



Beyond the Bistro

Paris has set the cuisine standard for years. But other cities have caught up and are redefining food standards. How has that influenced the restaurants in the French capital city? Let's take a tour and explore Paris' culinary scene.

*Text Rooksana Hossenally
Photography Nicole Franzen*



Paris

Previous page (from left to right): Le Poutch (13 Rue Lucien Sampaix) serves great coffee, lunch and brunch; artichokes displayed at a Paris farmer's market.

Left page: the good-old cobble streets of Paris guide you along new, adventurous eateries.

A couple of decades ago, young, ambitious chefs-to-be flocked to Paris, hoping to be taken under the wings of the master chefs of one of its many haute-cuisine restaurants. Now, other capital cities, such as London, Lima and Copenhagen, are attracting foodies from all over the world, including French ones. A new generation of restaurateurs and chefs has slowly been changing the old Paris bistro culture, adding international elements, and resulting in an exciting, delicious mix of something old and something new.

Historical foodies

Even though other food capitals have been taking over Paris' culinary leading role, the passion for food has never left the City of Love. Food has always been a central part of life for the locals, for whom eating out several times a week is the norm. Parisians' gastronomic roots date back all the way to the Middle Ages, explains Alec Lobrano, an American author and food journalist who has lived in Paris for the last 30 years. "The rise to gastronomy in Paris was due to its location as the French king's court, which numbered thousands of people and required an endless array of sumptuous meals and banquets. This was combined with the fact that France has always had such extraordinary produce being one of the world's most agriculturally bountiful and fertile countries," Lobrano says. "After the French Revolution, chefs formerly employed by the nobility went out on their own after finding themselves without work when the aristocrats were chased away. The restaurant was born, and this led to the growth of a diverse and knowledgeable food-loving public."

As a result, the Parisians have developed a taste for the refined over the centuries, valuing

quality and locally-sourced produce. The fact that the city's restaurants remained fully booked throughout the last financial crisis says much about the Parisians' connection with dining out. It is an experience that is as much about eating as it is about coming together to share food and wine with friends. In Paris, a traditional meal would often mean steak and frites, or *confit de canard* with creamy *gratin dauphinois* at a low-key area bistro or brasserie. Or how about French classics such as frogs' legs and Charolais beef tartare washed down with full-bodied wine classics from Bordeaux or Bourgogne?

In recent years – just like in the newborn upcoming food capitals – a wave of young chefs has turned the city's dining scene on its head, pushing the boundaries of traditional French cuisine to integrate foreign ingredients. The result is uninhibited French food served in a more relaxed setting. The focus has shifted to pleasing people with good food, as opposed to racing towards technical perfection and Michelin stars. And that's noticeable during your meals throughout the day.

Multicultural breakfast

Let's start with breakfast. For many Parisians, that used to mean quickly absorbing a shot of espresso and a flaky, buttery croissant at a neighbourhood café. But nowadays, and especially on weekends, breakfast has become more of a brunch ritual. Parisians take the time to sit down at one of the recently opened cafés offering freshly-roasted specialty coffee and home-baked cakes, like Ten Belles or Loustic. At places such as these, the weekend brunch trend has really come into its own.

As a result, almost every restaurant and bistro offers a brunch menu, and a multitude of restaurants specialising in an extended breakfast have emerged. One such Parisian favourite is Holybelly, whose high timber stools are usually taken not long after the café opens its doors. Close to the lively Canal Saint Martin in the 10th *arrondissement*, it's light and bright, with a laid-back café atmosphere that's perfect for chasing away the Sunday blues. Staff here juggle between fluent English and French, blurring the lines between borders – still a rare sight in the city today. People come for the cosmopolitan atmosphere as much as

they do for the soft-poached eggs with slow-roasted tomatoes and mushrooms sautéed in thyme and garlic. Whoever would have thought Parisians would trade in their short and sweet breakfast for something more substantial and savoury?

“Brunch really responds to a demand,” says Wai-Ming Lung, founding editor of French online food/lifestyle magazine *orgyness.com*. “People work more during the week and sleep in during the weekends. And when they wake up, they want to eat and share that experience with friends and family.” Oliver Bon – one of the founders of the Experimental Group, which has transformed Paris’ drinking culture with its speakeasy cocktail bars – agrees. “Sunday lunch has always had a significant place in French culture. Brunch – despite its Anglicism, which is not very sexy to us – is a way of keeping up with that family tradition, but in a more relaxed manner.”

