



Mother KNOWS BEST

French chef Eugénie Brazier was the first person to earn six Michelin stars in the 1930s and her restaurant in Lyon is still going strong, as **Paola Westbeek** finds out

Though the majority of chefs lauded in the prestigious *Guide Michelin* have been men, there is one woman whose culinary talent elevated her to legendary status.

Fiercely passionate about her craft and a perfectionist who ran her kitchen with an eagle eye, she has been an inspiration to France's leading chefs, yet her name is often forgotten in the pages of culinary history.

From peasant girl to *cuisinière*

For Eugénie Brazier, born on 12 June, 1895 in La Tranclière, Ain, the road to success was marked by hardship but followed with a hearty dose of determination.

She had already experienced a taste of real work by the tender age of five, when she was assigned the task of looking after the pigs and horse on the family farm. Even though the young Eugénie grew up with barely enough to eat, some of her fondest food memories took place during those early years.

Her favourite meal, taken in the fields with her mother, was a light broth of vegetables and eggs poured over bread. She learned to make tarts at her mother's side, saw how animals were butchered and was taught that nothing should ever go to waste. After her mother's death, when she was only 10 years old, Eugénie was employed on various farms, leaving her little time for school. By 19, she had acquired a job looking after a wealthy family in Lyon and it was there that her culinary talent truly blossomed.

A few years later, she honed her skills at renowned restaurant La Mère Fillioux, learning to create the classics that would make her famous. Among them artichoke hearts with foie gras, pike *quenelles* with a langoustine cream



sauce, and the most iconic of all, *volaille demi-deuil* (truffled Bresse chicken poached in an aromatic bouillon).

A leap of faith

In 1921, Eugénie decided to follow her heart and used her savings of 12,000 francs to transform an old grocery store and bar in Lyon into a restaurant. La Mère Brazier's first menu consisted of crayfish and mayonnaise followed by roasted pigeon with peas and a dessert of brioche filled with flambéed apples.

Word of mouth had customers flocking to Eugénie's table and soon her humble restaurant was frequented by the likes of

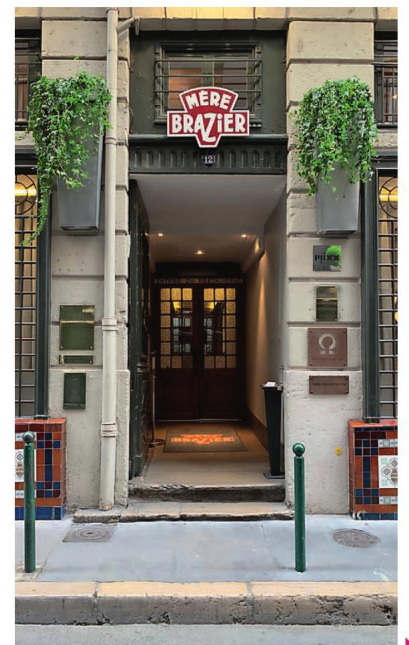
Above: Eugénie Brazier and her staff outside of her restaurant in Col de la Luère

Left: Brazier at work, always immaculately dressed with her hair in a tidy bun

Right: The restaurant Mère Brazier in Lyon today

Charles de Gaulle and Marlene Dietrich. Respected food writer Elizabeth David declared her *sole meunière* the best she'd ever eaten, and even discerning culinary critic Curnonsky called Eugénie "*la meilleure cuisinière du monde*".

Seven years later, exhausted and in need of a break, Eugénie purchased an old wooden shed some 20km outside Lyon in Col de la Luère. Slowly, she turned her little country retreat into a second restaurant, at first only open at weekends. It was there that the young Paul Bocuse apprenticed, learning everything from chopping wood and milking cows, to choosing the best ingredients.





DID YOU KNOW
The name *Mères lyonnaises* refers to the female cooks who gave birth to Lyon's gourmet reputation

In 1933, Eugénie's simple and elegant cooking earned both restaurants the distinguished three-star accolade, making her the first chef ever to hold six stars simultaneously. A monumental achievement and one that would remain unmatched until 1998, when Alain Ducasse became the second chef to secure six stars at once.

Since then, Michelin has recognised other female chefs such as Carme Ruscalleda, Anne-Sophie Pic and Dominique Crenn with a three-star rating.

Continuing her legacy

Despite her unprecedented success, Eugénie remained modest, even turning down the Légion d'Honneur award, saying that "it should be given out for doing more important things than cooking well and doing

the job as you're supposed to". Offered a position at New York's Waldorf Astoria with an annual salary of \$150,000, she refused, not wanting to leave her native France or son Gaston.

Perhaps shunning the limelight is the reason her name is not widely known. Her influence, however, is indisputable. In the foreword to her posthumously published cookbook, *Les Secrets de la Mère Brazier* (1977), Paul Bocuse wrote: "Plenty of chefs have left a mark with more or less brio, but few have left such an indelible imprint on the world of cooking as la Mère Brazier, whose legacy, even today, remains one of the pillars of global gastronomy."

The English version of the book, which contains more than 300 recipes, was published as *La Mère Brazier: The Mother of*

Above: Brazier with her son, Gaston

Modern French Cooking in 1914. In 2008, Mathieu Viannay took over the restaurant on Lyon's Rue Royale, giving her recipes a subtle, modern twist and making sure her culinary tradition continues to live on.

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Below: Brazier at work



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French cooking in London

PHOTOS: LA MÈRE BRAZIER, LYON