



Kevin Bonnaud is hiEurope's France correspondent. He reports on new and unknown places for you to discover.

# From Luxury Shoes to Gourmet Ravioles

By Kevin Bonnaud

*Romans is a worthy inland detour for gourmet lovers visiting the Northern Rhone Valley. The production of Dauphiné Ravioles (Ravioles du Dauphiné), a local specialty, has overshadowed the footwear industry in a city labelled the historic capital of luxury shoes. The takeover of the iconic Mère Maury factory by former footwear manufacturer Serge Manoukian is a case in point.*



144 has always been a sort of magic number in the Manoukian family. When they still made shoes, the luxury textile brand used to buy batches of 144 pins or buttons. Though the family's new business has nothing to do with fashion, their 19 employees now use the same medieval unit of measure to make thin, 1 cm squares of ravioli filled with cheese and parsley that are known as Ravioles du Dauphiné. Each individual portion includes 144 ravioles, three sheets of 48 to be precise.



## A Preserved Tradition

That's a lot of small pasta-shaped pillows to produce – around 700 tons a year. That may not be as much as the 4,000-plus tons produced by other manufacturers, but quantity isn't the point, Grégory Manoukian, son of the shoemaker, explains. "We are not interested in producing as many ravioles as possible. We are all about high-quality products made through a traditional process."

Walking down the factory's halls from one production room to another, visitors see the different steps of the process as they happen. One machine mixes flour, water, eggs and colza oil into dough. Here is the difference between a ravioli and a ravioles – the latter is bigger, and made of tougher dough. The dough is folded and put into a rolling machine. This old traditional process guarantees the quality of the finished product. "We let the fillings stand for two days, so the ingredients can develop into tasty flavours before stuffing them into the dough pockets. This is the haute couture of ravioles making," Manoukian told hiEurope.

The forming machines, which they call raviolatrices, give the final shape to the ravioles by making them go through a freezing tunnel. At the end, the little square pillows fall into containers and are put into bags by employees.

## Woodcutters

Dauphiné ravioles have been part of the local identity and holiday menus for generations. In the late 16th century, Italian woodcutters came to the area to help their French counterparts transporting tree trunks to build dams. "Deprived of Italian ravioli, those loggers reproduced their favorite dish while adding St. Marcellin cheese and parsley found here," Manoukian told hiEurope. The French loggers asked their wives to learn to cook this Italian dish. They did so, but according to their own recipes, and soon they were known as the ravioleuses of the village. Nowadays, a group of women try to keep the tradition alive during an annual food fair held in the town of Eymeux. Here, once a year, they make ravioles by hand, just like their ancestors.

The story of Mère Maury began in 1885 when Marie-Louise Gélibert and her husband Annet Maury bought a café in Romans. She made her secret raviole recipe for the locals, mostly shoe makers, soldiers, and late night guests who had been to the theatre. She soon became the embodiment of Dauphiné ravioles. "Mère Maury was the first to commercialize what had been mainly a homemade dish. She delivered and cooked ravioles in clients' houses and advertised in newspapers".

Her grandson sold the café in 1940 to invest in a dough filling machine. Thus he began to produce his grandmother's ravioles ten times faster than she had done and sold them in a new delicatessen shop.

New buyers moved the boutique to a former shoemaker's workshop near the train station in 1970.

The adjoining business was run by Serge

Manoukian. "My father made no secret of his interest in purchasing the Mère Maury workshop during a friendly conversation with the owner," Manoukian explains, and that's how things unfolded in 1998.

## New and Gourmet Recipes

The tradition is also perpetuated by Romans' Raviole and Pogne (orange blossom brioche) festival, where locals and tourists can taste original and new recipes from Mère Maury. "My father used to sell a wide collection of clothes and shoes in multiple colors and sizes, so it did not take too long for him to find new recipe ideas of unusual fillings and sizes for the ravioles."

A large range of gourmet stuffings has been tested, from basil to ceps, Reblochon cheese, Bleu d'Auvergne cheese or goat cheese, Burgundy snails, Foie Gras, Provence herbs (more recently), rennet-stomach and even chocolate filling from Valrhona (to eat with egg custard). Those delicious luxury ravioles are bigger and very tasty. "The stuffings burst in the mouth with every bite, as if there were no pasta around them," Manoukian explains.

That's why prestigious French chefs from Alain Ducasse to Anne-Sophie Pic, Guy Savoy along with the Bocuse brasseries have all become regular customers. One of the latest recipes, ravioles filled with truffles, has been co-created with Michelin-starred chef Benjamin Bruno, whose restaurant "Chez Bruno" is in Lorgues, a hinterland village between the Verdon Gorge and the Mediterranean coast. So even there, fine dining on an old traditional dish is possible.



## Tips



### Mère Maury

-100km south of Lyon, 20km east of Valence.

-Mère Maury factory tours for groups [www.raviolesmeremaury.com](http://www.raviolesmeremaury.com)

-Raviole and Pogne Festival – June 2-3