



# French Food in the US

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## A Look Back at the Last 250 Years of French Agriculture

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The French agriculture is marked by its history. The history of French agriculture could start with the Gaulois in 2000 B.C. They were the first farmers working on French land. The Roman invasion around 50 A.C. brought organization and technical progress like everywhere else in Europe. The Middle Age was marked by the feudal system. Farmers worked on lands owned by nobles or the Church. This system produced strong inequalities which ultimately led to popular anger and the Revolution.

### THE FRENCH REVOLUTION, AN AGRICULTURAL REVOLUTION

The French Revolution of 1789 was also an agricultural Revolution. One of the factors that led to the French Revolution was actually agriculture. For several years, weather conditions had been difficult, leading to bad harvests. Rural taxes called *"privilege seigneuriaux"* or seigniorial privileges, severely burdened farmers. People were hungry and fighting for bread which ultimately led to a rebellion against the political system in place. The French Revolution altered every part of the French social order. With the abolition of privileges for upper classes, every tax linked to the feudal system was lifted. On the other hand the selling of all the goods belonging to the Church, allowed a broad land redistribution. The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen stated property as a fundamental right. This was a big step towards land ownership for French peasants. The burden of the wars that followed the French Revolution was mostly borne by the rural world which provided most of the men, animals and food. The changes that happened created tensions in the French rural world which for example led to a revolt in Vendée.

Napoleon's regime (beginning of the 19th century) stabilized those tensions by establishing, a military, judicial and religious order. The economy was better, and a rise in agricultural commodity prices benefited the rural world a great deal. The introduction and spread of the potato and the beet as well as the development of wheat crops helped improve the food security issue.

### 19TH CENTURY MODERNIZATION OF AGRICULTURE SPARKS INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

In the 19th century, agricultural growth was undeniable. The era was marked by Agricultural production increases of 78% through technical progress (introduction of fertilizers and artificial meadows for example), the decrease of fallow and the rise of capital provided by the developing industries. The rural population had several activities to complete its income in the winter, work in the textile sector or in local crafts. The rural exodus began slowly but the overcrowding of the rural world was still very important. During this period the French peasantry acquired some political power. In 1848, the universal suffrage was introduced. Peasants represented 75% of the population. They had the majority by themselves which made them the favorite target of different political movements and led to a period of prosperity for French farmers.

With an economic crisis in 1870, however, difficult times soon returned to the French rural world. Three major factors seem to have caused it. A decrease in prices led to a decrease in farmers' incomes. Some agricultural products disappeared because of technological innovations like nuse of natural colorants or the breeding of silk worms near Lyon, while some new products arriving from the colonies created new competition. Finally, the mushroom phylloxera destroyed most of the French vines. This epidemic had a huge socio-economic impact since vineyards were grown on poor soils.



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This economic crisis led to profound change in the French rural world. Polyculture was abandoned; the different regions specialized

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### French Food in the US

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in a specific type of crop. Vines were replaced by fruits and vegetable crops, livestock and horticulture. At the end of the century, people were leaving the countryside to work in the cities. To face these challenges, the agricultural world organized itself around unions very listened to by the politics. The state started to protect agricultural production and helped farmers get loans. During this period, the rural world started to be infiltrated by the urban one throughout the national service, the introduction of the railroads, the press and mandatory school for children. In the years leading up to WWI agriculture was becoming increasingly reliant on the growing industry and the distribution sector.

#### **THE 20TH CENTURY: MORE SPECIALIZED AGRICULTURE TO ACHIEVE FOOD SECURITY AND A BASE FOR EUROPEAN CONSTRUCTION**

The demographic evolution continued, leaving fewer and fewer people working in rural areas. The cities offered a better quality of life especially a better income. The technical progress allowed for increased efficiency, requiring fewer people to work on a farm to produce the same amount of food. All these factors led to the rural exodus. Today, only 3% of the active population works in agriculture. After WWII, self-sufficiency became the major concern in agriculture. The Marshall Plan, the creation of the CAP (Common Agricultural Policy) and two important agricultural bills passed in 1960 and 1962 provided investments to technologically improve every aspect that could impact the yields. The creation of INRA (French National Institute for Agricultural Research) in 1946 helped a great deal raising yields as well as the development of tractors and other farm machinery. Traditional farms were slowly replaced by science-based, business-like farms. Those policies were so successful that overproduction later became a problem leading to a change in agricultural policies. CAP is today more concerned with environmental cross compliance, and ensuring decent revenue for farmers.

In the second half of the 20th century, French farmers, especially young farmers, started a movement to redefine agriculture. For them, farming was to be considered as a job like every other and therefore required specialization, education and should provide the same income as an urban job. But they also wanted agriculture to remain a family activity with strong values. Moreover the landscape was modified a great deal with the concentration of lands to create bigger farms, phenomenon known as le remembrement (land consolidation).



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This desire on the part of the farmers to modernize their agriculture and the agricultural policies led to an intensive, specialized agriculture all over France. But at the end of the 20th century, consumers concerns about the way food was made and its environmental impact led to the development of high quality standards for products (geographic denomination, label rouge), increased organic production, the support of farms in disadvantaged areas, farms providing for local buyers...

#### **THE 21ST CENTURY: A NEW STEP TO PRODUCE MORE AND BETTER FOOD, WHILE PRESERVING THE QUALITY OF OUR ENVIRONMENT**



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Today agriculture still has a very special role in France. Farmers have other responsibilities besides just producing food : working on the landscapes, preserving the biodiversity, keeping some rural areas from becoming empty, providing diversity for food and seeds. French agricultural exports have risen to 9 billion Euros. The bond of French people to their agriculture is very strong. It can be seen through the success of the Agricultural Fair held each year in Paris. Last year more than 650 000 people gathered there, a new



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To learn more:

[History of French Agriculture, Ministry's website](#) (in French)

📌 *evolution, history*



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