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MOVEABLE FEASTS

Paris in Twenty Meals

CHRIS NEWENS

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For my parents.

‘No matter what bestial tricks history might be playing,
there were always looms at work in Illyria.’

Rebecca West

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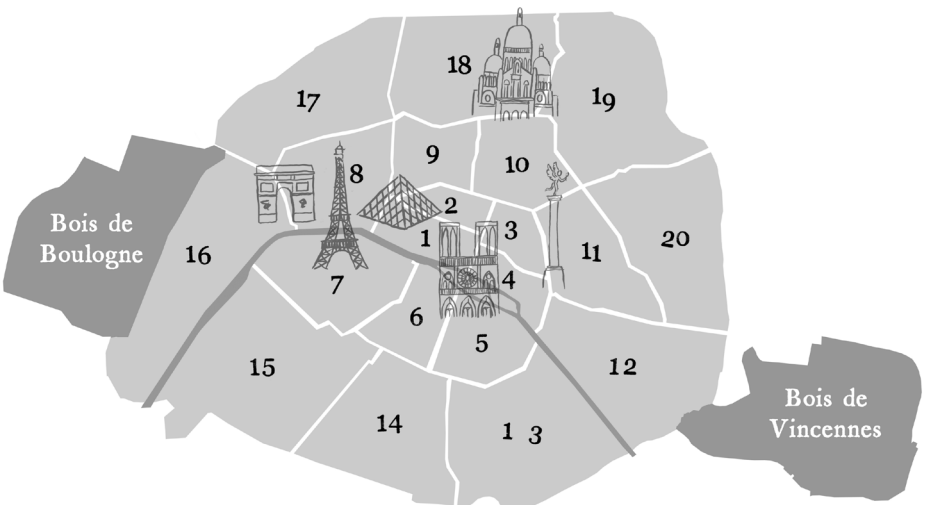
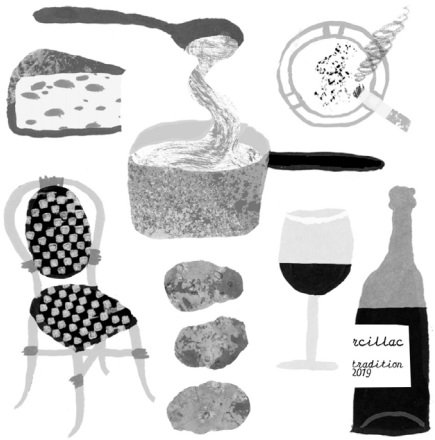
LES ARRONDISSEMENTS DE PARIS





20ème arrondissement

A Paris bistro is the stage of a thousand clichés. Surly waiters in their suits, barflies crowding the zinc, a terrace of small tables and rattan chairs that all face the street; coffee, croissants, *steak frites*.

Le Mistral, at the corner of the rue des Pyrénées in Belleville, fitted this description so perfectly it deserved World Heritage status; it was a place so familiar to the global imagination that, like Paris itself, I felt I knew it before I even came to visit the city, let alone live here. And pulling up a stool at its bar – which in a small but acceptable deviation from the archetype was clad in copper – I experienced a flush of pleasure at playing a supporting role to such a timeless scene. Even the conversation going on

between the nicotine-pickled locals was almost cartoonishly French.

It was about the definitive cuisine of the 20th arrondissement.

'*Bah, c'est la chinoise, évidemment!*'

'*Ah vraiment?*' – Oh, really? – '*Et quand tu dis la cuisine chinoise, c'est-à-dire la cuisine indochinoise*.' And when you say Chinese cooking, what you mean is Indochinese cooking.

'No. I mean Chinese.'

'Even though most of the Asians who live in Belleville are from Cambodia or Vietnam.'

'*C'est n'importe quoi*,' chimed in a third patron. 'The most typical cuisine of the 20th, of *all* the 20th, is obviously couscous.'

I listened in with growing delight to these three bickering men. Truth be told, I don't usually sit at the bar in Paris bistros, being content to set up at one of the tables and observe rather than get involved with the cast. But I had already decided that today was going to be different, and besides, nothing interests me like food.

'What do *you* think?' One of the barflies had caught me eavesdropping and decided to canvass my opinion.

'I'm sorry,' I stuttered. 'I'm English.'

'But you speak French,' he told me. 'I've seen you here before. You live in Paris, no?'

'I …' a strange feeling came over me: pleasure at being recognised, unease that I was not as much of the background as I'd thought. 'Yes. For ten years.'

'Yves,' the man held out a moist hand. He had a face like a melting candle to which he had tried to add structure with a fiercely waxed moustache.

'Chris,' I said.

Yves indicated the men beside him. 'Yannick, Ahmed.' Both were ashen and scrawny. Easy to believe they had not moved from this spot for years, kept alive only by the calories in their Kronenbourg *demis*, perpetually half-drunk in their bar-rested hands.

'*Et donc*?' Yves continued 'What do you think it is, the typical cuisine of the 20th?'