The Parisians have truly discovered the appeal of an extended brunch menu, like that served in, for instance, laid-back Australian beachside town Byron Bay. Everything is made fresh with local ingredients at Holybelly, and served with a range of specialty drinks. There’s a mean chai masala, cold-pressed juices and a standout flat white made with coffee beans from neighbouring roasters Belleville Brûlerie. With a menu like this and a blissful, relaxed vibe, it’s not hard to spend a good part of the weekend soaking it all up.

An American in Paris

Paris was always reluctant to embrace the fast-food culture, but with the hamburger now a restaurant staple, it has even entered the French capital’s households. The city has succeeded in making American-style food its own by blending classic comfort food with seasonal, high-quality produce. A host of top-ranking burger bars like Paris New York, Le Camion Qui Fume, Blend Hamburger Gourmet and Big Fernand have become loved in the foodie scene. But here, the burgers are gourmand, and eating them is a sit-down affair, not to be rushed.

Burgers aside, other single-concept venues are on the rise. Like Boulettes in the Marais, which serves up a delectable (albeit healthier) version of the all-American meatball. “The burgers went mainstream with Generations

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Places to stay

Hotel Paradis
Situating in the upcoming Strasbourg-Saint-Denis area, this is the perfect base for trying a variety of eateries nearby, such as burger joint Paris New York and neo-bistro Le 52.
hotelparadisparis.com
41 Rue des Petites Écuries

Grand Pigalle Hotel
With its speakeasy-bar feel in the rooms, this hotel is located right in South Pigalle, the most popular bar district of Paris, dotted with great places to eat.
grandpigalle.com
29 Rue Victor Massé

Grand Hotel du Palais Royal
An award-winning five-starred hotel with penthouse suites that boast views of the Paris skyline. Located in the city centre, it’s within walking distance to the Louvre, the River Seine and the opera house.
grandhoteldupalaisroyal.com
4 Rue de Valois

9 Hotel Paris
New, boutique-style hotel chain with outposts in Montparnasse, République and Opera. All locations feature modern design and art, an attractive living room as a lobby, and the prices are very reasonable for Paris standards.
9-hotel-collection.com

Places to eat/drink

Holybelly
One of the best places to experience Paris’ new brunch culture.
hollybel.ly
9 Rue Lucien Sampaix

Frenchie
Anglo-French cuisine to the max. Booking mandatory.
frenchie-restaurant.com
5 Rue du Nil

Le Chateaubriand
The restaurant that paved the way for the bistronomy movement, so not to be missed during your Paris trip. Booking mandatory.
lechateaubriand.net
129 Avenue Parmentier

Candelaria
Cocktail bars are also a new trend in Paris, and this is one of the most popular ones, hidden at the back of a taqueria and accessible through a nondescript door.
quixotic-projects.com/venue/candelaria
52 Rue de Saintonge

Arpège
From their own biodynamic gardens just outside Paris, chef Alain Passard and his team create magical vegetable and other dishes at this three-Michelin-starred restaurant. Such as the ‘Hot-Cold Egg’: warm poached yolk with sherry vinegar-infused crème fraîche, chives and Canadian maple syrup.
alain-passard.com
84 Rue de Varenne

Right page (clockwise from top left): street views from Paris’ 10th *arrondissement*; Paris New York hamburger joint (96 Rue Oberkampf); street view in the 9th *arrondissement*; Buvette gastrothèque is situated in both Paris (28 Rue Henry Monnier) and New York.

David Foessel (Paris New York)



“Bistronomy set the scene for the revival of French cuisine”

modern-bistro fare in an informal setting. The movement really took hold of the city ten years ago with the arrival of Le Chateaubriand, a new type of bistro: a ‘neo-bistro’. It was opened by Iñaki Aizpitarte, an unsuspecting Basque landscape gardener who started cooking at the age of 27 – which is later than most chefs. He started pitching in at restaurant kitchens to earn a living while travelling the world, turning it into a passion that resulted in a restaurant of his own.

