

Story Christine Manfield

Good enough to eat

Just being in Paris is a culinary experience – whether it's a pit stop for coffee and a croissant, picking up your daily bread, buying the freshest vegetables at outdoor markets or dining out in style

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Perhaps the most ravishing city in the world, Paris has become an all-consuming love affair for more than 30 years. My emotional response was immediate. The city's magical air stole my heart. It was impossible not to be overwhelmed by its beauty, its history and its passion, the songs of Edith Piaf drifting from sidewalk cafes, the very essence of France. Visually beautiful, its architecture, planning, trees and gardens are so structurally perfect, its ambience unique, it has that amazing ability to seduce and tantalise all the senses. The City of Light is symbolic of romance, food, wine, civilised living, intellectual discussion and hedonistic pleasure. Its style and sophistication embrace the latest haute couture fashion, culinary trends and every aspect of contemporary design. Paris is the ultimate city of love, its romantic air palpable and enveloping. It demands that you christen your visit with a glass of your favourite champagne.

Walking along the river or across one of the many bridges (Pont Alexandre III is the best) on sunset is a revelation: majestic buildings are bathed in golden light, the twilight sky is clear and blue. Who wouldn't feel a tug at their heartstrings? I could soak up those captivating views forever.

Central Paris is defined by its 20 *arrondissements* (districts). It's handy to carry the pocket-sized, red-covered Plan de Paris with maps of each district on a double page, metro and autobus routes at the back. These lifesavers can be purchased from any of the newsstands on street corners. Each *arrondissement* has its own distinct character and it's worth devoting time to each one, exploring hidden corners as you walk and discovering some of the city's delicious secrets. The Seine cuts across Paris, dividing it in two - the Right Bank on the north and the Left Bank to the south of the river. It defines the city, gives it shape and has shaped its history throughout the ages. The two islands in the middle of the Seine – Ile de la Cite and Ile Saint Louis – were the centre of religious and political power for centuries. This is where you will find the imposing Notre Dame cathedral and the Conciergerie – history at your fingertips.

Each time I visit I make a pilgrimage to Ile Saint Louis to eat a cone filled with Berthillon ice cream and sorbet. The *glacier's* menu of flavours includes salted caramel, wild strawberry, blood orange, peach and dark chocolate; the hardest part is choosing. The food markets of Paris are

among the most exciting and seductive in the world, filled with intoxicating aromas, colours and all manner of fresh produce displayed with great pride and consummate style. Parisians do not expect to have their produce bound and gagged beyond recognition in plastic cling wrap and displayed under fierce artificial lighting. There are food markets, big and small, all over the city. Asparagus and strawberries are in season on my most recent visit and they are everywhere. I admire the locals' respect for the seasons and how the produce is used to infinity during its season when flavours are full, delicious and mouthwatering. Morel mushrooms, tomatoes, cherries, tiny new potatoes (so luscious when cooked in duck fat) ... such offerings almost demand a kitchen. However, all is not lost if you don't have cooking facilities in your accommodation. Seasonal produce is reflected in the daily bistro and restaurant menus du jour. Even if you're hotel bound, it's possible to buy ready-prepared items from markets or *charcuteries* and indulge in a private in-house picnic. A crusty baguette from the *boulangerie*, some handmade cheese from the *fromagerie*, *saucisson*, pate, and celeriac remoulade from the *charcuterie*, sweet pastries from the *patisserie* and some handmade chocolates from any one of the artisan *chocolatiers* provide a complete taste experience. Breakfast demands you succumb to feathery light, buttery croissants or a *pain au chocolat*. The choices are positively sinful, yet utterly compulsory.

Paris is redefining itself food-wise and stepping up to the mark, with challenging, intriguing and funky places spreading like wildfire, and challenging the tried-and-true, upscale (often out of reach) Michelin formula of constrained predictability. Chasing the 3-star dining experience seems so 20th century sometimes – the world has changed and Paris offers so many more inspiring gastronomic choices. Thankfully, many of my best memories are beyond the gaze of the Michelin system. If you do feel the desire to splurge at one of the starred restaurants, go for lunch when it's possible to get a great deal with set-price menus; you can soak up the glamorous ambience and style for a fraction of what it costs at dinner. Lunch is a time-honoured tradition and it's when you will find most Parisians imbibing. The afternoon siesta follows lunch, sensible and entirely appropriate somehow. It gives order to the day.

