



ÎLE-DE-FRANCE

ONE OF THE BEST
THINGS ABOUT
LIVING IN PARIS IS
THAT IT'S SO EASY
TO ESCAPE TO THE
ÎLE-DE-FRANCE
AND REVEL IN
ITS SCENERY,
PRODUCE, AND
SUPERB HOTELS
AND
RESTAURANTS.

The Île-de-France, that lush green collar of fields and forests that surrounds the French capital, has been nourishing Parisians ever since the city was founded by the Celts on the banks of the Seine around 250 BCE. As for me, I've been rustivating in the region, where many Parisians have country houses, ever since I moved to Paris in 1986, but had become besotted by the bounty of its farms sight unseen in my teens, while working as a page in the public library of the small Connecticut town where I grew up.

Though it paid a pittance, I loved this job because I was surrounded by books, and, most of all, for the sleepy summer Saturday afternoons when the librarian would send me down to the cool, musty cellar to "tidy up the archives." The reason I knew she knew I actually didn't do any work downstairs was that she'd always leave the new book she recommended to me every week right on the counter by the basement stairs. And so one hot day, I picked up Émile Zola's brilliant novel *The Belly of Paris*, galloped downstairs to my roost cellar, and promptly went to France, or the Île-de-France.

*Chef Rémi Chambard
of Les Étangs de Corot in Ville-d'Avray*

"In the silence of a deserted avenue, wagons stuffed with produce made their way toward Paris, their thudding wheels rhythmically echoing off the houses sleeping behind the rows of elm trees meandering on either side of the road. At the pont de Neuilly, a cart full of cabbages and another full of peas met up with eight carts of turnips and carrots coming from Nanterre. The horses, their heads bent low, led themselves with their lazy steady pace, a bit slowed by the slight uphill climb. Up on the carts, lying on their stomachs in the vegetables, wrapped in their black-and-gray-striped wool coats, the drivers slept with the reins in their fists. Occasionally, the light from a gas lamp would grope its way through the shadows and brighten the hobnail of a boot, the blue sleeve of a blouse or the tip of a hat poking from the bright bloom of vegetables—red bouquets of carrots, white bouquets of turnips, or the bursting greenery of peas and cabbages.

All along the road and all the nearby routes, up ahead and farther back, the distant rumbling of carts told of other huge wagons, all pushing on through the



darkness and slumber of two in the morning, the sound of passing food lulling the darkened town to stay asleep.”

Since the only source of food I knew in those days was our antiseptic, neon-lit local A&P supermarket, my imagination devoured the raw sensuality of Zola’s minutely observed descriptions of the farm-to-market culture in the Île-de-France that once fed Paris. Someday, I resolved, I’d taste the famous cherries of Montmorency, the carrots of Crécy, the violet-tipped asparagus of Argenteuil—all of the glorious food that poured into Paris from its fertile nearby hinterland—and this is why I was almost as excited to visit the lively local market in Versailles as I was the Sun King’s château the first time I went to the most famous town in the Île-de-France aside from Paris.

Vanessa, a friend of a London friend who was teaching English in Versailles, invited me for a late May weekend, and after her art-historian husband, Nigel, had offered me a fascinating if assiduously scholarly daylong tour of the château, she spirited me off to the market the following morning. “I hope he didn’t bore you to despair,” she said of her husband. “In any event, you’d be too polite to say. But I think that what you see in the market, which was founded on orders from Louis XIV while Versailles was being built, may explain more about why the king chose to live here instead of Paris than the magnificent Galerie des Glaces [Hall of Mirrors] or any of the other grand loot in the palace.”

I’d hesitated at an invitation from a total stranger, but not only did Vanessa have a warm smile and a rapier wit, she loved to cook, too. So we trawled the aisles of the Marché Notre-Dame together while she tutored me, pointing out various strictly local delicacies, including raffia-tied bunches of pleasantly sour-smelling sorrel; small wooden boxes of fat Mara des Bois strawberries and piles of scarlet rhubarb ribs; and little terra-cotta cups of Fontainebleau, an almost vaporous white cheese from the town of the same name, which came protected by delicate caps of cheesecloth, and rounds of Brie—perhaps the most famous of all Île-de-France cheeses, with ivory rinds that felt like finely flocked

rubber on mats of yellow straw. Our real find, though, was at the *volailleur* (poultry merchant), where Vanessa was elated to spy a *poule de Houdan*, a rare breed of chicken with long, luxuriant black feathers and a scarlet butterfly-shaped cockscomb from the nearby Yvelines.

