Navigating Endimancher

This interview transcript has been *very* lightly edited for clarity.

Emily: All right, and welcome! Thank you so much for joining me today. Can you tell our audience a little bit about you and what you do here in France.

Emmanuel: Alors, my name is Emmanuel Rubin. I’m a French journalist, especially a French *critique gastronomique.* I work on a very well-known French newspaper called *Le Figaro*, and I’m the co-founder of Le Fooding. Twenty years ago, Le Fooding is a new movement of gastronomy in France. We try to change French mentality concerning gastronomy, and this year we are celebrating the birthday of Le Fooding, twenty years ago. That’s a good old age!

Emily: Yeah, a very good old age! And I think a lot of our listeners who are based in France and even abroad are probably familiar with Le Fooding. You’ve got a very popular Instagram tag; you’ve got some amazing reviews on your site, very useful for anyone who’s interested in food. And you and I have had a lot of opportunities to talk about sort of the evolution of French food, and in one of our conversations, you actually introduced me to a word that I had never heard of before, which is *endimancher.* And so that’s the word I want to talk about today. So what does *endimancher* really mean to you? What’s the definition of that word?

Emmanuel: *Endimancher* is a little precious French word. It means that things or persons or people are more beautiful, more elegant, or more tasty than usual. This word comes from *le dimanche*, and as you know, *dimanche* in French, that’s Sunday. And Sunday in France – not only, but also in France – is a very special day. Originally, from the Middle Ages until the *Ancien Régime*, in the 17th, 18th centuries, each person, each family, rich or poor, didn’t work on Sunday, because it’s a free day. That’s a blessed day. That’s the day of God. That’s the tradition of Catholicism. And Sunday, we were going to church, and this day, everyone took care of his outfit; the lunch was particularly very *net* (clear)*.* The cheese, the table, honored God, but also the family and all of the friends that we would see.

And after the *Revolution française* at the end of the 18th century, and with the birth and the development of the French Republic, Sunday remained that particular day. Without church, really, but always free. And the tradition of a special lunch with a lot of dishes has long continued.

And so at the end, when a person is particularly well dressed or a dish is particularly well cooked, we say that this person or that dish are *endimanché.*

Emily: I love that!

Emmanuel: It’s a pretty word.

Emily: It’s such a pretty word! And it’s such a unique concept, because I think France has this really interesting relationship with Sundays in general, because as you said, you have this long history of Catholicism, but then we also have a relatively long, I mean, more than 200 years history, of *laïcité* [Note: [Listen to Emily talk about *laïcité* with author Lindsey Tramuta](https://www.spreaker.com/user/14498309/navigating-lai-cite-with-lindsey-tramuta)!]*,* of secularism, so we’re separating the Church and the State. There’s no reason for Sunday, necessarily, to be this day, and yet even now, people who are not necessarily Catholic or going to church are going to get together with their friends and their family, and they’re going to have a special, long, Sunday lunch.

Emmanuel: France has a long memory, a long tradition, and a long history. There is a rupture, in France, with *la Révolution française,* and the birth of the Republic. But the reality, *la bourgeoisie*, in the 19th century and now, the *bobos* [Note: *bourgeois-bohème* – the subject of a future episode!] are continuing the same tradition as the noble part of French history, during the Ancien Régime. But in the end, we have the same tradition: that’s just a problem with religion. But at the end, the tradition is the same thing. It’s the same symbol of Sunday; just today, nobody goes to Church, or less people. But there’s always this tradition of Sunday, except with Church. Nobody goes to Church now. That’s the reality.

But that will be changed. We spoke about that, I think. Sunday, now, is not the same as 30 years ago. Because I think that France is now in the globalization. And that’s a problem for French people.

Emily: This is something that you and I have spoken about before. And I think it’s really interesting. So we’re seeing this generational change, in France, where we had… if you look at, like, Baby Boomer families, and they were going to be eating not only this big Sunday lunch, but every day, they were going to be eating maybe a four-course meal with an appetizer, and a main, and a cheese, and a dessert. And this is kind of the structure of the French meal that’s protected by UNESCO in 2010. But now you look at the new generations, you look at Generation X, and you look at Millennials, and people aren’t really doing that so much anymore. Is that right?

