

[OCTOBER IN PARIS]



Discovering the Brilliant Young Chefs of Paris

BY ALEXANDER LOBRANO

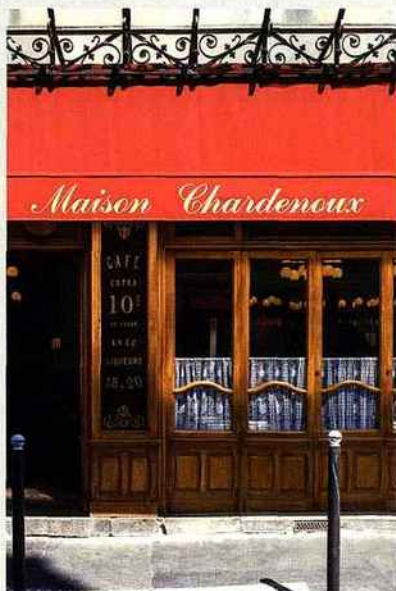
Of any given day, thousands of people are to be found packed inside of tiny airborne aluminium tubes tracing the world's skies on their way to Paris. The main reason many will have chosen the

French capital as a destination is because of its mouth-watering reputation for dazzlingly good food, a delicious honorific it has enjoyed for centuries. But does Paris still warrant these laurels today? Mais, oui! Or you bet it does!

The good news for visitors to Paris is that the city's storied gastronomic scene is just as spectacular in 2014 as it's ever been. This is due to a remarkably talented generation of young chefs who have opened an ever-growing constellation of new restaurants that showcases the new style of French cooking in the 21st century—think food that's creative, cosmopolitan, witty, pretty, fresh, and healthy.

If you happen to peak behind the kitchen doors of some of the best new restaurants in Paris, however, you'll be in for a surprise. The stereotypical Parisian chef—big-bellied, short-tempered, moustachioed, and perhaps slightly haughty—has been replaced by brilliant young cooks who are not only talented and comely but might even be American, Australian, Mexican, or most often of all, Japanese. One of the most important changes in Parisian restaurant kitchens at the beginning of the 21st century, you see, has been the internationalisation of the talent pool.

More than New York, London, Sydney or San Francisco, it's Paris that the most ambitious and adventurous young chefs around the world set their sights on these days. Why? "Paris is the big-time", says New Orleans-born, Boston-bred chef Braden Perkins, who opened his restaurant Verjus with his partner Laura Adrian in a duplex space next to the Palais Royal in the heart of Paris two years ago. "I really wanted to have the



experience of cooking for a Parisian clientele—they're so knowledgeable and demanding—and working with French produce", Perkins says by way of explaining why the couple upped stakes in Seattle and moved to France despite the fact that it has such a challenging business climate.

It hasn't been easy, bien sûr, but if the first response to Perkins' modern American bistro cooking in the French press was wane to wary, his restaurant has become a solid success and sort of an insider's address even among Parisians who love good food (Fascinated by the audacity of Perkins and Adrian, the English-speaking world's press has covered them admiringly from day one, which is why half of the dining room will be English-speaking at any given service). Perkins' menus change all the time depending on the seasons and his inspiration, but his style is consistently incisive and shrewdly off-centre,

as in dishes like citrus cured trout with pistachio butter, heirloom beets, beet greens, sorrel oil, crème fraîche or skillet cooked duck breast, garnished with smoked celery root, orange, red cabbage sauerkraut and caraway seeds.

A growing number of women are now to be found as head chefs in the most successful recent Paris restaurants, too. Mexican-born Beatriz Gomez trained at the elegant La Grande Cascade restaurant in the Bois de Boulogne park on the western edge of Paris before going out on her own with her French husband Mathieu Marcant to open the excellent and very successful modern French bistro Neva Cuisine in a quiet and rather forgotten part of Paris behind the Gare Saint Lazare. Gomez's delicate and delicious cooking immediately made this table impossibly popular, but another way of sampling Gomez's style is to head for her second restaurant, Coretta, an edgy duplex bistro overlooking an adjacent park named for the American civil rights leader Martin Luther King (Coretta was the name of his late wife). Dishes typical of Gomez's cooking at Neva Cuisine include fresh pea soup with coddled egg and crumbled bacon and monkfish with gironles mushrooms in citrus cream with tarragon. Pastry chef Yannick Tranchant's lemon meringue tarts and other sweet temptations are superb, too. Executed by Jean-François Pantaleon, formerly of L'Affable in the 7th arrondissement, the menu at Coretta is similarly suave and market-driven, including such dishes as foie gras with pomelo relish and pan-roasted duck breast with shallots and pears.