“You will never forget this bird,” vowed Vanessa, and she was right. Roasted golden that night with sprigs of thyme, whole cloves of garlic, and tiny new potatoes, it was the centerpiece of one of the best meals I’ve ever eaten in France. We started with sorrel soup, and then that succulent fowl with its finely grained alabaster flesh, followed by mesclun and Brie and strawberry-rhubarb tart with a *fromage frais*, Fontainebleau. And so I learned one of the best things about living in Paris is that it’s so easy to escape to the Île-de-France and revel in its scenery, produce, and superb hotels and restaurants.

L’ANGÉLIQUE AND TRIANON PALACE HOTEL

≡ Versailles ≡

For many years, the elegant dining room at the stately Trianon Palace Hotel was not only the best table in Versailles but also one of the favorite gastronomic destinations of Parisians in search of both an excellent meal and a breath of fresh air. Today, the hotel remains a fine place to stay in Versailles, with breakfast on the terrace, opposite the gardens of the château, being one of the great summertime pleasures of the Île-de-France.

The restaurant that shows off the enduringly royal tastes of the well-heeled locals, however, is L’Angélique, which occupies an elegantly decorated Directoire house where the dining comes with white-painted beamed ceilings, parquet floors, and wood-framed velvet upholstered armchairs dressed in snowy linens.

Under the direction of proprietor Régis Douysset, young chef Alix Guiet’s cooking offers an exquisite lesson in classical French cuisine with the occasional puckish and politely provocative twist. If a green lentil salad with crayfish and delicately sautéed frogs’ legs and a Porto sauce is regally tempting, Guiet is more playful with his seafood. Yellow pollack comes in an “oriental” broth spiked with ginger and lemongrass, and lobster roasted in salted butter is served with a sublime shellfish sauce boosted by aged rum, an intriguing riff on the classic recipe for lobster à l’Armoricaïne, and a *tian* of eggplant and fennel that teases its sweetness. Desserts are excellent, too, including, in season, an almond biscuit served with caramelized apricots and freshly made pistachio ice cream.

Beyond its great gastronomic worthiness, the other reason I love taking friends to L’Angélique is that it so discreetly exposes and displays the permanent nostalgia of the French bourgeoisie for the grandeur of having a *real* royal family, an aspirational longing that informs French life, politics, and cooking.

LES ÉTANGS DE COROT

≡ Ville-d’Avray ≡

Heeled by the honeyed perfume of the flowering linden trees in Ville-d’Avray on a late June afternoon, I studied the stillness of its famous pond from a park bench. Carefully observed, it wasn’t really still at all, since shifting clouds overhead continuously altered its color, and the occasional falling leaf or insect teased its calm with concentric ripples. Suddenly the quickening pulse of my perception was humbled by a much deeper appreciation of the painter Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot, who had seen these dark green waters better than I could ever hope to. This *étang* had been

Top: Les Étangs de Corot’s pond

Bottom: Les Paillotes Restaurant, Ville-d’Avray



one of his favorite subjects, and since he was the leading painter of the Barbizon school in the nineteenth century, I couldn't help but think of it as some sort of giant baptismal font for the impressionist painters. "There is only one master here—Corot. We are nothing compared to him, nothing," said Claude Monet.

What's remarkable, though, is that the setting that so inspired Corot has survived so recognizably, and this is one reason why I love running away to the delightful Les Étang de Corot hotel for a night. Another is that the hotel's dining room has consistently been a showcase for rising young chefs, the latest being Rémi Chambard, who oversees the hotel's three different restaurants. What's intriguing about Chambard's cooking is that his creativity is so logically inventive that his preparations seem almost obvious. A perfect example is a springtime starter of plump green asparagus served with a light vinaigrette that incorporates very finely chopped Spanish ham and comes with a side of airy Parmesan-enriched polenta, a brilliant little trilogy of tastes. Likewise, his smoked salmon topped with just-poached quail eggs and herring caviar with creamed broccoli offers a sublime constellation of tastes and textures. The exquisite balance and technical precision seen in a dish like panfried veal sweetbreads served with morel mushrooms and a macédoine of seasonal vegetables with preserved lemon are characteristic of Chambard's flawless technical skills, too.

