



Appétit for Paris

A gastronomic tour of the French capital provides delicious food for thought

WORDS LYNN O'ROURKE

HERE may be grey skies above and my battered broly is not faring well in the style challenge being set by the pert parapluies around me on Place de la Concorde, but nothing can detract from the thrill of being in Paris – particularly when the theme of this trip is all things foodie.

I am avidly people watching, wondering just how everyone can afford to look so very well turned out, when our guide arrives to escort us on a walking tour of the fashionable Right Bank, learning about *chocolat* – an art form in this city – along the way. The vivacious Myriam introduces us to five of Paris's most celebrated chocolatiers, with tastings at each stop. Her knowledge is impressive, ranging from the Aztecs' trade in what was originally a bitter drink (one that Christopher Columbus apparently rejected with a dismissive, "This is nothing"), to today's signature style of each chocolate maker. Our group soaks up the history of the cocoa bean, but we really come into our own with the tasting, starting with divine L'Africain hot chocolate at ornate tea room Angelina's on Rue de Rivoli, a one-time haunt of Coco Chanel.

By now I am slightly regretting the expansive lunch at Pascade, a restaurant specialising in les pascades, shaped pancakes with a sweet or savoury filling – resembling a large Yorkshire pudding if you like, but, what with this being Paris and all, with a degree more elegance. However, I manage to rally and road test a few Pierre Hermé macarons – a hugely popular French post-Sunday lunch treat – with flavours ranging from rose to coffee, which you can find in his beautiful Rue Cambon shop.

Leaving the sweet stuff behind, we head to antique wine dealer De Vinis Illustribus, situated in a 17th-century wine cellar in Rue de la Montagne-Sainte-Genève. Established by Lionel Michelin in 1994, the family business is a haven for aficionados as well as the less knowledgeable among us. With a wine shop above selling young and old wines, the centuries-old basement cellar has been sandblasted into shape and is now lined with vintage bottles, creating a wonderfully atmospheric

space for tastings. Lionel's love of wine spills over as he talks about why it is better to buy magnums (wine ages better in big bottles), how long you can keep it and some of the best French vintages (1929, 47, 59, 90 and 2010 are all winners) as we sample Burgundy, Bordeaux and Rhône.

We round off the day with dinner in a Paris couple's home, courtesy of Voulezvousdiner.com. The website offers the opportunity to have a meal in the home of a "host" in the country you are visiting. Guests book online, and pay the host as you would in a restaurant. The period Paris apartment we visit belongs to Anne-Laure and her husband Quentin. A dining table is beautifully set in a room with floor to ceiling windows overlooking the chic Paris streets below. It feels odd turning up at a stranger's home and we politely shuffle in, but a warm welcome dispels any awkwardness. Anne-Laure's family hail from France's Champagne

region and – naturellement – make their own, so would we like to start with some of that? Not surprisingly, we would. What follows is homemade foie gras, Normandy speciality blanquette de dinde, cheeses to swoon over and a divine plum tarte aux mirabelles. Anne-Laure does the cooking (from an astonishingly small kitchen), while Quentin matches the wine, both of which are excellent. Before long we are swapping stories and gaining an insight into life in Paris – a far more memorable affair than dinner in a local restaurant.

At Sunday breakfast I restrict myself to coffee, despite the urge to cram 15 versions of delicious-looking pastries into my mouth. We jump in a cab to the 5th arrondissement, speeding by the St Germain Brocante fleamarket, to meet Muguet Becharat of Paris Sweet Paris, which offers English-speaking gastronomic tours. Muguet oozes Gallic style, her enthusiasm for authentic French fare is infectious and before long I'm back in the tasting saddle with pastries (which seems too mundane a term for these towering delights of cream, choux, fruit and chocolate) at Carl Marletti's pâtisserie in Rue Censier (his violet and blackcurrant jam is one to slip into the souvenir bag – everything else demands to be eaten on sight).

