

VERVE SCAPES

TRAVEL · SPACES · FOOD · PARTIES

PARIS JE T'AIME

Paris is a city that can be visited over and over again. **Shirin Mehta** renews her love of the French capital, drops by the largest fresh food market in the world at Rungis, strolls around the picturesque Saint-Germain-des-Pres and looks forward to discovering ever more of its hidden secrets

ILLUSTRATIONS BY HEMANT SAPRE

Every alternate year, I plan a rendezvous with Paris. While my husband traipses through the stalls of food merchants from around the world at SIAL Paris, touted as 'the world's largest food innovation marketplace', I reacquaint myself with the spacious avenues, the cobbled streets, the amazing museums, iconic monuments, gourmet stores and patisseries in this city that most love to love and some, perversely, love to hate. I am definitely a paramour of this vibrant city by the Seine with its romantic bridges that inspire passion, iconic Eiffel Tower that reinvents itself with the changing sky, the Notre Dame Cathedral that emits calm even when thronged, the Sacre Coeur that seems to throw off its touristic avatar just

for me, the Louvre, the Musee d'Orsay....all the sights and sounds that excite me anew each time I visit.

This year, however, I decide to not-do any of my must-dos. And so, I allow the city to titillate in a different way, to turn new tricks for an old lover. Two experiences leave me spell-bound, each very different, though central to both is my abiding love of food and gastronomy - whether it is the largest fresh food market in the world at Rungis on the outskirts of Paris, or a tantalising bite of the most perfect, delicately-flavoured macaron on a windy street on the Left Bank's precinct of Saint-Germain-des-Pres.

Despite its recent vulnerability, I realise that Paris continues to attract....





RUNGIS MARKET

CULT VENUE

Rungis wholesale market, seven kilometres south of Paris, the largest fresh food market in the world, may be visited by invitation only or through a guided tour of the enormous halls that stock every kind of food from every part of the world. Even the most famous chefs visiting here may only view and never touch the fine produce, even as they visit before the crack of dawn....

Food lovers arise! It is almost 4 a.m., not quite the time to do so, but stumble out of bed I must. The rooftops of Paris are dark and the beginning of winter hangs bleakly in the early morning chill. Bundling up in woollens and a coat are necessary. And then, the excitement hits. I am off to market. Well, not to your neighbourhood collection of stalls and stands but to Rungis wholesale market, whose paths and halls spread copiously over 234 hectares, today the largest fresh food market in the world and a symbol of the French gastronomy heritage, employing around 12,000 personnel. Located seven kilometres south of Paris, this is where 1,451,388 tons of foodstuff arrives from all over the world, to be distributed city-wide to around 18 million consumers, in the wee hours. Where meticulous chefs and fussy restaurateurs receive their special orders from thrilling corners of the globe. Huge temperature-controlled halls provide the space for hundreds of firms, offering products from all over Europe and beyond. Little wonder then that Rungis has been called the 'stomach of Paris'.

The early morning drive through the outskirts of Paris with Carole Metayer, official guide of Rungis market who conducts VIP and tailor-made visits, takes less than an hour. (Rungis is a professional market that is not open to the public. You have to be invited or be accompanied by an official guide to visit it.) The early hour is necessary since the market bustles as the city sleeps. We will only catch the last few hours of the night, as things wind down with the rising sun. In the car-park, we are handed protective gear, white disposable coats and hair covers, to wear over our everyday clothes. I tuck my errant locks in and walk into a spotlessly clean environment that features myriad varieties of



seafood in crates with white-coated personnel still bustling around their work at the end of what is probably a long shift. With roughly 145,000 tons of fish and shellfish sold every year, the fresh fish sector of Rungis is one of France's largest ports in terms of volume.

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become the go-to site for the gastronome, a cult place for gourmets. Its history stretches back to the creation of a food market known as Les Halles in what is today the 2nd Arrondissement of Paris where it stayed for eight centuries until the move to Rungis. (In the novel, *Giovanni's Room*, first published in 1956, James Baldwin, the American writer in Paris, describes Les Halles as 'a place with choked boulevards and impassable streets, a place where leeks, cabbages, oranges, apples, potatoes, cauliflowers stood gleaming in mounds all over, in the sidewalks and streets in front of metal sheds'.) No wonder then that in 1962, the official announcement of the move was made and a new site had to be found that was vast and easily constructible, central in relation to transport routes and practical for incoming goods. The site at Rungis spanned 600 hectares, is close to Orly Airport and Paris could be bypassed simplifying the movement of goods. Work began in February 1964 and the Rungis wholesale market officially opened on March 3, 1969. Since then, several buildings have been renovated, converted or modernised, making the area a work in progress.



