she tucks in to large quantities of canapés with butter and of home-made jams, that she blossoms again. In her letters to Sido she makes no mention of her homesickness, instead she tells her only about the pleasures of Parisian life. She describes the animals owned by the eccentric characters she meets: green lizards, white mice that run along their owner's shoulders, dormice and snakes kept as pets. She tells her about a cart full of hens that overturns on a road in Montmartre. Hearing the shrill cries of the frightened creatures, she cries out: 'But this is Saint-Sauveur!' She falls ill. Her mother arrives to take care of her and buys her choice fruit and vegetables from the greengrocers in Rue de Buci: strawberries, hearts of lettuce, pink onions . . . And then she roasts a saddle of lamb for her. A friend brings her a chocolate Quillet bought from the cake shop of the same name, Léontine de Caillavet brings her pineapples and peaches. She convalesces in Brittany, at Belle-Isle-en-Mer, where she bathes in the sea, climbs on the rocks and feeds on fish, then at Champagnole, in the Jura, where she gets up at dawn to go gathering wild blackberries. At lunch and at dinner she eats freshly caught trout, crayfish, quail, hare and partridges bagged by poachers. She writes her first book in the *Claudine* series, which Willy consigns to the back of a drawer. It will be 'disinterred' when they move to 177a Rue de Courcelles, the apartment where the couple hold a salon every Wednesday afternoon. If the visitors arrive at the last minute they must trust to *la fortune du pot* and eat what there is. Colette is much appreciated as a country style hostess with a warm welcome. Her buffet has a wealth of *petit four*, *foie gras*, Beluga caviare, club sandwiches, strawberries and small dishes with ginger. The guests drink champagne and sip *jézabel*, alcoholic cocktails created and mixed according to the imagination of each drinker. And 'crouched oriental-style before the marble of the hearth' like *Claudine*, she melts chocolate on the flame with the aid of a square grill made of silver wires, and then lifts some 'thin layers' of it with the tip of a knife 'to prolong the exquisite taste of toasted almond and vanilla gratin'.

In *Claudine s'en va*, the main character receives an unexpected visit while she is intent on toasting chocolate. This does not stop her, however, from carrying on.

' - It was nearly cooked to the right point, I couldn't leave it, do you see? - She is holding a small square grill of silver wire, on which a bar of toasted chocolate is darkening and swelling (. . .)

- But this is not the best tool, you know, Renaud? They've made the handle too

short and I've got a blister on my hand, look! -

- Let me see. -

Her large husband bends down, tenderly kisses her delicate burnt hand, caressing her with his fingers and his lips, like a lover . . .

- It's healed, it's healed – Claudine cries clapping her hands. - We'll eat the grill, we two, Annie. - (. . .)

To please Claudine, I accept some pieces of toasted chocolate, which taste a bit of smoke and a great deal of praline.

- It's divine, isn't it? - '

At the end of the summer she goes to Bayreuth with her husband to listen to Wagner. In order to face the exhausting pace of the concerts, the exhibitions and the premières, she keeps her strength up with hot sausages and with the cream cakes she likes so much.

When she returns to Paris, she would like to escape for a while the round of society life in which she feels trapped. She is nostalgic for life in the provinces, the food eaten there, the freedom to come and go without having to account to anyone. In the spring she takes refuge in the Monts-Boucons estate, near Besançon, which Willy has just bought, where she re-designs the garden with small woods and areas of high ground, turning a cave into a place where she can be alone, and dealing with the aphids on the apple trees. She basks in the sun, eats her fill of violet centred peaches and cathartic cherries, she feeds on mashed potatoes with truffles, fruit cakes and soups of cherries in syrup, typical of the region. She lives for months in the solitude of a shepherdess, in perfect harmony with nature. For company she has the cats, the dogs, an old horse, the swallows, the grass snakes and five little birds of prey perched on the trees. She goes walking, fantasizes, re-lives her childhood going to meet the dawn as she did as a child. She writes the continuations of *Claudine*, for whom crayfish have the same evocative power as the *madeleines* do for Proust.

'A tiny groan of cupidity escapes me, kindled by the trail of perfume left by a plate of crayfish passing close by.

- Crayfish too! Here, here! How many? -

- How many? I have never known how many I can manage to eat. Twelve to begin with, then I'll see . . . - - Oh, crayfish! If only Renaud knew . . . At Montigny² they're very small, I myself used to go to get them with my hands at the Gué-Ricard, going into the water bare-footed . . . These are peppered perfectly. - '

When Willy comes, she prepares the *choucroute* and the mushrooms in cream, two of the *gros plats* that he loves and which make him put weight on. They eat large quantities of food even when they decide not to cook, as she writes in *Almanach de Paris An 2000*.

'The day when no cooking is done, a glass of milk here, a thin slice of ham there, soup of cherries in syrup with croutons of fried bread, then there's the left-over cheese to finish . . . It's just incredible how you can overindulge when you decide not to eat'.

where she was born and grew up.

² In the *Claudine* series, this is the name Colette gives the village masking Saint-Sauveur, the village where she was born and grew up.

Colette and Willy divorce in June, 1910, after years of separation. In her book *My Apprenticeship*, Colette will later take revenge on Willy for his unfaithfulness, even though it is thanks to him that she has made important friendships and has developed in herself the creative taste which was begun by Sido.

At 4.30 p.m. on December 19th in 1912, Colette marries the baron Henri de Jouvenel, nicknamed Sidi. The ceremony is brief, the celebrations less so. For a week the guests go from lunch to dinner and from dinner to lunch, until the Christmas Eve ball. 'We ended our week of revelry going to bed at seven in the morning'. The excesses cause Colette to suffer from enteritis. With some reluctance she goes on a diet. The newly-married couple go to live in a somewhat false and vulgar Swiss style chalet, at 57, Rue Cortambert. One day, a friend's daughter finds the writer busy preparing green beans to bottle. At Corrèze, at her husband's castle, she re-creates Sido's garden. 'You should see what state my hands and arms are in after pulling out the nettles and pruning the rose bushes! - she writes to a friend – Here there's no-one, only a thousand animals, plain food with garlic, beautiful countryside, silence . . . and butter which measures up to the very best in your region'. A daughter is born on July 3rd 1913. Her daughter's English governess is also a good cook and makes cognac meringues filled with cream for her. Her husband, a refined gourmet, organises gastronomic itineraries. She puts on weight, but doesn't care. 'We eat a lot and well' she writes to Sido, who thinks that her daughter has '*un peu trop de quoi s'asseoir*', a posterior which is a bit too fat.

There is an ever increasing number of social, editorial and journalistic engagements to cope with. Her work as a theatre critic means coming home at two in the morning and then dozing at her desk at the newspaper offices. When she wakes, she is ravenous and gulps down food like a monster. In 1921 her husband is elected senator. In a letter to Proust, who has sent her a copy of *Guermites* and another of *Sodom and Gomorrah*, Colette explains that she is late in replying because of her involvement in her husband's election campaign. When they move to Boulevard Suchet, Colette organises dinners for the guests, who sometimes number as many as eighty or more including the French President. She arranges the seating rather originally: on her right there's the most important guest, on her left is the doggy Pati-Pati, followed by the others. In *Belle Vue* Colette lists the dishes that she usually shares with the dog:

'We've had fish soup, Pati and I, creamy and generously strengthened with garlic, a substantial helping of roast pork with sage, flanked with apple and potatoes, some cheese, pear preserve flavoured with vanilla, dried almonds, a carafe of local rosé wine. I only hope that two weeks of a similar diet will have repaired the damage from two bouts of bronchitis'.

When she is not engaged in her duties or when she tires of playing the part of a good bourgeois lady, she calls Francis Carco, the artist and writer who certain days survives by stealing the bread and milk left outside the service entrance to the homes of the bourgeoisie. She goes around the neighbourhoods of ill repute with him, speaking to thieves and prostitutes, before having a glass of wine and something to eat in one of the bistros in Les Halles. Colette has an affair with her stepson, Bertrand. Her

husband does not approve, but for some years he goes on sharing the house and career with her, until, that is, the scandal explodes. By chance, they are all in Algeria at the time, where Colette crams her young lover with couscous and dates, as in *Chéri* – the book that almost leads her to a severing of relations with her editor, a break that is mended with the sending of a blue crystal goblet full of delicious chocolates – the middle-aged Léa crams the very much in love young boy with strawberries and coffee, the concierge's famous coffee.

'A certain *café au lait de concierge* that I mentioned in *Chéri* aroused a great deal of curiosity, I have left – as it were – unsatisfied. Once a doorkeeper gave me the recipe for a breakfast to dispel the shivers of winter mornings.