'Well, it's a difficult question,' I said, my mind flashing through the streets of this hilly, working-class neighbourhood that I knew so well, lying next door to the one in which I lived. I thought of its crumbling Paris elegance; its vast seventies social housing estates. Its tree-lined boulevard patrolled by Chinese sex workers, its cobbled side streets spangled with retro commerce and silted in grime. The outposts of hipster gentrification, the pho joints, the pizza shops, the shisha bars …

'I've no idea,' I concluded. 'It's a district of immigrants, no? There are Chinese people here, yes—'

'It's only the second largest Chinatown in Paris,' interjected Yannick, who had been taking the pro-couscous line. 'It's nothing compared to the 13th.'

'Right,' I continued, 'because then there's, I guess, a very big North African population.'

'*Exact*.'

'And a lot of people from the rest of Africa too.'

The men looked confused.

'*L'Afrique noire*,' Yves added helpfully.

There was some general nodding.

'And, I don't know,' I went on, 'wasn't it Jewish historically?'

'Tunisian Jewish,' Yannick said.

'I mean, one cuisine for the whole arrondissement – you might as well try to choose one for all of Paris.'

'This is what you get for asking the English about food!' cried Ahmed, and the other men laughed.

'You would prefer *fish-and-chips*. Ha ha!'

'A *cup-of-tea*.'

'*Marr-ma-lad sandweechis!*' Yves was particularly proud of this one. So much so that he said it twice. Funny to think of this Belleville barfly being familiar with the work of Paddington Bear.

'But *en fait*, perhaps he is not wrong, this English.' This was a fourth voice, Le Mistral's barman, who until that point had been as still and proud as the figurehead of a ship, silently surveying his bar, tea towel cast roguishly over one shoulder. He was a large man, prosperous looking, and his words rang heavy with authority.

'The 20th *is* the arrondissement of immigrants,' he said. 'And therefore, it is the food that we serve here in Le Mistral that is its most representative.'

I wasn't sure if I'd understood. My French is decent, but I am not above mistakes. Surely he couldn't be suggesting that this bistro, which was as Parisian as a, well, as a Parisian bistro, was an import. Yves was also confused.

'So now *steak frites* is immigrant cuisine?' he said.

'*Steak frites* is not cuisine,' the barman snapped. '*Blanquette de veau*, *that* is cuisine.'

What a tremendously French thing to say.

Except now I was wondering, where *did blanquette de veau* come from? The uncompromisingly white veal ragout enriched with egg and cream had always seemed to me so

deliberately aesthetic and bourgeois that it surely had to have an urban origin.

'We are from the Aveyron,' the barman announced. 'Like the original owners of all Paris bistros. We were the first immigrants to bring our food to the city. The first!'

Now, the Aveyron, I knew, was a beautiful *département* in France's south-west, a volcanic region just below the Dordogne. All green valleys and crumbling medieval towns. I searched my memory, trying to remember the food.

'*All* Paris bistros?' Ahmed was saying. '*Mais, c'est pas vrai!*'

'Very nearly all of them,' the barman countered. 'Café de Flore, Les Deux Magots, Le Dôme: all Aveyronnais. I am surprised you don't know this. Those are just the famous ones.'

'But, how? I mean, why?' I blurted.

The barman sighed, as if he had told this story many times before.

'When we came here in the nineteenth century, it was to sell coal. Look …' He gestured over our heads towards the landscape amateurishly painted on Le Mistral's wall. I'd barely noticed this painting before, its pale blockish houses, corduroy fields and pastel-blue sky.

'The Aveyron,' the barman elucidated, 'is very beautiful, but also very poor. Bad for farming. But we had coal. And they needed coal in the cities back then, so many people left the Aveyron to come here and trade coal. *Les bougnats*, we were called. And the city-dwellers would buy the coal in large quantities. It took time to fill their sacks. So, while they were waiting, we would offer them glasses of the wine we had also brought with us from our vineyards.

'We still sell Aveyronnais wine here.' He changed tone. 'My brother has a vineyard. *Ce n'est pas un grand cru* but … you should have a glass.'

Though it was only three in the afternoon and I had planned on sticking to Perrier water, this was a hard sell. The barman, who I now understood to be Le Mistral's owner, pulled a simply labelled bottle of red from behind the bar and worked out its cork with a flourish. The wine was light and sharp, and, thanks to its backstory, one of most satisfying glasses of anything I'd tasted in a long time.

'It was not long until people started coming to the coal shops just to drink,' he continued. 'And the Aveyronnais began serving food as well. Soon, we had given up on the coal entirely and started growing our restaurant businesses instead. *Et voilà*.'

That '*et voilà*', as '*et voilà*'s tend to, covered a lot of history. Of, I could only imagine, the tenacious drive of people from the Aveyron to capitalise on a new business model. Of families getting each other jobs in the trade, of whole generations learning the new skills of how to be bistro owners, waiters and chefs, of the birth of the look of these cafés that had come to seem typical of the city. But the brute facts of what Le Mistral's owner had said remained, and I had no reason to doubt them: Parisian bistros were not as Parisian as I had, until that moment, believed them to be.

'It's not the same now, of course,' he went on. 'Young people, they don't want to work in hospitality. So all over the city we're selling our family businesses. To the Chinese, mostly.'