LES MAGNOLIAS

✧ *Le Perreux-sur-Marne* ✧

Though its lyrical name evokes a pastoral idyll that it generally delivers, the Île-de-France (Island of France), which includes Paris, effectively begins on the other side of the *périphérique*, the busy beltway that defines the city limits of the French capital. Recently, and to the general surprise seasoned with a good dose of skepticism

on the part of most Parisians—good restaurants in this layer of la Métropole traditionally were faux medieval auberges cum expense-account blowholes where the chef played it loose with foie gras and truffles to offer his patrons an excuse to order a really good wine—this inner ring of suburbs has become the setting of some of the most intriguing recently opened restaurants in France, chef Jean Chauvel's Les Magnolias, for example.

Even though Chauvel boasted one of the most impressive pedigrees of any young chef in France when he first opened his own place in 1999—he'd worked at Taillevent, La Tour d'Argent, Bernard Loiseau, and La Table d'Anvers, among other kitchens—it was like pulling teeth to persuade anyone to accompany me to his restaurant, because it's located in Le Perreux-sur-Marne, a quiet suburb forty minutes out of Paris by the RER train. Complain about the trip though they did, those who went with me were bowled over by such spectacularly imaginative but gastronomically logical dishes as caper gazpacho and red beet mousse topped with caramelized popcorn—Chauvel nodded knowingly when I told him this taste constellation reminded me of Lower East Side delicatessens in New York City— "white" pizza with garlicky snails and a crème brûlée of foie gras cream in peanut cream, and tuna steak in seaweed sauce with salsify laquered with ginger juice. "I don't want a passive customer. I want to provoke emotional reactions from the people who eat my food," Chauvel told me.

What also fascinated me in those early days was that Chauvel dared to believe there was a receptive clientele for such audacious cooking in the quiet middle-class suburbs of eastern Paris. He bet that it wasn't just grand bourgeois types in Saint-Germain-des-Prés who liked to be tantalized at the table, and he won. To be sure, the aesthetics of his dishes are occasionally a little overwrought, but his cooking remains consistently brilliant. To wit, I'm still craving and mentally savoring the pigeon braised with sweet wine and served with red cabbage and chestnuts cooked with miso that I ate the last time I was there.



Vaux-le-Vicomte in Maincy

LE POUILLY

✧ *Vert-Saint-Denis* ✧

The perfect complement to the pleasure of visiting, the magnificent seventeenth-century Vaux-le-Vicomte chateau, created for French finance minister Nicolas Fouquet by architect Louis Le Vau, the painter-decorator Charles Le Brun, and the landscape architect André Le Nôtre, is lunch at Le Pouilly, an easy twenty-minute drive away in a quiet little village.

During the cool months, a fire crackles on the hearth of the big stone-lined brick fireplace in the dining room, which was created from the former barn of this handsomely restored nineteenth-century farm, and huge beams overhead and exposed stone walls create an atmosphere of stylish rusticity. The rest of the year, weather permitting, they serve outside on a terrace overlooking well-tended gardens, which makes this an ideal warm-weather address.

Against a backdrop of such well-groomed and carefully staged rusticity, I guessed that homemade *terrines de foie gras* and *lièvre à la royale* (hare in a sauce of its own blood and gizzards) would be house specialties when I came for lunch on a pleasantly chilly October day when the wine-and-apples smell of newly fallen leaves had given all of us an appetite. Instead, our carte blanche menu began with sublime langoustines cooked tempura style and served with a mango-pineapple-tomato chutney, a shrewd garnish that primed our palates with fruit-buffered tones of acidity. Butter-braised red mullet with stewed eggplant with deboned pigs' feet and Gorgonzola was funky and fascinating, while roasted guinea hen with tapenade, melted Parmesan, and a small flaky pastry tart garnished with burned potatoes announced autumn with a brilliant theme of char and fermentation. Occasionally, Anthony Vallette overreaches, but I am a committed fan of his culinary audacity, which is unfailingly fascinating and often leads to some remarkably good eating.