In the mostly residential 11th arrondissement, a part of the city where visitors rarely venture, Le Servan, a café that's recently been renovated into a bistro is the home turf of one of the city's hottest recent openings, a superb modern French table where the kitchen is variously

inspired by the Philippines and French ancestry of the two sisters who run the place. Don't miss Tatiana Levha's succulent steamed cockles in peppery Filipino fish-sauce and radishes with herbed herring butter to start, and then dishes to share like cuttlefish salad with celery, roasted peanuts, and pomelo and roasted quail in an adobo sauce.

Like almost every country today, France has its share of chefs who've become renowned because of food television. Cyril Lignac is among them, and this very successful and impressively disciplined young chef has created a culinary footprint in the capital that runs from his stylish contemporary restaurant Le Quinzième to a pair of bistros in Saint-Germain-des-Prés and the 11th arrondissement, Chardenoux-des-Prés and Chardenoux, respectively. Among these tables, the one I find most interesting is Chardenoux, because Lignac has used such a deft hand in creating a subtly modern menu for one of the most beautiful and best loved bistros in Paris, a land-marked place with wedding cake mouldings and a big zinc bar.

The three-course 39-euro menu is good value for the money, and is complemented by a daily chalkboard menu that features seasonal dishes. Highlights of a recent dinner here included a starter of coddled egg with girolles mushrooms, tiny fava beans and freshly made croutons and foie gras with a superb rhubarb-ginger chutney, beautifully prepared main courses of veal sweetbreads with curcuma-seasoned carrot puree and miso-glazed cod with baby peas and chopped ham, and one of the best baba au rhum in Paris for dessert. This very good restaurant is open daily for lunch and dinner.

The most impressive recent opening in Paris, however, is Restaurant David Toutain, which is the new table in the 7th arrondissement by young chef David Toutain. Toutain, whom many local gastronomes consider to be the most promising young chef in the French capital, trained in an impressive suite of some of the world's best restaurants, including Bernard Loiseau, Marc Veyrat, Arpège (Alain Passard), Mugaritz (Andoni Luis Aduriz) and Corton in New York City, and his delicate and deeply imagined cooking stuns with a brilliantly lucid originality. A deep love of vegetables is a signature of Toutain's menu, which changes often according to the seasons and the chef's inspiration, and the chef also likes to vary the gastronomic rhythm of a meal, so a quiet dish or two like cuttlefish with yuba (bean-curd sheet) and translucent Parmesan gnocchi is followed by an earthy and deeply satisfying one like seared foie gras in baked potato bouillon with black truffles.

And among the young Turks in Paris, both male and female, perhaps the most consistently and



Restaurant David Toutain (top photo);
Colourful dishes at Verjus (bottom photos)

impressive inventive chef is the very talented Jean- François Piège, and since his casually elegant and beautifully designed eponymous restaurant opened in 2010, it's become sort of a closely guarded secret among Parisians as one of their favourite places for a really special meal without paying the astronomical prices found at most haute-cuisine restaurants. Piège works in a windowed kitchen at the back of the low-lit supper-club-like dining room, and his evolving menus include such exquisitely conceived and cooked dishes as a composition of soft brioche in a shallow pool of tomato water with oregano, slivered Kalamata olives, and burrata, over which the waiter shaves some frozen anchoïade, a classic Provençal sauce of anchovies and garlic, and a magnificent royale (flan) of chicken livers with crayfish under a foam of chicken livers, made according to an 1892 recipe by French chef Lucien Tendret. After you've discovered food this stunningly elegant and original, you'll never wonder why the skies over Paris are so busy with air traffic ever again.

ADDRESSES

VERJUS

52 rue de Richelieu (1st), 01 42 97 54 40
Dinner only.

NEVA CUISINE

2 rue de Berne (8th)
01 45 22 18 91

CORETTA

151 rue Cardinet (17th)
01 42 26 55 55

LE SERVAN

32 rue Saint Maur (11th)
01 55 28 51 82

CHARDENOUX

1 rue Jules Vallès (11th)
01 43 71 49 52.

RESTAURANT DAVID TOUTAIN

29 rue Surcouf (7th)
01 45 50 11 10

RESTAURANT JEAN-FRANÇOIS PIÈGE

79 rue Saint-Dominique (7th)
01 47 05 79 79