Two centuries ago, ragged and tired, Napoleon’s army camped in the southern French farming village of Bessières, near Toulouse. The general demanded dinner, so his cooks served him up an omelet. But what an omelet—one so good that he commanded all the eggs in town to be gathered and made into an omelet for his hungry men.

This legend may be a tale as tall as that omelet was large, but in six cities around the world, it is remembered annually, just as the ancient Greek games are remembered at the Olympics. Thirty-three years ago, after an Easter mass in Bessières, the townspeople decided to make a giant omelet to commemorate the Napoleonic meal. But this time the purpose was decidedly different: to feed the indigent families in town. Following on the success of this event, the Confrérie mondiale des chevaliers de l’omelette géante (World Fraternity of Knights of the Giant Omelet) was born, and the practice of making a giant omelet soon spread from Bessières (where it is now made on Easter Monday) to Fréjus, France; Malmedy, Belgium; and thence to other cities with francophone histories: Dumbéa, New Caledonia; Granby, Quebec; and Abbeville, Louisiana.

Despite these far-flung locations, “the omelet is the thing, the common bond,” explained Whitney Atchetee of Abbeville, on Louisiana’s Gulf Coast, three hours west of New Orleans. Chevalier Atchetee has traveled to several of the other towns in the confrérie and participated in the making of forty omelets, half of them at home in Abbeville, which cooks up its annual omelet the first weekend of November. When I caught up with him in Granby, in the Eastern Townships, an hour and a half east of Montreal, it was his twelfth visit there.

There are several levels of membership within the confrérie, in order of ascending importance: friend of the confrérie, squire or écuyer, chevalier, maître, and grandmaître. New members “apprentice” for a year to see if they are a good fit within the society. Mostly, it’s a chance for the other members to see how open the new member is to helping out and having a good time.

Though it may be hard to believe, the sole function of the confrérie is to make outsized omelets; its members travel around to the six cities and towns to help their fellows. According to Lisette Therrien, a grandmaster of the Granby branch who lives in Montreal, the only cost to the visiting member is the flight. The host opens his or her door and picks up the tab for everything else, with sometimes unexpected results. Ten years ago, for instance, a chevalier from the confrérie in Bessières, Gérard Arnoult, asked Therrien if his son Ricardo could visit. Ricardo was a young man then, only twenty-two and somewhat aimless. He ended up apprenticing himself to a bread maker in Quebec, and after several years of working for the designer bakery Première Moisson, he opened his own boulangerie in Boucherville, southeast of Montreal on the opposite side of the St. Lawrence River. “He’s now the top bread maker in the province,” Therrien proudly informed me. Ricardo Arnoult supplies the Granby confrérie with ten-foot-long baguettes every year for the June 24 making of the giant omelet and was recently named the confrérie’s maître de pain.

While a giant omelet unites the various towns, each has a regional flavor. The Louisiana omelet, with its onions, sweet peppers, crawfish, Tabasco, and other spices, is heavily influenced by Cajun and Creole cooking traditions. “It's
what we do. It’s Cajun,” Atchetée explained. “In Fréjus, they use herbes de Provence. Each is a little different. What’s the same is the friendship.” In Belgium the omelet is made with pork lard while the original, in Bessières, is, like the one in Granby, made in a more traditional fashion.

Because the participating cities vary so much in population, there is no competition over the size of the omelet. And besides, such rivalry would result in wasted food, which goes against the spirit of the omelet made in Bessières in 1973, when nothing was wasted in the making. The confrére carefully calculates how large an omelet to make based on how many people are likely to show up. The number of eggs used ranges, city to city, from five thousand to fifteen thousand.