Take a small soup dish, one of those individual ones that you use for soups au gratin or a large fireproof porcelain bowl. Pour the sugared milky coffee into it. Prepare some good slices of bread – home-made bread, English bread is not suitable – spread them generously with butter and lay them on the coffee, taking care not to submerge them. It only remains to put all this in the oven. Take this wonderful breakfast out of the oven only when it is a good burnished colour and crispy, when it bursts into big oily bubbles.

Before breaking the layer of bread, sprinkle with a little salt. The salt gives a bite to the sugar. Lightly salted sugar is a rule which is ignored by Parisian pastry making and without a pinch of salt the pastry is rather tasteless'.

Henry files for divorce and Colette leaves for the South of France where she gives a series of lectures and some shows. The wonderful climate of the Riviera in Nice, the sea and the flowers give her some respite from her inner conflicts. 'I'm fighting sadness with a deliberate appetite, mostly addressed with seafood'. But food – delicious stuffed scorpion-fish, dishes dressed with garlic, thyme and olive oil, the rosé wine that accompanies the melon, the succulent peach – is not enough. She takes her mind off Boulevard Suchet because she knows that she will return to an empty house there.

Eating is the only way to forget the pain and to ward off bad luck. On returning home, she avoids the dining room, carefully closing it and taking her food to her room on a tray. 'It's the snack of women on their own' she says. She spends the summer in Brittany, at Rozven. 'The charm of the brick villa giving on to the deserted sand dunes does not strike you at first, you grow fond of it in time' she writes to her mother. She goes for a swim three times a day, fishes for crabs and shrimps. Occasionally she goes fishing even at night, with the full moon. She weeds the garden, digs out a flight of steps in the hill behind the house. Despite all the intense physical exercise she has by now reached a weight of eighty kilos, she is a large *triton*, whose flesh peeps out of the holes in her open-work costume. 'I look like a Gruyère cheese in mourning' she says. She acts the matriarch with the women writers who are her guests. 'The men come and go - she writes in her book *The Vagabond* – but two women immersed in each other do not even dream of separating, they are as one, they suffer as if one body only'.

She is concerned about her stepson, Bertrand, and his lack of appetite. It is outrageous that he's not hungry at breakfast, that he refuses the cold roast duck or the goose skin casserole that she offers him. In the afternoon, Colette goes to see the lobster pots and chooses some for the *court-bouillon* for their dinner. She likes to

devour them immersed in their stew with a basis of white wine and spices, and the addition of butter and parsley.

'From one side the fine cloud of vaporized rain at the sea's edge soaked us, cloaking our cheeks and hair in a veil of silver, while from the other the wind dried us. Only hunger drove us towards our large wooden house that smelled of ships. I climbed the stairs hurriedly, impatient to sniff the little lobsters in broth, the slices of tuna fish with shallots, as thick as those of veal; I skipped up the stairs leaving the prints of my bare feet, cool and damp like those of a savage', she tells us in *Retreat from Love*.

In May 1921, while at dinner at friends', she meets Maurice Goudeket, seventeen years her junior, 'twin to the Eiffel Tower'. Colette, 'short wavy hair, mischievous eyes, pointed face', is lying face down on the sofa. As soon as she sits down at table, she grabs an apple from the fruit basket and takes a bite, amused by the effect it has on her fellow guests. The impression Maurice has is that she overacts. When he pours her some wine, she throws him a glance of satisfaction. They meet again on the Côte d'Azur, then in his apartment in Paris, charming but cold. Other dinners follow, other evenings spent talking, with 'orgies of mineral water, oranges, grapefruit and cigarettes'. Colette lives in a small mezzanine flat of the Palais Royal that she calls the tunnel. One of her friends says that in such low-ceilinged rooms sole is the only food one can eat. On the plus side is the fact that no steps are needed to hang the curtains. When she begins to suffer from arthritis caused by the excessive dampness, the doctor tells her to leave. So she buys a house at Saint-Tropez and moves into two small rooms on the sixth floor of the Claridge Hotel on the Champs Elysées. In the wall-cupboard, turned into a kitchenette, she prepares simple dishes with the vegetables that arrive from her kitchen garden on the Côte d'Azur. For dessert, she eats chocolate éclairs. More elaborate dishes arrive from the restaurant kitchens, after she has chosen what she wants from the menu that the head waiter shows her. Sometimes she goes down to the lobby to mix with the cosmopolitan crowd she finds there. To save appearances, Maurice Goudeket lives in the next room. They will marry on April 3rd, 1935. The main fare of the wedding breakfast is pork trotters.

'On that Spring day of winter temperatures the menu for the wedding breakfast lived up to our expectations, It consisted of pigs' trotters cooked in the pan, that melted in the mouth, covered in their pinkish fat and their pigskin, immersed in broth which was perfumed with celery, nutmeg, horseradish and all the health-giving vegetables that are the aromatic servants of the master meat. We also had crêpes.

Can one wed without champagne? Yes, if the champagne is eclipsed by the meeting with one of those anonymous wines that enliven our French inns, dark and golden like Spanish game, capable of standing the confrontation with the pork and the cheeses . . .' the writer will later narrate in *L'Etoile Vesper*.

Gastronomic Journeys near and far

'What won't I eat in Marrakech!' she exclaims just before leaving for Morocco on her honeymoon. She fantasizes about the feasts *Arabian Nights* style, Arab cuisine – she writes – is 'like a poem in a hundred dishes', 'with almond milk and mint tea taken in moonlit gardens where roses, mint and yellow jasmine grow and where there's the murmur of water from mosaic-clad fountains'. Prince Al-Glawi, her host, has eighty cooks at his disposal and many negro slaves, 'docile like the fruit', who serve at table. And, even though Colette has always given preference to traditional French cuisine, she was not one to draw back when faced with the cuisine of other countries.

'Dinner guests of the chamberlain to the Sultan. Mosaics and streams of light bathe the walls. By dint of being so vast, the place houses the moon, too, which pours down into the open courtyard where the waters murmur. The Arab dinner begins with a peppered soup, then we have:

Pastilla, egg flaky pastry and sweet chicken.

Pigeon.

Chicken with fresh almonds.

Mechoui.

Alose.

Mutton covered in olives and lemon-peel.

The bottoms of artichokes resting on well-cooked meat.

Mutton served with cooked green apples.

Couscous with chick peas and raisins, accompanied by curdled milk.

The turban of Cadi.

The ears of Cadi.³

Orangeade without water.

Coffee, mint tea.

And, later, milk of almonds.

This is the long list of the dishes of Moroccan cuisine that is found in *Prisons et paradis*, a book which talks a great deal about cooking. *Pastilla*, is flaky pastry filled with pieces of pigeon, raisins and almonds. *Mechoui* is lamb cooked whole on a spit over the embers of a wood fire. *Alose* is a fish that is similar to our sardines.

Also in the book *De ma fenêtre* there is a reference to what the writer ate during a journey of hers in the Algerian desert.

'I was introduced to bread cooked in the frying pan during a stop in a kind of hamlet, all pink, the soft pink of the desert. The Mountain of Salt shone in the distance.

We had *mechoui* in a caïd. I must particularly underline the exquisiteness of the meat roasted just right, doused with water salted with rock salt . . . There was no bread and so it was made on the spot. As far as I can say, the only things added to the lovely perfumed flour were the yeast and a little salt dissolved in the water used for kneading

³ The names of these dishes are inspired by famous episodes from the tales of *Arabian Nights*.

the dough. Instead of putting the bread in shapes, as is the practice in Europe, the dough is shared out in two or three pans . . . I discovered no other magic. But I tasted a kind of bread which was golden both on top and underneath, more like a crisp focaccia than bread . . . '

She also savours almond milk, for which in *Prisons et paradis* she gives the recipe, a drink that she will never abandon for the rest of her life.

'For 2 litres of milk of almonds you need 1 kilo of fresh peeled almonds. Crush them in a marble mortar with a little sugar. Drop by drop add just enough water to create an emulsion. Cover the mortar with a cloth, and leave it and its contents in a cool place to rest overnight. The next day filter the emulsion through a closely woven cambric or muslin bag. Taste it and add a little more sugar and the amount of water needed to make the two litres. If serving the drink immediately, you can use fresh milk instead of water. Never shake the almond milk, but float a leaf of lemon grass, green, just immersed, as thin as a Chinese junk, on the pale blue creamy wave of the milk. And don't forget – all is lost without it – the drop of essence of roses, a drop, one only . . . '

On the terrace of her house in Saint-Tropez, in the shade of the wisteria and the vines, she dines on local Provençal specialities: grilled scorpion-fish, mamma Lamponi's ravioli and rice with *favouilles*, the small flat green crabs the fishermen collect off the rocks, washed down with a cool local rosé wine. There are also plentiful helpings of freshly gathered aubergines from the vegetable garden, eaten either as a starter mixed with other vegetables or fried. She calls them *karagheuziennes*, from the name of Karagoz, a character from Turkish shadow theatre, protagonist of farces, who, according to the writings of Théophile Gautier in *Constantinople*, recalls punchinello in Neapolitan theatre or Punch in English puppet shows somewhat.