Emmanuel: Yes, that’s right. You know, during a long time, the French meal is really a constitutive part of French culture. And as you said, that was classified as intangible heritage by UNESCO. But I think really, now, this meal is, I would say, in English, perhaps, an “endangered species.” Really. That’s the end. You know now, there’s a lot of wisdom that can explain why this decline. But really, now, lunch, which *was* a very special moment of gastronomy in France… that’s the end. The time spent cooking is getting shorter and shorter. Same observation for the time spent at the table: shorter and shorter. And I think, because France now is in the open society, France is a country who discovers globalization. And the USA is not for nothing in this situation.

Food, as a way to take a meal, in France, is really Americanized. Or becoming more and more Americanized. Really, that’s… and why? Because first, women work like men. Of course it’s really not a problem. But the women were the ones who produced and reproduced our culinary culture. And now, they have no time. Because at the same time, the world, the cities, the companies go faster and faster and leave less time to people. Because the requests are more numerous; the TVs, the sports, the travel. France really enjoyed leisure society now, you know? So she won some things, but she lost other things. Perhaps not lost… but France gradually is forgetting a part of itself. She lost this France; it’s memorial little. I think now, the French meal, *la gastronomie*, is now more a hobby, not a way of life. We are spending little time at the table; we are cooking on the weekend. But that’s a hobby. That’s not a real way of life.

And I think that begins in the 90s of the last century, and there is a really… with the beginning of the new century, France is a part of the world. And you know that’s perhaps a problem, but for a long time, France considered that it was a country with a lot of exceptions. Cultural exceptions. Food exceptions. Now, that’s the end.

For example. The burger, the hamburger, is one of the most favorite of the French people now. Most favorite dishes in Paris. All the famous cafés, the famous brasseries, serve hamburgers. More than steak-frites. And the burger is the symbol of fast food, of street food. You are eating this burger very quickly with your fingers. You are walking at the same time as you are eating. And that’s a symbol that France is now… French food, the French meal, is a real *fantasme* [fantasy] now. And that’s perhaps why UNESCO classified this French meal. When this French meal was classified, some people said that [it was classified] as French meal entered into a museum. But that’s the reality.

Emily: You’ve raised some really interesting points here. Firstly, I think that when you were talking about cooking becoming less of this part of French life and more of a hobby, it’s true that if you look at Millennials, people like to cook, but they like to cook when they have time. And then a lot of the time, when they don’t have time, they’re going to go on Deliveroo or Uber Eats, and they’re going to get something easy. And in France, it used to be that whether you felt like cooking or not, making dinner was part of the culture; it was part of your day. You had to do it. But you took pleasure in having this tradition, that you were a part of. Is that right?

Emmanuel: Yes, it’s all right! But now, perhaps during the Sunday, we have [still]… we take time. Perhaps on Sunday. But the rest of the week, that’s a *fantasme*, really.

Historically, the French meal was very structured. It is the heir to the meal built in the court of the kings. And then, it was codified by the French *bourgeoisie* in the 19th century. It was structured in several sequences. There is the *hors d’oeuvre,* with vegetables and vinaigrette. After, we have *entrées* called the starters: warm starters. After the first dish, with fish. Second dish, with meat. *Fromages. Entremets.* And desserts. And there was, too, a special attention paid to the table setting. But now, really, that’s a *fantasme.* Nobody takes this time at the table. Perhaps during Christmas. Perhaps during… to celebrate a special day, a birthday or a wedding. But in the French real way of life, now, everybody eats in front of a screen: pizza, burgers… if we speak about the famous cheese. This cheese, this sequence, just before the dessert, just before the sweet. The cheese has almost disappeared in restaurants and in domestic tables.

Emily: Yeah, and this is something that I think maybe Americans would be surprised to know, that in any French house up until maybe, like, what, 20 years ago, 30 years ago, if you were to go to anybody’s house, and you sat down for dinner on any random night, you would have a cheese course. You would have… it might be the cheeses that you have in your fridge; it might be a special cheese plate, if it’s a special day. But you’re always going to have a piece or two of cheese. And if you go to homes, but especially, I know, these days, if you go to restaurants, this cheese course, which is so French and so essential to French terroir and to French producers, is disappearing.