'My family used to run a restaurant,' I said. I suppose I was trying to build a connection with him before I realised

the implications of what I was saying. 'In England,' I gabbled. 'Well, a bakery and tea rooms.'

'Oh yes,' the owner said, rounding on me fully, a cloud of disdain passing across his heavy brow, 'and what has happened to it?'

'I, well … They sold it,' I confessed.

'So you were free to move to Paris?' But he was smiling. 'It's fine. I understand. You're smart. It's terrible, restaurant work. Very hard. That's why I am sending my sons to university.'

I wanted to protest. To tell him I had liked restaurant work, how I knew the long hours and the stresses of serving food to others, but how the pleasures always outweighed them. On the other hand, when my dad had decided to sell this business that had been in my family for six generations, I hadn't offered to take it over, I hadn't prevented him. So I remained silent.

'*Alors*, food from the Aveyron is the original cuisine of Paris immigrants,' Yves picked back up. 'And the 20th is an arrondissement of immigrants. So, what are we concluding is the 20th's most representative dish? *Blanquette de veau*?'

The owner laughed, 'I don't know. I don't believe *blanquette de veau* is originally Aveyronnais.'

There was a short silence.

'So it is Chinese food, after a—'

'No!' the owner pounded his copper bar, making the glasses on it clink. '*Aligot*. It would be *aligot*.'

'*Aligot*?' I asked.

He scowled at me as if I'd just spat on the bar.

'It's potato and cheese,' Yannick said helpfully.

'Potato and cheese!' the owner exclaimed. 'Pah! And

wine is grape juice? *Aligot*, my friend, is the combination of potato and *Tomme de vache* in nearly equal measure. It is flavoured by garlic, then mashed smooth like velvet. It is an ancient dish. In Aveyron we served it to pilgrims on the Chemin de St-Jacques. It would have been everywhere in Paris once. Now you only have fries.'

As I walked the short distance back to my apartment, over the invisible arrondissement border into the 19th, the Mistral conversation repeated on me like an overly rich meal. I climbed rue de Belleville – pausing to gaze at the expansive view of the city, the Eiffel Tower small and iconic on the misty autumn horizon – then passed along the rue Manin, around the belly of the parc des Buttes-Chaumont, and I thought about what I had just learned of Paris bistros. What that conversation had really done was reveal even more starkly how little I knew this city. As I had already several times that past month, I found myself questioning how much I belonged in this place I had come to call my home.

When I arrived in Paris a decade ago, I had, like many before me, come chasing a fantasy, searching for the city of ex-pat writers and artists: the playground of Gertrude Stein, Pablo Picasso, Ernest Hemingway. I wanted late-night indiscretions, literature-worthy romances, up-till-dawn debates. Against the odds of the twenty-first-century, I had found what I was chasing, or as near an approximation as it was possible to get; and it can be tough extricating yourself from a dream. I had friends here, a decent life, but the Paris I could truly say I knew was embarrassingly small.

This is the most densely populated city in Europe; it is as

complicated and gritty and multifarious as any capital on earth. This was no longer something I could nonchalantly both feel proud of and ignore, but a truth I had started to feel on every corner. When I spoke to waiters and beggars, *boulangères* and flower sellers, binmen and *bouqinistes*; when I crossed on the stairs with my Bangladeshi neighbours, smelled the lamb curry wafting from their apartment which they shared four to a room; or locked eyes with the old woman who was always last to quit the terrace of my own street's corner bar; or drifted by the men who stared into rheumy nothing from city benches, quarter-nibbled baguettes at their side – I stood accused of ignorance by all the Parises of which I was not a part.

More and more, I had been thinking about the quote that opens Hemingway's famous memoir of the city. About how he claims that, if you are lucky enough to have lived in Paris when you are young, 'then wherever you go for the rest of your life, it stays with you, for Paris is a moveable feast.' But a moveable feast, literally, is a religious holiday that, while shifting about the calendar depending on the year, is still parenthesised by certain dates. It's never going to be Easter in January. I wondered, had Hemingway been saying more than he realised? Was it possible that one day I would return to a life in English suburbia and all the spirit and adventures I had experienced here would not come with me?

My decision to sit at Le Mistral's bar that afternoon had been intended as one of the many small gestures I had been making recently to fight against this possibility. I should have been happy that it had worked, up to a point. The story I had learned about the origins of the typical Parisian bistro had peeled back a layer of the city's myth to reveal a hint

of the richer stew underneath. But as with any good meal, I wanted more.

By the time I turned onto my own road, I found I was cooking up an idea.

Food and service *were* things I already knew intimately. As a toddler, growing up around my family's café business, I had played with pastry as play-dough and food colouring for paints. Later, I worked there: washed dishes, iced cakes, blitzed soups, bussed tables. The language of cooking and hospitality and shop gossip were how I had communicated with my parents and grandparents; and how they must have communicated with their forebears in turn. Now, I started to wonder if my fluency in the kitchen could become a key to unlock Paris, to step from my one-note fantasy into a more complex reality.