Here, too, as in Paris, Colette's meals begin with garlic, awarded place of honour among the rustic flavours, rubbed on a crust of fresh bread lightly sprinkled with coarse salt; they end with a sweet, possibly fruit.

Sometimes she goes on a picnic, which she narrates in *Prisons et paradis*.

'It's wonderful to be near a spring, to offer it an empty glass or the belly of a full bottle, while you open the basket of violet figs and cut the pie with anchovies into slices'.

In the evenings, she goes to drink white wine with friends at the fishermen's dance or goes along to the small harbour restaurant to pay her respects to the *bourride*, the fish soup made with scorpion-fish, frog-fish, hake, bass and mullet, and to the broth of which she has the fish heads added. Or perhaps she eats the *sotto coffi*, she mentions in *Journal à rebours*.

' - This fish is famous! What do you call it? -

- Who knows? Around here it goes by the name of *sotto coffi*. Dressed in its Provençal clothing, would you have recognised the name of the common *stockfish*? It took me some time. - '

In *Prisons et paradis* she describes its preparation.

'Is it a recipe? No. It's a primitive preparation, as old as the olive tree, as fishing with the trident. No cooking has ever needed fewer preparations, what is essential is

the procedure. All that is needed is a Provençal forest or, at least, a southern Mediterranean one. Get a supply of choice wood: horned olive logs, small bundles of rock rose, roots and branches of laurel, round discs of pinewood oozing golden resin, tiny bushes of terebinth, almond, not forgetting vine branches. Next prepare the fire between four large splinters of granite and light it. Watch it while it burns, red, white, cherry, with blue and golden edges . . . At twilight, the green sky is tinged with the colour of the lake. The flame dies down and spreads out; of course, you have a beautiful fish from the Mediterranean to hand, or even more than one, gutted . . . At Saint-Tropez, you will have acquired a monstrous scorpion-fish, dragon-throated, or else you will have brought from Toulouse malicious grey-mullet with their black backs, in whose bellies you will not have omitted to rub a slice of lard. Good. Now prepare your *balai*, this is what I call the perfumed bunch of laurel, mint, *pebredai*, thyme, rosemary and sage, that you will have tied up before lighting the fire. So, place the *balai* in the pan, in such a way that it is immersed in the best olive oil mixed with wine vinegar – and here only the pink sweet vinegar is to be used. Garlic – did you naïvely think that we had perhaps forgotten him? – pounded until it is the consistency of cream, enlivens the mixture as it should. A little salt, quite a bit of pepper. Caution. Very soon the fire is nothing more than cinders. A thick layer of cinders that hums, some firebrands that burn for a while yet; a puff of light translucent smoke brings to your nostrils the burnt soul of the forest . . . this is the moment to give that master stroke that sends the cover, the firebrands, the smoke-hole faraway and brings to light and levels the burning charcoal of a uniform pink colour, lays bare the pure heart of the fire on which a little fiery ghost pants, bluish, even more burning than him.

In the very centre of this hell, you must set up – perpendicularly – an old three foot high grill, twisted salamander at the service of the flame, welcoming the fish blessed by the sauce. Of course, the best results require experience and the witchcraft of the man of the Dom, of whom only the shadow is to be seen and his black arm moistens and sprinkles ceaselessly, for . . . For how long? The black man knows. He doesn't count the minutes, he doesn't consult his watch, he doesn't taste a sample, he knows. It's a question of experience, of intuition. Unless you are in possession of a little witchcraft, it is best for you not to meddle in matters of cooking.

The 'grilled fish with a kick' jumps off the old gridiron and onto your plate. You will see that it is stiff, clad in a crunchy skin, which flakes off to reveal firm white flesh the flavour of which recalls the sea and wild woodland balsams.

The resinous night falls. On the table, the feeble lamplight reveals the garnet red colour of the wine that fills the glasses . . . Highlight this happy moment with a libation of acknowledgement'. She spreads the aïoli sauce on slices of bread, alternating it with the anchoïade, a sauce of anchovies in olive oil. She ends the meal with a beautiful green melon or with a tart of wild strawberries, for which she is greedy and which she personally goes out to gather.

'A sweet wave of perfume guides one's steps toward the wild strawberry, round as a pearl, that ripens here in secret, darkens, trembles, falls and slowly dissolves in a soft decomposition, whose aroma mingles with that of a greenish honeysuckle, intermixed with honey, with that of a ring of white mushrooms', she writes in her book *Tender Shoot and Other Stories*.

Then she goes swimming, gardens, goes for walks, trains the butterflies to drink rosé wine on her fingers. 'how sweet it is to live physically and feel the muscle strength that you thought lost returning . . .'. She realises that she 'is becoming very southern', as she narrates in the same text. 'In summer, the afternoon teas in the warm garden, the cream-filled meringues, the raspberries, faded in an excess of light and heat'.

She goes on picnics in Paris, too.

'There are some mild days in February. We would take our bicycles, some fresh bread stuffed with butter and sardines, two sausage rolls bought from a delicatessen near La Murette and some apples, all tied to a small straw-covered flask full of white wine . . . We had a coffee somewhere near the station of Auteuil, black and insipid, but piping hot and made syrupy by dint of adding sugar . . . For me few memories are as sentimental as those of those meals without cutlery or table linen, of those outings on two wheels.' she remembers in *Chambre d'hôtel*.

Sometimes she goes off on gastronomic trips to restaurants in the provinces. In *Bella-Vista*, in her unmistakable style, she describes one of these experiences.

'In the dining room, which was not at all grand, but was low-ceilinged and duly dark, a dozen small tables scattered around, covered with rough unbleached basque cloth, reassured my unsociability. No butter in shells, no head-waiter in greenish-black tail coat, no frugal flower holder containing a camomile flower, a shabby anemone or a sprig of mimosa. But instead a large cube of frozen butter and, on the folded napkin, a rose from the climbing rose bush, a single rose with its edges slightly scorched by the mistral, a rose I am free to pin to my jersey or to eat as a starter.

Among the tables, Lucia, absent-minded, tired and powdered, brought the onion omelette, the brain fritters and the beef stew'.

Rather odd are her gastronomic trips into the woods in order to procure the raw material for one of her favourite dishes: truffles, which she wanted served in the pan with their perfumed juice.

With a small sow on a lead, 'an artist in her field', off she sets in search of the precious tubers, 'jewels of a poor earth', which, on arriving home, she personally sets about brushing them meticulously, refusing to entrust this precious task to others.

'Too dear for us – she writes in *Prisons et Paradis* – in winter the Périgord truffle gave its place to the grey, rather tasteless Puisaye truffle, whose perfume deceives the ignorant. But whether it be grey or black, after having brushed the truffle, wrap it in a bag of oiled greaseproof paper, then slip it into a small bridge of very hot ash, close to the flame.'

Alternatively:

'Moistened with some good white wine – keep the champagne for banquets, the truffle can do without him – salted but not excessively, peppered with tact, it will cook in the covered cast iron pan. For 25 minutes it will dance in the continuous boiling, dragging into the whirlpools and the froth – like so many tritons playing around a black amphitrite – a score of strips of bacon, half fat, half lean, which enrich the cooking. No other spice! And down with the napkin that smells of chlorine, final couch of the cooked truffle! Your truffles will arrive on the table in their broth. Do not be sparing in serving yourselves; the truffle is both aperitif and digestive'. Colette detests these delicious tubers being served in slices, in shavings or chopped, unless they serve

to surround the meat. A part of the cooking broth is poured into liqueur glasses to be drunk.

In winter, she sometimes allows herself a holiday in the mountains. A holiday as it were, given that, for her, a holiday often means simply a change in the work place. At Gstaad, for example, she attempts skiing, but when she sees that the headlong falls, with landings on the backside, are more numerous than the stretches of ski-runs travelled, she opts for the table, where she sits with friends who come to see her.

In the 40s and 50s she is by now famous and is invited to Germany, Belgium and Roumania to give lectures. These are triumphal tours with interviews, photographs and banquets in the presence of kings, presidents and ambassadors. In Brussels, following the ceremony for the awarding of the Legion of Honour, she goes with friends to the best restaurants in the city, where the élite of Europe have their meals and where the best cru wines of Europe are served. Once again the writer causes a scandal, both with her appearance – she is bare-footed in her sandals and her toe nails are varnished red – and with her request for a dozen bottles of Krieken-Lambic, the popular beer with a basis of barley and wheat mixed with Schaerbeck cherries, that is drunk only in the taverns, to take back to Paris.

