

Paris Food Scene

A Moveable Feast



Paris is always a good idea! Not all Parisian restaurants are though. Food-wise, it is a city where one has to be in the know to avoid tourist traps. The main thing is to respect rule #1: Don't search for food in real no-go areas such as Saint Michel, or the Champs Elysées. Avoid these temptingly obvious places and you will find every food you desire, and much more too. Here are a few options you might want to consider to make your stay unforgettable—one bite at a time.

Photo: 1) Balls

Paris' restaurant scene gets more diverse.

The gastronomic meal of the French was added to the Unesco cultural patrimony list in 2010, but it doesn't say much about the diversity that "the gastronomic meal of the French" covers. There is no longer one "gastronomic meal", there are dozens, with some of them being miles away from white napkins and waiters in suits. Indeed, the map of Parisian not-to-be-missed restaurants has changed a lot in the past 25 years. It all happened because of a redefinition of the food scene itself. A few decades ago, all eyes were cast on Michelin-starred restaurants, mixing complicated techniques with traditional recipes, in a posh (and sometimes cold) setting. As of today, Paris has the highest concentration of Michelin stars in Europe. These haute-cuisine temples are still highly coveted by Parisians and tourists alike. Eric Frechon's three Michelin-starred restaurant *L'Épicure* at the supremely luxurious Bristol hotel is one of them. The signature entrée, stuffed macaroni with black truffle and foie gras is a must in its own right, and so is the dessert "Précieux au chocolat Nyangbo", a breath-taking chocolate sculpture. One can also get a glimpse of his take on French cuisine at the *Mini Palais*, a more accessible venue located in the heart of the Grand Palais. There, in this spectacular dining room, Eric Fréchon mixes classic and contemporary cooking in a cosmopolitan version of the Parisian brasserie.

L'Arpège (3*) by Alain Passard, is the benchmark when it comes to vegetable-focused haute cuisine, a rarity in Paris. He even owns a vegetable garden a few kilometres outside of Paris that provides produce for his restaurant.

But recent years have seen a change in the expectations of a younger generation of chefs and consumers alike. It's hard to define where the change originated from, but it seems that a new group of diners wanted to break free from older generations' reference points.

From Michelin stars to the rise of bistrology

"Bistrology": a contraction of "bistrot" and "gastronomy", definitely bridges dining scenes by mixing casual decor with quality food. This movement started back in the '90s with Yves Camdeborde's restaurant *La Régalade*. After experiencing kitchens of Michelin-starred restaurants (*La Tour d'Argent* and *l'Hôtel de Crillon*, to name a few), Camdeborde felt the need to emancipate himself from the pressure of Michelin star, *dos* and *donts*. He created *Le Comptoir du Relais*, a one-of-a-kind micro venue, loud, laid-back and amazingly good. Other chefs, among them Stéphane Jégo (*L'Ami Jean*), Bruno Doucet (*La Régalade Sainte Honoré*), or Christian Etchebest (*La Cantine du Troquet Dupleix*) soon joined forces, creating what was about to be decisive for the Paris food scene.

L'Ami Jean really represents this wave of bistronomy pioneers. Taking over the oldest basque restaurant in Paris in 2002, Jégo has been successfully twisting French classics, while adding his own personal touch. His signature dishes include an amazing pâté, served with Jean-Luc Poujouran bread, an old-parmesan soup with croûtons, porcini mushrooms and smoked ham; and a big bowl of creamy rice pudding with salted butter caramel. This no-fuss yet truly decadent eatery is always packed, so it's necessary to book in advance. Simply exceptional.

The younger generation of chefs seem to be going down a similar path, offering a wide range of options for those seeking French-inspired cuisine, focusing on quality ingredients, in a low-key atmosphere. Also, it is fair to say, they rock the kitchens with Brooklyn-style beards and a dedicated attitude (yet miles away from being snobbish). Chef Franck Baranger, for example, trained at Le Bristol and Christian Constant. He opened his own restaurant *Le Pantruche*, in 2011. Today, this restaurant is widely regarded as a point of reference. It features French classics, such as lobster bisque, "Blanquette de veau" or "Épaule d'Agneau" in hearty portions, along with an art-deco Parisian feel, and a cool crowd. The lunch menu is a bargain, at €18 for two courses, and so is the dinner menu, at only €35. One might complain that it's very tricky to get a table there, but on the other hand, this is what happens with good and fairly-priced restaurants in Paris. The good



Alain Passard's vegencentric three star restaurant.