Because wasn't it also the case that Paris's reputation as a global mecca of cuisine is among the first myths about the city that even casual visitors discover is very different to the reality? While Paris may be where modern dining was invented, the home of *Larousse Gastronomique* and Le Cordon Bleu, it is not a town where it is always easy to find a decent meal. In bistro after bistro, corners are cut, pre-made meals are reheated, the cheapest cuts of meat are fried. There is excellent food here, just not always of the kind people expect. Many of the best bouillons these days are Vietnamese pho, the most popular sauce is a spicy ketchup called *algérienne*, and only tourists eat frogs' legs. I knew these things already, but on that misty autumn day, I was seized by a conviction that I needed to dig deeper, and the city's food was the way in.

My path into doing this, meanwhile, had been decided for me by three men propped at a copper bar.

I would seek out representative dishes not just for the 20th, but for all the Paris arrondissements. These may only have been administrative categories, established in the mid-nineteenth century around the same time that Paris was being reconfigured by Napoleon III and his city planner Baron Haussmann, but even administrative categories soon take on a more soulful shape. And while the borders between arrondissements were porous and invisible, didn't each at its core, after almost two hundred years of existence, have a character and culture and food that could be called distinctly its own?

I would find the people – find the Parisians – who could teach me how to cook these dishes. I would learn their recipes and hope at the same time to discover their stories and their worlds. Through food, I would aim to discover and understand the city I had lived in for so long, but did not know. It would be a way of making Paris feel a part of me, of making sure it would stay with me wherever I went for the rest of my life. I would turn the city into not one, but a whole collection of moveable feasts.

Back home, I started to jot down ideas: a list of the arrondissements and their possible corresponding meals, drawing on my own knowledge, books, the suggestions of friends. I would begin in the 20th and spiral my way backwards – the arrondissements of Paris are arranged like the swirl of a snail's shell. My choices were driven in large measure by my experiences – any individual's vision of a city will always be more autobiographical than definitive – and by a search for the city's contrasts, the food of its immigrant populations as much as the food of its traditional tables. I did not want to be iconoclastic. There is a certain kind of person who

would have it that the true Paris is nothing like the face it shows to the world, which is rubbish; it is still as much a city of croissants and *coq au vin* as it is of kebabs and couscous. My selection had to show this breadth in order to be representative of how Paris truly ate.

For the 20th, meanwhile, my choice of dish had already been made.

Le Mistral's chef looked more like a bank clerk than a gastronome. Hailing from Sri Lanka, just shy of sixty, he wore wire-rimmed glasses and a striped black and purple shirt under his whites. He had grown long the nail on the little finger of his left hand: a status symbol in some Asian cultures of not doing manual work. It made me reflect on his attitude towards his job, and the artistry with which he must perform it. Keeping a little fingernail long is no easy task when you in fact do work all day with your hands.

His meticulously clean kitchen was a tiny space to the side of Le Mistral's bar, from which it hardly seemed possible he could stay on top of the bistro's forty or so covers a night. A large pot of potatoes was already on the boil.

At first, he seemed suspicious of me. Who was this outsider who'd called Le Mistral earlier that day wanting to learn his recipes? But as the conversation went on, so he became increasingly loquacious, eager to share his art.

He had always cooked, he said, but only began doing so professionally when he came to Paris in the early 2000s. He chose the French capital because he had distant family here but he arrived penniless and without a word of the language. Fortunately, he found himself a job as a dishwasher in the kitchens of Les Deux Magots, the Aveyronnais-run

former hangout of Sartre, de Beauvoir and other intellectual luminaries. There, he worked his way up the kitchen ranks, spending nearly two decades learning and perfecting another country's regional cuisine, so that when he had heard Le Mistral was searching for a cook, he was well qualified.

I asked him if he had ever been to the Aveyron.

Once. He went to stay on the vineyard belonging to the brother of Le Mistral's owner.

'And you know, it was strange,' he said, 'it reminded me very much of Sri Lanka. All that green they have in the Aveyron, the small villages, the quality of the air; it seemed just as it was in Sri Lanka. Going there, it was like going home.'

Now, I have never been to Sri Lanka. So perhaps it really is more like the Aveyron than I suspect. But I was moved by this evidence of our ability to layer a landscape or place with our beliefs, to bring a sense of belonging with us. A green hillside and a blue sky can be a porthole from the temperate zone to the tropics, and a dish placed on a table can transport us anywhere in the world. It was partly a similar desire to see my own home in Paris that had brought me to this tiny bistro kitchen.

Eventually, we got on to cooking. The chef confirmed that yes, *aligot* was certainly the most typical of all Aveyron's dishes. It was also, he said to my relief, very simple. Really just potatoes and Tomme.

'That's all?' I asked.

'Ah,' the chef said with a twinkle. 'In cooking, there is never an "all".'

I waited for him to expand on this gnomic utterance.

'For example,' he said, 'you must always choose the best

potatoes you can. Ones that are big and fluffy and expensive. Because they are most of the dish, and even an expensive potato is not expensive.

I nodded, feeling a quiet thrill at this small transfer of knowledge, at how readily these old Paris ways were being given up to me.

'Let your potatoes boil for a long time,' the chef continued. 'Much flavour is brought out by boiling and they must be very soft before you start to mash.'