Am I in a market or a lab I wonder, as I traipse past crates of fish on ice being shifted by fork lifts. The fresh fish pavilion is a star feature of Rungis and a world benchmark, as much for its infrastructure as for the quality and diversity of the produce ranging from both wild and farmed fish, deep sea and tropical fish, shellfish, oysters (including cherished Prat-Ar-Coum oysters), smoked and frozen fish. The pavilion boasts combined cooling and air treatment systems where the cold is 'layered' from the ground up to a height of 5 metres, while innovative materials, special resin on the floor and lacquered walls, make sure the area is squeaky clean. In the pavilion's fileting workshops, the fish is cut and proportioned exactly as required by some of Paris' most fastidious chefs. A 24-hour countdown from the unloading at the fishing port to arrival at Rungis and display at the fishmonger's stall or chef's kitchen assures the freshest fish in France.

In these glorious days of food hysteria, Rungis has



Having ogled at fish as large as ourselves and lobsters in huge water tanks, we head to the carcass meat pavilion. Not for the faint hearted! Entire top-quality lamb and beef carcasses including the famous Charolais bull from Burgundy, hang from hooks in the ceiling under refrigeration. There are some animal heads sprinkled around as well. Labels list weight, origin and other minute details, making traceability key. Inaugurated in 2001, after a complete renovation, this pavilion blends modernity,



safety and quality. The supply, acceptance, weighing, first and second cut and sanitary control procedures are done directly at wholesalers' stores. Unlike the fish guys, the personnel here walk around with white coats and aprons splattered with blood and gore. For all that, they look more cheery and boisterous than the fish folk. I wonder why?

Pork cutting is one of Rungis' specialties; however we are not allowed to view the pork pavilions and we move on to the poultry and game pavilions. We see some top produce here. Our guide, Metayer, points out poultry and capons from Bresse, Rouen duckling and other rare species like coucou de Rennes, Gauloise blanche a crete pale, Geline de Touraine. We look out for fresh foie gras. During the hunting season, we learn, that the highly controlled and sanitised game processing centre proposes rare, sought-after products like wild boar, wild game, mainly grouse, and other delectable meats.

We walk through the enormous vegetable and fruits pavilion to witness the finest produce that the world has to offer, flown in from everywhere - old, rare or trendy products, all the ingredients for culinary happiness, like flowers, shoots, early fruits and vegetables, exotic fruits, baby vegetables, heritage vegetables.... Authentic local produce like asparagus from the Landes region, sand-grown carrots from the Cotentin, beet or red mustard shoots from Ile-de-France. All products are available through the year, though many reach peak quality during particular seasons. It's all a matter of hemisphere, it is explained. When it's winter here, it is summer in the southern hemisphere. When there are no cherries in France, they are ripe in Chile; this is what is meant by out-of-season products. We stand next to a giant pumpkin and wonder if it is real, clicking pictures and taking selfies. An entire section is stacked with an unfathomable variety

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of mushrooms. A selection of onions, garlic, tomatoes, meant for different specifications, make me realise how special and different these common vegetables can be in appearance and taste. Crates of vegetables stretch out before us, making me wonder about the consumption that takes place in Paris and indeed the world.

The sky is lightening slightly in the east. The heaviness in our eyes has been dispelled by the sheer volume and variety that we have witnessed. The rail station where two full trains arrive every night, the waste recycling and the incineration plant, the ice making plant.... At the end, after the vibrant and colourful flower pavilion, we had traversed what seemed to be the largest cheese board in the world, one of four gigantic pavilions displaying approved-label cheeses at every degree of maturity and for every culinary use. All the families represented in their diversity - soft, hard, blue, goat, soft and hard pressed cheese, fromage frais...including 49 protected labels (AOP) in dairy products. The aroma of cheese makes me drool and wish that I could buy up a truckload to carry home!

And even as the sun starts to peep out dispelling heavy clouds, with a promise of a sparkling winter morning, we head, gratefully, to one of the complex's many restaurants for a typical Rungis gourmet breakfast. Hot coffee and tea, flaky warm croissants, platters of charcuterie and cheese, orange juice is placed in plenty before us, as we breakfast with the white-coated population who tuck up before heading home with the morning, to sleep until the night and Rungis beckon yet again.