In New York, where she is greeted triumphantly, a strange episode occurs. At the official banquet with the mayor Fiorello La Guardia there are 800 guests. The writer's invitation, which appears under the name of Mrs Goudekot, bears the number 799, Maurice's is 800. Colette is furious and decides, perhaps for the first and only time in her life, not to go either to the official banquet or that of the writers. She goes sightseeing around the city.

When bed-ridden by her crippling condition, she makes arrangements for the flavours of the country to come to her.

'Garlic, white onions, coarse salt pepper on freshly curdled white cheese, cool muscadet wine and cherries . . . When there's no better alternative, it's a way of going into the country.' she writes in

Sometimes she asks Pauline to mix the new onions into the fresh goat's cheese. She telephones *Le Grand Véfour* restaurant on the floor below. At a signal from the manager, Raymond Oliver, two 'robust dishwashers lift a kind of sedan-chair onto their shoulders' and go to fetch her and take her down to the restaurant. One day the mezzanine catches fire and the entire premises are invaded by the smoke. Colette is cut off by the flames but keeps her head. 'It is not a good excuse for not having coffee' she says. The firemen's ladder arrives just in time.

'Colette loved birds. She certainly admired those that she saw from her life-raft. Didn't she write. "The sparrow, this pedestrian"? She wished them no harm. At the same time, however, sparrows, larks or ortolans, preferably in the form of pies, admirably suited her idea of gastronomy. Because she had decided opinions on the subject and I respected them.' Raymond Oliver, who wrote down the recipe for her adored lark pie, wrote of her.

'Count 6 birds for 2 people. It is difficult to make a pie for just one person. Thoroughly bone the birds and marinate them for some hours while flavouring by sprinkling them with some young Armagnac and crumbling some flowers of thyme over them. Make some stuffing with some pork meat, desiccated ham fat and poultry,

in equal parts. Season with a little black cumin, salt and pepper. You should be moderate in your seasoning. Cut a number of cubes of *foie gras* and of truffles, as many as there are birds. Prepare flaky or short pastry for the pie bottom and flaky pastry for the pie lid. Do as you would for a Pithiviers pie. A layer of stuffing, a layer of birds filled with a cube of *foie gras*, arranged in a ring, then the filling. Cover with filling and pastry. Seal well. Bake till golden brown, in a lively oven for 30 minutes. Leave in a warm oven for 15 minutes, and serve. It can be accompanied with a small sauce or, very simply, with some cream to which a little melted butter has been added. This sauce should be seasoned and whipped'.

A love for birds – to the end of her days she went on putting out food for the sparrows on the window ledge, watching them in the garden, feeling sorry for them when there was snow outside – and tasting them cooked at table was one of her contradictions. In addition to the birds, she loved hens.

'I've kept for last the recipe for chicken in clay and cinders . . . - she writes in *Prisons et Paradis* – It sounds barbari It reminds you of Chinese chicken, sealed in lacquer, except that chicken in cinders calls for the chicken to be wrapped in smooth ball clay, sculptors' clay, unplucked, with all its feathers. You need only to remove the innards with great care then salt and pepper the bird. For all the rest the chicken's own fat is sufficient. The ball of clay and its gallinaceous heart undergo a rather long cremation. After three quarters of an hour, in the poked and renewed cinders, the soft clay is transformed into a terracotta egg. When this is broken open, the chicken feathers remain stuck to the crock and you are offered the wild perfection of a tender chicken that inclines you towards a prehistoric and rather brutal gluttony . . .'

Her final 'gastronomic trip', this time very short, she makes on the day of her eightieth birthday in order to go to the same restaurant to eat hare *royale*. 'Which of you readers, on tasting the true hare *royale*, which melts in your mouth, would suspect that sixty – you have read correctly, sixty – garlic cloves have cooperated to produce its perfection. A hare *royale* well made does not taste of garlic. Sacrificed to a collective glory, the sixty garlic cloves, unrecognisable, nevertheless are present, indiscernable, columns supporting a heaped and light flora of home-made spices . . .'.

Artichokes Roman Style

In June 1915, Italy enters the war alongside the allies, against Austria and Germany. The newspaper *Le Matin*, which sees its circulation increase up to half a million copies due to its readers craving for war news, sends Colette, baroness of Jouvenel, to Rome to describe the repercussions of the war on everyday life. 'How beautiful – she writes – the Italian slope of the Alps is, watered by clear waters, covered in flowers, draped with vines, veined with corn, fresh despite the heat, hot in spite of the nearby snow!' The pine forests refreshed by the rains, the waterfalls, the steep mountain streams, the flowers the pastures and the vineyards arouse her admiration. She discovers a race of people physically similar to that of her own Burgundy, but more generously suntanned. 'Genuine unadulterated flour and wine' bestow upon the women a richer bosom, give the children a stronger stomach and healthier teeth. Also the 'bersaglieri' leaving for the front singing and laughing, as if it were some sort of festival, the officers on the platforms, the troops on the trains remind her of the French soldiers.

She arrives in Rome in the rain mixed with hail. At the Excelsior hotel where she puts up there's already another baroness of Jouvenel. It is Claire Boas, Henry's first wife, whose Parisian salon was where Italy's entry into war on the allies' side was prepared. Colette is treated with suspicion, as an adventuress, and she is not given a room. She opts for the Regina hotel opposite. Her first impression of the capital is that of a city emptied by the heat, forced into idleness by the morning haze and by the midday wave of fiery heat, prompting the closure of window-shutters. Only the arrival of a westerly breeze enables the city to resume its normal activity.

Nine o'clock in the evening is the hour of the blue reverberation of the oxyhydrogen light, tingeing hands and face with a greenish pallor. At first, the welcoming arms of the city, the melodious tongue that she hears being sung around her, the hearty crowd swallowing ice-creams and lemon juice while reading the fourth edition of the *Corriere della Sera* keep her in festive mood. But then one day, while watching the wonderful children, the idle women, the vendors of fruit and lemon juice from a terrace in Frascati, it comes to her mind that 'beyond the plain and other plains, beyond the water, France is no longer there . . . '.

It would take more than thirty hours by train to reach her *foyer*, to see once again the people she has ties with and to make certain they are safe and well. From that moment she is no longer able to savour the beauty that surrounds her, like any other tourist. A small green cemetery near a church where she walks in the sun makes her thoughts turn to her husband. 'Touching the sun-warmed stone, one would greatly desire to return to this place with him'. She goes around the Gianicolo and Trastevere areas of Rome, where she sees a square with little houses made gay with the brightness of the colours of tomatoes and of lemons growing in the strip of land in front of the buildings. Together with other French people she visits the markets, where, because of the war, there is little of interest. Among the broken bedsprings, the old lamps, the

lockets in which to keep portraits of those who have gone off to war, she observes the vendors – old men and women, the other men are all on the battle front – as they eat a dish of rice with a flask of wine beside them. To overcome her crisis, she appeals to her pride and her sense of duty.

In a restaurant in Trastevere, the mandolin players play the Marseillaise bringing tears of joy to her eyes and she is deeply moved. The premises, where the back room is in effect a covered in garden which smells of saffron and cool wine, are an ideal refuge for her boredom as an exile. At nine o'clock in the evening there's 'a beneficial animal noise, warm with the laughter of women, with roughly handled glasses and the shouts of children'. Parents have with them the entire tribe of offspring, including the newly-born babies who breast feed as the mother devours a plate of spaghetti. At eleven o'clock, the young children are still around among the tables like wide-awake sparrows. The local wine of the Castles sparkles in the glass flasks, which carry a small lead seal with the brand. 'Everything is amusing to the eyes, the hands, the palate – she writes in *Les Heures Longues*, in which most of her Italian experiences are collected – even the stodgy sweet served straight after the baked fish'. At the end of a blind alley, in an irregular shaped square, there's another inn where Colette loves to linger. It's a *salle à boire*, derived, in part, from a Byzantine dome. It is called Basilica Ulpia⁴, it is 'low, vast, perfectly round', with walls in which there were the doors of a series of cellars, but which have since been bricked over. The only decoration in the place is that of some series of slender necked flasks filled with golden-coloured Orvieto wine, ruby-red Chianti and rose-coloured Frascati wine 'whose froth tickles the nostrils'. The room gets its air from a small door protected by a cloth curtain. The pleasantness of the wine and the heavy cakes, that crumble in the mouth like sugary sand, induce you to drink more than you would like.

She speaks of this restaurant in *Flore et Pomone* too.

'I ate in fairly modest restaurants and the one called Basilica Ulpia always gave me great satisfaction, given that every day, apart from a plate of pasta, it served me a heap of new artichokes, taken out of the boiling oil as stiff as fried roses'.