'How long?' I asked and received a shrug in return.

'I never time. But they must be soft. Half an hour, a little more.' He then explained how I should put the potatoes back on the heat after pouring off the water, to make sure they were as dry as they could be before I added butter.

'But only a very a small amount of butter,' he cautioned, as strict with this instruction as any Aveyron-born Frenchman talking about the dish of his homeland. '*Aligot* is about the cheese. It should be 70 per cent potato, 30 per cent cheese.'

'That's a lot of cheese,' I said.

'Yes,' he agreed, 'a lot of cheese. And you must add it a little at a time, and always, always beating it in. You must be vigorous. With a wooden spoon.'

Aligot

Serves 4 as a side

Ingredients:

700g russet potatoes
Small knob of butter
300g Tomme cheese
½ tbsp garlic paste

I began by washing and peeling the potatoes.

The chef was right about buying expensive, of course. What a pleasure to consider the russet spuds in my kitchen sink, the dirt of their Breton pastures still clinging to their skin. Peeling them was like the unwrapping of so many gifts. One after another, I dropped them whole into my largest saucepan, half-filled with cold water.

My own Paris kitchen, which would be the site of my forthcoming explorations and experiments in recreating the city's cuisine, is small, with no room for people to pass along its two-metre length. The fridge and washing machine serve as additional work surfaces to the cheaply tiled countertop, allowing for space, albeit cramped, to prepare several things at once. My spices, grains and cooking oils are crammed onto a rickety wood shelf balanced precariously at the back of the counter. Plates and pots and pans are stacked tight underneath. I hang fresh produce in mesh baskets from the ceiling. The oven and hob are both, joyously, gas, while the sink, shallow and wide and robust, could almost belong in a modest farmhouse kitchen. This last feature is the only anomaly, except in the sense that unexplained idiosyncrasy is one of the great constants of any Parisian apartment. Everything is wholly typical of most domestic cooking set-ups in this densely populated city.

I set the potatoes on the gas to boil, and before tidying away their skins began to grate the *Tomme de vache*. Mild yet sour, and just on the crumbly side of rubbery: I was gentle with it against my grater, through which it spooled in long strands.

The potatoes were starting to boil. Fidgeting in the pot, steaming ferociously, fogging up the tall, narrow window

behind my oven so that I was forced to crack it open despite the cold autumn night.

Waiting, I uncorked a bottle of red wine picked up from Le Mistral, sourced from the owner's family vineyard. It had the same light taste I recalled from the bistro counter and went well with the crumbs of leftover Tomme.

Off came the potatoes, tumbling into my colander in an explosion of steam. Once drained, I returned them, just as I'd been told, still smouldering, to the saucepan in which they'd been cooked.

I added a small amount of butter. A homeopathic amount of butter. I wanted this to taste right. Which is to say I wanted it to taste *different*: to be more than just cheesy mash. I wanted it to be Aveyronnais; to be Parisian. So I set to pulverising those potatoes, and only when they were desiccated to the consistency of a cloud did I add the cheese.

The chef had made a motion for me to follow: a simple stirring mime. But recalling the electric flicker of tendons in his forearm – muscles honed from half a lifetime of beating *aligot* – I knew this would be a task I had to put my back into.

The sprinkled Tomme streaked into the potato as I stirred and then was gone. I sprinkled more, I stirred more, and I returned the mixture to the heat as it began to loosen. My arm Wurlitzered. I beat the ingredients away from their previous forms, transformed them into region, into cuisine. And suddenly, I had *aligot*, or very nearly. It pulled like silk about the pot, a luxuriant scarf against the cold night. Its smell was thick and indulgent, but still with that hint of farmyard sourness: the countryside brought into town, into my tiny kitchen. Finally, to this mixture, as instructed, I

poured a swirl of garlic paste and olive oil – its insistent scent heady as a drug.

It was time to eat.

The mixture wrapped about my fork like glue, though at the same time clung to the plate in strings as though reluctant to part from it. The first bite was rich and warm, with a sophistication that belied the dish's simple, hearty ingredients: the tastes of the potato and cheese still distinct as themselves, yet coming together in a unique combined flavour. It was a paradox.

It tasted too rural to be representative of Paris. Here was a dish to be eaten in a hillside shepherd's hut with a gale outside and maybe a goat at your feet. Its presence here, though, spoke of the city's willingness to accept and imbibe flavours from beyond its limits. A willingness that at that moment I believed was most exemplified by the 20th out of all the arrondissements. And, indeed, the *aligot* literally offered comfort. It tasted like an embrace, was a flavour of a particularly French welcome, which, through a chance conversation at a copper-topped bar and the patient instructions of a man from the Sri Lankan interior, I had made for myself.

19ème arrondissement

Paris, like many old cities, is saturated with blood.

Standing on the place de la Concorde, encircled by the indifferent thrum of cars over cobbles and the enlightened spires of civilisation, you'd never believe it was once a field of death, where the guillotine did bloody business during the Terror of the French Revolution. Likewise, in front of the Hôtel de Ville, where the medieval city gathered to see its own 'traitors' dispatched. Then there are the streets – Rohan, Lepic, Saint-Honoré and numberless others – places of massacre and murder, firing squad and last-ditch barricade. All now made almost pure again by the relentless street-cleaning of urban life and time. Ghosts don't hang about in cities like they do elsewhere. Perhaps that's why cities are so popular with the living.

