Unlike most staunch Bordeaux gastronomes, France’s latest culinary shepherd, chef Thierry Marx, does not align himself with a particular terroir, or region. He decries produce-worship, believing ingredients always to be in the service of their cooks, and he is convinced that even the noblest of fresh vegetables can be enhanced by some thoughtful tampering. His book, Planet Marx—a recipe collection, coffee-table tome, memoir, and lab manual rolled into one—presumes that we all have liquid nitrogen in our pantries and Paco-Jets, Robot-Coupes, and Thermomixes on our kitchen countertops. In short, Marx’s brand of Marxism is futuristic, globally informed, and intensely creative. So it’s a bit surprising to learn that when it comes to lamb, this iconoclast reveres a local breed and relies on the timeless techniques of roasting, grilling, and steaming.

The thing is, this is no ordinary lamb. This is a Pauillac lamb.

Pauillac natives have always taken their meat with generous helpings of seriousness and pride. To receive an official IGP (protected geographic label) stamp, a Pauillac bleater must be killed in that wine-wealthy village of the Médoc. These animals were originally Poland-born and Romania-reared. But in 2002 Dominique Reyes, president of the Association of the Lamb Pauillac and, since 2003, founder of the Brotherhood of the Lamb, began an on-the-premises breeding operation at his Bergerie des Grands Crus (Sheep-pen of the Great Vineyards) to create a 100 percent of-the-region specimen. His herd of some 420 ewes and a dozen rams complied with all the conditions required to produce other Pauillac lambs, but because his animals grazed on the riverbanks of their eponymous locale, they developed a distinctly local flavor. The prized offspring lived entirely on their mothers’ milk until, at the tender age of two and a half months and weighing no more than twelve kilos, they were led to slaughter.

“The particularity of the flesh is that it is very white, almost clear, and that the fat part of the meat, when cooked, turns very crispy,” Chef Marx elucidates, waxing dreamy about Reyes’s babes in the meadow. “It is a meat that has a very sweet and soft flavor in comparison to other lambs, which taste gamier.” As a member of the Brotherhood of the Lamb, Marx is nearly idolatrous.

Many of Marx’s peers attempt to pare down cuisine—to showcase the natural deliciousness of ingredients for diners, or to simplify complicated restaurant fare for home cooks—but the two-starred Michelin chef does neither. His standard Marxist doctrine is “to give pleasure with the product, using as many techniques as are available today.”

Indeed, in both his professional kitchen at the Château Cordeillan-Bages and in his couture cookbook, Marx takes the comforting basics we know, deconstructs them, and rebuilds them in heady, often chemically altered ways. His coupe-like quiche Lorraine involves lining a crisp, light conical shortbread tuille with strips of bacon and filling it with savory molten custard. His onion soup is served, with a straw, in a sealed bag bearing traces of Gruyère foam and dried onion at its opening. Marx toys with our expectations—rendering the soft elements of a dish crisp, making the hot components frozen, or using a dessert-like appearance as the delightful decoy for an entrée. These fantastic

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constructs and sci-fi maneuvers are all conceived to deliver the best-tasting bite possible.

For the petite Pauillac lamb, there are three possible best bites: the grilled cutlet, the roasted posterior, and the steam-poached shoulder and neck. Marx prefers a tripartite approach, because it allows him to use the entire animal and adapt the preparation to the type of meat. “The roast,” for example—the saddle and leg—“really gets the crispiness of the fat.” The kidneys, liver, and neck are turned into a stuffing courtesy of a sauté in butter and white wine. A portion of the mixture goes inside the to-be-trussed shoulder, which, after a fast pan browning, will get steamed with a heap of rosemary. An easy ten minutes on the grill takes care of the remaining rack. Quick-braised baby potatoes and seasonal vegetables are elegantly humble chaperones. The ultimate accessory? A most basic of sauces—more beurre noir, shallots, thyme, and the deglazed drippings from the roasting. Tout simple.

Such flagrant traditionalism is actually not so far off the Marxian mark. Although the chef has plenty of fun with gadgetry, his target remains unchanged. “If the best way to harness flavor is to grill, roast, and poach, there is no reason to show off how technical you can be, or to be modern just for modernity’s sake. It is all about flavor,” he maintains.

As for trademarking the flavor in question, in 2004, after a hard-won battle, Reyes’s herd obtained the French government’s AOC (appellation d’origine contrôlée, a certification of origin), which, along with its signature mark, an “AP” (Agneau Pauillac) and vine-leaf insignia, insures that the meat has been produced in the region. The federal classification protects the product’s name and promotes increased revenue (prices can be raised justifiably and knockoffs discouraged). But this move was not enough to offset the costs incurred by adhering to the strict standards set for AOC approval. Marx compares Pauillac lamb to Kobe beef: “It is very difficult to work with, not very profitable for the farmers, and very exclusive.” In fact, Reyes found himself unable to turn a profit, and as 2006 came to a close, so did the purebred business and diners’ opportunity to sample one of the world’s best meats.

Yet Marx is not concerned. He emphasizes that what made Reyes’s Pauillacs so special was their restricted diet of maman’s milk and brief, seventy-day lifespan; he is certain that other farmers will find different ways to raise the Pauillac lamb. He has already discovered some fine contenders: one from the north of Spain; another from New Zealand. Marx insists that the geography is not crucial. He even goes so far as to assert that “my terroir is inside me.”