The team behind L'Epicure, chef Eric Frechon, patissier Laurent Jeannin and sommelier Marco Pelletier.



Franck Baranger chef at Le Pantruche

news is that in November 2013, the team behind *Le Pantruche* opened a sister restaurant called *Le Caillebotte*. With a completely different décor, courtesy of the Scandinavian touches (marble counter, wood palisades, etc.), the cuisine manages to have the same vibrancy and generous feel as *Le Pantruche*. At the recently opened Corretta, chef Jean-Francois Pantaleon draws his inspiration from his time spent at l'Affable and serves an updated neo-bourgeois cuisine in a contemporary setting. Other amazing bistrot venues led by oft-bearded young chefs include the likes of *Bistrot Bellet*, *Terroir Parisien*, and big-time favourite, *Aux Deux Amis*.

Some have taken the experiments a little further, playing with the codes of traditional French cuisine, and freeing themselves from it even more. In 2006, the Basque chef Inaki Aizpitarte opened the now-famous Chateaubriand, attracting people from all over the world. Being a forerunner in the inventive bistronomy movement, this self-taught chef keeps coming up with adventurous cooking in the form of a five-course €60 fixed menu. Expect the unexpected, along with some never-before-seen combinations. Some people might think it's too cerebral to be good, but others swear it's the best meal they have ever had. This is a case where the best way to find out is to actually try it. Be sure to book if you want to go for the first service. Otherwise, if you're more of a free spirit, check out the chef's wine bar, *Le Dauphin*, right next to the Chateaubriand. Get some natural wines and some tasty nibbles while waiting for your table. Although very different from *Le Chateaubriand*, *Septime* by Bertrand Grébaut, is another example of creative bistronomy. The cool vibe, and great market-based cuisine, reinventing the French classics, makes for a perfect foodie destination. Beyoncé and Jay-Z know it too: They have made it their Parisian canteen.

Photos: 1) Le Pantruche, 2) Diane Yoon, 3) L'Epicure

Foreign influences : A whole new take on French cuisine/The restaurant scene gets more diverse

Recently, French gastronomy has seen foreign chefs, or French chefs with foreign influences, take the lead on the Parisian food scene. The reason is simple: Chefs are travelling more and sampling more exotic cuisines than the former generation of chefs ever could have imagined. Paradoxically, though, they are still part of the bistronomy movement, as they are often reinterpreting French classics. To get a taste of French chefs who have travelled and brought back the very best of their time abroad, one should head to *Frenchie* by Greg Marchand. He understands French techniques well, and combines them with what he learnt training with chefs such as Jamie Oliver in London and Danny Meyer in New York City. His menu changes daily and features French classics such as “riz de veau” or foie gras, but also fresh handmade pasta or other ingredients that are not French by definition. His cuisine doesn’t fail to impress because it is simple, creative and well-executed.

In a different register and more of an upscale choice, Adeline Grattard, the chef behind the amazing *Yam’Tcha*, also epitomizes this trend. She travelled to Hong Kong after completing experiences at the three Michelin-starred *l’Astrance*, amongst others. From Hong Kong, she brought back a love for subtle combinations and a fascination for tea. In her restaurant in Paris, she creates amazing fusions such as foie gras and girolle woks, or Sichuanese-style smoked aubergine. Her Franco-Chinese approach to cooking is unique, and takes the best from both worlds and techniques. The food and tea pairing is a once-in-a-lifetime experience. It’s compulsory to book weeks in advance as it is so special.

Many new wave Paris chefs are foreigners. It might seem that that’s no novelty, but it actually is. They are no longer merely cooking food from their home countries or just learning French cuisine and sticking to it. Instead, they are bringing new flavours, and new techniques to the table. This trend has seen chefs from the United Kingdom, the United States, Italy, Japan, Sweden and more offering their take on French cuisine. *Abri* is one of these restaurants that is not only a great example of this movement, but is also exceptional in its own right. The Japanese chef Katsuaki Okiyama trained with big names (Robuchon, Taillevent, Agapé Bistrot ...) before opening his own restaurant. He offers two distinctive options: Either Japanese sandwiches to take-away (lunch only), or fixed surprise menus for lunch and dinner, offering a perfect fusion between Japanese and French cuisines, ingredients and aesthetics. Some other joints run by Japanese chefs taking the bistronomy challenge include *Vivant* (Atsumi Sota) and *Encore* (Yoshi Morie).