In the most blood-soaked corner of Paris, however, scrape just a little, and traces of the gory past remain. It was a kind of carnage, after all, that still goes on in modern France, albeit beyond a veil of secrecy that most prefer to ignore. For in the 19th arrondissement, from the mid-1800s to the 1960s, were the abattoirs of the entire city. For a century, every *gigot d'agneau*, every *bavette*, every *tête de veau* consumed at Paris tables belonged to a lamb, cow or calf that at one point passed through their gates. Here was a whole phantasmagoria of cutting: a 39-hectare complex dedicated solely and ceaselessly to the production of meat. The sheer tonnage of tendon, cartilage and offal sliced and auctioned here over the years is almost impossible to imagine.

Today, where this industry once stood, is the parc de la Villette. A peaceful public green space constructed to a post-modern design. Yet the park is as evocative as any ruin. Much of the slaughter yard infrastructure is still here. A glass front seals the entrance of the former killing floor, which is now a concert hall, bike paths follow the grooves of old train tracks used to haul livestock, and metal sculptures reshape the pavilions that housed the bureaucracy of slaughter. At the park's edges, beyond the blast radius of municipal spending, living remnants of the lost *quartier* endure in the form of a number of cavernous butcher's shops.

The oldest of these is the appropriately named Abattoirs de la Villette, founded in 1903 by a former abattoir worker. Its current owner, the great-grandson of the founder, is Richard Gordon. In his late fifties, he seems straight from a Happy Families card deck, with a taut-drum belly and rosy-pink jowls.

Villette was a city within a city once, he told me. Nearly everyone who lived in the arrondissement either worked

in or had some association with the slaughter yards. Now, the 19th could feel characterless, especially compared to its neighbouring districts formed around the communes of Montmartre and Belleville. 'Its heart has been removed.'

Monsieur Gordon still sold plenty of hearts. Mostly to African customers. They bought most of his offal these days, along with the local Chinese, while restaurant owners from across Paris still came for the finer cuts.

'For quality, we are cheapest in town,' Monsieur Gordon crowed. 'Though now we get our meat from all over Europe.'

He described a life on the move, travelling the Continent to inspect different slaughterhouses, checking that their livestock is good and their practices humane.

'If an animal has been treated poorly, it's there in the taste.'

How much easier it would have been when the entire industry was at his front door, he lamented. But those days were gone.

He guided me along the nearby parade of shops. Many were old cafés and restaurants left over from the boom times. They still had shower blocks in their basements, M. Gordon said, where slaughter-men would wash the day's blood from their skin.

'And look,' he pointed to the columns that framed the entrance of one of the cafés. I had seen this architectural feature in many Paris bistros but never considered its purpose. 'They have gas pipes inside them, and there would have been a hole in each leading to an always-lit flame.'

I was confused.

'For cigarettes,' he explained. 'The workers were always

smoking. But they stayed healthy, because the slaughter yard was such physical work.'

There was melancholy in his voice. Nostalgia for a world he had not quite known, where the folly of smoking could be remedied by swinging a spiked mallet into a cow's head. A simpler time.

I still eat meat. Most of us still eat meat, despite the guilt that growing numbers of us feel about how our meat is produced and slaughtered. It's an ethical inconsistency, but there it is. Here is no place to unpack it, save to say that I try to limit my meat consumption, and when I do eat it, to seek out meat that has been humanely treated and killed. I sometimes slip up. Often when I'm drunk. Often late at night, on my way home to my apartment, which is in the 19th as well, past tower blocks and social housing and a proliferation of fast-food joints. On those occasions, I close my ears to the panicked lowing of the phantom livestock, which can seem to roll with the wind down the canal, and I eat a kebab.

In my personal food odyssey around Paris, then, what could be more apt to represent the 19th arrondissement than those waltzing columns of miscellaneous flesh, which quietly comprise one of France's favourite foods? Also, kebabs are cheap. In addition to being the traditional home of its slaughter yards, the 19th has a long working-class heritage, and still ranks as the poorest arrondissement in Paris. The choice was easily made.

From the front door of my apartment building, there are seven kebab shops within less than five minutes' walk: in ten minutes, that number quadruples. So when I stepped into the October drizzle of the avenue de Flandre, with its chaotic

central reservation and unlikely constellation of classic and postmodern architecture, the direction I took was random. I reached a kebab shop in seconds.

You don't know the Restaurant Bodrum. But also, you do. For there are Bodrums in every city of the world. Name spelled out in red plastic above its door, high-contrast photographs of its dishes peeling in the window, and inside, between strip lights and tile floor, a miasma of frying. The two men behind the counter had grey, exhausted faces. The older man, customer facing, forced himself awake with banter and a rictus smile; the other was a hunched back over hot oil.

'*Bonjour, chef*,' said the front-of-house guy. 'What do you want?'

