

Paris is for (food) lovers

An American in France learns to eat like a local ... and live a little

By **Maridel Reyes** for USA TODAY

IT'S 9 A.M. IN PARIS, AND I'M STARVING. I'VE BEEN traveling for the past 12 hours, saving my appetite the whole time.

My friend Lara and I open the door to our rented apartment in Montmartre, the neighborhood that served as the setting for the film *Amelie*. The welcome baskets are waiting. One is full of fresh fruit, pulpy orange juice, butter, and milk; the other is loaded with preserves, cookies, crackers, and a bottle of wine. But I head straight for a white platter of flaky pastries and baguettes. I pick up a pain au chocolat. I can't remember the last time I allowed myself a pastry.

This is why I came to Paris: food. I think of myself as an enthusiastic, capable cook—and an even more eager eater. I curl up with food magazines and a cup of tea to relax; chopping vegetables and stirring sauces soothe

me. Most of my energy is spent planning my next meal or perusing menus online.

The second reason I'm here: to chill out. After a roller-coaster year on a personal level, and the professional pressures of running a small business, I spend most days with gritted teeth, running from appointment to appointment. My blood pressure is probably through the roof. (But I'm not sure; it's not like I have had time to go to the doctor.) So six days in Paris should be enough time for me to unplug, slow down, taste

the good life, and recharge.

Lara and I have finished the pastries and have moved on to a crusty baguette with butter and juice in tiny cups. (Everything is smaller in France!) The tightly wound, control-freak version of me in New York would never eat this for breakfast. But in Paris, I'm laughing about our love lives and reaching for thirds.



Spice hunters

My first stop is **Goumanyat & Son Royaume** (3 rue Charles-François Dupuis), a spice shop housed in an old apothecary. It's only open four afternoons during the week and from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. on Saturdays. I ring the bell to be let inside. Famed chefs like Pierre Gagnaire and Alain Ducasse stock up here. Bright peppercorns, pods, flowers, and stems are displayed in glass containers. Colorful spice blends are arranged under handwritten signs that reveal what type of food and dishes they complement.

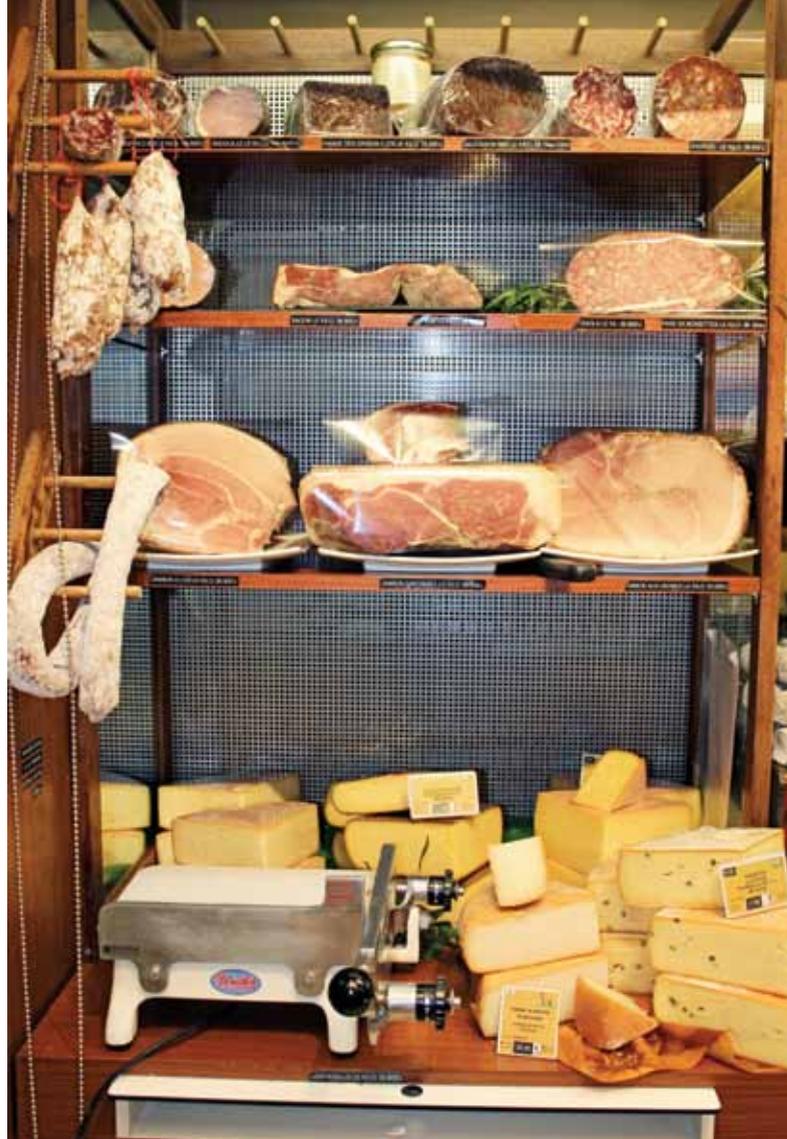
The shop is known for its saffron, sold by the owner's family since 1809. There's a table of saffron-infused perfume, chocolates, and candy. I buy a big package of caramels for my sister for 5 euros and marvel at how even the smallest purchase is carefully wrapped in tissue paper and a chic bag.