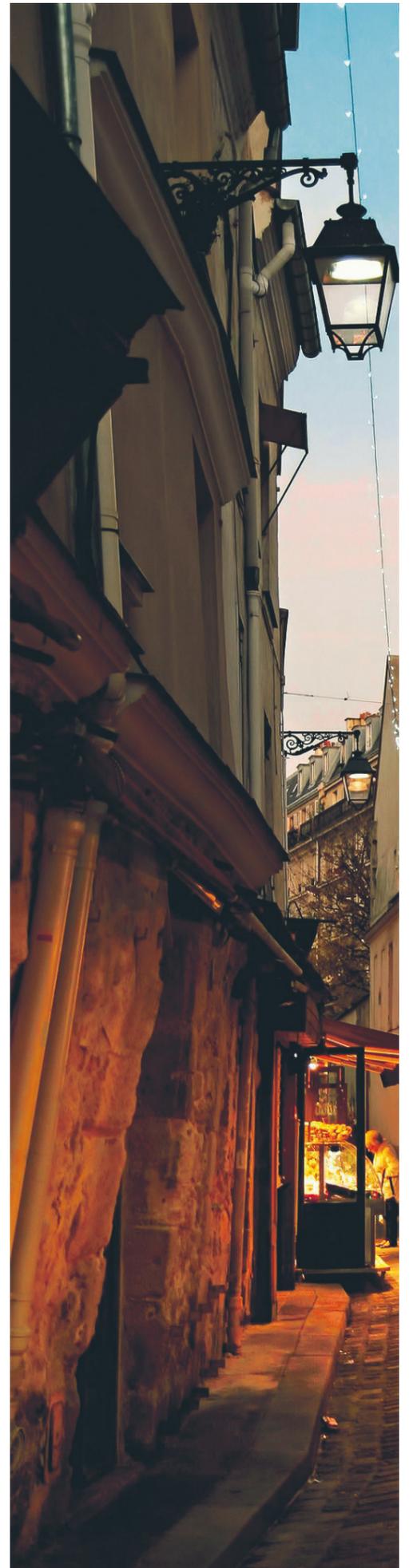
We head to the open-air market in the Latin Quarter's Mouffetard district, one of Paris's oldest and liveliest areas, with its specialist food shops tucked away. Muguet knows them all. According to her, the name of the area stems from old French slang meaning "stinky", but don't let that put you off – this is a fabulous slice of old Paris. Market days are Wednesdays, Fridays and Sundays, and curious tourists mingle with savvy local shoppers.

We start at cheesemaker Androuet in Rue Mouffetard where the array is mind-boggling, before meandering up the narrow, cobblestoned street, a Roman road built 2,000 years ago, to seek out crisp-crust Mandor bread, baguettes, olives, pates and tapenades to picnic on. Tucked away at No 89 is another chocolatier, Mococho, where the dazzling array of pralines look too good to eat – almost. It is a joy having these foodie gems pointed out, instead

FACT FILE

Air France flies direct from Edinburgh to Paris, see website for current prices (www.airfrance.co.uk);

We stayed at the four-star boutique hotel Relais Monceau, 85 Rue du Rocher (www.relais-monceau.com); double rooms from €114-€195 (£92-£159); breakfast, €15 (£12); Pure Chocolate Walk on Paris' Right Bank, duration two hours, €60 (£48) pp (www.meetingthefrench.fr); Wine tasting with De Vinis Illustribus, €50 for tasting, €150 for lunch with wine (for a minimum of four). Contact: Dominique Michelin (Domi_michelin@hotmail.com) (www.devinis.fr); Gastronomic walks with Paris Sweet Paris (www.parissweetparis.com); half day from 2-4 hours, €240 (£194) per group (5 to 15 participants maximum for gourmet tours); small private groups: half day, €140 (£114), €160 (£130) for two and €180 (£146) for three to four; Cookery course with chef Olivier Berte (www.coursdecuisineparis.com), €100 (£81); Restaurant Pascade (www.pascade-alexandre-bourdass.com); For further information see www.rendezvousenfrance.com and the Paris tourist office's website, www.en.parisinfo.com



TUCK IN (clockwise from top left) De Vinis Illustribus wine cellar; chocolatiers abound in Paris; choose a cheese from a mind-boggling array; the enchanting Rue Mouffetard

of blundering around finding nothing more than the local supermarché.

We bid our adieu with much cheek kissing at the Cour du Commerce Saint André, a charming pedestrianised passageway dating from the 18th century that is home to small shops as well as the oldest café in Paris, Le Procope (once a haunt of Victor



Hugo, Voltaire and Oscar Wilde), and chocolate concept store and restaurant Un Dimanche à Paris, owned by chocolate maestro Pierre Cluizel, as well as the wonderful olive oil shop, Première Pression Provençal.