'Actually,' I started, 'I'm just trying to find out more about how kebabs are made in Paris, and I wondered—'

'No, chef.'

'I'm sorry?'

'I cannot tell you about that,' he looked almost frightened. 'We're too busy.'

The shop was empty.

'What do you want?'

To talk to you, I thought. To find out more about kebabs. But his hostility had unnerved me. I panicked.

'Uh, a kebab, thanks.'

The hostility disappeared, replaced by that exhausted smile.

'*Salade, tomate, oignon?*'

In other cultures, salad additions to a kebab sandwich come as standard. It's up to individual customers to speak up if they want something left out. In Paris kebab joints,

however, the question is always posed, and always in this exact manner: *salade, tomate, oignon*.

'*S'il vous plaît*.' I played my own role in the ritual, even as I was wondering if I really wanted a kebab before twelve in the afternoon.

'Which sauce?'

'Uh, which sauce is most popular?' I tried to get back to my mission, but the server's defiance resurfaced.

'We have all the sauces,' he said.

'Yes, but … which sauce is chosen the most?' I tried to elaborate, 'Because sauces are important in France, right? In England we barely have a choice of two. Chilli or garlic. And mayonnaise and ketchup,' I was babbling, 'but here you have … I mean, how many sauces do you have to choose from?'

'Twelve.'

I almost said how interesting it was in a nation with an *haute cuisine* formed partly around the creation of elaborate sauces that you should see some reflection of that in its fast food. But I was being stared down.

'*Algérienne*,' I buckled.

'Good choice,' the kebab man said. 'Yes, *algérienne* is our most popular sauce. *Algérienne* and ketchup.'

As he spoke, he pulled a great bottle of the stuff from behind the counter and violently piped the grainy, spicy, sweet orange gloop into the sandwich that was taking shape. Meanwhile, the man behind him was shaving from the great column of meat, which had been keeping a steady rotation all the while.

'Do you like *sauce algérienne*?' I dared another question.

'I don't have sauce on my kebabs,' the server said. 'I taste the meat.'

From there, we were off: nattering away like people who'd known each other for years.

I discovered that he was from Turkey, that he'd come to Paris when he was seventeen, that this was the first place he had worked because his family knew the owners. That had been twelve years ago. I asked him if he had any part in making the doner kebabs. He did not, he admitted. The kebabs were ordered in. They got through about seven a week, he said; shaving down 30kg of meat a day, though the Restaurant Bodrum was not even an especially popular kebab store. Then, the kebab was ready, and he thrust it into my hands. Our conversation was over.

I took a seat, hunched over my sandwich and stared into space. I didn't want to eat the kebab. It was too early in the day, it had too much fat and salt, was too processed and morally suspect to happily eat sober. But here I found myself. I took a bite.

What dissonance! The bland cushiony pliancy of the bread (another way in which French kebabs reflect broader French tastes is that they come in thick baps reminiscent of baguettes), giving way to the salt crispness of the grilled-then-fried meat. Cutting through it all, the fresh crunch of the lettuce, the cool sweetness of tomato, the sharpness of onion. All held together by the spiced umami of the *sauce algérienne*.

Christ, kebabs are good, I thought, and this wasn't even a good kebab.

People have been roasting meat on sticks ever since there's been meat and sticks to roast it on. Less than inventing anything, the Turkish simply refined this practice and gave it a

name. Shish kebabs, however, were not the food I was pursuing. For while skewered chunks of whole lamb or chicken were available in most, if not all the *kebaberies* I visited, their popularity is nothing compared to their all-conquering Frankenstein cousin: the doner.

The origin of these vertiginous meat carousels dates to the mid-nineteenth century. Almost unbelievably, their invention can be traced to a single individual, a restaurateur named İskender Efendi from the town of Bursa in modern Turkey, who looked at the traditional method of horizontally roasting stacks of seasoned sliced meat and turned it on its head. Or on its side. Roasting meat vertically gave gravity a bigger role in the cooking process, allowed the juices to better ingratiate with one another, and made carving something that could be easily accomplished while the dish was still on the turn. The concept spread rapidly, and was refined in the 1970s by the Turkish diaspora of Berlin, who realised the ultimate application of such easy-to-shear meat was sandwiches. No sooner had Europe blinked than there were kebab shops on street corners from Dublin to Donetsk.

In France, kebabs found a particularly warm welcome. Introduced, as elsewhere, by Turkish immigrants, the dish also gained a loyal clientele among the country's large North African population. As such, kebabs soon came to prove tiresomely political, with certain French nationalists coming out against the dish with the rubbishy claim that it disrupts traditional values. A stall at the 2013 conference for France's far-right party, then known as the *Front National*, even made headlines with the slogan '*Ni kebab ni burger, vive le jambon-beurre*' ('Neither kebab nor burger, long live the ham sandwich'). Frankly, anyone who thinks a ham and

butter baguette is better than a kebab deserves the sad, bland life they've made for themselves.

This said, even on a culinary level, kebabs don't have the best reputation. They look like the ultimate in junk food. Reconstituted, of non-distinct origin, sweating grease: there is something of the fatberg to a doner in its pre-sandwich form.