After the evening meal she goes walking along the Fori Imperiali, re-baptised the 'Fori of the Cats'. Sometimes, she goes to other inns in Trastevere, with Gabriele d'Annunzio, to whom she shows photos of her daughter, speaks of the heroism of the girl's father, tells him about her adored husband. D'Annunzio, whose signed portrait she will always keep on her writing desk, has the impression that he causes her suffering.

In July Colette goes to Venice. The summer smell of the canals creeps into the houses even through the closed windows and takes away her appetite. Under an ashen sky, the city, devoid of tourists because of the war, appears to make a mimetic effort to blend in with the waters. The sand bags, under which the city hides, helps to make the

⁴ This restaurant, which still exists, looks onto the Traianei Markets. It has been listed as a historical building of Italy since 1880, the oldest in Rome. It has its seat in the palace of the Marquis of Gallo of Roccagiovane and has always counted among its visitors, crowned heads, princes, actors, artists and important people from the world of politics and finance. The Tavern, the room Colette talks of, stands on the remains of the Basilica Ulpia, built in the first century A.D. by Apollodoro of Damascus, called to Rome by the Emperor Ulpio Traiano to build the Fori and the basilica in honour of the god Ulpia. The area below ground level is imposing with a high vaulted ceiling and here a stretch of Roman paving can be seen, as well as original sculptures and amphorae.

landscape unreal, a dreamscape. All the statues and the masterpieces of Saint Mark's square are wrapped up, the famous horses by Lysippo are walled in. 'The hour for dinner arrives, though perhaps not that of appetite. In the dining room, low-ceilinged like that of a boat, the open window lets in the insipid smell of the water, - she writes in the paragraph concerning Venice in her book *Les Heures Longues* – the tonic odour of the fish, of the wet fishing nets is missing . . . there is no longer any

fishing in the Atlantic. This insipid salmon trout comes from Basle. But in the false gaiety of thirty electric light bulbs, the wonderful fruit, the cracked figs and the aroma of the coffee are sufficient'. By day the voices of the women and children can be heard, the tinkling of the cutlery and the glasses, by night the silence and the darkness are absolute and the impression is that of being in a tomb. It is necessary to feel one's way by touching the walls and to get one's bearings it is necessary to count the columns, trying not to bump into the dark shadows walking in the dark. The feeling of the unreal is total. 'Perhaps I am dreaming. - she writes – Perhaps nothing exists apart from the frozen perfume of my vanilla water-ice'.

In September 1916, she is sent to Cernobbio, on Lake Como, by the magazine *La Vie Parisienne*. Here she enjoys a second honeymoon at the luxurious Grand Hotel Villa d'Este where she is joined by her husband. 'How happy we are here! Sidi, the sage in flower, the convovulus, the water lapping round the steps, the ripe figs . . . I am stunned'. She writes a patriotic piece around a Parisienne fashion show that takes place in the hotel lobby, invaded by tulle dresses and *lapin* coats disguised as silver fox fur. Between luncheons, dinners, teas and coffee, the rich hotel guests try to while away the time. But Colette finds a way to redeem these idle women, for whom, apparently, the war causes no pangs of guilt. 'It's enough to observe them carefully – she writes – to recognise that profound thought, the only one, that torments all women in wartime: the waiting'.

Colette and her husband return briefly to Paris at the end of October, in time to witness the collapse of a corner of their Swiss chalet. It is no optical illusion, as Colette at first believed when she saw the rain cross her bathroom, the roof had actually fallen in. In November they move to number 69 on Boulevard Suchet, in Auteuil, just a stone's throw from the Bois de Boulogne. December sees them in Rome for the Agreement conference that he has to follow. Aristide Briand, French prime minister, meets David Lloyd George, British prime minister, to reach an agreement with him before the arrival of the Americans. Rome in the winter is extraordinarily beautiful, but living in a country whose language you don't speak is not so pleasant. Food is rationed, 'fifteen grams of sugar, a knob of butter, a few slices of bread per day . . . !'.

So she goes to the British Embassy to give a recital of her *Animal Dialogues* and there she can have all the butter she wants, a very fresh butter, home-made! There is only the *salade Italienne* that she dislikes, made of 'coppa' (pork sausage), tomatoes, anchovies, mozzarella and olives. 'It is an example not to be followed for its excessive abundance of different flavours, which do not blend together, on the contrary, they clash' she writes.

On the whole, though, her life in Rome is not all that different from that in

Boulevard Suchet. Instead of walking the dog in the Bois de Boulogne she walks it in the gardens of Villa Borghese and in the afternoon she finds shelter on the Palatine, where she gathers bunches of flowers. Her husband leaves, she stays on to deal with cinema. A film based on her book *The Vagabond* is being shot and the star is her friend Musidora, who the director considers 'too Italian', thinking a blond would be better.

The sun beats down and the heat in the studios is suffocating. At midday, the sounds and smells of cooking arrive from the janitor's lodge – spaghetti with meat sauce – but as long as the sun is high in the sky, work must go on. She stays on the set in order to describe for her readers just how a film is made.

She returns to Paris at the end of winter. She sends a copy of her Italian diary to Marcel Proust. He replies that he found her description of Rome marvellous. He says certain pages remind him of the elegant eighteenth century prose of Bossuet.

Coming to Grips with Rationing

In 1914, despite his being 38 years old, Henry de Jouvenel, editor of the newspaper *Le Matin* and future politician, is sent to Verdun. The Germans are marching on Paris, by the end of May they are sixty miles from the city. In a letter, Colette tells him she has created the *phalanstère* – a kind of women's corporation - for the 16th arrondissement, in their house in Rue Cortambert. She takes charge of the cleaning, the actress Musidora does the shopping, Marguerite Moreno cooks and washes the dishes. All three live on biscuits, vegetables and sardines. From time to time, Annie le Pène sends them a small pullet and some truffles. They keep one another company, they comfort one another and share their modest material resources. Mealtimes raise their spirits once again and cheer them, after the absurd and irrational disputes that occur while preparing the meal. 'While working together in the kitchen – Colette writes - we can't help but talk of what awaits our soldiers on the battle front and the future of Paris'. Day by day the situation worsens, fuel becomes scarce, people buy a few kilos of coal here and there when it is to be found. Otherwise, when people can no longer stand suffering from the cold, they burn fruit crates, broom handles, wooden shelves, a sofa . . .

At New Year 1915 Colette goes to Argonne with some baskets of gifts. 'For the troops? No, the soldiers have all basic necessities and even more. At Christmas they had ten thousand geese, oranges, chocolate, wine . . . The army is well provisioned and is feeding the nearby villages'. Instead she takes dolls, marbles, oranges and chocolate cigars for the children, with whom, after the distribution of presents, she has lunch in the school rooms. There are sardines, capon fish with tomato, ham, chocolates and the oranges on the menu.

One day she decides to go and see her husband at Verdun. This is forbidden, but she obtains false documents and travels by night on a blacked out train. She spends the days hiding in the house like a kind of stowaway, painting water colours and waiting for her husband. She goes out after nightfall, while there is gunfire and goes under the bridges to watch the bombs falling. She goes back in in the morning, across the craters left by the explosions. 'Twenty-three bombs a week ago, thirty-one yesterday . . . - she writes to a friend – I'm a spoilt prisoner, crammed with food, full of comfort and bombs'. At New Year she dines in a partly demolished building with a group of officers who are visiting the battle front. In the background, the sound of gunfire can be heard. 'One quickly gets used to war' she says.

In Verdun all the shopkeepers have taken to selling foodstuff: the stationer sells sausages, the embroideress sells potatoes, the piano-seller sells sardines and tinned mackerel in neat piles on the instruments. Butter is a rarity – margarine is passed off as butter – condensed milk replaces milk, vegetables are sold on the black market at exorbitant prices. Leeks are sold one by one and if there are no *macaroni* rice and potatoes are eaten. The coffee is not real coffee but essence of coffee. It is only the

troops who are not short of victuals, but they have tired of the quartermaster's beef and its arrival is met with curses. The only alternative is a pasta salad with sardines or a dish of rice in milk – almost without milk – with a dusting of cocoa powder and a sprinkling of crumbled nuts. One day, a soldier from the department of Lot, on leave, brings her a basket of truffles and for ten days the house is pervaded with their perfume. Another day – a memorable one – a flour merchant in Verdun, who has a cow in his garden, gives her a fresh cheese. Then there are the nocturnal meals in a clandestine/back-street restaurant, reached by creeping through the dark streets. The frost is sharp, the north wind makes anyone spending the night outdoors even more acutely hungry. It is essential to eat in order to fight off the cold. 'It's a matter of keeping the blood warm in the veins, that blood that everyone here is prepared to shed in streams, to give without limits. Great courage, great appetite . . .'. she writes in her book *De Ma Fenêtre*. One evening she informs her husband that she has asked Annie le Pène to join them. 'Why?' he asks in surprise. 'Why, to cook *boeuf bourguignon*!' He bursts out laughing. And it is Annie Colette writes to shortly before returning to Paris to ask her to get some butter, a black pudding, some meat, some red wine and some onions.