X and Y [born between the mid-1960s and 1980, and the 1980s and 2000, respectively], based on their nostalgia for the burgers they ate at McDonald’s,” says Lung. “When those generations became adults, they had more money to spend and were more food conscious, giving rise to the gourmet, quality burger, which is no longer synonymous with fast food.”

Rise of the neo-bistro

Gourmet burger bars make great lunch stops, but many Parisians still insist on a longer sit-down, with a glass of wine, during their one-hour (or even two-hour) lunch break. For a gastro experience more closely tethered to Anglo-style cuisine, there’s nothing like stepping into chef Grégory Marchand’s welcoming restaurant Frenchie. A small and cosy Tudor-style bistro tucked away on a cobbled side street of the 2nd *arrondissement*, it forms a trio with the irresistible Frenchie To Go next door, and Frenchie Wine Bar across the street.

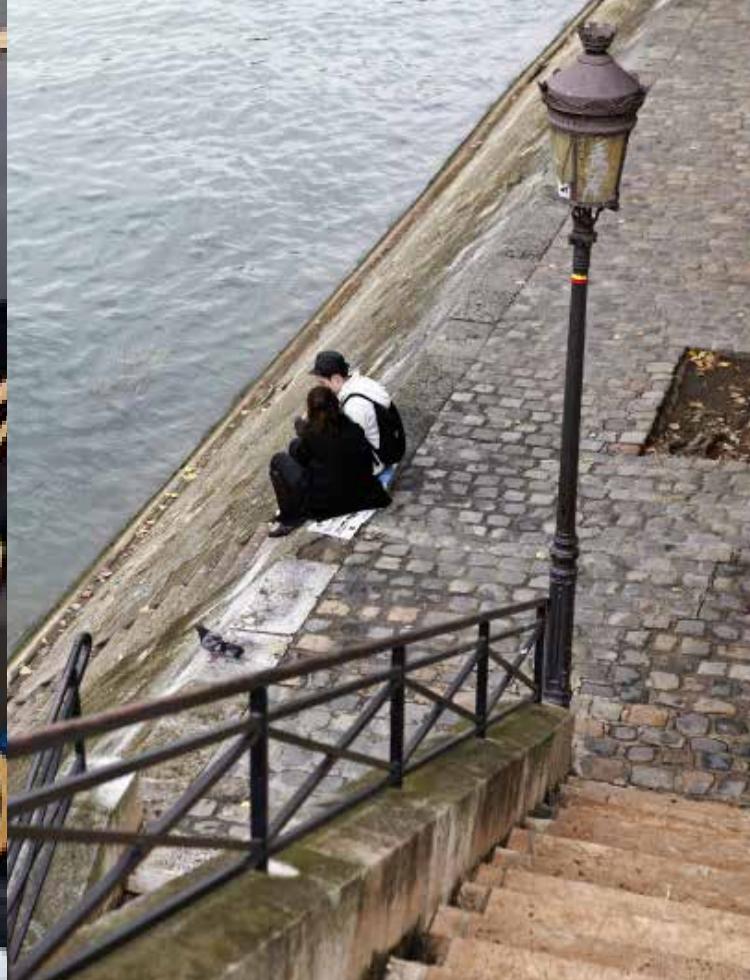
A young chef who trained across the world, Marchand has a penchant for English countryside specialities, like slow-roasted meats. As soon as one walks through the door, homely aromas waft their way through the din of diners eager to tuck into the seasonal menu, all made with top-of-the-range local produce. A starter might be a serving of creamy artichoke, tangy cheddar and black truffle, followed by suckling pig with glazed carrots and mustard seeds, finished with a selection of heavenly British cheese from Neal’s Yard or a heavenly Brillat-Savarin mille-feuille. Washed down with a sterling local wine, there’s no experience that merges foreign techniques with classic French cuisine while maintaining the refinement of tradition like the one at Frenchie.

