

Post



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Meeting at the big head - September 28, 2023

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SUMMARY

We all met for breakfast on Rue Montorgeuil, a picturesque foodie street, followed by mostly browsing the kitchen supply stores that abound nearby. We took our Marais Foodie Tour then parted company to pack/last minute shop/etc. We met back up with Ron and Nancy for cocktails at our favorite bar, Les Deux Magots while Mike and Liz imbibed at nearby Le Flore. Ended up at Le Recamier, our oft-visited soufflé restaurant, for The Last Supper. - Karen

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DETAIL

Today is our last full day in Europe, tomorrow we fly back to Austin. We feel we have to make the most of the day so we're up early, at 6 am. As arranged, we plan to meet the gang at the giant head sculpture next to Saint Eustache church. The six of us have a foodie walking tour of the Marais but want to do a couple of other things first.

Karen and I plan to walk to the big head. It's mostly dark as we start out. The sky is blue with a few high wispy clouds. Our route takes us along the seine, across the Pont des Arts and through the Tuileries to the pyramid of the Louvre. We go through to the rue du Rivoli and around the amazing, round Bourse de Commerce.

One again six we head up the Rue Montorgeuil, a much loved foodie street, and get breakfast. We watch the people walk and bike by. We're across from the oldest bakery in Paris. Karen heads over to read the plaque commemorating the bakery and get's caught up in an interminable conversation with an American ex-pat who came over years ago and never looked back.

Breakfast out of the way we visit some food and food prep stores. First is G. Detou where they have the very best of everything packages, dried, and preserved. Little or nothing is refrigerated but the assortment is amazing. We're tempted but remain strong. Next is Toc for pots and pans and cooking utensils. The quality and assortment is only outdone by the high prices. Next door they sell supplies for people wanting to serve amazing snails, and duck confit, lamb's heart, foie gras, and the best wines and liquors. Again amazing but we're able to resist. Across the street and a ways down is Mora with molds, silpat, torches for crème brûlée, chain mail gloves for opening shellfish. Here things are bought.

As the time for our foodie tour draws nigh, we again pass the big head next to Saint Eustache and walk through the center of the above-ground part of Les Halle. We see the Centre George Pompidou aka Boubourg and make a small detour to visit Le Défenseur du Temps (the defender of time) animated sculpture. Alas it only comes to life at certain times and we're on a tight schedule.

We're supposed to meet our foodie tour at St. Paul. That's the name of both a famous church and a metro stop. We guess metro stop and finds others already waiting there for the tour. Eventually our guide, Alexandre, shows and checks us in. Through a marriage, a birth, and a remarriage Alexandre split his childhood between France and the UK. The lucky guy's French and English are both impeccable.

First stop is a very French-looking bakery a half-block away. The awning has the baker's name (Chinstau VABRET) and below that "Meilleur Ouvrier de France". It's explained this is a national program, for all of the various professions, where the top people in that particular profession select those few who do the very best (meilleur) work (ouvre).

Thus each of the guys are the Meilleur Ouvrier, or Best Worker. They get a gold medal at a ceremony, have to have eleven apprentices (to pass along the knowledge), and help pick out the future Meilleur Ouvrier.

The shop looks extremely traditional, with all of the paint and flourishes of a traditional French bakery. We're told it always will. If later it becomes a dress shop or a bitcoin store, it will still look like a traditional French Bakery. By law. We see a few of these on our tour.

We do the show of hands for who wants a croissant and who wants a pain au chocolat? It's our first food of the tour. Five minutes later we each get our own pain au chocolat (they were out of croissants). We hungrily "sample" the whole thing, the ever present pigeons picking up what falls off as we crunch.

As we eat our treats we hear about the building the metro. Workers were from all over France which at the time was not very united. As a part of their lunch workers brought big loaves bread and knives to cut them up. Fights broke out. Killings were regular occurrences. They thought "We'll never finish at this rate!" New rule: No knives. Bakers: Design for us a bread that's easy to transport and tear with your hands. Ergo: the invention of the baguette!

Next we head to a top of the line cheese shop. Alexandre buys cheese while we hang out on the street. There are cases out there showing cheeses they've doctored up, with fruit or nuts. They have wedges of brie with a layer of chopped almonds or figs in the middle. They all look so tasty. We encouraged to go into the shop for a quick look around (just not all 12 of us at once, please).

Inside it looks and smells divine. A part of the store is sectioned off by a little see-through wall (really just a few finely crafted open lattice of wooden sticks formed into an Asian looking panel). We're told not to get go back there or we will get a stern talking to. Curious! Back on the street Alexandre tries a joke that gets different reviews based on the composition of the tour. "In France the government isn't tied to one single religion. If it were, the god would be "chee-sus". None of us were overly offended.

We don't eat the cheese here but rather move along to a small restaurant on a side street (rue Beautreillis) where Jim Morrison died. Where we are (Au Vins Des Pyrénées) is connected to a wine store across the street. The Doors frontman used to regularly drink way too much over there.