In the capital life is ever more difficult, there are strikes and the inhabitants are suffering. Milk is reserved for the elderly and children under the age of three, butchers' shops only open twice a week. After the armistice, things slowly return to normal. Henry resumes his post as editor of *Le Matin*, Colette that of contributor to the same newspaper.

The writer, in her long life, goes through two wars. In 1941 rationing returns to Paris, as do the cold houses, the lack of food, the shops and restaurants that close for scarcity of basic materials. In her book *De Ma Fenêtre* there is a reflection on this situation.

'Someone reads aloud a recipe from 1939, expecting to make us laugh.

- Take eight or ten eggs . . . -

- Who to? - asks a small girl who has not laughed, who knows that eight eggs are not to be found on sale anywhere and that she is going to queue for a thin layer of cheese, a kilo of chestnuts and some Brussels sprouts . . .'

In this difficult situation many children are sensible. One of them advises his mother to fill the stomachs of all the family members with: 'vegetables, big thick soups, baked apples and chestnuts, a piece of fish, perhaps . . . Only on Sundays a roast or boiled meat. No wafer thin steaks, nor transparent ham slices, nor sliced salami in smaller slices than one of papa's coins. Instead, meat balls in hot sauce or beef *miroton*. And a cake bought from the baker. But from Sunday evening, a change in view. Only a hot chocolate, made with water, before going to bed. And, if possible, put aside a little of the *miroton* sauce in order to make Monday's potatoes more tempting . . .'. Yes, because the juice of the meat cooked in this way, with onion, lard and vinegar, improves the taste of the potatoes, making them savoury and appetising.

For her part, Colette recommends mothers *flognarde* dessert flan, which, she claims, according to the certificates of origin and the patent letters in her possession, was already well-known in a mail coaching inn in Flogny, Yonne, a century earlier.

'While the husband changes the horses, the wife beats the batter energetically,

bakes the dessert and makes the travellers be patient around the *flognarde*, washed down with a bright local wine, light and fruity. Served either hot or cold, it is a nourishing dessert, quickly prepared, an excellent snack'.

It is exactly because it is 'quick and nourishing, excellent either hot or cold, does not need milk, needs just 2 eggs for four and even six people, 3 or 4 spoonfuls of castor sugar or vanilla sugar and an indispensable pinch of salt' and that, if desired or if you have no sugar, it can be replaced with a greater dose of salt and a little grated Gruyère cheese, it is suitable in times of restrictions.

Here is her suggestion, contained in the book *De Ma Fenêtre*:

'Treat your children to a *flognarde* like that which Pauline prepares for me when I have worked well. This large crêpe, which swells in the oven to bursting point, does not require any special skill nor is the cost very great and it is the quickest dish to prepare there is.

Just two eggs, a glassful of flour, another of cold water or skimmed milk, a generous pinch of salt, three spoonfuls of castor sugar. In the mixing bowl, make a fountain with the flour and the sugar and stir in the liquid and the whole eggs a little at a time. Then beat the mixture as if it were the batter for a crêpe: pour the mixture into a previously greased baking tin and put it in a corner of the oven or the stove to warm for a quarter of an hour so that the heat takes the batter by surprise. After which, in twenty minutes' cooking time the *flognarde* becomes a huge swelling that fills the oven, browns, bursts here, swells there . . . At the height of its eruptions, remove it from the oven, lightly sprinkle it with castor sugar and share it out while still hot. If you prefer a sparkling drink: cider, sparkling wine or not too bitter beer'. Serve it as soon as it comes out of the oven because the swelling flattens quickly.

And a little further on:

'In times of plenty, you refused the yellow and oily custard, the cake sprinkled with vanilla sugar, the *kouglof*⁵ and the éclair as if they were satanic traps, allowing only the sainted Biscuit. Today, your spirit of contradiction drives you towards sweets, despite the restrictions . . . '.

From the window of her apartment, Colette watches the people in the garden of the Palais Royal. They are mostly young people who come to have a snack in their break from work in the 'ateliers' or in the banks. 'They read standing, resting alternately on one leg and then on the other. In one hand they hold a book and with the other hand they eat. They take the baguette, a hollow flageolet-shaped tube that frequently contains nothing, up to their mouths, or break off little mouthfuls from their pockets or from their bags with an absent-minded air. . . '. She is moved to see the women, stubborn and courageous, losing weight in their cold dens, with the fireplace reduced to a blackened hole, the double bed empty, the table which was once brightened with at least another place laid, now never laid at all. She does not console them nor does she sympathise, but she supports them with practical advice about how to cope with the difficult situation, how to cook using low cost ingredients, substitutes, how to keep the fire burning for longer with the aid of newspapers very tightly rolled up. It is the

⁵ *Kouglof* is a typical sweet from Alsace, which in shape recalls our Christmas pudding and contains raisins left to soak in rum.

knack of getting by.

Fortunately, there are the *petites fermières* Yvonne Brochard and Thérèse Sourisse, launched into the adventure of land cultivation and bee-keeping through their taste for the country and animals. Between February 1933 and August 1952, these two women send her food not to be found in Paris from their small farm in Normandy. 'If it weren't for you . . .' Colette writes to them over and over again. 'And I do not blush when eating, because eating cheers me' she adds, as if in reply to the objection that in those years there's very little to eat for everyone. Certain days she eats the potatoes stored in the cellar, that Pauline cooks for her freeing them patiently from their shoots, other days she draws on the small reserve of preserved food. 'If I heeded desire – she says – I would open one tin after another, but one has to be wise'.

Yvonne and Thérèse are part of a kingdom that once was hers, the kingdom of her childhood, which they restore to her by sending her food such as almonds with pistacchio, just like those her mother used to bring her from Auxerre, and chestnut jam, which is exactly like Sido's. The opening of the parcels, caskets full of treasure, is a party. 'Do you know what gave me the greatest pleasure in the last parcel? The bread, so good and light. If you could see ours!' Sometimes the eggs arrive with

broken shells because they are not sufficiently well-packed, the strawberries are reduced to a cream, the cabbages have become soft, only the juice remains of the cherries. Not to mention the butter and the meat during the summer months. But the green beans, the prunes 'that speak English', the pig's trotter round and rosy, the delicious vanilla wafers, the *gaufrettes*, the turnips, the radishes, the sweet beetroot, the honey, the *petit-beurre* biscuits to dunk in the coffee, the rabbit leg, the black ^{*p.71} pudding, the garlic, the shallots, the Brussels sprouts looking like rose buds, the *crépinettes*⁶ are marvellous. 'And the precious salad! We are perhaps the only ones in the whole of Paris to be able to eat salad . . .' Yvonne and Thérèse come in person to bring the writer *poules-au-pot en comprimés*, the cubes which Pauline uses to make a thick and concentrated vegetable soup. On other occasions they bring a golden pullet with its rose-coloured meat, fattened to the right point. Colette does not consider it to be king's food only because at the time there are no kings who can eat that well. She re-baptises their pâté Pathérhèse and adds that if she were able to make such a good pâté there would be no end to the books written and she would make a fortune. In the left-over fat Pauline cooks the potatoes to make them tastier. 'What a lunch I offered myself today! Two cocotte eggs in the left-over meat juice, a delightful cauliflower with bechamel sauce and a salad. Everything was so fresh!' Sometimes Colette feels like a kind of Scrooge sitting on her riches of meat, eggs and vegetables. 'The semolina is superb. I'm waiting for the green beans and all that can be eaten and preserved. Thank you for the golden-coloured grapes. With the kidney beans I could make a crown for myself . . .' 'Do you know what I've found to be the most delicious in this period of crisis? Your lard, soft as velvet! And the duck, which we finished in a single meal'. From the 'nourisher angels' a mortadella (Bologna sausage) arrives, too, *des jours d'autrefois*, like that of old times. 'This evening then we shall eat the *crème de la*

⁶ *Crépinettes* are made of pork meat wrapped in the omentum of the same animal.

Lande'. All her letters, concise, vivacious, colourful and written in her usual beautiful style, have been collected in the book *Lettres aux Petites Fermières*.

