

Gourmet

THE MAGAZINE OF GOOD LIVING

The Bistro Boom

Small, homey places run by young Parisian chefs are all the rage today—despite recent rumors to the contrary

Just a few years ago, the rapidly thinning ranks of bistros made perfect fodder for alarmist headlines in the Paris papers. (What better way to coax a euro or two out of a Gaul's pocket than to suggest that his favorite restaurants are headed for oblivion?) Fast food, fusion, the high cost of doing business in France, a preference for eating light—all were blamed for the bistro's imminent demise.

But a funny thing happened on the way to extinction: The bistro made a spirited comeback thanks to the hip, upper-middle-class types who now inhabit a huge swath of formerly sleepy neighborhoods in central Paris (the 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th arrondissements). Their nostalgia for the old places translated into demand, which was a signal to all the young chefs (with talent but not much cash) who were striking out on their own. Add to that a backlash against fast food and industrialized farming, and the bistro emerged reborn. Today, the genre is positively thriving.

With just 21 seats that fill instantly at both lunch and dinner, **La Cerisaie** (70 Boulevard Edgar-Quinet; 01-43-20-98-98) is a textbook example of the new-style bistro. Run by Maryse Lalanne (in the dining room) and her husband, Cyril (in the kitchen), the minuscule Montparnasse bistro has no printed menu and takes no reservations. The blackboard is revised daily and runs to such dishes as cream of chestnut soup with foie gras shavings, terrine of *confit de canard* with vinegary pickled *piquillos*, and pan-roasted goose breast with poached spiced pears.

At **L'Ami Marcel** (33 Rue Georges Pitard; 01-48-56-62-06), a café deep in the 15th arrondissement that has been remodeled by a young team with years of experience in haute cuisine, classics like homemade duck terrine share the menu with contemporary takes on bistro standards—snails in a lush green sauce with arugula, parsley, and chervil; cod steak in a light vinaigrette with grilled polenta.

Les Papilles (30 Rue Gay-Lussac; 01-43-25-20-79), in the Latin Quarter, comes on like a grocery store—you can choose your wine from open racks and even pick up takeout—but is really so much more. Bébert (he prefers to go by one name), formerly the pastry chef at The Bristol, changes his menu daily. Among his standouts are cauliflower soup with chorizo confetti, roast rack of lamb with ratatouille, and a killer baba au rhum. There are also oysters in season and delicious plates of charcuterie. And at about \$34, the prix fixe is hard to beat.

The hottest address on the Left Bank, however, is **L'Ami Jean** (27 Rue Malar; 01-47-05-86-89), a Basque restaurant in the 7th that's a favorite with rugby-playing bankers and their ilk. You'll be packed in like a sardine but will probably decide the noise and smoke are worth it once you've tried such updated classics as *piquillo*-stuffed squid, suckling pig, and delectable Brussels sprouts and *pétoncles* (tiny scallops) cooked on the half shell with parsley and bacon. Stéphane Jégo, formerly sous-chef to Yves Camdeborde before he sold his legendary La Régale, performs the culinary miracles here.

Le Mesturet (77 Rue de Richelieu; 01-42-97-40-68), on the Right Bank not far from the Palais Garnier, is a hit for its friendly service, innovative menu, and relaxed décor of flea market treasures unearthed by owner Alain Fontaine (already known to Parisians for La Baracane, a well-established place in the

Marais). Fontaine is rightly proud of his sourcing—artisanal Rocamadour cheese, poultry from small producers in the southwest, and inexpensive wines like an excellent Marcillac for only \$20. Terrine of free-range chicken with vegetable chutney, *blanquette de veau*, and a sea bream roasted with Mediterranean vegetables all show off the kitchen's rustic personality.

The epicenter of the bistro revival, however, is surely the Bastille. **Le Marsangy** (73 Avenue Parmentier; 01-47-00-94-25), in particular, is just the type of place everyone dreams of finding in Paris. The red walls and low lighting create a glâm atmosphere that attracts an appropriately hip crowd, the bargain wine list is a beauty, and the kitchen turns out brilliantly executed homey fare like plump langoustines in lemon chive vinaigrette and whole wild sea bass roasted with fresh dill and garnished with couscous.

Not everyone will be happy at **Le Sot l'y Laisse** (70 Rue Alexandre-Dumas; 01-40-09-79-20), a noisy, smoky spot in a remote part of the Bastille, but there's no better place than this storefront bistro to find out what the young avant-garde chefs are up to. Don't miss the sautéed chanterelles with slices of *chipolata* sausage, and the panfried monkfish medallions with eggplant- and caviar-stuffed tomatoes.

In the 11th arrondissement, **Au Vieux Chêne** (7 Rue du Dahomey; 01-43-71-67-69) remains something of a neighborhood secret. Like most of the young bistro chefs, Stéphane Chevassus changes his menu daily. Dishes such as *escalope* of panfried foie gras on fresh Païmpol beans in duck *jus* are outstanding, as are langoustines in crisp pastry with mango chutney and a huge entrecôte that comes with a creamy slab of *gratin dauphinois*. Tables at this brightly lit dining room, with a vintage, 1900-era black-and-white tile floor, a huge zinc bar, and old enameled advertising plaques, are in continuous demand.

You need to book at least a week in advance at **Le Temps au Temps** (13 Rue Paul-Bert; 01-43-79-63-40), a bacchanalian hole-in-the-wall, also in the 11th, that's decked out with amusing sepia caricatures of the great chefs of France. Like Au Vieux Chêne, this place mixes Granny's favorites with edgy, contemporary recipes in dishes like stuffed baby clams on a bed of *tétragone* (Provençal spinach), cream of Jerusalem artichoke soup with shavings of Spanish *pata negra* ham, and *tendrons de veau* braised in a casserole with thyme and raspberries and served with a sauce of salt-butter caramel.

... and a surprising hotel dining room

Not every hot restaurant in Paris is a bistro. **Le Murano** (13 Boulevard du Temple; 01-42-71-20-00), at the pompously named Murano Urban Resort, in the Marais, has ushered in a feeding frenzy the likes of which this city hasn't seen since the opening of the Hôtel Costes a decade ago. Cranberry velvet upholstered chairs and banquettes lend a red-hot dimension to the otherwise all-white space. Plastic tubes hang from the ceiling like postmodern stalactites, while a DJ spins bouncy lounge music from an elevated crow's nest. It's never a good sign when food follows fashion, but the surprise here is that the contemporary French cooking, from a team of young chefs (including one who recently cooked at Sketch, Pierre Gagnaire's London outpost), is outstanding. The menu caters to the calorie conscious in dishes like quinoa salad (the high-protein Andean grain) but also pleases sophisticated palates with dishes like roast sea bass topped with sweet Cévennes onions. Aside from the overpriced wine list and the snooty service from wannabe actors, Le Murano more than lives up to its star billing. —Alexander Lobrano >