It is the little secret spots that locals tell you about, or a chance discovery, that are the true gems and so many abound in this fascinating city. Avoid the tourist traps at all costs. Venture into the neighbourhood backstreets where

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PHOTOGRAPHY: CHRISTINE MANFELD PHOTO LIBRARY

modest bistros and small restaurants offer a wide scope of dining adventures, a feast for the senses that's easy on the pocket. Art and culture are often rolled into one with some of the city's young chefs taking charge and cooking up a storm. Their set price menus mean you experience some thrilling and innovative food at remarkably affordable prices, anything from €25-€40 (\$34-\$68) for three courses. Now that's a bargain in the 21st century. This has helped Paris to reinvent itself, be relevant and put itself back in the league as one of the world's premier food capitals.

The socially aware and progressive Bertrand Delanoë, Paris' first openly gay city mayor, elected to office in 2001, has had a pivotal role in developing social housing, urban planning, more green spaces, cultural innovations and progressive architecture, which melds with the city's bones while harmonising with its history. All these initiatives contribute to the dynamic

energy of the city. His legacy is evident, the changes are significant. Paris feels like a different city compared with the 1980s and '90s, it's more liveable somehow. One of the best ideas is the introduction of bicycles for public hire. At many street corners, bike racks have been installed with a central meter. Insert a card or cash to pay for the time you use, then dispatch your bike at the nearest rack to your destination. Ingenious and practical, it's eco-friendly, has reduced car traffic and given the city even more vitality. If you're not up for a bike ride to get from A to B, opt for the Metro. It's easy to navigate (each line is colour coded), cheap and user-friendly and will have you feeling like a local in no time. Buying a carnet (pack of 10 tickets) is the way to go.

As we walk, we notice clusters of kids, students and business people sitting in parks or in small squares using their laptops. One of our Paris friends tells us that WiFi hotspots

are being set up across the city, a wonderfully generous gesture of sharing of technology.

My favourite places in Paris include: Pere Lachaise (in the 20eme or 20th arrondissement) and Montparnasse (in the 14eme) cemeteries, which are home to some of France's most famous corpses. Visiting significant people of the past gives an intriguing insight into the city's rich history. We have had many a picnic at Pere Lachaise over the years, lounging around nonchalantly on the grass while the likes of Jim Morrison, Colette, Gertrude Stein, Modigliani, Oscar Wilde and Marcel Proust lie in rest. The haunting quietness resonates in such beautiful settings. Over at Montparnasse, we challenge each other to find Susan Sontag, Brancusi, Samuel Beckett and Man Ray hidden among the close set tombs. It's easy to spot Jean Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, side by side, just inside the main gate.

The Marais district in the 4eme is the gay village of Paris, so familiar to those who know Sydney's inner east. The restaurants, cafes, bars and shops in the few blocks between rue des Archives, rue Sainte Croix de la Bretonnerie and Vieille du Temple are packed to the rafters, particularly on weekends and evenings when everyone is out promenading and the area has an easy-going village atmosphere.

Nearby rue des Rosiers is a long narrow street full of kosher food shops, their yellow stars brandished on the walls above the doors. The Jewish quarter is just as crowded on weekends and holidays. The queues for the falafel shop alone snaked around the corner.

A couple of blocks further brings you to Place des Vosges, my favourite square in Paris, lined with aristocratic red brick and stone townhouses that date back to pre-Revolutionary times. It is, without doubt, the most alluring and beautifully designed square in Paris. It's a joy to wander through the perfectly manicured garden square, stop at one of the bistros for a croque monsieur (Paris' signature sandwich) and marvel at the distinctive old architecture and expansive arcade. The large fenced park in the centre of the square is a favourite spot for locals to enjoy the sunny outdoors.

My favourite areas for retail therapy and aimless wandering are the 6eme and 7eme arrondissements; from Boulevard Saint Germain des Pres, along Rue Bonaparte to Saint Sulpice, rue du Cherche-Midi to rue de Sevres, rue du Bac and rue de Varenne

and everything in between. Small boutiques, sensational food and wine shops, galleries – so many things to tempt and tease.

