

Chapter 9. Before Sunset...and After

(visit erickirchmann.com/chapter9 for maps, links and pictures)

After the late night, we slept longer than we would have preferred. First up on our agenda today was the Marché d'Aligre in the twelfth arrondissement. We rode the Métro to the busy Gare de Lyon about a five-minute walk from the market. In operation since the eighteenth century, Marché d'Aligre is one of the classic French markets. It has both an outdoor produce market and an adjacent covered section (Marché Beauvau) with artisanal meats, cheeses, and baked goods. Completing what many feel is the best market in Paris is another whole section, the Puces d'Aligre. This flea market sells antique items, ancient books, vintage jewelry and much more. Courtney and I love flea markets, in Europe in particular. We only had about an hour until the market closed, so we hurried through the stalls searching for hidden treasures. The next time we will definitely arrive sooner. Courtney bought several vintage items—a cameo, a one-of-a-kind metal bracelet, and some antique ice tongs. I picked out three other pieces of unique jewelry for her, but we had to pass on them telling the seller they were “trop chère” (too expensive). Insisting one piece was real silver, he wasn't interested in bargaining. We weren't so sure about the silver. We thanked him and wished him, “Bonne journée.”

We walked about a block to a wine bar targeted in my research, Le Baron Rouge. It was better than advertised. They had an extensive wine list available in various sizes. The bartenders were approachable and appreciated our French. We ordered a “pot” (500ml) of a Rhone red and a large charcuterie plate, “Le Grand Mixte.” The tables nearby were filled with locals who all seemed to know each other. It was obviously a jovial, post-market hangout. All around the bar, they had barrels of wine direct from wineries. You could get one liter (or larger) take-away containers of really good wine for ridiculously low prices. Planning to walk most of the afternoon, it wasn't practical to take any wine to go. We wished this cool spot was closer to our neighborhood. Deciding to use the bathrooms before our next adventure, I was pointed outside and down a back alley to an outhouse style shack. When I opened the door, I laughed out loud. I had found the first Turkish toilet of the trip! Courtney took a pass on the bathroom break...

Rue Crémieux is one of the cutest one-block neighborhoods in Paris. A short walk from the Le Baron Rouge toward the Seine, and we were there. The street calls to mind the famous “Rainbow Row” of Charleston, South Carolina with every house painted a different shade of pleasing pastel color. Some are decorated in trompe-l'oeil, and most have luscious landscaping in large terracotta pots. The narrow cobblestone street of quaint row houses transports you back to the late nineteenth century. While blogs often refer to it as a “secret” hidden gem in Paris, it isn't really that secret. At times, it was difficult to get a picture without someone in the background posing ridiculously, often right on the steps of someone else's house. The residents have actually (unsuccessfully) petitioned Paris to put up gates and close the street on evenings and weekends.

We walked a couple blocks into the heart of the Quinze-Vingts neighborhood. This neighborhood in the twelfth arrondissement is not a tourist destination but is quintessentially Parisian. “Quinze-Vingts” stands for fifteen-twenties or three hundred. It was named for a famous hospital for the blind which had three hundred beds. The odd numeric term comes from the ancient vigesimal system (based on twenties) used by the Gauls, a Celtic people. When Rome conquered Gaul, the Celtic numbering system was hybridized with the Roman decimal system. In fact, the French word for eighty, “quatre-vingts” is a product of this hybridization. In any event, we loved the Quinze-Vingts neighborhood for being so normal. The vibe is laid back with normal folks just going about their business. We found a nice-looking café at a crossing, Café Quai 33, and sat down for some caffeine and hydration before heading to our next destination.

The Coulée Verte was one of our very favorite places in all of Paris—a romantic hideaway featured in the poignant 2004 film, *Before Sunset*, starring Ethan Hawke and Julie Delpy. Also known as the Promenade Plantée, the path started its life as an elevated railway line in 1859. This line ceased operation in 1969. In the 1980s, the area started to revitalize. The abandoned, elevated path was reclaimed and repurposed by an architect and landscape artist to create one of the “true” hidden gems of Paris. Open since 1993, this free 4.5 kilometer stretch of park is an absolute delight. You can access the beginning of the path via a staircase at 12 Avenue Daumesnil.