Why, then, go through all the labor and heartache and bother to form a brotherhood, if woolies from other regions are just as tasty? The answer is that even though these counterparts are qualitatively as flavorful, the flavor itself differs from region to region, and, more minutely, from meadow to meadow. Which leads to an essential question: What is a chef’s responsibility to locality?

Before globalism encouraged and championed the itinerant chef and the concomitant multi-continental restaurant empire with outposts in London, Tokyo, Las Vegas, and Dubai, a chef’s horizon was much smaller. It was confined if not to a city or county, then at least to a country. French chefs were born in France and usually remained loyal to the soil on which they were born, either locally or nationally. Now the archetype is changing. Chefs are proud to list stints in northern Spain or Japan on their cvs, to share their cultural backgrounds, and to apply those experiences to the classic, Francocentric curriculum of traditional culinary schools. What is emerging is a cult of the personal that is steeped in a definitively modern brand of multiculturalism.

If we consider the celebrity-chef model—a construct that has mostly been driven by or linked to a cult of personality—then, within that framework, Marx’s conceit that he is his terroir seems, well, conceited, an outburst of hubris. But if we consider Marx differently—as a representative of his individual self whose experience as a person and, subsequently, as a chef has been shaped by a nomadic lifestyle and immersion in myriad cultures and locales—then the notion of being one’s own composite soil from which original products emerge seems less about egotism than about narrative and self-expression.

Indeed, if one reads Marx’s book, or speaks to him, this latter model emerges more clearly. He speaks often of his early childhood in the rundown, multiethnic district of Belleville; of being shunted between his parents’ and grandparents’ houses; and of being forced to move to a makeshift government suburb constructed for Paris’s lower classes. This constant uprooting inspired wanderlust and an easy adaptability, which led to Marx’s sense that home is not identified with a specific place, smell, or taste. The Arab, African, and rustic French cuisines of his Belleville neighbors were later displaced by junk food and generic supermarché offerings. Aside from family, what grounded Marx was studying judo and mastering a practical trade. His apprenticeship in a bakery led him to Tours and his grandparents’ houses; and of being forced to move to a country. He refers to Kobe beef: “It is very difficult to work with, not very profitable for the farmers, and very exclusive.” In fact, Reyes found himself unable to turn a profit, and as 2006 came to a close, so did the purebred business and diners’ opportunity to sample one of the world’s best meats.

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After mastering pâtisserie, Marx went to Lebanon to enlist for the Christian cause. There he endured army life and the violence of war. “I retain, engraved in my memory, this image of a man in the ruins of the Ashrafiyeh district, lighting a brazier among the rooms in order to cook some falafel which we shared, and which will always remain for me the best in the world, with its unforgettable fragrance of cumin and coriander seed mixed with the odors of a street that had been devastated a few days earlier.” This sensual imprint became a type of scar, part of Marx’s biographical roadmap.

Next came the Michelin tour and “proper” training under the acknowledged geniuses of the professional French kitchen—Joël Robuchon, Alain Chapel, Bernard Loiseau, and Claude Deligne and Philippe Legendre at Taillevent. This training gave Marx credibility. But before settling in the Médoc, he traveled to Sydney and New York, Singapore, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Thailand.

All of these experiences shaped Marx’s approach to cooking, his ideas about taste, and his interpretation of dishes—from falafel among the ruins to perfectly seared foie gras chez Taillevent. When describing his book, a literary and gastrological self-portrait, he says, “This book is really a personal work that is the result of my experience in life. There are a lot of influences from my childhood in Belleville—a mix of people from North Africa, from Asia—where I grew up in an atmosphere of different countries, flavors, spices, and smells. Another inspiration is Southeast Asia and the time I spent in Japan. And then there is the pastry, especially the work with chocolate.”

This description is about as far from a marketable catchphrase as one can get. Marx is no Naked Chef, no spokesperson for rustic Italian cuisine or for any one methodology. He is proof that each chef has an inimitable culinary fingerprint, that the food he or she makes is an index tracing the past. Marx embodies the idea that a
person absorbs the terroir of his or her current residence and carries it to the next stop, along with all of the other stops on life’s tour. Nothing can be as local as what emerges from the terroir of a single self. Isn’t this the ultimate localization?

“I had become a pilgrim in a context known for its rigor,” Marx writes in the first chapter of his book, addressing his tour through France as a student of pastry arts. “I progressed without taking root anywhere, discovering with pleasure and curiosity the products of each region or terroir through which I traveled.” What he sends forth now, at Cordeillan-Bages, is not simply a representation of that region’s terroir or of his accumulated regional knowledge, since he is ever mindful of an overarching, macro terroir. Yet it is the micro version, his own, informed by where he has been and how that has led him to incorporate other terroirs, that drives the bites he delivers.

Marx’s model is as adaptable to American asphalt as it is to a French grazing patch. He dreams of opening a restaurant in New York City, a neo-delicatessen that honors one of the region’s most beloved culinary genres. This would be an only-in-New York, only-by-Thierry operation, an apotheosis of the layering of his personal terroir over the terroir of place. Marx’s Deli, he explains, would require collaboration with local chefs in order to beget something locally specific that still evinces a distinctly Marxist flair. If the five boroughs and their immediate environs can offer up their own answer to Reyes’s milk-fed lambs—perhaps a calf that will yield a never-before-tasted pastrami or brined brisket—Marx is the one who can source that infant cow and, by all gastronomic means necessary, extract its absolute essence. Thierry Marx’s talent proves that with or without Pauillac lambs, we can lick our chops and eat them too.