SAINT-GERMAIN-DES-PRES

PASTRIES AND PAINT

Saint-Germain-des-Pres, on the Left Bank, is a haven of art and gastronomy, with patisseries and galleries weaving through and around cobblestone streets, ancient churches and historical cafes where the great literary minds of yore frolicked and fought....



Pierre Herme



Les Deux Magots

church porch, I wait anxiously on this rough afternoon for Marion Prouteau of Robert Pink (customised tours), my guide to the ubiquitous pastry and chocolate boutiques and art galleries that line the picturesque streets of Saint-Germain-des-Pres, in Paris.

Several phone-calls later, I spot a pair of pink pants on the far side of the fountain and a wave of hands confirms that I have discovered my chaperone to this famous Parisian district, characterised by history and tradition. "We are in the heart of Paris," says Prouteau, "but, in the Middle Ages, this would have been a small village concentrated around an Abbey, on the outskirts of the city." No wonder then that I feel a seamless blending of a busy city vibe with a laid-back, small-village feel, even today. Classic stone facades hold often minuscule stand-alone stores and cafes, bistros and bars. Cobble side-streets meander towards the Seine, laden with art galleries. In this quarter is also located Le Bon Marche, the oldest department store in Paris, though we do not visit on this gusty afternoon.

Already considered a centre of intellectual life by the 17th Century, following World War II, in the '40s and early '50s the area boasted a thriving artistic and literary community. Nightclubs and bars flourished. Cafes became famous for the books that were written there. Writers, painters, actors, intellectuals left their mark down the decades - Ernest Hemingway, Alain Delon, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Pablo Picasso, Albert Camus.... American jazzmen visited and their music flourished in the bars and cafes. Today, the annual jazz festival continues to replay the atmosphere of the time. Whereas the Right Bank is characterised by large boulevards and touristic monuments, the Left Bank was a monument to art, literature and intellectual passion.

From Saint-Sulpice Church, we head towards the store in Paris for macarons, Pierre Herme. "Herme is considered the Picasso of pastry making," says Prouteau of the man who stated, "I consider the creation of pastries as an Art with a capital A, in that it is a true form of expression,

The Weather App on the iPhone had thrown up an indecipherable squiggle, that morning. So, now I understand what it meant, as winds lash at my jacket and the remnants of autumn leaves on the cobble streets. I watch fascinated as the water from the fountain in the centre of the church square blows sideways, in plain defiance of the law of gravity. Standing outside the Saint-Sulpice Church, (made more famous by Dan Brown's novel, *The Da Vinci Code*), pulling my neck scarf close around me, eyeing the homeless seeking shelter in the





Pierre Marcolini



Saint-Sulpice Church

A long line of patient clients weaves its way along the pavement awaiting the fine selection of pastries, chocolates, waffles, jams, as we taste the wonderful ganache-filled little meringue cookies with flavours that defy imagination.

just like music, painting, or sculpture.... Many places and cultures throughout the world inspire me in the creative process, but at the core, pleasure is my only guide." A long line of patient clients weaves its way along the pavement awaiting the fine selection of pastries, chocolates, waffles, jams, as we taste the wonderful ganache-filled little meringue cookies with flavours that defy imagination. My eyes glaze over as I take a quince and rose flavoured bite that is soft and malleable and crisp, all at once. Innovative creations like ice cream sandwiched between two macaron biscuits and macaron icecream in cups, make my mouth water. "It was in the early 2000s that chocolate makers and pastry chefs flocked here, to Saint-Germain-des-Pres," Prouteau exclaims. "It seems like almost every day a new chocolate shop opens here."

We pass a street called Rue de Four, translated as 'street of the oven' where the villagers of yore congregated to bake bread. And on to the Saint-Germain-des-Pres, the

oldest church in Paris, with its Romanesque Tower, unusual in this city. This is where the old Abbey stood. Opposite is Les Deux Magots, the café where philosophers and writers famously met and across I spot the Café de Flore where James Baldwin worked on *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. Both cafes were founded in the late 1890s, with their art deco details and the intellectuals over the years had their favourites. Many a brawl has been recorded here to go down into the posterity of literary history. Another famous café of the area was Brasserie Lipp where journalists met to discuss and argue the events of the day.