I break for a croque-madame and fries, then hop on the Metro to **Fauchon** (30 place de la Madeleine), a bakery and gourmet market. There are rows and rows of French macarons, delicate pastries, and savory spreads. It's crowded, so my friends and I go around the corner to **Hediard's** flagship store and restaurant (21 place de la Madeleine). It feels far removed from the bustling street outside—and my email inbox. We share a tray of sweets: a raspberry tart, a passion fruit macaron, a chocolate-glazed cake that looks like a tiny wrapped present, and a lemon custard tart. We *ooh la la* over a plate of dark chocolate squares and madeleines.

I order a cappuccino. Its whole-milk foam is piled high and proud.

Cheese, please

"This butter will change your life," Chef Eric Fraudeau tells the group of American tourists gathered later that evening for a wine and cheese class at the recreational cooking school **Cook'n With Class** (21 rue



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Charcuterie and cheese at a shop in Montmartre; fresh market vegetables, crucial for French cooking; the formal dining room at Veuve Clicquot's Hotel du Marc; pigeon served at La Table d'Eugene; a staircase to the champagne caves at Vranken Pommery; Goumanyat & Son Royaume, a spice shop in a former apothecary; this Clicquot table allows sediment to drift to the top of the bottles.

Custine) in Montmartre, a 10-minute hilly walk from our flat.

The butter is made from unpasteurized milk, which wouldn't fly in America because we're "so scared of everything," Fraudeau laughs. He owns *Cook'n With Class* and fosters an infectious, convivial atmosphere among visitors and instructors. I take a bite. The butter is a deeper color, creamier, saltier, and coats your mouth in the most luxurious way. I now understand why people go to great (illegal) lengths to buy it in the states.

Over the next few hours, we nibble on five cheeses—each one funkier, richer, and more pungent than the last, paired with equally impressive wines and charcuterie. We learn why you shouldn't eat cheese or white wine straight

from the fridge (cold dulls flavors); why some cheeses are wrapped in leaves (to draw bugs away from the food); what the blue bits are in blue cheese (rye bread that turns to mold); and that you should eat the rind of the cheese to get the full experience. When in doubt, pair wine and cheese from the same region; they'll naturally share complementary flavors.

Markets and macarons

The next morning, a group of us gather near one of the many merry-go-rounds in Montmartre for a market class. Chef Constance, a young woman with a pixie haircut, points to a butcher shop with a neon sign in the outline of three horse heads. *Boucheries chevalines* like this sell only horsemeat, which





is cheaper than beef. One animal lover (and horse owner) in the class leaves the scene in terror.

On to the next butcher shop, where we lose another participant when we see chickens and ducks displayed with their heads and feet still attached. The chickens' black talons and long, stretched necks and the bloodied work surfaces gruesomely fascinate me. Chef Constance says you can gauge the freshness of a chicken by inspecting its head and eyes.

Around the corner, we stop at a fishmonger. "Fish doesn't smell when it's fresh," Chef Constance tells us, and she's right. The shop gives off a pleasantly briny aroma, like the sea. She selects a piece of salmon, and we watch one of the workers fillet it with a few swipes

of the knife. We make stops for cheese, bread, and vegetables and return to the cooking school.

