Unlike Rocamadour, Gramat had not one tourist to its name. It was neither ugly nor pretty; residents moved with the efficiency of those uninterrupted by the glamour of miracles. In the midst of town sat a big, fieldstone hotel veined in wisteria, with café tables and umbrellas set out front. The Lion d’Or, The Golden Lion. The tablecloths were starched and pink and the umbrellas white, the silverware heavy and pitted with age but gleaming. I hesitated, suddenly worried it might be too expensive, but the delay proved fateful—the hostess was already indicating a table. I sat and selected from the starter and entrée menus the two items with the most words I was able to understand.

The starter, I knew, would feature foie gras, about which I had an Augustinian opinion: Lord, please give me the strength to forgo eating goose liver pâté, but not yet. After leaving the Gouffre de Padirac I had briefly stopped at a farm stand that sold pâtés and confits. Like nearby Perigord, Quercy is a top producer of foie gras and other goose and duck products. Brochures advertising farm shops and local cooperatives used to be splashed with photos of rugged elderly women in cheerful aprons performing le gavage, the force-feeding of geese. The women sat on something earthy—a stump or a rock, anything to imply that this is a natural, earth-sanctioned act—with a goose firmly wedged between their knees as they expertly shoved a funnel down its throat (over-feeding makes for a plumper and tastier liver). New brochures invariably depict free-range flocks waddling around in front of a handsome stone barn. No animals were in sight whatsoever where I’d stopped, except for a friendly dog that jumped in my car. I’d bought a little tin of rillettes de sanglier—a coarse wild boar pâté—on the likely assumption that no old woman, however brawny, would willingly force-feed a boar.

But now I’d become complicit again. I’d intended to drown my qualms in a glass of Cahors, but recalling that I had to drive after lunch, I waved away the wine list. My young waitress gave me a disapproving look, as if abstinence were a mutual insult. She was slight and dark-haired, and...
“Is Madame pleased?” My young waitress again. I nodded enthusiastically. “Is Madame tasting the flavors of the calendar? Yes?” Her face looked expectant and keenly hopeful. “In this,” she pointed to my plate, “one perhaps tastes the young year and the old?” It was a question I sensed she wasn’t sure I’d be able to answer. But I also had the impression that I’d acquired a tutor driven to cultivate the vocation of eating in those who appeared to lack it. She smiled and clipped off in a whirl of competence, having alarmingly upped the ante of what constitutes lunchtime satisfaction.

M.F.K. Fisher wrote in the thirties about having been virtufully accosted with food, course upon course, by a provincial French waitress fanatically passionate about her job. I had assumed she’d exaggerated the tale, but was now not so sure. A Brittany spaniel raced zigzagging between the tables, and I took a few more bites. My waitress was right. It did taste of all the seasons at once, of promise and fulfillment, of photosynthesis and darkness. I hadn’t noticed. I hadn’t the practice. My eyes usually told me everything I thought I needed to know. Even now they were taking over again.

In the time it takes lightning to strike I saw Neolithic tombs out on the causse and the mires that grew in their shade. I saw Quercy’s aimless drystone walls and the algae clinging to the Gouffre. And then I ate, hungrily. It was one of the three or four best things I have ever tasted.

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I’d seen the same gesture before: on the tympanum of the Romanesque church at Carrenac, a nearby town on the Dordogne built of baguette-colored limestone. Two squat angels rushed toward Christ from either side, bent double to accommodate their corners, round-shouldered and obsequious. With their arms outstretched in front of them they looked precisely as if they were carrying steaming tureens of soup to their savior. They may in fact be the only winged waiters ever recorded on a Romanesque façade. I’d been sketching them when two drunken men had bumped into me and offered to buy me an omelette. “Leave her alone,” shouted an elderly woman as she and her grandson brushed past with a soccer ball. The old woman had been dribbling.

