

ANNEXE 6

This column was published by Harriet Welty Rochefort in Paris Pages, May 2000). It is an excerpt from her book, French Fried.)

"I'm not hungry tonight," my French husband Philippe will often announce when he makes it back home from the office around 9 p.m. "Today we had a business lunch at -- (now you can fill in the blank with Les Muses or Divellec or the Carré des Feuillants or Ducasse, the most expensive and most prestigious restaurants in Paris). He negligently tosses out the names of these fabulous restaurants I would DIE to go to as I stare at him in sheer envy.

I'm not really all that jealous though as first of all, the idea of discussing business would kill a good meal for me and secondly (and very nice for our bank balance), I actually prefer going to simpler homier places. Hey!

The type ? An unpretentious place which serves good rustic French food and respectable wine in a decor that hasn't been too tarted up and become too trendy. Or to put it another way, a restaurant which is warm and friendly and authentic! The waiters have been with la maison a long time and know what they're doing. They're professional but not obsequious, friendly but not overfamiliar. They don't, for example, congregate in little groups wondering what to do while ignoring your requests nor do they reach in front of you to get your plate. Fellow diners are friendly but not inquisitive, considerate when it comes to things such as not blowing smoke in your face (if they didn't smoke at all it would be even better but let's not dream) or letting their dogs (yes, many French restaurants allow dogs) climb all over your feet. Does this exist ? Of course !

Take the Balzar on the rue des Ecoles in the Latin Quarter, for example. There was a great flap about the Balzar, Lipp's less snobbish sister restaurant, when the Brasserie Flo chain took it over in 1998 but so far it seems to have retained its authenticity and personality. It's got good food and wine and capable waiters who serve the white linen covered tables efficiently and with good humor. When you sit there, you feel that you are briefly "home". In fact, Balzar has been home to

generations of students and professors - and their sons and daughters - from the nearby Sorbonne. They know the waiters and the waiters know them, but this being France, there's always a respectful distance on both sides.

Bistros, Brasseries, and Restaurants and some cultural misunderstandings

When you come to Paris it's good to have a few definitions under the belt to avoid cultural misunderstandings. For example, many foreigners are mystified or simply ticked off when they walk in a restaurant at 3 in the afternoon, ask for a salad and a glass of water, and told they won't be served. That is because a French restaurant is very different from an American restaurant. In France, a "restaurant" connotes "sitting down and taking your time" and is for two, three, or four course meals with sophisticated fare. For a savory home-cooked pot-au-feu or blanquette de veau, head to a bistro which will have the same hours as a restaurant (generally 12 pm to 2 pm and 7 pm to 10 pm). A bistro, from the Russian word for quick, evokes red checkered tablecloths and lace curtains but some of the most up and coming bistros in Paris these days are anything but that with their contemporary design and New York feel. For a light salad or a quiche outside of these traditional French meal hours, a brasserie is your best bet. Originally a place to drink beer, brasseries evolved into what they are now, lively bustling places where you can get anything from a sandwich to a choucroute at any time of day and late at night. In both brasseries and cafés, you'll see that some tables have white linen cloths on them and other tables have nothing. If you only want a cup of coffee or a sandwich, stay away from the white linen. That's for a real meal.

Memorable meals, both good and bad

Although I've been fortunate enough to eat in a few three-star restaurants, most of my memorable meals took place in simple restaurants with honest food and an atmosphere I liked. I probably wouldn't make a special return trip to any of them for the food although it was good. What I liked about them was the particular moment I

spent there, the people I was with, and the situation. A village restaurant in Auvergne, a country restaurant in the Eure-et-Loir, a crêperie in Brittany, even the occasional routier (truck stop) are all places I like to go to eat and prefer to most Parisian restaurants because they feel "real" to me.

Speaking of Paris restaurants which range from absolutely divine and sublime to atrocious, one of the worst meals I've ever encountered was right off the Champs-Élysées in a restaurant where a friend of mine and I ordered the ubiquitous salade de chèvre chaud, goat cheese salad. I swear it was on the French equivalent of Wonder Bread, untoasted, and the chèvre was not chaud but froid. We asked the waiter how he could serve such under par fare and he replied that's what the tourists want. (I think he was embarrassed because after all, he wasn't the one making the food!). I've also eaten in places where the food was fine but the atmosphere was so chilly that I would rather have been anyplace else in the world. Who needs it? And I've been in tony à la mode places where the decor was très soigné and all the "in" people were there but the food ranged from blah to bad. Of course food in those places isn't what it's all about, thank God. But between you and me, I'd rather eat good food with nobodies than horrid food with somebodies. So when you come to Paris, now you know: "restaurants" are for formal two or three or four course meals, bistros for home-cooked meals with rustic food in an informal friendly atmosphere, and brasseries for sandwiches, salads or choucroutes or whatever you want at any time of day. Guidebooks such as the Zagat Survey of Paris Restaurants and Patricia Wells Food Lovers Guide to Paris can help but it's always fun to strike out on your own as well if you're feeling brave. And when you get to the restaurant or brasserie or bistro, here's a little tip: **Don't mistake the reserve and distance of most French waiters for "unfriendliness". French waiters have been trained as professionals for whom waiting tables is a job, not a stopgap until they find something better to do.** They won't say "Hi, I'm Pierre, I'll be your wait person for the evening" and they won't interfere in your conversation to add their own unsolicited comments. They will however be able to describe to a T what's going to be on your plate. At least they'd better be able to because in France, what's on your plate is what counts!