We're all assigned different jobs. Some chop, I learn how to debone fish with a pair of tweezers, others practice the proper flick of the wrist and saute apples for dessert. Chef Constance shows us a simple way to poach an egg by tightly wrapping it in plastic wrap with olive oil, salt, and pepper and then dropping it in boiling water. Hours later, we feast on a three-course meal, plus two amuse bouches and more glorious cheese.

"Most people in France don't eat breakfast. Or maybe [they'll] have coffee and bread," Chef Eric tells me after class. "Dinner is the biggest meal and holds you over until lunch the next day." And

unlike Americans, the French snack on unprocessed foods like cheese, fruit, or bread, not chips or energy bars. Their portions are smaller, and they eat more vegetables.

The next day, our last in cooking school, we end with a three-hour course on macarons. Chef Pino warns our chatty groups that the mini treats are not forgiving and we must work fast. He's done the heavy lifting for us—sifting and weighing dry ingredients, separating eggs and chilling them overnight. He holds our hands for the hard parts like weighing ingredients, making the filling, and piping meringue onto the baking trays. We tote home three kinds of wobbly-shaped macarons of different varieties: white chocolate olive oil, spiced, and salted caramel.

Fancy France

With cooking school over, I check into the centrally located and swank **Hotel Fouquet's Barriere** (46 avenue George V), just off the Champs-Elysees, for some Old World hospitality. The concierge asks me what kind of snack and beverage I would like on arrival, as well as the temperature I would like, the type of music I want playing (French pop, *s'il vous plait*), and even the color of roses I prefer.

The room is spacious and bright, and I'm offered a glass of organic champagne. As lilting French music plays, I lie on the couch and nibble on a tray of foie gras, bread, olives, and nuts. For the first time in forever, I'm completely relaxed. I could weep with joy but instead set off for some shopping.

When I return, I nearly squeal when I see the careful turndown service complete with macarons, chocolate, and bottles of Evian by the bed. Each guest has an assigned butler, but, feeling awkward, I ask only for a set of weights delivered to my room and help booking my train tickets for a trip to the Champagne region.

That evening, my friend and I go out for our one blowout formal meal at **Fouquet's** (99 avenue des Champs-Elysees), the more-than-100-year-old brasserie. It's attached to the hotel and has windows looking out on the Champs-Elysees. Fouquet's hosts the annual Cesar Awards dinner, France's version of the Oscars. It's the kind of place where your purse gets its own stool and you get scolding looks for taking photos of your food.

I start with a salad of vegetables shaved into long ribbons and bracingly fresh crab. Next is sea bream (a white fish native to Europe) and razor clams on a bed of nutty bulgur wheat. Dessert is the restaurant's famous raspberry Napoleon. The meal takes four hours, but I appreciate every languorous bite.



Cook'n With Class Chef Eric Fraudeau prepares a fish terrine (front) and pork charcuterie.

TRIP PLANNER



GET THERE. It's easy to get to the City of Lights—nearly every major airline flies there. Air France offers 140 flights to Charles de Gaulle Airport weekly from 11 cities.



EAT. La Table d'Eugene, located in non-touristy northern Montmartre, serves up a modern take on brasserie fare at affordable prices. Order the show-stopping chocolate bomb dessert. 18 rue Eugene Sue

L'As Du Falafel in trendy Le Marais always has a line, and it's worth the wait for a cheap to-go lunch. 34 rue des Rosiers

Chez Janou serves Provencal fare and feels like you walked onto the set of *Amelie*. 2 rue Roger Verlomme

For a five-star, traditional French formal dinner—plus juicy people watching—go to

Fouquet's on the Champs-Elysees. 99 avenue des Champs-Elysees



STAY. To get a taste for Parisian living, rent an apartment from **Feels Like Home in Paris**. Choose from studios to four-bedroom flats in neighborhoods like Montmartre, Northern Marais, and Canal Saint-Martin. Each apartment is located near the Metro, bakeries, cafes, markets, grocers, and specialty shops, so you'll feel like a local. feelslikehomeinparis.com

For the ultimate service, check into the luxe **Hotel Fouquet's Barriere**, right off the Champs-Elysees. 46 avenue George V; lucienbarriere.com



PLAN. Peak season falls around mid-June through August. But you'll be pleasantly surprised to find the city relatively

empty in July and August, when Parisians vacation in the countryside. To save money, plan a trip during the shoulder season (April through mid-June and September through October) or off-season (November through March).