Unlike other churches I’d seen in Quercy, Carrenac’s had been encroached upon by the town. There was no space for awe, no sense of approach, only surprised discovery. You were on top of it before you knew it, face-to-face with a menagerie of beasts that prowled the portal. Duck, wolf, mink, bird, boar. Each bristle on the boar’s back and haunches had been picked out with a chisel, and as if in contradiction to the “wild” in front of his English name, he’d worn a tiny collar with a bell. A pet rather than a creature destined for pâté.

“Voilà, Madame!” My second course had taken me unawares. I decided that I had been too hungry for the first, and that my waitress’s quiz about the seasons had therefore been void. This time, primed but no longer ravenous, I was ready to taste the unseen, ready to take Romanesque art’s leap into the intangible, if not quite the eternal, from the unaccustomed platform of my tongue. For my entrée I had chosen a gâteau de canard—literally, a duck cake—cooked in shallots and pan juices and served in a “mirror of red wine” with wild mushrooms. The cake turned out to be a golden concoction of pureed potatoes; morsels of crispy duck were hidden beneath. A fan of sliced potatoes, each pleat membrane-thin, hovered on top, nesting in a little mound of red cabbage pierced with rosemary and a strip of baked bacon. A tiny wall of mushrooms, fallen under the attack of my fork, tumbled into the dark red, silky lake.

It posed a challenge. There was a gill-tickling sweetness, but also a richness, an almost overwhelming richness so deep it demanded a valley. It seemed to rebuke the flat paleness of the causse. The dish was well beyond me in maturity. It had outgrown spring. Some hitherto unconsulted intelligence in my gullet whispered it was about vitality in the prime of life, about embracing complexity and autumn, whereas the starter, like me, hovered between spring and fall.

I was desperate to communicate at least a fraction of these thoughts to my waitress, but while I’d been eating, an entire orchestra had arrived at the restaurant unexpectedly. The outdoor tables were filling up with men and women carrying awkward instrument cases shaped mostly
like giant pears. The latter had been set down to become a run of rapids in the aisles that the two waitresses navigated with cool, if slightly manic, grace. I decided to keep my gastronomic enlightenments to myself. That I had eaten with appreciation—and probably comic concentration—was more than evident.

No sooner had I concluded this than my young waitress raced past my table, hesitated a millisecond, then turned back. She beamed first at my nearly empty plate and then at me. “Et maintenant, vous me permettez?”—And now, will you allow me? And then so deftly that her fingers never touched my skin, she tucked in the label at the neck of my sleeveless top.

After lunch I was starting my car when I was startled by a tap at the window. It was the man who had sat with his back to me at the Lion d’Or. Was I in a hurry? I said no, not particularly. Why then, he wondered, had I eaten so quickly, and without wine or coffee? I told him I loved wine, but was driving after lunch. He shrugged with contempt.

“Your duck needed a Cahors—Et bien, Pamela, one glass of Cahors!—to come alive again.” I made a face at the thought but he was too serious for humor. “Pay attention: we are not far from the vineyards here in Gramat. The terroirs of Cahors are just down the road. It is your duty to respect locality.”

A pretentious wine shop in Gramat called Atrium sold “Cahors et Grands Vins du Sud-Ouest.” It had the hush of a church and was almost morbidly respectful of its product. The salespeople looked like models. Serge took me there for a brief lecture.

“Serve the young wines with foie gras or Roquefort, and you won’t go wrong,” advised Serge. “And for the older ones, of the causee?” His eyes glowed with eagerness, and we’d only just finished lunch. “Truffles, fowl, wild mushrooms, and les cabécous de Rocamadour. Oui? Vous savez les cabécous?” I explained that I’d tasted the little round pats of goat cheese in the Rouergue. Serge shrugged as if he’d never heard of it. Even though cabécous are also made in the Rouergue, the town of Rocamadour gets all the credit.

Serge helped me pick out a good bottle of mid-priced wine, a 1997 Château de Haute-Serré, and then, before roaring off in his van to sell tiny frocks and overalls, he rolled down the window to give me his telephone number, adding, “Terroir shapes wine. Wine shapes us. Eat and drink well, Pamela, and you will belong to Quercy.”

It was a mediocre pick-up line, but the best I’ve ever heard that came from the stomach rather than the heart.