We get just get two glasses of wine, a white and a red, and water. We're here to try their croque monsieur which uses truffled edam cheese. We hear the story of how this now ubiquitous French dish got its start. How a restaurateur, at lunch time, found he didn't have the makings for the normal workers lunch (no baguettes). So he made a ham and cheese on square bread topped with béchamel sauce. He called it a croque, which means 'crunch'. He got very famous for it and supposedly spent the rest of his working life asking his clients "Would you like a croque, monsieur?" and thus the sandwich got its name.

By now my wines (a red Malbec and a white ???) are gone. Both from the Pyrenees, which is the focus of the restaurant and wine store. Now comes the sampling of the cheese, purchased earlier. So to recap: bread (pain au chocolat), bread with cheese (croque monsieur), and now cheese (to be eaten with a soft, freshly sliced baguette). Hm... thankfully the cheese is very tasty. Comté, bleu de something, and a brie.

More walking. We go through the gorgeous and impeccable Jardin de l'hôtel de Sully. It's such a contrast to the hurried traffic, shops, and pedestrians of the rue du Rivoli. Our guide heads for the far corner and Karen and I know the punchline awaiting us through the doorway: the one and only Place de Voges. We hear that maybe one unit here goes up for sale each year and that US\$4M might get you a nice but modest 900 square foot flat.

We continue on to the Jewish quarter of the Marais ("the swamp"). We hear that whether there was a Jewish presence, or not, in Paris, depended on the feelings of the King at the time. When the Jews left (were forced out) and then returned, it was always to this area.

So far we've seen lots of building put up at the direction of Baron Haussmann (né Georges-Eugène Haussmann). Here we see great examples of "pre-Haussmann" buildings. Shorter (maybe four floors) and more plain.

Next stop is a chocolate/macaron store. We get some of each, of our choosing, to sample but by now I'm quite full. Nancy won the contest of finding the clothing store that was once a bakery, so she gets even more.

And on to our last stop for Merveilleuse. These are big desserts built up from a meringue substructure with frosting and toppings. Talk about guiding the lilly!

Tour over, we tip and thank our guide. We arrange when and where we're getting back together for our one last group eating/drinking session.

Karen and I walk most of the way home, switching to the metro only when her watch says she's met her daily goal and her feet say they're tired.

Our short down time is filled with resting, blogging, packing and apartment cleaning. Just in time, we head out for drinks before dinner. We're meeting Nancy and Ron at the "two magots" (Le Café aux Deux Magots). They're actually two magi, but our version's more fun. Mike and Liz are next door at Café Flore, at the insistence of her aunt ? Cousin? We'll reconnect prior to dinner.

At the Deux Magots Karen and Ron get kir royale (crème de cassis and Veuve Cliquot champagne) and I get a bracing glass of Comparri with ice. Nancy is good and drinks water. Dragon Rigz abstains altogether.

Our final dinner in Paris is at Le Récamier. Karen made the reservation six weeks ago, at the start of our trip. We have salads, ravioli de Royan (the tiny ones), and savory soufflés. We mean to eat in courses but don't make that clear. Everything arrives at the same time. The table is overflowing. Live and learn. It's fine and we have fun.

The 'all at once' dinner got us headed for our VRBO much earlier than we would have otherwise. It's warm at home so we open all the windows. We get a good cross breeze but also all the noise of the party going on in the courtyard one floor down. Thankfully they pack it in around eleven. We have to be up at six! (To go home. Noooooo!)

Photos



What appears to be a downed tree in the Tuileries garden is actually a sculpture.



What appears to be the Louvre and another building is actually mostly obscured by a structure housing materials for the re-furb of the hotel on the left. The big cube in the middle is fairly invisible thanks to the orthogonal placement of the mirrored walls. Brilliant!



You can't miss the gorgeous round building that is the Bourse de Commerce at one end of Les Halles



Nancy having fun with the sculpture:
"Ecoute" or "The Listener". It's
placement right next to the Saint
Eustache church, and that the eustachian
tube is so key to listening... Coincidence?
I don't think so!



Karen getting sucked in to an 'oh so long'
conversation, in English, with an
American. Sigh. Expats! The oldest bakery
in Paris in the background.



Some of our gang in the bakery, checking out the yummy merch.



It's all in the marketing. Dry pasta brought to you by the Good Hair Day Pasta company.



Goose livers the size of loaves of bread. Lots more calories, though.



The Defender of Time. But can he do something about how little time we have left in Paris? Whaaaa.



Beaubourg at Le Centre George Pompidou. Famous for having the plumbing and A/C ducts on the outside of the building (instead of on the inside like most buildings). The French like this and Jerry Lewis but wanted to get rid of the Eiffel Tower? Go figure.



One of my favorite corners in all of the Marais



Alexandre showing us where we're not



Sigh



Cheese behind the wall you're not supposed to go behind



Croque Monsieur



The Jardin de l'hôtel de Sully, free to visit and so close to the hustle and bustle of Paris' busy streets



A Boulangerie Patisserie. No, wait, it's a dress shop!



A pre-Haussmann building



Figuring which two flavors of macaron you want to try



FARNSNIENTE



The two oldest buildings in Paris



The bar area for the Café aux Deux Magots



Rigz. Finally old enough to drink some wine



Mike and Liz at Café Flore. Required given how much time Liz's aunt? cousin? spends there.



Our last meal. Soufflés at Le Recamier, of course.

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