On the Right Bank, the high-voltage "look at me" designer labels fight for street prominence. This is also where you'll find some of the more spectacular food emporiums. Wander around Place de Madeleine in the 8eme to fantasise in front of the opulent Fauchon window displays. Across the other side of the square, Hediard is one of Paris' definitive food stores, extraordinary in its offerings, matched by hefty prices. Boxes of fruit jellies, in Hediard's distinctive red and black packaging, look more like bespoke jewellery than fleeting and edible treats. During

spring this year, Hediard were showcasing a new exclusive product, the latest to hit Paris: De Jaeger Caviar – la perle d'escargot or snail caviar. These tiny white translucent pearls look too good to be true, let alone digest, but are perfect for the stick-thin stylistas who obsess about their weight. Rose was the flavour of the month and the shelves were packed with rose wines, rose-flavoured fruit jellies, rose-petal confiture, perfect with a buttery croissant or butter biscuits (sables), and rose-scented tea. I bought a jar of violet jelly, suggested as a condiment with roast duck.

We walk through the Tuileries on our last night. Perfectly designed French gardens complete with mazes, people out promenading

and making the most of the lovely summer weather and beauty of their city. Every corner captures another memorable image – this has to be the most photogenic and seductive city in the world. The summer twilight hours last beyond 10pm, then the sky starts to change colour to a deep, deep blue and the fingernail of a new moon emerges, like a perfect painting.

The hardest thing in the world is leaving Paris. Each time I am filled with an immediate sadness and an overwhelming desire to return. But this time I leave with an extra bag, filled with the violet jelly and other goodies I couldn't resist purchasing, so at least I can keep the flavours and taste memories of Paris alive when I'm back home. 🍷

Food, glorious food: Freshly baked bread is a daily delight, there are flavour sensations to be had in tiny cafes as well as multi-starred Michelin restaurants and cooks will delight in providores, such as Hediard (pictured above, second from right) and the Grande Epicerie in Bon Marche department



FACT FILE

Sleeping
Montalembert
3 rue Montalembert, 7eme (just off rue du Bac)

Cool contemporary, even better now there's a front outdoor terrace for casual dining or a glass of wine.

montalembert.com
Hotel Keppler
10 rue Kepler, 16eme (off ave Marceau), near Arc de Triomphe

hotelkeppler.fr/en
Hotel Bel Ami
7-11 rue Saint Benoit, 6eme (off Place Saint Germain des Pres)

hotel-bel-ami.com
Hotel Bourg Tibourg
19 rue du Bourg-Tibourg, 4eme (opposite Mariage Freres Tea Shop)

hotelbourgtibourg.com
Shopping
Grande Epicerie at Bon Marche
Rue de Sevres, 7eme

An amazing food hall, a gastronomic heaven in this renovated department store. There's an outdoor cafe on the first floor, which makes for a good pit stop for a Campari Soda if you need a break from shopping.

Merci
111 boulevard Beaumarchais, 3eme The new zeitgeist store that opened in March 09. Captivating; stocks many things that can't be found elsewhere. Bespoke collectables.

Pierre Herme
72 rue Bonaparte, 6eme The most exquisite pastries in Paris. Herme is considered the most renowned pastry chef in France, the Picasso of Pastry. His macarons and chocolates are second to none, his flavour combinations sublime.

Eating
Ze Kitchen Galerie
4 rue des Grands Augustins, 6eme Chef is William Ledeuil; modern, clean, light flavours.
T: 4432 0032

Restaurant Aux Lyonnais
32 rue Saint Marc, 2eme Classic dishes of the Lyon region. Request a downstairs table; the wine list is fab.
T: 4296 6504

Relais de l'Entrecôte
Rue Saint Benoit, 6eme (near Cafe de Flore, off boulevard St Germain) The best steak and frites; no-choice menu; no bookings.
T: 4549 1600

Gaya Rive Gauche
44 rue du Bac, 7eme (opposite Robuchon) Pierre Gagnaire's more casual seafood restaurant, great flavours.
T: 4544 7373

Le Bistro Paul Bert
18 rue Paul Bert, 11eme Terrific bistro; cool local crowd; sensational flavours.
T: 4372 2401

Le Comptoir du Relais
9 carrefour de l'Odeon, 6eme Timeless elegance, celebrates the essence of seasonality
T: 4427 0797

Ribouldingue
10 rue Saint Julien le Pauvre, 5eme Some great offal dishes; brave food.
T: 4633 9880

Le 21
21 rue Mazarine, 6eme Small, cool hangout with locals
T: 4633 7690

Il Vino d'Enrico Bernado
13 blvd de la Tour Maubourg, 7eme Enrico Bernado trained as chef then swapped sides; he won best sommelier in the world in 2004. His menu is led by wine choices – all by the glass – and the food is a surprise once you choose your wine.
T: 4411 7200



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