At the Granby omelet making two years ago, there was plenty of friendship to go around, along with lively Quebec music, including the confrére’s theme song, a sentimental little ditty about the knights’ service and loyalty as ambassadors of friendship: “Nous sommes les Chevaliers / de l’omelette pascale / Dans la joie et la gaieté / Nous parcourons / Le monde entier.” (We are the knights of the paschal omelet; we cover the world over in joy and happiness.) There was also a lot of horsing around before the serious work began, all behind a banner that read “J’craque pour toi, mon coco!” the promotional theme of Quebec’s egg producers’ association. It translates rather loosely as “You Crack Me Up!” (The campaign in English is known as “An Egg a Day Is OK.” Much more than egg whites is lost in this translation.)

The knights of the giant omelet, numbering several dozen, marched in, circled the fire—more than eight feet in diameter and piled high with wooden pallets—all the while singing and bopping to the beat. They wore chef’s toques of different styles and sizes and skillet-shaped medallions around their necks with red, white, and blue ribbons. One conférére, when asked how he kept his toque from turning flaccid, smiled devilishly before removing it to reveal a roll of paper towels balanced atop his pate.

After a round of speeches and the introduction of guests from abroad, the chevaliers got down to cracking eggs that had been donated by the Quebec Federation of Egg Producers. Most of the chevaliers cracked eggs one by one—neither with a Cordon Bleu one-handed technique nor with Jamie Oliver’s flashiness, but quickly and steadily nevertheless. As bowls filled with yolks and whites, they were taken away and the contents dumped in one of a dozen large pots, where they were whisked by an electric mixer that looked like a piece of gardening equipment. At the far end of the table, several of the volunteer chefs chopped scallions or sliced bread. As the self-imposed half-hour deadline approached, a couple of journalists joined in to chop. The cooks had no need to worry: They beat their deadline by ten minutes.

The recipe for Granby’s omelet—a huge scrambled egg, really—is familiar to most Quebecers: eggs, salt, parsley, thyme, pepper, scallions, and olive oil. In this case, however, the quantities are staggering: fifteen thousand eggs, four liters of salt, five thousand scallions, and twenty liters of extra-virgin olive oil. As for the dry herbs and pepper, well, there was a lot. And there had to be: This omelet was calculated to serve ten thousand.

When no pallets were left to burn, a crane lowered a giant multilegged cast-iron pan over the fire. As it heated,
knights dumped in the olive oil to bring it to temperature. Then, with dramatic flourish, they poured in the egg mixture, along with the herbs, spices, and scallions. Most of the chevaliers then braved the heat of the fire—it was already an exceptionally warm day—and took up their “spatulas”—long-handled wooden paddles. As they stirred, the eggs turned green—the color of the scallions and herbs. When the cooking was done twenty minutes later, it became clear that this was an omelet in name only.

Surprisingly, the scrambled-egg omelet was not too rubbery. It was tasty and filling and certainly a pleasure to eat, even if, for some, the pleasure lay only in an “I’ve had a bit of one of the largest omelets in the world” kind of way. Thierry de Beur, who had been maître de cuisson for the event since 2002, said that he finds making the omelet a bit of a challenge but worth it for the people he has met. He was particularly touched when the confrérie made an omelet with twenty-five thousand eggs as a fundraiser during the Just for Laughs comedy festival in Montreal in 2003. “There were homeless people who took plates and then came back with their friends for more. It was a great event. You see, the egg is a life symbol, and we offer life to people.”

Bessières’ Easter tradition is easy to understand in that context, de Beur added. As for Quebec, the confrérie’s omelet is wrapped up in the larger celebration of the provincial holiday, the feast of Saint-Jean-Baptiste on June 24, an occasion of nationalist pride, parades, lots of Labatt Bleue beer, and children’s games. But the feast of Saint-Jean is also a time of renaissance. “Traditionally it is the time to light fires to burn the fields before reseeding. The symbol of rebirth goes much further than just the eggs,” de Beur noted.

Although the making of the giant omelet has its roots in history and its symbolism in religion and nationalism, it is also a celebration of the senses and of generous human spirit. Each steaming-hot plate of eggs at the Granby event was served up with a slice of bread or two and a smile from the chevaliers as the sun glinted off their skillet medallions.