

# Nuns at Work



CONVENT FOOD IS BACK IN FASHION. Over the centuries the foods produced by nuns have hardly changed, even in increasingly consumerist societies. The nuns are finally reaping their reward. Their products follow old recipes using ingredients that have historically been grown right on the premises or sourced locally. They are therefore intrinsically organic and fair trade—and have been for ages, long before these terms became chic. Their foods are also inherently traditional, encapsulating a specific sense of time and place. The French convey this quality in a single word—*terroir*—which reflects a longing to return to a time when gastronomy was still embedded in both cultural traditions and the environment.

Most European convents have a quaint little shop where they sell their own products alongside those from

others. Beeswax, herbal teas, jams, soaps, CDs, and books—the randomness of the selection is part of the charm. The products vary from one convent to the next, depending on the religious orders and their connections with other convents and monasteries throughout the world. In 1989 the word *monastère* (meaning “from a monastery or convent”) was trademarked to help promote and protect thousands of products and to keep outside companies from falsely capitalizing on claims to monastic origin.

French Benedictine liqueur and Belgian Trappist ales are still often thought to originate from the medieval monasteries of their birth. In fact, however, the recipes and names for these were sold to business ventures in the 1950s, at a time when the religious communities were unable

or unwilling to develop commercial strategies and their products were perceived as outdated. These products bring in lucrative royalties, but for the most part the monasteries no longer benefit from them. Society’s increased mechanization of food production and the aggressive tactics of multinational companies have not been entirely negative, as most of convents continued to produce food on a small scale, keeping thousands of traditional, local products alive. These products relied entirely on the convents’ reputations; by selling locally to trusting clients, they were able to remain self-sufficient. With the turn of the twenty-first century, however, the lack of funding and an insufficient number of new acolytes have forced convents and monasteries to seek new ways to gain financial independence.

**Left to Right:** *The hectic activity of an Orthodox nun contrasts with the silent convent outside at the Monastère de la Protection-de-la-Mère-de-Dieu in Solan. Baking toasts at the Convent of St. Margarita on Pag, Croatia, is a high-precision task; if left too long they will burn. Dulces made of apple jelly await topping with pastry at the Santa Maria del Socorro Convent in Seville. A Benedictine nun poses with some bread at the St. Margarita Convent on Pag.*

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Luckily, their venerable products are experiencing an extraordinary revival.

The foods produced in convents and monasteries reflect a hierarchy of gender. Monks handle the more vital aspects of the food chain, such as alcoholic beverages, cheeses, and meats, while nuns are limited to secondary products such as jam, biscuits, cakes, and herbal teas. The nuns' food production is deeply rooted in specific tradition and place; it has the additional appeal of a nurturing, feminine home cooking even as it represents a contemporary entrepreneurial approach.

The Benedictine nuns at the Convent of St. Margarita on the island of Pag, Croatia, bake *baskotini*, large golden toasts that are not found anywhere else. Long, elegant, and fragile, these plain toasts are packaged in simple plastic bags and sold directly from the convent's front door. Customers ring a bell, and through a rotating device that limits contact between the nuns and the outside world they exchange money for the precious baked goods.

The Franciscan sisters at the Santa Maria del Socorro Convent in Seville bake traditional *dulces* that reflect the lasting Moorish influence on Spanish cuisine. It is difficult to imagine that only four nuns are responsible for the thousand of pastries produced in their tiny kitchen; their efficiency is stretched to the limit during Christmas and Holy Week. Like most Andalusian monasteries, Santa Maria del Socorro is well known for its *dulces*, but it cannot survive on them alone. Several bedrooms of the sixteenth-century convent have been converted into guest rooms for tourists. Even so, the community's survival remains uncertain.

Near Liège, the Belgian Cistercians at Abbaye de Brialmont were advised by the Ministry of Agriculture to grow mushrooms, and the government subsequently helped them transform their old-fashioned farm into a high-tech production facility. Most of the mushrooms show up in local restaurants and shops; any that are unsold find their way into soups and savory tarts that the nuns themselves enjoy.

The Orthodox Monastère de la Protection-de-la-Mère-de-Dieu in Solan, France, is a very young community that dates back only to 1993, when a piece of land and an old *mas* were converted into a vineyard and winery. The nuns had to learn wine making from scratch, a process that took years. They have finally developed their own identity in a difficult market, producing organic wines—*les vins du monastère de Solan*—that have achieved considerable recognition and success.

That the nuns in all of these European communities have managed to shake off the musty, old-fashioned image of their products bears testimony to their tenacity and imagination. Yet, despite their creative strategies, there remains an underlying sadness that some extraordinary food products will eventually be lost along with the passing of the last generation of nuns and monks. ●

**Left to Right:** *Cake making in the relaxed atmosphere of the kitchen at the Santa Maria del Socorro Convent in Seville. Packing is the last stage before the goods are sent to the shop at this convent. Cistercian nuns at the Abbaye de Brialmont near Liège, Belgium, will use these dried mushrooms in savory dishes. Solan's massive garden allows the nuns to experiment with different kinds of preserves at the Monastère de la Protection-de-la-Mère de Dieu.*

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