On December 12th, 1941, her husband, who is Jewish, is arrested in their apartment at the Palais Royal. She feels *démolie* and has no desire to eat. It is only on the cook, Pauline's insistence that she eats. She receives requests for food from Maurice in prison. 'The best of it is – she says – that just after his arrest a parcel arrived full of the things he likes: pâté, butter, fresh meat . . .'. The list of things he would like scribbled down by Maurice include: bread, butter, biscuits, gingerbread, cheese, ham and honey. 'Gingerbread is the best thing for the intestines . . .' he explains. On February 6th he is freed. When he returns home – Colette is at the hairdresser's and was not informed – on the kitchen table there is parcel that has just arrived from the country, containing *madeleines*, butter, a chicken and a light sweet. Just the very thing he needs having lost twelve kilos in prison! The winter is bitterly cold, Paris lies under a dirty mantle of snow that no-one removes. The bombardments continue, but Colette and her husband are not afraid and remain in their apartment in Paris.

When, at last, the war is over, Colette writes to her friend, Marguerite Moreno: 'I want to eat. But here everything goes so slowly. I want pickled herrings and beef stew . . .'. She has in mind the stew of Madame Yvon, of which she writes in *Prisons et Paradis*.

'One day when I had eaten her 'old-fashioned' beef stew, which satisfied at least three of the five senses – in fact, apart from the velvet taste and the tenderness that made it melt in your mouth, it shone with a caramelized sauce, *mordoré*⁷, and was encircled along the edges with a thin layer of fat of a golden colour – I shouted: - Madame Yvon, it's a masterpiece! What did you make it with? - With beef – she replied – My God, I know that well . . . Nevertheless, there's a mystery in this preparation, magic . . . You have to give a name to such a marvel! - Sure, it's beef – Madame Yvon replied again'.

The months following the liberation are the worst of all. Communications are lacking, the trains and lorries are mobilised for the army, fuel is scarce. 'I burn what little remains and I live under the blankets with a hot water bottle'. She generously shares what little chocolate she has with a friend who is in hospital, obliged by her illness to move around on all fours. The first week in February reassures the *fermières*, who continue to send her butter and beans, that the fuel has lasted until the thaw. There's no coffee. Every so often, Maurice, who used to sell precious pearls to the ladies of high society, leaves for the country in search of rare books to sell off and comes back with a hare or a dozen eggs. They exploit every possible occasion where food is concerned, she goes into the schools, too, to judge the children's drawings. '*On est nourri!* . . .' she says. On August 26th she is invited by the ambassador Sert to watch the victory parade from a balcony in Rue de Rivoli. There are shots from below that smash the glass panes and the gilded mirrors. But she, who had not been frightened by the bombardments, certainly does not allow herself to be frightened by a few gun

⁷ *Mordoré* comes from *maure-doré* which means a brown colour with hints of gold.

shots. Without being particularly upset, she goes in and approaches the rich buffet of cold meat and champagne, ready to savour everything with relish.

At Easter she accepts an invitation from Simone Berriau to stay at Les Salins in Hyères, not far from Saint Tropez. The house is as crowded as a railway station, but there's plenty of food. One evening the house owner returns with a live sheep. Colette has a terrace all to herself, where she is working on a book of memoirs called *L'Etoile Vesper*, in which she writes of her life during the war, the suffering, old age, the cats and dogs she has had.

She returns to Paris, but she is becoming increasingly infirm. Her only distraction at the Palais Royal, is to watch the change of the seasons from the window. A Swiss doctor invites her to his clinic in Geneva, where she has a series of injections and electric shock treatment, which leave her deaf and suffering from dizziness. The treatment does not have the desired effect. 'I don't over-estimate the benefits of my treatment, I will never walk again' she writes to her friend Hélène Morante. She tries to remain optimistic, helped by the fact that there are no restrictions in Switzerland and the food reserves are plentiful. It seems to her that in this land of plenty fountains of milk run, mountains of chocolate rise up and everything is to hand, in profusion. But she feels that her life, abounding in scandals and fruitful in works of art, is now behind her. The moment is drawing close when 'the eternal dust, that deprives the eyes of their marvellous light . . .' will deprive hers for ever too, of the colour of the sea.

A Remarkable Sommelier

'I was no more than three years old when my father, advocate of progressist methods, gave me a glass full of a *mordoré* wine which had come from his native south, to drink: muscat wine of Frontignan' Colette writes in *Prisons et Paradis*, in the chapter concerning wine. The initiation rite to Colette's education in wines, to her 'voluptuous shock on the enlightened papillae' begins early. And continues, without further interruption, for the rest of her life.

'That consecration made me worthy of wine for ever. A little later I learned to empty my goblet of warm wine, aromatised with lemon and cinnamon, while dining with boiled chestnuts. At the age that one learns to read, I slowly tasted, drop by drop, red Bordeaux wines, matured and light and splendid Yquem wines. Then it was the turn of champagne, reserved for anniversaries, wedding feasts and first communions . . .'

Her mother is afraid that, growing, she will take on too pale a complexion. Therefore, she goes and digs up the bottles that she had buried in 1870 in order to hide them from the Prussian soldiers. They are coloured by the tannin that has deposited over the years, but the contents have kept all their ardour and the invigorating virtues.

'I drained the choicest wines . . . My mother re-corked the opened bottle and contemplated the glory of the prized French wines on my cheeks'. Wines like Château-Larose, Château-Laffitte, Chambertin, Croton . . . It is on her return from school that Gabrielle drinks a glass, to go with her modest *en-cas*, the light meal ready at any time of day, consisting, depending on the day, of 'a cutlet, a cold leg of chicken or a few flakes of hard cheese 'passed' under the cinders before splitting it in pieces with a fist'. Other times Gabrielle drinks just sweet acidulous tasting cider with her boiled chestnuts.

She drinks at school, too, as does *Claudine*.

'From the first really hot days . . . each of us brings at the bottom of their basket, in their leather satchel or in their cloth rucksack, a bottle full of a cold drink. The competition is all about making the oddest cocktail, the most adulterated liquids. No coconut milk for us, we leave that to the little ones. For us only water and vinegar, which whitens the lips and tightens the stomach, tart lemon juice, peppermint drink that we make ourselves with fresh peppermint leaves, brandy pinched from home and filled with sugar, gooseberry juice that sets the teeth on edge wonderfully. Anaïs the Stanga (the plank) laments the transfer of the chemist's daughter who supplied us with whole bottles of spirit of peppermint diluted with a little water or Botot liquid toothpaste sugared. I, who have less complicated tastes, make do with white wine with soda-water, with the addition of sugar and a little lemon . . . Seeing that the use of bottles is prohibited, we close them with a stopper and put a straw through it so that, while bending over with the excuse of picking up a dropped spool of thread, we can drink without moving the bottle from the basket'.

As an adult, there is no quality wine – white, red or rosé – she does not sample. In the spring, when 'the same omnipotent force that makes the primroses flower and the peach and plum trees blossom, pushes out the shoots of the vines, a sign that life is again on the move, tingling inside', she goes walking in the vineyards. She loves 'the severely disciplined rows of plants, fruit of human care'. She also frequently visits the wine cellars where in this underground kingdom, under arched vaults, at a constant temperature of 13°C, the barrels are lined up as far as the eye can see, barrels that when 'questioned with a drumming of knuckles, reply with different notes that they are full of Burgundy wine. A river of wine is imprisoned there, put aside for the future, a reserve that is renewed each year and which never runs out', she writes in *Prisons et Paradis*. In these cellars sounds are muffled, there is peace and quiet, a measured slowness in the gestures of men dressed in black, who talk in low voices while they tap, decant, put in barrels, filter, 'cradle the living, sensitive, susceptible wine', they shake it to aid clarification, after having poured in the egg white which attracts the impurities like a magnet and makes them precipitate. The bottles, in which the fruit of so much labour is transferred, 'cover themselves slowly with a grey and white mantle . . .'. There is antagonism – Colette writes – 'between the noble *cru*, national pride and glory that makes eyes sparkle and the lips moisten on hearing the name, and the *marque*, which comes from young vines, 'bastards without honour', which are Burgundy only in their origin'. Of both, with unusual descriptive skills, she outlines the colour, bouquet, transparency, vigour, harmony . . .

How delicious it is to soak in wine those special biscuits, ideal for dipping because

they drink up the wine, as she describes in the book *Le Six à Huit des Vins de France*.

'Where have they gone to those biscuits, pleasant accomplices of the wine? Squat biscuits, joined in rows of four by a fragile membrane, that seemed as hard as stone, but which fell apart and melted in contact with the wine. Pink biscuits, slightly vanilla flavoured, bound for red wines, and exquisite biscuits made in Montbozon, not to be found nowadays...' .

'Here it is, my tonic! - the writer announces to her readers in *Prisons et Paradis* speaking of an invigorating wine which she always has a supply of, prepared by herself – A small flask of green crystal still contains some orange wine, five years old. Pour me a finger in this crooked slender glass, that seems affected by coxalgia going back perhaps to Louis XIII. That year the oranges from Herez were beautifully red and ripe.