The beautiful Verjus Bar à Vins caters to those who want to sample some perfectly executed, hearty world food in an elegant setting.

The rise of foodie wine bars

Wine bars are no novelty on the Parisian landscape. But now they suddenly also serve as foodie destinations, no longer sticking to the traditional charcuterie or cheese boards. *Frenchie Bar à Vins* will please those who want a taste of Gregory Marchand’s cuisine without struggling for a reservation at *Frenchie*. The small plates—tapas style—encapture Marchand’s cooking and are delicious. And, of course, so is the wine list, a selection of wines from France and the New World. You get a similar vibe and can sample another buzzing chef’s cuisine at *La Cave de Septime*, Bertrand Grébaud’s wine bar. Food comes from the kitchen of the award-winning bistro *Septime*, right next door, and wines (mostly natural) are from small producers. *Le Verre Volé* is also a safe bet when it comes to great wine and great nibbles. Located on the hip Canal Saint-Martin, and conveniently open every day, this “cave à vin” is a place to go for cool nights, sometimes loud ones, but always in a great atmosphere, filled with natural wines and small surprising plates. *Verjus Bar à Vins* caters to those who want to sample some perfectly executed hearty world food. Ranging from Mediterranean options (marinated feta, roast tomato vinaigrette, purslane and olives), to Japanese (gyozas of celeri root with toasted peanuts), to Cajun (buttermilk fried chicken). There is no bad option on the menu.

Photo: 1) Diane Yoon



A typical Parisian scene at Verjus Bar à Vins.

The wine list is not extensive but long enough not to be bored or disappointed either.

Street food in Paris: Name it, you have it

Another consequence of chefs travelling the world is the rise of street food, as seen in the last few years in Paris. Although street food is as old as the streets themselves, it took quite a while to take off here. A few years ago, it was limited to Le Parisien, the traditional ham and cheese sandwich, or crêpes. Now it's a whole different story. The street food craze started with Le Camion Qui Fume, a burger truck by the American chef Kristin Frederick. Its success paved the way for countless newcomers, including Cantine California, which serves west coast-inspired burgers and tacos. Today, one can find all kinds of street food in Paris, ranging from burgers to pizza al taglio (per slice), haute couture kebabs, fish & chips, sandwiches, and Argentinian empanadas. This fad has its flaws—some of the new venues being just a little too gimmicky—but overall, a lot of them make for a tasty (and cheap) snack. Among the dinner winners, *Big Fernand* is certainly a safe bet for Frenchified versions of the burger. The kebab everybody keeps talking about is at *Grillé*. It takes the humble kebab to new heights with meat from Hugo Desnoyer (the Michelin brigade's butcher of

Photo: 1) Diane Yoon/Verjus bar à vins

choice). The veal is marinated in soy, rosemary, sake and pink garlic, and served in a homemade flatbread and a fresh herb salad. The newly-opened *Miznon* is the sister restaurant of a restaurant in Tel Aviv. Under the direction of chef Eyal Shani, his team prepares pita with grilled cauliflower or sweet potato, among other typical Israeli ingredients. The mint tea is free, and the atmosphere just as buzzing as in Tel Aviv. For a more fishy experience, *The Sunken Chip* is definitely the place to go. Grab your gourmet fish, mushy peas and tasty fries and head to nearby Canal Saint-Martin for a truly bobo experience. Last but not least, the latest talk of the town is *Balls*, a meatball venue located in the edgy Rue Saint-Maur. The menu is short and simple: Five different recipes of meatballs, all prepared traditionally with fresh herbs, and sides that include a creamy polenta—to die for! A great place to enjoy comfort food at its best, sip cocktails and rub shoulders with a cool crowd. Even *Frenchie* chef Gregory Marchand has his own street-food place, *Frenchie to Go*. From there, Reuben sandwiches and pulled pork have made their way into the Parisian hearts and bellies. All in all, Paris' take on street food is a gourmet one—both ingredient-focused and creative.

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