At the back of the Saint-Germain-des-Pres Church, Prouteau points out one of the little surprises that Paris seems to throw up regularly. A small vineyard in a tiny courtyard struggles to be seen by pedestrians walking past. The vineyard turns out some good bottles of Beaujolais every year, says Prouteau who reveals that this tiny vineyard follows all the pomp and ceremony of wine



Gilbert 1

The long lines force us to regrettably leave with only a sniff at the wonderful variety arrayed. As we walk away, I view the narrow streets that fall away to the side, towards the Seine. These are lined with art galleries, a phenomenon that pockmarked the area sometime from 1980-90 when contemporary art galleries sprang up all over this area. Out of Paris' approximately 1000 galleries, around 200 are concentrated in Saint-Germain-des-Pres. There are entire streets dedicated to African art or antiques or contemporary art.

We walk down the Rue de Seine and through a small and delightful street market. And onward to the Helene Bailly Gallery with its current exhibition, *(de)construction*. Prouteau leads me to a part of the floor that allows a view through glass of the rough-hewn basement where an engaging exhibition has been mounted. A visit to the basement throws up the work of the young artist Gilbert I, enriched by its subterranean setting. The artist works with scrap, in the streets and in abandoned spaces, as



growing. Paris boasts at least 10 vineyards today, says my guide, remnants of the Middle Ages and planted down the years in keeping with tradition.

Walk away from the church and enter the chocolate shop of Belgian master chocolatier, Pierre Marcolini, once named 'World Champion of Pastry'. In his chocolates you may discover unusual fruit, such as apple, pear, black current and melon and also ingredients like pepper, chestnut, tonka beans, patchouli, sandalwood and oak.

well as in his studio and galleries expressing himself through abstract and unstructured figures.

Galerie Kamel Mennou, which we visit later in the afternoon, throws my senses into disarray faced with a forest of ocarinas perched on legs as though they were trees. Ocarinas are wind instruments that have been



made in Kosovo since the Neolithic Era. The artist, Petrit Halilaj, born in Kosovo, amazes further as the whitewashed basement throws up an extraordinary installation, the vision of a horse, several metres high, standing in an intensely pink lake edged by earth, branches and thickets. On its muzzle, the artist has placed a *shoka*, a long traditional belt with this phrase embroidered: ‘Yes but the sea is attached to the earth and it never floats around in space. The stars would turn off and what about my planet?’ No one would imagine, as they walk past the galleries that such wonders could lie within. Somewhere along the way, behind large wrought iron gates, is pointed out the *maison* where Picasso had worked on his masterpiece, *Guernica*. I can now understand why artists and galleries would wish to



locate here, an area agog with creative energy.

We walk past the nondescript façade of a typical Parisian brasserie, La Palette, close to where the French National School of Fine Arts (ENSBA) opened in the 19th century. “It is very fashionable to go to La Palette,” points out Prouteau. We are heading to another traditional institution of fine patisserie, Maison Meert (*fondée en 1761*), famous in particular, for its waffles made from an old

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Left Bank: Picturesque monument to intellectual passion



recipe, in the traditional way. This is a beautiful store, very traditional looking, with a very old waffle maker on display in the window together with other goodies. The waffles take pride of place behind the proprietor and suddenly, with sometime French gallantry, he picks one, bags it and hands it to me. I take it with a delighted word of thanks and it is only later, in the confines of my hotel room, when I taste this delicious offering, that I realise how splendid these waffles are indeed!

We wander through lanes, pretty and picturesque, and Prouteau leads me away into a parking lot, to view a part of an old medieval wall in the subterranean underground, then through the Passage Dauphine which connects to the Rue Dauphine. The charm of this area, with its many delicious and unexpected secrets, its colourful and often rambunctious history, plays delightfully on my senses as we peep through the glass shop window of Dilettantes, the house of Champagne that displays exclusive bottles from the smaller champagne producers, of Mariage Freres which welcomes you with a heady aroma of the huge variety of teas stocked here. We arrive now at Un Dimanche a Paris, a modern-looking tea room with a selection of pastries and chocolates on display as well as a gastronomic menu of dishes with a touch of chocolate. From the window, I spot Le Procope, dubbed the oldest restaurant in Paris with its Napoleon’s hat on display. Another Paris secret to be discovered, another surprise to be uncovered, in this most charming of precincts! 📍