Emmanuel: Totally.

Emily: Right?

Emmanuel: Most French restaurants don’t propose cheese. There is no cheese, now, in restaurants. And when a restaurant serves some cheese, that’s only one or two cheeses. Or sometimes just one piece of cheese on a poor plate. But in reality, there is no cheese. And that’s the same ball as the end of our French meal. When I was young, that was really a fault not to eat all together at the table. That was a fault! [Ed note: *faux pas*.] [If] we are well-educated, well… you stay at the table with your family for the lunch, and especially for the dinner. Now it’s not a problem to eat in front of the TV set, on the sofa… that’s not a problem now! 30, 40, 50 years ago… that was a fault! So that explains why French people are more in the *fantasme* of their French meal. That’s just for me… cooking is now a hobby, like tennis or golf. We are cooking as leisure during the weekend, and concerning this French meal, that’s really a *fantasme.* And especially a *fantasme* in the [mind] of [foreigners]. Because in France, nobody discusses about this situation, except some food critics and foodies. But most people consider it not a problem.

There is some anecdotes. In France, there is a TV program, very well known, that’s called *Top Chef.* That’s a culinary show with all young chefs who cook on TV doing some battles. I don’t know; I have no TV set.

Emily: Yeah, this competition, this *Top Chef* competition. Very popular.

Emmanuel: A lot of people watch this program. Very excited! A lot of people are very excited with this competition, and they say how this young chef will be the winner, and all French people are watching *Top Chef!* But they are watching *Top Chef* in front of their TV set, and in the same time, they eat pizza, or burgers, or Deliveroo meals. There is a total paradox. People are watching culinary competition programs, and at the same time, they are eating some poor meals in front of the TV set. And then the French paradox and the French contradiction. And this program is a symbol of the *fantasme* of the French meal and French cooks now. For me.

Emily: Absolutely. Because there is this *fantasme*, this fantasy of the French meal, and we have that… we always had that abroad. I grew up in the United States, and I feel like my mother was always very proud, because she had lived in France, and she said, “No, we in this house, we always eat at the table together.” But that was perceived, in America, as being a very French thing to do. And the reality is that now, a lot of French people have this image, this fantasy, this *fantasme*, that that’s what they’re doing. That they still have this structure and this tradition and these norms around their meal, but the reality is that they’re sitting on the sofa, watching *Top Chef*, watching these chefs compete, and they’re not actually sitting down to dinner with their families quite so much anymore.

Emmanuel: Yes, that’s also a question of *nostalgie.* That’s a *fantasme*. And at the same moment, a *nostalgie*. And you know, in France now, we have this kind of problem, not only concerning cooks or food or French meals, but all of society’s questions about politics. That’s always the same thing in France. We are very difficult to consider our history, our past, and our reality. And the world’s reality. And that’s the same debates, discussions, concerning politics, concerning a lot of things. And that’s the real problem of the French or France now. That’s the end of our culture. Of our civilization. And at the same time, because of *nostalgie,* we have a lot of difficulties to open in the new world, in the open society, in the globalized world. That’s very difficult for us, because we have too much *nostalgie* about our past. But that’s only a *fantasme.* That’s only *nostalgie.* The reality is that life, now, is yet in the open society. But it’s difficult to lose this past. Just a difficulty to lose this past, to say goodbye to all that, but the real life is now we are a nation between the nations. We are in open society. And now we are eating some burgers, some pizzas, some poor sushi, in front of the TV set, as in England, as in the USA, as the *cité monde* [global city] that just, I would say in English, for French people, that’s a *déchirure* [rupture].

Emily: It’s a tear. It’s a break.

Emmanuel: It’s a break. Not all people! I think that Millennials don’t ask this kind of question. But all the Baby Boomers, the Boomers, and all the society is in this break. Between the end of our culture and the new world. And I think that’s the most problem for the French people now. Accept to say goodbye to his past and set to enter into the new world.

