Welcome to the most delicious place on Earth: France. No country is more famous for its food, and no people are prouder of their tradition of elegant cuisine and fine dining than the French. Stroll through any city neighborhood or village square, and breathe in the smell of freshly baked bread. Duck into a cozy café for a sip of creamy chocolat chaud (hot chocolate) and a nibble of sticky, sweet apple tart. Admire the tempting sausages and hams hanging in market windows, and watch farmers delivering fresh cheeses and baskets overflowing with just-picked vegetables.

You can also see something else in almost any French city or large town: The golden arches of McDonald’s. This American fast-food restaurant is everywhere in France, with some 1,200 already established and more opening every
month. McDonald’s earns more money in France than in any country other than the United States.

How did McDonald’s win over the French, who are known to cook with the finest and freshest ingredients? The French, whose chefs are world famous? The French, who so cherish their mealtimes?

By becoming more French, that’s how.

At McDonald’s in France, the mustard is spicier and the ketchup isn’t as sweet. Diners can sink their teeth into Big Macs, but they can also choose la Recette au Camembert, a beef sandwich on a hard-crust roll with Camembert cheese. Dessert fans can nibble on la Mandise, bite-size cakes with chocolate-hazelnut filling.

It isn’t just the menus that are different in France. McDonald’s French restaurants are also designed with local dining traditions in mind. Unlike Americans, who are happy to rip open a burger and wolf it down in the car, the French treasure their mealtimes. School children get up to two hours for lunch. While you’re choking down your rubbery pizza in a noisy cafeteria, French kids are dining on four-course déjeuners with their families. Those who can’t go home eat at school, in the restaurant-like cantine, where meals are often served on glass plates with silverware. Many French McDonald’s resemble elegant American restaurants, with large tables, soft lighting, and comfortable chairs.

Not everyone in France is pleased about McDonald’s though, and there have been a number of protests over the years. One of the most famous occurred in 1999, when 300 people marched to a newly constructed McDonald’s in the southern French town of Millau. As bystanders watched and cheered, the protesters destroyed the McDonald’s building. The crowd was led by French farmer José Bové, who later said, “This is an act against McDonald’s. The fast-food chain is a threat to French culture and traditions. They should get out of France!”

Bové was sentenced to three months in prison. He continues to protest the spread of American fast food in France.

Still, the company’s formula of adapting to local palates has been successful, and not only in France. McDonald’s now has far more restaurants overseas than at home and operates in 119 countries. In Mexico, the breakfast menu includes McMolletes, rolls topped with refried beans, cheese, and salsa. In Italy, the Nuovo Focaccino features salami and provolone cheese drizzled with olive oil. Brazilians can get banana pies for dessert. The award for most exciting McDonald’s dish? It should probably go to Japan’s and Singapore’s Shaka Shaka Chicken, chicken pieces served in a spice-filled bag that diners shake up.

Soon, McDonald’s will open its first totally vegetarian restaurants in India, where many do not eat meat for religious reasons.

What’s next? Perhaps someday, when you look up into the sky, you’ll see those golden arches on the moon.
McTACO VS. FRIED CRICKETS: A DUEL IN THE OAXACA SUN

By TIM WEINER
August 24, 2002

The town square in this old city in Mexico is a kind of sacred space. Beside a cathedral, under ancient shade trees, people sit for hours on cast-iron benches, passing time slowly, framed by stone arches glowing golden in the afternoon light.

Two new golden arches may be rising soon. A certain corporation known for its hamburgers—back in time. It is famous for its seven varieties of mole (MOH-lay), a painstaking sauce that can take three days to make; tamales baked slowly in a banana leaf; and those crickets, which take a long time to catch but have far more protein, fewer calories, and less fat than ground beef. (They taste like grass-fed shrimp.)

Public opinion favors those old tastes.

Oaxaca may be the poorest state in Mexico. Some people wonder whether it can afford to reject any form of foreign investment. “Oaxaca was isolated from the world for so long that any change feels like an onslaught,” said Iliana de la Vega, 42, who runs a restaurant off the zócalo. “Now, I’m not in favor of McDonald’s. But there are people who want their business. And if they follow the rules, pay taxes, give people jobs—you can’t outlaw that, can you?”

The argument now lies in the hands of the city government. But this may be less an issue of politics and power than of taste and time. Can a company that prides itself on speed and uniformity fit in a place where people value taking their time and making food by hand?

“Real food is not frozen meat,” said Jacqueline García, 24, who runs Toñita’s, a food stand. “It’s fresh cheese and crickets. McDonald’s belongs in the United States, not our zócalo.”

NOTE: McDonald’s was not granted permission to open in the zócalo. There are McDonald’s in other parts of Oaxaca, however.

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