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Pastis endures as a symbol of southern French culture and conviviality

Anise-flavored spirit from Provence maintains its popularity as both an aperitif and culinary ingredient in France and abroad

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Pastis, an anise-flavored spirit, has become a symbol of social life in southern France, particularly in the Provence region and the city of Marseille. Its origins trace back to the early 20th century, following the ban on absinthe in France in 1915. Absinthe, once

popular for its strong herbal profile and high alcohol content, was prohibited after being linked to health concerns and social unrest. This left a gap in the market for anise-based drinks, prompting producers to seek alternatives that would comply with new regulations.

In 1932, Paul Ricard, a young entrepreneur from Marseille, developed a recipe for an anise liqueur that did not contain wormwood, the banned ingredient in absinthe. Ricard’s creation quickly gained popularity and became known as pastis de Marseille. The name “pastis” comes from the Provençal dialect, meaning “mixture,” which refers both to its blend of ingredients and the way it is traditionally served—diluted with water.

The production of pastis involves macerating star anise, licorice root, and a variety of Mediterranean herbs such as fennel, cardamom, coriander, and angelica root in a neutral alcohol base. Each producer keeps their exact recipe secret, resulting in subtle differences between brands. After maceration, the mixture is either distilled or filtered before being blended with water and sugar to achieve the desired flavor and alcohol content, typically between 40% and 45%. The drink’s yellowish hue comes from natural plant extracts rather than artificial coloring.

Pastis is most commonly sold in 70cl or 1-liter bottles and is widely available in supermarkets, specialty stores, and restaurants throughout France. French law protects the name “pastis,” requiring that any product labeled as such meets specific standards regarding composition and production methods.

When served, pastis is poured into a glass—usually about 2 to 3 centiliters—and diluted with four to six parts very cold water. This addition of water causes the drink to turn cloudy white due to the emulsion of essential oils that are not soluble in water—a phenomenon known as “louche.” This transformation is part of the ritual of drinking pastis and is often enjoyed on café terraces or during games of pétanque.

On the nose, pastis offers intense aromas of anise and licorice with hints of Mediterranean herbs. The palate is marked by a strong anise flavor balanced by sweetness from licorice and freshness from herbs. The texture is creamy due to its essential oil content, and it leaves a long aromatic finish.

While pastis is most often enjoyed as an aperitif with simple snacks like olives, almonds, or fresh cheeses, it also features in several classic cocktails. The “Mauresque” combines pastis with almond syrup; the “Tomato” adds grenadine; and the “Perroquet” uses mint syrup for a refreshing twist. Some variations include lemon juice or tonic water for different flavor profiles.

In Mediterranean cuisine, pastis pairs well with seafood such as sardines, anchovies, and mussels. Chefs sometimes use it to add depth to fish stews or sauces. In desserts, small amounts can be found in sorbets or tarts to provide a subtle aromatic note.

The popularity of pastis grew rapidly after its introduction in the 1930s thanks to brands like Ricard and Pernod. These two companies eventually merged in 1975 to form Pernod Ricard, now one of the world’s largest spirits groups. Other notable brands include Pastis 51, Henri Bardouin, and Casanis.

Today, pastis remains closely associated with French culture and lifestyle—especially during summer months when its refreshing qualities are most appreciated. Its export has increased across Europe and beyond as interest in traditional spirits grows internationally.

Although similar anise-flavored liqueurs exist elsewhere—such as Greek ouzo or Italian sambuca—French pastis stands out for its unique blend of botanicals and its deep connection to Provençal traditions. Its role as both a social beverage and a culinary ingredient ensures that it continues to hold a special place on tables across France and abroad.