

## French mayor rants against kebabs so critics declare an international kebab festival

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Robert Menard claimed that kebabs had nothing to do with French culture

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Robert Menard doesn't approve of kebabs. The 62-year-old Frenchman was a longtime journalism advocate, founding the international non-governmental organization Reporters Without Borders in 1985, but for the past year he has been the mayor of Beziers, a small town near the Mediterranean coast in southwest France. Since entering politics, he has loudly pursued an anti-immigrant agenda, even going so far as to count the Muslim schoolchildren in his city. Now kebabs, a staple food for many immigrants in Europe, have become his latest target.

In response, a large number of French citizens are fighting back — around 40,000, to be more precise.

The trouble began last week, when a video of Menard ranting against kebab restaurants in his city was aired on French TV. In the video, the mayor justified his decision to block restaurants opening in Beziers's historic city center by explaining: "We are a nation of Judeo-Christian tradition." Menard then said that there were too many kebabs in his town, and that he would block new kebab restaurants opening in Beziers.

After the clip aired, Menard doubled down on his anti-kebab statements. "I do not want Beziers to become the capital of kebabs," he wrote on [Twitter](#). "These shops have nothing to do with our culture!"

Menard's comments sparked a debate in a country that has long struggled with immigration and often prides itself on its distinct national identity. But the mayor may not be pleased with one response to his plan: 50,000 people have said they will visit Beziers (which has a population of approximately 80,000) for an "International Festival of Kebabs" next year.

That "festival" is the brainchild of Baptiste Fluzin, a Paris-based executive who has no ties to Bezier. Fluzin told *The Washington Post* that he was appalled by Menard's comments and created a Facebook event page to mock him. "I think that stupid politicians needs to be laughed at," Fluzin said. "We need to hold a mirror to their stupidity instead of being shocked."

"Menard is just someone aging badly, and he tries to feel important by jumping from one controversy to another," he said, explaining that the former journalist had made an "incomprehensible turn" since leaving Reporters Without Borders.

Menard isn't the first in France to see kebabs as a threat to national identity. Far-right bloggers have criticized kebabs online for the past few years, and last year local officials from the far-right National Front warned that kebab shops in French towns would face scrutiny because they could be front operations for "dishonest" activity like drug dealers. (Menard, while on the far right, is not a member of the National Front and runs as an independent).

In a country where food is closely linked with identity, perhaps kebabs are an easy target. As one Parisian kebab shop owner [told Reuters](#) last year, by criticizing kebabs "you can speak ill of Muslims without speaking ill of Muslims." It's been estimated that around 3 million kebabs are eaten in France every year, though the food stuff isn't as ingrained in the culture as it is in Germany or Britain.

Fluzin says he wasn't surprised by the scale of the response to his Facebook event: He knew that many in France are just as angry at the far right as he is. So far, Menard hasn't responded and Fluzin says he doubts he will. "He's stuck because the stupidity of my event enlightens the stupidity of his declarations," Fluzin says. However, the success of the event does leave him with a dilemma. He had initially envisaged the event as a prank; the kebab festival was never supposed to actually happen. Now he wonders if it should. "I don't know yet," he says when asked about it, adding that he fears the possibility of violence. "Anyway, I like the idea that it may happen and that Menard will dream of kebab invasion until then."

(675 words)