Into four litres of dry Cavalaire wine, a straw-yellow colour, I poured a litre of genuine Armagnac, to the protests of my friends, who exclaimed: 'What a waste! To sacrifice to an undrinkable ratafia such a good brandy! . . .' . I cut and immersed in the liquid four sliced oranges, a lemon which until just a minute earlier had been hanging on a tree, a stick of vanilla, silvery as an old man, and 600 grams of cane sugar. In charge of the maceration, which lasted fifty days, was a rounded jug/pot stoppered with cork and fabric. When this time was up, all that remained was to filter the liquid and bottle it.

If it is good? Dear Parisians, when you go back home at the end of a hard winter's afternoon or one of a false spring, lashed by the rain and hail, whipped by a sharp sun, with shoulders that shudder, blow your noses feel your forehead, look at your tongue, then complain: 'I don't know what's wrong with me . . .' . I do know what's wrong. You are in need of a glass of orange wine'.

The summer of 1947 is very hot, everywhere is dry and arid. But for the grapes it is good. Colette has not been able to walk for some years now. Maurice, without the doctors' knowledge since they would forbid it, decides to give her a surprise. In September, during the grape harvest, he takes her one more time to her beloved land of the Beaujolais. A chain of arms carry her from the car to the wine cellars where the vats are brimful and the air is full of the aroma of the new wine. Colette samples a 1944 wine from a silver cup, eating some ham and some cheese. 'Come back to sample our '47 wine – the *directeur* invites them – it will be in no way inferior to this one'.

For a second Colette forgets her disability and promises to return. But there will not be another occasion, for her there will be no more grape harvests. Her husband has offered her what in effect is her final, conclusive journey to a place she loves.

Garlic, Oil, Vinegar, Rose Petals and Aromatic Herbs for Health

Nourishing meals, seven hours uninterrupted sleep, some naps during the day with one's head resting against the back of the armchair, are the best recipe for good health. And at all times have a good piece of cheese and a bottle of wine to hand. 'Her writing desk – says the editor Fayard – always looks set for a picnic'. Not to mention the chocolates. Thanks to these supports, she manages to keep up a frenetic pace at work, almost without breaks. Even when stricken with her various ailments, the recipe never changes. Since childhood, food has been her panacea and cure-all. At the age of five and when running a temperature, she does not follow the doctor's advice to drink broth and milk, but asks her mother for some Camembert, which she is duly given. The cheese performs the miracle, the temperature goes down. Food revives the body and strengthens the immune system. In 1918, Spanish 'flu is the cause of an astronomical number of deaths. Among the dead are Guillaume Apollinaire and Colette's friend, Annie le Pène, the first-rate cook of *boeuf bourguignon*. Colette accuses her of having been the cause of her own death. 'What an idiotic way to die! - she says – She forgot to have lunch or dinner, or she skipped meals so as not to put on weight and the influenza struck her while she was without defences, with an empty stomach'. There's absolutely no danger of the same thing befalling Colette. When in Saint Tropez she breaks a bone in her leg falling in a hole, she complains of being hungry while they are putting her leg in plaster at the hospital. And never mind if this means being rather stout, 81 kilos for a height of a metre 63 cms. She makes no bones about stuffing herself greedily even next to the funeral room where her friend is laid out. 'The dead mustn't sadden the living – she says – After all, sooner or later we'll all meet the same end!' And to soften Annie's daughter's pain, she takes her to a restaurant, saying that food is the only means of fighting off the painful condition of mourning.

Only in her last years does she heed the doctors' orders. 'During the six days when I had to stop feeding myself – she writes to the *petites fermières* – you saved my life with your biscuits, which I was allowed to dunk in the *unsalted* vegetable broth. Vegetable broth is a marvellous purifier'. If she were a fashionable woman, she would be happy with the kilos lost by forced dieting and would never stop being thankful. But she is not interested in staying agile and slim and she only feels disconsolate and weakened, to the point of not being able to stand up. You can't go on eating just turnips and carrots!

She has always believed in the therapeutic virtues of garlic. She boasts of munching forty garlic cloves daily, as if they were peanuts. 'It protects you from influenza and bronchitis', she claims. It's aroma is part of her from early childhood almost until her death. She uses it to flavour dishes, she adds it to cheese, she munches it raw as if it were peanuts, she sucks it *fondant*, as she describes in her book *De Ma Fenêtre*.

'I was in the habit of using it in all seasons to recover my strength and my good mood. I would put the garlic in a hot oven, taking care not to char its transparent outer covering.

When the white flesh feels soft to the touch, you need to pierce the skin and suck the inside, like children do with boiled chestnuts. Do you, madam, draw back just reading this? You are mistaken. What's more, garlic is almost a cure-all for one's health'.

She also believes it is necessary to eat raw vegetables in order to maintain the organism's physical well-being. Above all fennel, for which she invites people to 'love the aniseed taste'.

'Let's eat them raw, we need raw vegetables. Or cook them, but very little. Let's take away the tougher outer ribs, which will serve to perfume a soup. Let's arrange the tender part on one of those pastries poor in butter, sugar and eggs, that we all know how to make and which are good when eaten as soon as they come out of the oven. Fennel flan, tinned peas flan, garden sorrel flan . . . '.

She often boasts of taking care of the health of friends and of lovers, who she puts on her diet and helps them with appetising therapeutic recipes. She tells them that as a pick-me-up there is nothing better than a hot chocolate or a sweet semolina with vanilla. She concerns herself with the children during the war.

'I am surrounded by youngsters who are suffering terribly because of chilblains on hands and feet.

Going back in memory, far back, I recall that in summer my mother prepared and then kept by, in case her children had those open chilblains that we call 'cracks', a bottle of rose vinegar made with rose petals put in strong vinegar and left to infuse for a month and then passed through filter paper to clarify the solution'. This preparation was so good that, when her mother wasn't looking, she sucked the compresses soaked in the vinegar 'with a stinging smell, delighting in the combined taste of vinegar and rose . . . '. The vinegar was home-made, obtained by the fermentation of white wine. The roses, red roses, came from the garden. There was also always some red wine vinegar in the house, aromatised with pepper, fennel seeds, garlic and tarragon. She also adored pickles. In her book *For a Herbarium* she describes how she prepared them:

'Those vegetables that we don't consider even to be nourishing food found a place in the hors d'oeuvre dish, in the jug, in the stoneware keg, where the 'mother' of vinegar sleeps and swells. In the season when the nasturtium faded and the swelling berry appeared, I sent it to join the caper buttons taken from the Segonzac plant, the fattish branches of the 'critmo', the small aborted melons, weak carrots, some green thread-like beans, verjuices, all the seasonal left-overs which, renouncing enrichment of themselves with sugar, instead sank their pale virtues into the vinegar, with the object of later raising again the melancholy spirit of cold veal meat and breaking down the last resistance of salted beef'.

Colette recommends quinces for stomach-ache and infusions of hyssop for coughs. She uses small stems from bushes of the latter, which is also a digestive, to stuff cabbages. As she describes in her book *Le Fanal Bleu*.

'A Hyssop, Monsieur, I believe that already dry but still perfumed small branch is a hyssop, almost as delicate as snow flakes . . . at first its perfume reminds one of camphor, its scent is a cross of two or three chaste perfumes like those of lavender and

rosemary, before arriving at . . . my God, at that of hyssop. Hyssop and 'mundabor'⁸ . . . Therefore accept as hyssop the small pleasantly perfumed plant. I consider it to be one of the gifts that fly out of a letter, roll out of a leaf of stuffed cabbage, come out of a box of pharmaceutical products. In short, one of those gifts I never tire of'.

In the magazine *Marie Claire* she informs readers of the correct way to gather and keep violets, in order to make infusions from them or to crystallise their petals in syrup.

'Thrifty housewives, who gather medicinal leaves and flowers at the right time, do you know why your infusion of violets is insipid? Because you gathered your violets in the sun. Gather them in the shade, in the first days of their season, without stems, and dry them in the shade, on white paper and not on a napkin. In our part of the world we say that linen "drinks up scents". Do not trust cold tables of marble because they 'surprise' your tepid flowers, roll them up and take away a part of their souls'. Once again, the importance of details is highlighted, the little things in which **there is all the wisdom and the art of living of the grand gourmande.**

⁸ According to ancient religious usage, hyssop was used in purification rites. The reference is to the Old Testament, psalm 51, verse 7. David, having sinned with Bathsheba, asks the Lord for forgiveness and says: 'Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me and I shall be whiter than snow.' ('Asperges me hyssopo, et mundabor: lavabis me, et super nivem dealbabor .')