Emily: And you can have this… what you’re referring to is this really interesting sort of society-wide nostalgia. It’s not individual nostalgia. It’s a nostalgia of a whole generation for this meal that used to be a staple, that used to be normal for everybody, and that at the time that we’re protecting it with UNESCO is already, as you said earlier, kind of endangered.

But when you personally think about your own nostalgia for your childhood and this Sunday meal, what do you remember it as being? Did you have it at home or with grandparents? Aunts and uncles? Or was it just with your parents? I mean what did that look like for you: the Sunday meal, the Sunday lunch?

Emmanuel: It depends! Sometimes with all my family: uncles, aunties, granny, and sometimes just my parents and my four brothers. But each Sunday, that was very important to eat together. Really, during 20 years! Til my first step in studies, I was with my parents and with my family each Sunday at lunch. Perhaps not each Sunday, but two Sundays by month. It was an important… and that’s not very important. That’s as a reflex! OK, Sunday, I go to my family, with my girlfriend or no. OK!

When I was with my first girlfriend, one week we were eating with my family, and the week after, I was eating with my girlfriend’s family. But that’s a real tradition! Now it’s totally exploded. My girl [daughter] is 18 years old. Perhaps she is coming to take a meal… \*laughs\* with her family, perhaps one Sunday… per three? Sundays you do other things! But that’s the end! And I’m not an exception. My family is the same of all the French families, and especially in the cities, perhaps. It’s different in *province,* in the countryside, I’m not sure. But in big cities, *les villes monde*, the world cities, like Paris, that’s the end. Really, this is a part of education. Now, we have no time. It’s difficult to explain to our children that this meal is a part of our culture. Because the real society is more stronger than our culture. But when I was five, ten, fifteen years old, it was really a part of *éducation.* [Note: In French, this word has a slightly different connotation – a topic of a future episode! – but relates here to the way in which children are brought up.] You have to eat with your family. It was really important. It’s a time, a precious time, where everybody is in the same moment at the same table, and we can discuss about our problems, or we can discuss about politics, or nothing! But we are together at the table. And that’s not only a question of food, but really a question of culture.

Emily: And that is such an important part of this meal is… so I first came to France 20 years ago. I was fourteen years old, and I was living with a French family in the North. And I remember that every single Sunday, I would sit down with the parents and the four children in this family, and me, and we would have this lunch, where we would start with an [*aperitif*](https://www.spreaker.com/user/14498309/navigating-apero-with-forest-collins), [Listen to Emily talk *apéro* with cocktail expert Forest Collins!] and I was fourteen, so it was like a bit of Pulco, with the little snacks, and then you have the appetizer, and then you have the main, and then you have the cheese, and then you have the dessert, and then you have a piece of fruit, and then you have coffee, and it would last for three, three and a half hours, and it was every single week like this. And that’s only twenty years ago! But you’re right that as this generation, my generation, I was fourteen, then, and now I’m 34, so my generation is the one that’s supposed to be cooking, and nobody cooks like that in my generation. Nobody thinks, I’m gonna make a five, six, seven-course random Sunday afternoon lunch.

Emmanuel: That’s why I explained that that’s not a real problem, but women work now, like men. I don’t know, but I’m sure that according to your experience in the North of France, that was a woman who cooked.

Emily: Yes…

Emmanuel: And now, they have no time, women, who want to have the same lives as men. Thirty years ago, women cooked on Sunday for all the family. Really. Women were the ones who produced and reproduced culinary culture. When she decided to… that’s not a woman’s decision, but when society changed, and women changed, in the same way, this woman wants a lot of things, but perhaps we are losing the *instant de la cuisine.*

Emily: The culinary moment.

Emmanuel: For me that’s not a problem! It’s just a reality. A matter of facts. That’s the way. And you know, if women decided to stop cooking, that’s not men who said, “Sure, no problem, I will cook.” No! \*laughs\* Men forgot.

Emily: Well, I will say, the longest Sunday lunch I ever went to, I went to lunch at 12 o’clock, and lunch finished at 8 o’clock in the evening. And that was a Sunday lunch that was cooked by a man. And it was one of the longest French lunches I’ve ever been to in my life, but it was, I mean, it’s about conviviality! It’s about conversation! It’s about… sitting at the table.