As you top the staircase, you enter a little piece of heaven in the midst of bustling Paris. The landscaping is remarkable in that it feels at once both beautifully manicured and yet still a little wild. The path is segmented, and you pass seamlessly from one scene to another, each a little different with reflecting pools, benches, and arched passageways. The smell of jasmine floats on the breeze. Roses, climbing plants, luscious garden beds, and lime and hazelnut trees are found in abundance. Copious shade cools on a warm day. All along the path are views of notable buildings of a variety of architectural styles. At one point, the path actually passes directly through a modern curved building which arcs around it on either side.

The beauty is undeniable, but it is more than that; it is the mood and the feeling of the place. The Coulée Verte is the ultimate place to “flaneur,” a lovely French word which means to wander aimlessly simply for pleasure’s sake. You experience an incredible cross section of Parisian culture: young and old—strollers and canes, unsupervised school-aged kids walking (or running) through the park, dogs, lots of dogs, high school and college students, young professionals, and the working class—all of ethnic and racial diversity and all showing respect with a smile, a nod or a bonjour. Everyone we asked was happy to take our picture and wanted to make sure the shots were perfect before moving on. Everywhere along the path people, young and old, were holding hands, stealing a kiss, or even going in for a passionate one. At one point, the platform widens with an ice cream stand and fun activities for kids. I am not sure, but I think I even remember a small carousel... of course there was, this is Paris. Later, a large park

spreads out widely around the path with Le Jardin Reuilly-Paul Pernin to one side and Square Eugène Thomas on the opposite. The lawns were filled with people lounging in the sun, picnicking, and drinking wine. Toward the end of our walk, the surroundings became more working class with several immigrant communities living side by side but felt no less charming and just as safe. We were sad to exit the Coulée Verte, but it was time to hit the road and hop the Métro home to get ready for yet another trip highlight.

Our big splurge for Paris was the highly rated restaurant, Boutary (rated number five by one source). We knew it was going to be the most expensive meal of the trip but figured it would be an unforgettable experience. We freshened up at our place and put on our fanciest clothes, me in my sports jacket for the one and only time of the trip. We went out early to participate in the evening apéro custom. After failing to find a seat at a couple different bars, we snagged a terrace table at “Le Petit Buci.” The bar sits at one of the major corners of Rue de Buci, a happening little strip of cafés and restaurants. Greeting and ordering all in French, we were served with a smile—a Ricard for me and a white sangria for Courtney. The people watching was great with fashion running the gambit from causal to hip, and all the way to suits and evening gowns. Tourist garb stuck out like a sore thumb, and we played one of our favorite games, “Guess the Country?”

Arriving at Boutary, we were taken to the elegantly decorated upstairs dining room with an ultra-modern lighted flare pattern carried through the tables, floor, and walls. The design artist added contrasting, classical fixtures which lit the room as the sun went down outside the opened shutters. Our waiter was energetic and funny but dead serious about his profession. We hit it off right away when we asked for the French menu. He asked if we wanted to speak in English or French during the meal; we chose the latter. Later in the meal, when we would break into English to ask a question, he would playfully scold us insisting we continue in French while coaching us on our vocabulary. This was a great exercise in improving our French. The downside was that when he explained each complex and exquisite dish, he did so in rapid-fire French. When we got home from this extraordinary meal, Courtney and I sat together and tried to take notes from memory to capture all the details of the seven-course tasting menu with caviar and paired wines. The dishes were not described anywhere on the menu. The courses were chosen at the pleasure of the chef who crafted artistic masterpieces from the freshest and most unusual ingredients. Apologies to the chef, I am certain our memories left out many amazing details.

Our waiter arrived at our table with our first wine, a bright, crisp Riesling designed to open the palate. Before our first culinary experience, our waiter gave us a lesson on caviar. He explained the restaurant had strict specifications for their caviar. They only served caviar from sturgeon of a specific size, caught only at precise locations, at particular depths, and only during certain seasons. Then, he explained how choices made during processing and aging impacted taste. The chef prefers to have his caviar salted less than some and aged for eight to ten months. The longer aging with less salt leads to buttery and creamy undertones (with less of the harsh salty taste I associated with caviar from the few times I’ve had it before). He suggested we try eating

it the traditional way, served directly on the back of your hand, tasting a few eggs at a time letting the flavors roll around on the palate. Eating it this way evolved for safety reasons. Historically, if the caviar irritated the skin, it was poisoned and should not be consumed. He then applied a large glob of caviar to the back of each of our hands and left us to enjoy. The taste first exploded into your mouth then softened to indeed give a buttery deliciousness. Savoring each little taste slowly, me with eyes closed emitting involuntary, audible happy sighs, our dinner was off to a great start.