Sunday afternoon is spent in the charismatic company of chef Olivier Berté, who runs cookery courses aided by assistant Sophie, whose English, thankfully, is much, much better than my French. They aim to put us through our pastry paces and sharing tasks among our group of six, the flamboyant

Olivier sweeps aside any language barrier, ignoring our lack of expertise, to help us produce surprisingly professional choux puffs and chocolate-filled macaroons.

We leave the Berté kitchen full of good intentions to reclaim our dusty home blenders, clutching aprons, recipes and leftovers (who knows, we might need a snack before dinner), inspired by the passion the French have for food. Eating is a pleasure and Paris knows just how to let you enjoy yourself. □

DO NOT DISTURB TWIST & SPROUT YOGA AND RAW FOOD RETREAT, EASTWOOD HOUSE, DUNKELD

TWIST & Sprout is the remarkable union of a dynamic and inspiring pair of almost thirty-somethings, yoga teacher Susan Reynolds and raw food chef Lorna Crawford. They are pioneers in Scotland of three-day restorative retreats and one-day workshops extolling the values of bliss moments and a cleaner and more serene lifestyle. This is an opportunity to un-plug for a while, nothing about it is punishing. It's feasting rather than fasting, energising not exhausting, and sheer comfort rather than hair-shirted hell.

Think light-hearted days filled with food, yoga, walks, massage, music, sleep and many laughs. OK, you may miss coffee and a glass of red, but the results far outweigh these tiny sacrifices. Eastwood House, just outside Dunkeld, is the HQ, a newly-restored Victorian villa sitting on the river bank with the water rushing past, amid rose gardens, vegetable patches and herbaceous borders. Opposite is Birnam Woods, which played a part in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. As you enter, the warmth from the vast log burning stove in the hall hits you with almost as much kindness as the hostesses' welcome. Drop your shoulders, your bags and enjoy.

BUDGET OR BOUTIQUE?

Neither, it is like staying at a house party laid on by friends who have covered every possible desire and whim of those with a yearning to live a more organic country life. The house sleeps 16 and there is masses of space to chill out in the three public rooms downstairs. The look is Farrow & Ball walls, scrubbed wooden floors, roaring fires, deep, comfy sofas, lazy armchairs, and a vast dining table for all to share plus acres of books.

WORTH GETTING OUT OF BED FOR

The days start and end with yoga. Reynold's excellent tuition ensures that the morning class is dynamic and invigorating and the evening session restorative and relaxing – it includes a guided meditation and chanting. There are talks on yoga, raw diet and a food demonstration where you get to join in, plus one-to-one time if you like. Birnam Woods or the nearby Hermitage with its mind-blowing waterfall and Ossian Tower are within walking distance and there is also the ritual of jumping into the Tay for a blast of freshness.

ROOM SERVICE

Although the rooms are shared, you can request your own for a supplement. Each is decked out with seriously comfy beds, contemporary furniture, traditional fabrics and organic sheets, and locally-sourced flowers provide simple but divine decoration. Bathrooms are separate, there are more than enough to go round, and the endless supply of



piping hot water ensures the many deep Victorian roll top baths are always begging to be wallowed in.

LITTLE EXTRAS

Reynolds and Crawford love music and say it helps people to relate. With an enviable library they choose and play tracks to tie into what is happening during each stage of the retreat to match the mood of guests.

WINING AND DINING

It's all about hydration and getting the body alkalisied – so you will be encouraged to drink and eat as much water, herbal tea, cold-pressed juices, smoothies, soups and greens as you can. The tempting seasonal, organic and locally sourced menus are planned to complement the yoga practice and the time of year. You will not go hungry since there is an abundance of tempting dishes. Everything is sugar, dairy and wheat-free, and it is remarkable what Crawford conjures up with her artist's-trained eye and a love of reinvention: pesto, pastas, avocado burgers, mushroom stacks, stir fry's, sushi, dips, granolas, torts, cheesecakes, macaroons and plenty more. Raw Chocolate is a huge part of the retreat; it's a staple of the diet and stimulates happiness, so not more than a few hours go past without a chocolate treat or drink.

GUESTBOOK COMMENTS

A clear head, feeling fit, strong and a little wiser is what I loved experiencing and it's all here. Suffice to say, over half of the punters I met were returning for their second or third foray into this Twist & Sprout world. □

Rachel Meddowes

Twist & Sprout's next event is at Eastwood House: Three-Day Retreat 2-4 January, 2015, £390, and an autumn date has yet to be released, www.twistandsprout.co.uk