Emmanuel: Yes, but we are beginning with the lunch at noon, with aperitif, as you say, and then during three, four hours, we are eating and speaking about politics, about family, about a lot of things. But at 6 pm, all families decide to say, “Oh, so we are… now we prepare the dinner.” So from noon to 10 pm, we are just at the table! That’s not possible now! I understand that. But it disappears. This French meal disappears. And this part of culture of French people disappears.

Emily: So in your home, do you still eat Sunday lunch?

Emmanuel: Yes.

Emily: And what does Sunday lunch look like in your house?

Emmanuel: But yes, but that’s a symbol of relationships. Because some Sundays you are with your family, and the next Sunday, you receive your friends, and the next Sunday, these friends receive you, and every month, each Sunday, you pass at the table some time with your family, some time with family of your mother-in-law. Sometimes with friends. But each Sunday you have a good meal and a long meal. That’s not only a family symbol. That’s also a relationship symbol. Because everybody receives everybody.

Emily: It’s a constant invitation of, oh, we’re going to this friend’s house, and now we’re going to grandma’s house, and now we’re going to our brother’s house, and always moving around…

I know that in restaurants, there’s a lot of importance paid to the *arts de la table*, the way that a table looks and the table setting and the tablecloth and the glasses. Is that true in someone’s home, too?

Emmanuel: Oh, yes. That’s the word, *endimancher.* There is really a special attention paid to the table setting that was very important on Sundays. Each day of the week, we are eating in family, but usually in the kitchen. But Sunday, that’s not in the kitchen, you receive. You receive in the *salle à manger* [dining room]. It was very important to have a beautiful table with a tablecloth, you know? That’s another symbol, that’s the tablecloth. Every Sunday, in the *salle à manger*, you put the tablecloth on the table. And now, in France, tablecloths are disappearing. And not only in a domestic way. In restaurants, there is no more tablecloths. You know the white tablecloth, which is a symbol of French culture and the French meal. It has disappeared. Most Parisian restaurants have no tablecloth on the table. And it’s a little symbol, but I think it explains this end of a special culture.

Emily: And what will you usually make today for a Sunday lunch in your home? Do you cook a Sunday lunch? Do you have someone in your house who does a Sunday lunch or will you go out? What do you like to do?

Emmanuel: Two things: First thing, I’m a food critic, so on Sunday lunch, I’m in a restaurant. But I’m a particular man. But with my family, I have three children, a little boy who’s six years old, so he’s a very little boy, and then I have an [older] son and an [older] daughter. But it’s not possible to convince them to share a meal on Sunday; it’s very difficult. They have always something to do. Sometimes it’s possible, but it’s really difficult. But! With my parents and with my friends, we are trying to really, one Sunday per month, to make a big lunch together. But with my children, it’s difficult.

Emily: Yeah, if your children are 20 and 18, yeah.

Emmanuel: I can’t reproduce what my parents have learned [taught] to me. It’s difficult, really.

Emily: Because you grew up going home and seeing your parents for Sunday lunch, and with your children, they’re 18, they’re 20, they want to see their friends, they don’t want to come home, they don’t want to make the time…

Emmanuel: Yes, but when I was 20 years old, I *had* to take time with my parents. That’s the rules! Now it’s impossible. So perhaps because my children decided to live their lives, and no problem, but 30 years ago, that’s not a problem to live your life. You accept to – and you are really happy – to pass some time, and especially a meal with your parents. That’s the tradition. And now that’s not a tradition. That’s the past. That’s just a *nostalgie.* And sometimes, we are playing to this great meal all together, but perhaps one or two Sundays a year. And especially during Christmastime. But really, that doesn’t take place anymore. Perhaps in the countryside. And I’m not sure really. But in big cities, that’s disappeared.

Emily: So we’re losing this balance between family life and family tradition and sort of the… living your life, going out and doing what you want. That balance that used to happen where Sundays were sacred, even though we didn’t have the religious component of it, but Sundays were sacred for family, for tradition. That’s kind of ending in France. Or has ended already.

