

A FEAST FOR THE DYING



As he was dying of cancer in 1996, former French President François Mitterrand arranged to have a final meal — a repast worthy

of a man who counted food as a spiritual experience.

The menu included oysters, foie gras, capon, and, finally, ortolan — a tiny bird, consumed whole, that's supposed to represent the French soul. It's now illegal to eat ortolan, since there aren't that many of them. Or so I learned in "The Last Meal," *Esquire* journalist Michael Paterniti's elegiac account of flying to France, then recreating and eating Mitterrand's final repast.

As Paterniti reports, Mitterrand knew that his culinary swan song would, indeed, be his last trip to the dinner table because he'd decided to stop eating after it was through. He died a few days after polishing off the last course, getting it down with copious amounts of red wine.

Not all or even most of us will have the luxury of knowing when our last meal will be. But Paterniti's story got me wondering about what, were I given the chance, I'd choose for my end-of-life menu.

We all have madeleines of our own — something that, once on the tastebuds, returns the past palpably and powerfully to the foreground.

I hail from Louisiana, where many people share Mitterrand's French ancestry, and where, in a nod to the culture, at least half of each day's conversation is about food. The subject of last meals would surely prompt some lively arguments among the neighbors.

A source of debate might involve whether, in bidding adieu to the kitchen, one should follow the philosophy of Marcel Proust, who wrote one of the most famous food scenes in all of literature. In *Remembrance of Things Past*, a character based on Proust himself munches a madeleine, a sublime French cookie that prompts a flood of memories.

We all have madeleines of our own — something that, once on the tastebuds, returns the past palpably and powerfully to the foreground. When I was small, my father served me weekend breakfasts of toasted cheese sandwiches, a meal easily prepared without waking up everyone else. Throughout my life, when grieved by losses large or small — the failed test, the lost brother, the grim headlines — I find myself heading to the toaster, slathering mayonnaise on warm bread, then wedging a square of cheddar between the slices. For me, it's the flavor of family, unconditional love, the faith that things will be OK. A simple dish, I know, but one I'd gladly welcome as the last one on Earth.

What else might I like to sample on my way to the grave? Some of my mother's cornbread dressing, and her eggnog, served warm, the sting of its whiskey a parting thrill on the throat. Or maybe the Greek pasta salad my wife and I have made together all these years, a recipe of such complexity that it requires four hands and five bowls — an elaborate collaboration, like marriage itself.

But a tummy can hold only so much before the Grim Reaper raps on the door. I've charted out my last menu, and you shouldn't wait to plan your own.

DANNY HEITMAN (Southeastern Louisiana University), a columnist for *The Advocate* newspaper in Louisiana, frequently writes about literature and culture for national publications.