Auberge Ravoux

➤ AUVERS-SUR-OISE ➤

The reason most people may have heard of Auvers-sur-Oise is that this pretty village an hour north of Paris was both the final home of and inspiration to the Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh. On May 21, 1890, the painter pitched up here and rented a spartan room with a single dormer window at the Auberge Ravoux. Van Gogh felt safe in the village, and during the next two months he produced some seventy paintings, including the superb *The Church at Auvers-sur-Oise*, today in the Musée d'Orsay in Paris. Van

Gogh died on July 29, 1890, in his attic room at the Auberge Ravoux, after shooting himself in the chest with a revolver.

The auberge was renovated several years ago, and van Gogh's room is open to the public, but I resisted this place for a long time because I assumed it would be a tourist trap. It's not; instead, the dining room of the auberge has been lovingly restored with great attention to detail and flawless good taste to create an atmosphere that's deliciously authentic. The food—simple, hearty, generously served French country comfort food like duck terrine with pistachios and *gigot de sept heures* (lamb braised in wine and herbs for seven hours)—is good, too, which makes this place a terrific outing from Paris.



Auberge des Templiers

➤ LES BÉZARDS ➤

Located almost at the beginning of the legendary RN7, once the main highway between Paris and the Riviera and affectionately known to the French as *la Route des vacances*, this stately old inn with beautifully landscaped grounds was one of the original Relais & Châteaux when the chain was born in 1954. It's been regularly modernized through the years, but still maintains a curiously pleasant fly-in-amber atmosphere of the sort of well-mannered bourgeois fastness that once characterized this famous and famously French chain of hotels. But it's not stuffy. I love coming for the weekend with a good book during game season—this place is just on the edge of the Sologne, famous for its *gibier*—and have also happily stopped here many times for the night heading north and south. The last meal I ate in the handsome beamed dining room was perfection, too: purple-tipped asparagus with a sauce mousseline, sautéed sweetbreads with baby carrots and fava beans and pasta tubes stuffed with *duxelles*, and strawberry charlotte, exquisitely prepared from impeccable produce.

Barbezingue

➤ CHÂTILLON ➤

After being one of the leading chefs in the modern French bistro movement in Paris, chef Thierry Faucher moved to suburban Châtillon. "I needed some space," says the chef, who trained with Christian Constant at the

Hôtel de Crillon and with his friend Yves Camdeborde before the two of them went on to reboot the bistro. So in Châtillon, forty-five minutes from central Paris by the RER train, he found a space with room not only for a large terrace where he serves outdoors during the summer, but also a garden with a *pétanque* course. Faucher's cooking is hearty, succulent, and generous. Among recent dishes I've loved—all part of the prix fixe menu—are fiddler crab soup with Comté cheese, terrine of *boudin noir* (blood sausage), mussels cooked with olive oil and lemon, *sandre* (pike perch) with a truffled potato puree, and roasted wild duck with *cèpes*. This is a great spot to come with a large group of friends or family.

Ferme Yamashita

➤ CHAPET ➤

The tidy little vegetable farm and hen houses run by Asafumi Yamashita and his wife, Naomi, in the pretty little village of Chapet in the Yvelines is a wonderful outing from Paris. Yamashita supplies best-quality seasonal vegetables and chicken to five top Paris restaurants—Ze Kitchen Galerie, Pierre Gagnaire, l'Astrance, Le Cinq, and Guilo Guilo—and also offers a delicious table d'hôtes-style feed on Saturdays (lunch and dinner) and Sunday (lunch) from May through October on a reservations-only basis. The menu changes regularly according to the seasons, but highlights of my last feast here included white radish salad, ramen with vegetable tempura, and chicken meatballs with baby eggplant and ginger.