Emmanuel: That’s a pity! For me.

Emily: It is a pity!

Emmanuel: For me. But you know, I am 52 years old, so I’m not a young man. I’m not an old man! But I’m not a young man. But I’m a symbol of this generation who lives between the past and the present. It’s difficult for my generation to accept to lose a part of his education, a part of his culture. And in the same time, it’s important to appreciate that your children and society opens in a new century, perhaps. But it’s just difficult to live. Not to accept! I accept that society is changing. But it’s difficult, sometimes, to live. Because… and especially when you are 50 years old, because you say, oh, you begin to have some *nostalgie*, some *melancholia.* It was a good time. It was not better in the past, but it was really a good time. And sometimes you don’t understand why, in a shorter time, all this culture has disappeared. You know? With the beginning of the new century, we discovered that a lot of symbols of French culture disappeared. And it’s difficult, sometimes, to accept this matter of fact.

Emily: Absolutely.

Emmanuel: Not to accept, but to understand, sorry. I accept, but sometimes, it’s difficult to understand: but why? Why can’t we take time to eat together on Sundays or on Saturdays? Why? So you don’t understand. You say, “that’s just crazy.” But I accept. And we will see the next steps.

Emily: Now obviously we talked about… this Sunday meal is about a lot more than just the food, it’s about what you’re talking about – and you can talk about almost anything! You can talk about politics; you can talk about art; you can talk about thoughts; you can talk about anything. But of course, we’re all very interested in what is on the table. Do you have a favorite Sunday lunch menu? Something that you love to serve or love to eat on a Sunday?

Emmanuel: Yes, I have – so it’s always the same thing. My mother is native of Burgundy, and Burgundy – la Bourgogne – is a very well-known gastronomic area. And so my mother has cooked, really, a lot of Burgundy specialties. First, *les oeufs en meurette*. *Les oeufs en meurette* is eggs with a red wine sauce. It’s very difficult to prepare, but very exciting to eat. First, *les oeufs en meurette.* And then it’s *boeuf bourguignon.*

Emily: Oh, delicious.

Emmanuel: That’s beef with a very strong sauce with red wine. So red wine with the eggs, for the first [course]. Red wine sauce with the *boeuf bourguignon.* After, cheese, and especially Burgundy cheese that’s called Epoisses.

Emily: Oh! A washed rind cheese.

Emmanuel: Yes. And at the end, always, just a tart. A fruit tart – depends on the season – but always just a simple tart. That’s not a complicated meal, but that’s my favorite meal, because – perhaps – that’s my mother’s meal. My mother’s favorite dishes. For me, a Sunday meal is Burgundy. Because I’m Parisian, but I have the *fantasme* of my mother’s way to cook, because she was a girl of Burgundy, I prefer and I have good *souvenirs* [memories] of this kind of Sunday meal.

Emily: And of course you’d have to drink Burgundy with that meal.

Emmanuel: Oh yes, of course.

Emily: Amazing! Well thank you so much for joining me today, Emmanuel, to talk to me about *endimancher.* I only have one more question for you before I let you go, and that is: what is your favorite word in French?

Emmanuel: My favorite word! It’s difficult. I love *romance. Romance* is a particular word. You know *romance,* it’s a romantic way to live. That’s not only a love affair! Because when you are in love with a woman, you live a *romance*. But *romance*, I think, I don’t know, that’s a romantic word. That’s the whole life, in Paris. I think Paris is a romantic city, and when you are in Paris – perhaps it’s a *fantasme* too – but you live the *romance.*

Emily: Absolutely! Paris is a romantic city and you can live a romantic lifestyle here whether you are in love with a person or just in love with the city or in love with a beef bourguignon.

Emmanuel: Yes. Or with a restaurant! Or I am in love with a lot of restaurants.

Emily: Restaurants with tablecloths?

Emmanuel: Yes!

Emily: Thank you so much for joining me today.

Emmanuel: I’m sorry for my poor English.

Emily: No, your English is wonderful! Do not worry. Thank you so much! Bye bye.

Emmanuel: Bye.