With his cross-border cuisine, Marchand fuels a movement that’s come to be known as ‘bistronomy’, which involves serving gourmet

The move gave rise to an entire generation – coined ‘the Iñaki generation’ – of well-travelled young chefs, many of whom were also self-taught, to brave the formal Parisian food scene and open their own establishments to offer high-ranking French fare that deviates just enough from the local culinary traditions laid down by the Godfathers of French gastronomy like Auguste Escoffier and Paul Bocuse. Culinary entrepreneur Bon is also a follower of bistronomy. “It set the scene for the revival of French cuisine: simple, accessible and dedicated to taste. Traditional French restaurants have had to adapt to their new rivals all the way to their very core, including the coffee, bread, meat et cetera.” Bon and his colleagues serve drinks, snacks, bites and dishes at their bars and restaurants that are true to the bistronomy movement. “The future holds a place only for the restaurateurs who have a real passion for this profession, who are truly dedicated to food and products, who know their produce and where it’s from.” Lung believes bistronomy paved the way for the organic scene in Paris. “Before the bistronomy movement, organic produce would come from Spain and Germany,” he says. “There was nothing here; it had to be created from scratch by passionate people. This also applies to the wines – organic ones are now really popular, despite having already existed since the 1980s.”

Low-fuss cuisine

Le Chateaubriand has been one of the most popular restaurants in the city for a decade now. Here, gourmet cuisine (or *cuisine d’auteur*, as the chef calls it) is served inside the plain but soulful interior of a neighbourhood bistro. “I was always fascinated by the local bistro or brasserie – they are meeting places for the locals, I just love it,” says Aizpitarte. “I decided >



Paris



Jasmin Evans/Art Associates

Right page: chef Grégory Marchand (right) in his Frenchie restaurant (5 Rue du Nil).

- 1 Holybelly restaurant
- 2 Frenchie restaurant
- 3 Le Chateaubriand restaurant
- 4 Hotel du Nord
- 5 Candelaria cocktail bar
- 6 Merci concept store
- 7 La Gaîté Lyrique arts centre
- 8 Villa Léandre
- 9 Musée Picasso Paris
- 10 Hotel Paradis

Places to visit

Gaîté Lyrique

An old theatre turned into a venue for art exhibitions and screenings.
gaite-lyrique.net
 3bis Rue Papin

Marais neighbourhood

This area's tiny streets are lined with a wide range of shops and boutiques. Drop by Merci, a giant concept store offering all things cool and beautiful.

Montmartre

Hilltop village Montmartre makes you forget the outside world exists. Don't miss the English-inspired country lane Villa Léandre.

Les Magasins Généraux

Award-winning advertising agency BETC turned a 20,000m² graffiti-covered warehouse into both its new workplace and a community-oriented centre for innovative cultural programming. Located in Pantin, an area dubbed the 'Brooklyn of Paris' by *The New York Times*.
 50, Avenue de Magasins

to open my own bistro, and to cook things I love to eat from all over the world, from the places I'd been on my travels." The chef serves a several-course meal of low-fuss yet inventive French cuisine heavy in international soul. Think: mouth-watering beef cheek with zingy mango sauce, and full-flavoured lamb tagine with pickled vegetables. Always pushing the boundaries of flavour combinations, the menu changes according to available produce and seasonality. Not only does the unexpected menu take away the formal edge normally associated with dining out, it also encourages diners to arrive with an open mind.