DON'T MISS. **Cook'n With Class** in Montmartre offers 13 different recreational cooking courses from French dessert-making to molecular gastronomy. Classes are taught in English. 21 rue Custine; cooknwithclass.com

Reims, in the Champagne region, is a 45-minute train ride from Paris. Tour famous brands' cellars, taste various vintages, and visit an 800-year-old cathedral where kings of France used to be crowned. Champagne is about one-third less expensive in the region than abroad.

Champagne wishes

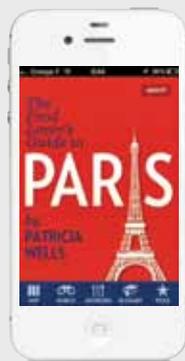
During wine and cheese class, I learn that about 60 percent of the champagne produced by France is consumed within its borders. The French pop open bubbly to toast even the smallest occasions. "It's a way of honoring your guests," Adelaide D'Orleans, a publicist for Veuve Clicquot, explains over a glass of bubbles. "It's not a party without champagne."

After five days in Paris, I have the beginnings of baguette fatigue, but my appetite for champagne is still holding up mightily. And everything is still charming. French people actually do say *voilà!* all the time—while presenting a soufflé, when they're talking about wine, even while hailing you a taxi to the train station.

I hop on a bullet train to Reims, about 45 minutes and 90 miles from Paris, home to champagne houses like Moët, Krug, Veuve Clicquot, and Pommery. Last year, Reims introduced a tram system that goes to the major champagne houses plus local attractions like the 800-year-old Notre Dame de Reims cathedral, where kings of France were crowned, and Le Boul-ingrin, an Art Deco-era seafood brasserie beloved by locals.

My first stop is **Vranken Pommery** (5 place General Gouraud, Reims), built in 1868. Madame Pommery was a patron of the arts and commissioned murals carved into the chalk cellar caves. Our tour guide describes the wine-making process and says only sparkling wines from the region are allowed to be labeled champagne.

We descend 116 steps into the cellar to find contemporary art exhibits in the caves along with bottles of bubbly. Neon lights slice through the dim cellars, showing off the dramatic contrast between the champagne-making traditions and classic art and the modern works on display.



AN APP FOR FOODIES IN PARIS

Food critic Patricia Wells published the first edition of *The Food Lover's Guide to Paris* in 1984, the same year Apple unveiled the Macintosh. The book and its subsequent editions have won praise and awards. Now, Wells has launched an iPhone app featuring more than 300 spots to dine in Paris. This English-language app has a GPS locator and allows users to browse by category, neighborhood, price, and type of cuisine. \$4.99; compatible with iPhone and iPod Touch running iOS 5 or higher



I'm just in time for lunch at Veuve Clicquot's **Hotel du Marc** (18 rue du Marc, Reims), the private mansion built by Madame Clicquot's business partner in 1840. Reopened after four years of extensive renovations, the house is stately and grand on the outside but playfully chic and current inside. Not an actual hotel, it's used for events and entertaining. The entryway walls are painted a purple ombre to suggest the pinot noir grapes that dominate the brand's champagnes' blend. Upstairs is an art installation with tangles of wood flowing into a bench (a nod to vines) and stylized paintings of the Clicquot family.

D'Orleans, a photographer on assignment, and I sit in a sunny dining room and enjoy a three-course meal with champagne pairings.

This cheese shop in Montmartre is well stocked with countless varieties of bold and pungent cheese, a staple of the French diet. Never to be eaten chilled—the coldness dulls its flavor—cheese should be removed from the fridge at least an hour before serving, chefs say.

French connection

At the airport on my way back to New York, I pick up some unpasteurized brie and comté. There's a bottle of champagne in my luggage that I'll take to a party back in Brooklyn. Saffron caramels, macarons, and chocolates are safely stowed.

Two weeks later, all the cheese is gone. The champers has been toasted. But it hasn't all gone back to the status quo. I'm cooking my eggs in butter, not my usual calorie-conscious cooking spray. When I sit down for a meal or a snack, I step away from my computer and turn off the TV. Instead of an energy bar choked down on the go, I let the cheese come to the right temperature and enjoy it with a little bit of jam. It adds a certain *joie de vivre*. 