The courses now proceeded with our waiter presenting each with great flare along with a detailed description of the high-quality, artisanal ingredients mixed together in surprising, delectable combinations. First was a small corn chip bowl filled with beans of summer, corn, and an edible purple flower. It looked too pretty to eat. Next came a plate with two offerings—short bread with tapenade, and pickled anchovy and lemon paired with a gnarled bean chip topped with an unusual mushroom and caramelized shallots. Following that combination came an absolute work of art—delicate pieces of smoked salmon with passion fruit, mangos, pureed sweet potatoes, special spicy greens, pickled red onion, sea asparagus, and a mind-blowing sauce beyond description. We moved on to our second wine, a Northern Rhone white from Saint-Joseph with powerful flavors and honey undertones.

With each course, one of us would exclaim, “This is one of the best things I have ever eaten,” only to repeat it with the next presentation. This brings me to the absolute best dish of the trip. The waiter arrived with two covered round bowls. I said, “It looks like you have a surprise.” He smiled and said something like, “Oh you just wait!” There was already an enchanting smell in the air. After setting a bowl in front of each of us, he dramatically removed the covers. We were immediately engulfed by a heavenly smoke. While the smoke cleared, he explained that the large mound of caviar on top had been cherry wood smoked. The base of the dish was a special kind of French potato pureed with chives and pressed into a cylindrical mold. The potatoes had been cooked in what is considered the best butter in France made by the renowned Monsieur Bordier from Brittany (his process takes twelve times longer than most commercial butters allowing it to mature, deepening in flavor and complexity). In between the caviar and the pureed potatoes was a crisp, feathery ultra-thin potato chip. The base of the dish contained a thick, buttery white sauce. I would hazard to say this may be the most delicious thing I have ever put in my mouth!

However, we were not even close to being done. Following the smoked caviar came one of the most unusual dishes, tender chunks of asparagus with wild garlic ice cream (think fantastic!) in a French cheese sauce with flaky pink chips of some sort and pennywort stems and leaves. Next was the fish course, a delicate monkfish which favored lobster, topped with a Japanese miso, honey mustard sauce along with mini turnips and sweet peas. Moving from white to red, our next glass was a Saint-Émillion that was outstanding. This paired nicely with the meat course—rare filet of duck with a green pea purée and morel mushrooms. It was sprinkled with dabs of rhubarb and cashew bits and bathed in a famous French sauce whose recipe dates to the Middle Ages.

Finally, we got to the desserts, plural! The palate cleanser, pre-dessert was freaking out of this world by itself—rhubarb and grapefruit compote with a dill whipped cream topped with an edible flower. Courtney chose for her main dessert fresh strawberries with fromage frais (a soft, fresh sweet cheese) in strawberry vinegar with basil ice cream. I went with a 90 percent pure hardened chocolate ball covered with crème fraiche then dusted with cocoa powder and cardamom. We were fully sated... Then came coffee with post-dessert—almond cakes with pistachio cream along with a firm, mini chocolate cake topped with fondue and sprinkled with unknown savory toppings. The dinner may have cost more than a month's rent at our first apartment in 1989 but it was worth every penny!

On our way back home, we took a detour down the hidden passageway, le Cour du Commerce Saint-Andre, near our place. You would have to be a local (or have done obsessive Google Maps study!) to know about this lane. We had walked down it earlier in the trip during apéro hour, and it was hopping. Most of the businesses were now closed save a couple restaurants serving their last customers. It was shadowy, dark, and oh so romantic. I grabbed Courtney and sneaked in a kiss in the deserted lane. After all this is Paris! Our second to last day in Paris was once again an action-packed day and maybe one of the best of the trip—Marché d'Aligre, the Coulée Verte, an apéro and one of the best meals of our life.