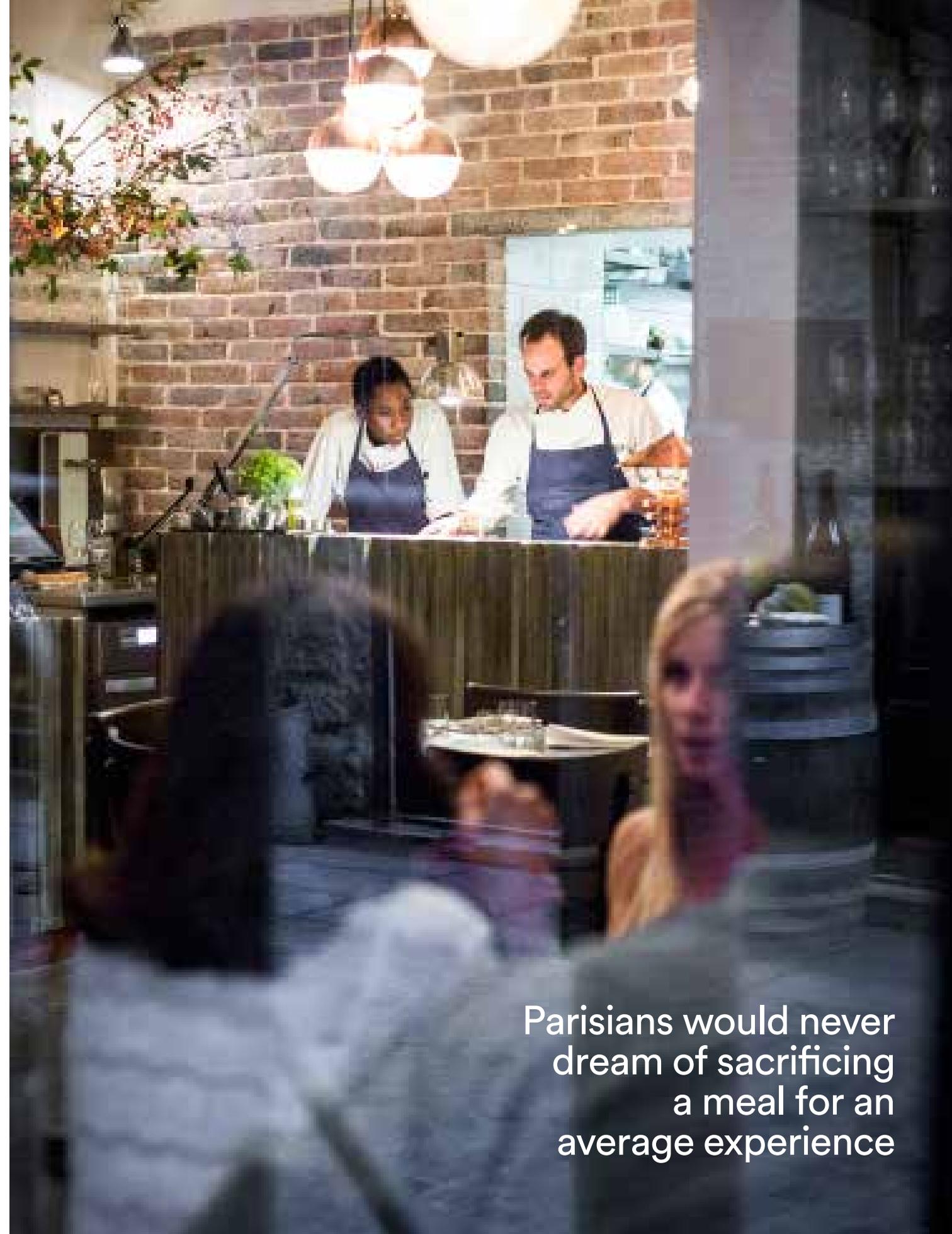
Changing the way Parisians feel about food, the city – which has over 40,000 restaurants – is now scattered with neo-bistros that come with month-long waiting lists. This new love for foreign ingredients has also opened the door to a rise of foreign restaurants. There's refined Italian (at Ober Mamma and Daroco) and inventive Japanese (at Neige d'été, Pages and Cartel), and many more fusion restaurants are popping up. This evolution of the Parisian food scene doesn't mean the quality of the cuisine has been compromised – quite the contrary. Chefs have indeed mastered the art of offering a rounded eating experience; because

in the end, eating remains synonymous with pleasure, a guiding life principle for Parisians.

Passionate melting pot

In fact, if there is one thing to remember about Paris, it's that pleasure is a right. A duty, even. "Food is one of the *arts de vivre*, or the arts of life, and Parisians cherish these arts with almost as much ardour as they do with painting, music and sculpture. The love of food and wine also expresses the ambient sensuality of the city, its rich public life and appetite for pleasure," explains American food journalist Lobrano.

Parisians take food very seriously and would never dream of sacrificing a meal for an average experience. This is what separates Paris dining from that of other cities. With the next generation of chefs, the Parisian food scene is in complete flux. While still rooted in its historic culinary perfection, Paris cuisine now reflects influences that are as diverse as its people. So, if the evolving food trends are anything to go by, whoever thinks Parisians are aloof, protectionist people should consider taking a second look, because today, Parisian food marks the city's diverse cultures and passion for integrating them as never before. ■



Virginie Garnier (Frenchie)

Parisians would never dream of sacrificing a meal for an average experience