Waterzooï du pêcheuret petits légumes at Auberge Ravoux

Les Pléiades

» BARBIZON »

The charming little town of Barbizon is best known for the school of nineteenth-century painters that bears its name. Today, Barbizon is a favorite weekend getaway of arty Parisians, and the address they favor is the delightful Les Pléiades, a vintage 1830 inn on the town’s stone-cobbled main street (most rooms are in a modern extension to the original building, and the hotel comes with indoor and outdoor swimming pools and a spa). The auberge has two excellent restaurants—a casual brasserie and a cozy gourmet restaurant, Les Pléiades, with massive old beams overhead and a very ambitious menu by a young chef, Michael Christmann. While the brasserie is ideal for lunch, Christmann’s nervy cooking is a pleasure at dinner, including such dishes as foie gras with coffee, pistachios, and hazelnuts; thyme-smoked lamb with a tomato-garnished jus; sage gnocchi; roasted langoustines in an anise bouillon; and a soft dark chocolate cake with a banana daiquiri.

... THE ANCIENT ROLE OF
THE ÎLE-DE-FRANCE AS
THE LARDER OF PARIS HAS
RECENTLY SHOWN THE FIRST
GREEN SHOOTS OF A SMALL
BUT DELICIOUS REVIVAL.

Restaurant Axel

» FONTAINEBLEAU »

Though it’s very much overshadowed by both Versailles and nearby Vaux-le-Vicomte, the fascinating château at Fontainebleau ranks for me as one of the most underappreciated historic monuments in France. With the arrival of the brilliant, Japanese chef Kunihisa Goto at Restaurant Axel, the town has now become a serious gastronomic destination as well. Goto trained with an array of major young French talents, including Jacques Decoret in Vichy and Philippe Etchebest in Saint-Émilion, but if his cooking is informed by this experience in terms of an impeccable mastery of classical French cooking, his style is very much his own. Goto’s menus change regularly, but I knew he was a major talent when I sampled his exquisitely fresh carpaccio of scallops with crabmeat and a brilliant remoulade of Jerusalem artichokes—an intriguing reflection of the way both the Japanese and French chefs venerate their produce by seeking to enhance its natural taste and texture—an impeccably cooked rack of veal with ginger and fresh almonds, and a delicate cherry tart with lemon verbena ice cream. Goto’s cooking is so good it merits a trip to Fontainebleau in and of itself.

Composing a plate at Auberge des Templiers





MAITRE DE GOUT

✧ *Eating the Île-de-France in Paris* ✧

After waning for some sixty years due to galloping urbanization, the ancient role of the Île-de-France as the larder of Paris has recently shown the first green shoots of a small but delicious revival. In Paris, three-star chef Yannick Alléno has become the directional champion of a seriously researched and curated locavore movement, with special haute cuisine menus featuring such nearly extinct local produce as cherries from Montmorency, asparagus from Argenteuil, and cabbage from Pontoise. Alléno has opened a sleek Latin Quarter bistro, Terroir Parisien, which showcases the best Île-de-France produce on a menu that follows the seasons. Highlights of the spring menu included potato-and-leek soup with smoked eel, watercress with a soft-boiled egg and *lardons*, and matelote “Bougival” (freshwater fish and eel stew), and rhubarb compote. The dish I couldn’t resist was the *Navarin printanier d’agneau de chez Morisseau*, which is made with lamb from a species native to the Île-de-France raised by the Morisseau family in Aufferville. It was superb, with vividly fresh al dente baby vegetables garnishing the lush but light brown sauce that napped the tender, flavorful meat.

Alléno eventually plans to have his own farm, but in the meantime, he’s assiduously sought out a variety of small producers for pears, carrots, potatoes, herbs, and other produce, and he also intends to revive production of *la poule* (chicken) *de Houdan* in the Yvelines town of the same name. “*La poule de Houdan* was more famous in Europe than *le poulet de Bresse*,” Alléno observes. “What changed everything was the Great Depression, when the government encouraged Paris chefs to use produce from all over the country as a way of helping struggling regions, and then the suburbanization of the Île-de-France.”

One of the other most ardent defenders of the Île-de-France’s traditional market garden culture is Joël

Thiébaud, who grows seventeen hundred different varieties of vegetables on a fifty-acre farm in Carrières-sur-Seine, just five miles from the Eiffel Tower. The farm was founded in 1873 by Thiébault’s great-grandparents, who were among the first to set up shop as *maraîchers*, or market gardeners, at the newly created farmers’ market now situated on the chic avenue du Président Wilson in Paris’s 16th arrondissement. Today, Thiébault supplies top chefs like Pascal Barbot of L’Astrance and Pierre Gagnaire, but still sells his produce at the Président Wilson market on Wednesday and Saturday mornings (he’s also at the rue Gros market in the 16th arrondissement on Tuesday and Friday mornings).

Dining room at Auberge des Templiers



RADISH VICHYSOISE WITH PICKLED CHERRIES

Paris locavore chefs source their ingredients from Île-de-France truck farmers like Joël Thiébault (p. 11). Here, the fresh, gentle flavor of leek-and-potato soup gets a market twist with the addition of slightly bitter radishes, and cherries amped up with sherry vinegar make your taste buds spring to attention.

12 sweet red cherries, pitted and halved 1 tsp. sherry vinegar 2 Tbsp. (30 g) unsalted butter 1 medium leek, white and tender green parts only, quartered lengthwise and thinly sliced 1 lb. (500 g) red radishes with greens, radishes halved and thinly sliced, greens coarsely chopped	Kosher salt and freshly ground pepper 4 cups (1 L) water 4 oz. (125 g) Yukon Gold potato, peeled and diced ½ cup (125 ml) heavy cream	4 appetizer servings
---	--	----------------------

1. In a shallow bowl, sprinkle cherries with vinegar.

2. In a large saucepan, melt butter. Add leek and cook over medium heat, stirring occasionally, until softened, about 5 minutes. Stir in sliced radishes and season with salt and pepper. Add water and potato and bring to a boil. Simmer, partially covered, over medium heat until potato is soft, about 20 minutes. Add radish greens and simmer for 2 minutes. Let cool slightly.
3. Working in batches, puree soup in a blender. (For extra smoothness, strain soup through a sieve into a large bowl.) Pour into a large bowl, whisk in cream, and refrigerate, whisking occasionally, until chilled, about 2 hours. Season soup with salt and pepper. Ladle into bowls, top with pickled cherries, and serve. **Do ahead:** Soup and cherries can be refrigerated separately for up to 2 days.

Overleaf (left): A terrine at Auberge Ravoux in Auvers-sur-Oisc; (right): lobby at Les Étangs de Corot in Ville-d'Avray

GREEN ASPARAGUS WITH CHORIZO VINAIGRETTE

At Les Étangs de Corot in Ville-d'Avray, chef Rémi Chambard's chorizo vinaigrette gives meaty depth to spring asparagus, and a soft bed of polenta, enriched with mascarpone, rounds out the smoky sausage.

1 Tbsp. extra-virgin olive oil 1 Tbsp. chicken pan juices or extra-virgin olive oil 1 Tbsp. sherry vinegar Kosher salt 1 oz. (30 g) Spanish chorizo or other spicy, dry salami, finely chopped	12 large green asparagus, peeled 2 cups (500 ml) chicken stock ½ cup (80 g) instant polenta ⅓ cup (80 ml) heavy cream 1½ oz. (45 g) mascarpone 1 tsp. hazelnut oil (optional) Piment d'Espelette (optional)	4 appetizer servings
--	---	----------------------

1. In a medium bowl, whisk olive oil with pan juices, vinegar, and salt until smooth. Stir in chorizo.

2. In a large skillet of boiling salted water, cook asparagus until just tender, about 6 minutes. Drain well and pat dry. **Do ahead:** Vinaigrette and asparagus can be refrigerated separately for up to 4 hours. Bring to room temperature before continuing.
3. In a medium saucepan, bring stock to a boil. Add a pinch of salt. Gradually stir in polenta and return to a boil. Cook over medium-low heat, stirring often, until thickened, about 3 minutes. Remove pan from heat and stir in cream, mascarpone, and hazelnut oil. Season with salt and piment d'Espelette. Spoon polenta into shallow bowls. Top with asparagus, drizzle with vinaigrette, and serve.

© Hungry for France by Alexander Lobrano, Rizzoli New York, 2014. Images © Steven Rothfeld but may not be reproduced in any way, published, or transmitted digitally, without written permission from the publisher. Serial rights are available; for information please contact Nicki Clendening at (646) 330-4878 or nclendening@rizzoliusa.com.