Defiantly, however, French *kebaberies* have made an emblem of this unappetising appearance. The trapezoid silhouette of a full doner is as common a Paris shop sign as the diamond shape indicating a *tabac* or the green cross of a pharmacy. Nevertheless, the hostile response I encountered in the Restaurant Bodrum, which was repeated with only mild variation in all the other kebab houses that I visited in the 19th, did not come as a great surprise.

They thought I was a snoop. Why would someone be curious about kebab recipes if not to expose how awful they were – how pumped full of salt, and preservatives and connective tissue? No one I spoke to was proud of the food; they were proud of the work. Of the Herculean shifts they put in, from 11 a.m. to 2 a.m. every day of the week. The kebabs themselves were for them symbolic of a Sisyphean labour. For no sooner was one carved to its skewer than another would be put in its place.

I was learning that most kebab places in the 19th are still owned and run by people from Turkey, often supported by immigrant workers from Bangladesh or Sri Lanka, rather than being the pan-Muslim concern that many on the political far right assumed. The clientele, meanwhile, hail from a very broad background. Many customers treat kebab houses as a refuge. They are shelters to asylum seekers, drunks and madmen, whom I saw set up at tables over single trays of

fries, eating with the pedantic lethargy of the truly hungry and bored.

Most intriguingly, I learned that the majority of kebab stores in the 19th got their doners from a single supplier, a firm called Bay Tat located deep in the Paris suburbs. If you want to learn how to make a kebab, I was repeatedly told, get out of here and go and visit them.

After several unanswered emails to Bay Tat and three phone calls informing me that the factory manager was nowhere to be found, I took a risk. Two trains, two buses and a half-hour walk later, I reached my destination. Beneath grey-white skies, surrounded by unsuspecting two-storey homes, I stood before one of the secret engines of Paris: the factory where its doner kebabs were made.

The gate to the compound was open, and I walked in unannounced, surprised to feel a pinch of fear. Few places are as lonely as a suburban corner where you have no business being. And here I was, approaching a meat-mincing factory to which I had received no official welcome. I'm not saying that I truly thought anything sinister was going to happen to me, but I was very aware that if it did, there would be no trouble hiding the body.

There were eyes on me as I crossed the cracked concrete forecourt. The only sign of what might be going on inside was a chimney on top of the large prefab structure that belched out smoke as black as an undecided conclave. In the reception window, a young woman was watching my approach with the hawkish look of someone about to reach under their desk for an alarm. Or a gun. But soon I was talking to her, and she was polite but firm. No, I would not be allowed to visit the factory floor.

My face fell. It had taken me the best part of two hours to get out here, I protested.

You've wasted your time.

Couldn't I at least talk to the manager?

He will say the same as me, the woman said. But fine.

The manager was summoned. Young, nice looking, reassuringly not covered in blood.

No, there was no way I would be allowed in. I could not even ask questions about the kebabs.

It was the same thing as in kebab shops of the 19th; they seemed to think I was out to get them. I protested I was there for my own benefit. I just wanted to know how their kebabs were made so I could make one for myself.

No, came the answer again.

I considered slipping into a more journalistic idiom, saying that yes, I *was* writing an exposé and if they didn't let me in, I'd be forced to assume the worst, that they were hiding something. Eyeballs, testicles, calf foetuses: if I wasn't allowed to see it, I would be at liberty to write that *anything* could go into the kebabs.

I didn't say any of this, however, because it was certainly untrue; because not letting me in was simply a question of insurance, hygiene, lack of time in an already busy day to show around a nosy stranger. And because, let's be honest, I still felt a little intimidated by this unfamiliar meat-mincing factory in an unfamiliar part of town.

'You will never learn how to make a kebab,' the *kebabiste* said, keeping his smile fixed on my face while with his knife he deboned raw chickens. 'I could tell you every one of my secrets, but still you would not be able to do what I do.'

'Are you going to tell me your secrets?' I asked.

I had cheated.

My visits to the *kebaberies* of the 19th and to Bay Tat had not yielded a single doner merchant willing to talk, so I had dipped into the 11th, to a kebab shop on the rue Saint-Maur called Le RDV. On a previous visit there, I had complimented the proprietor on one of the dishes (a lamb kofta, succulent and aflame with cinnamon seasoning), eliciting a great monologue about technique and pride, about how many other kebab shops around Paris did not care about quality and just ordered from big industrial suppliers.

'But I,' the man talking was middle-aged, very short and bald, and effervescing with recent success, 'I make everything myself. And I make it well.'

If he had been so willing to talk after a mere passing compliment, I figured he would respond at length to a deeper probing into his craft. And I had been right. Mostly.

His name was Adel. Originally from Turkey, he had lived in France for nine years. He greeted my arrival in his shop and my questions with delight.

'Sit down. Have a coffee. On the house, my friend.'

His 'house' was not so different from any of the other kebab stores I had been to. Brightly lit with white tile flooring and cheap aluminium furniture. There were no photographs of dishes, however, only a short, handwritten menu above the counter; and no faded pictures of the Bosporus decorated the walls. It was also meticulously clean. Rather than rancid grease or frying, it smelled, fantastically, of roasting meat.

'I am not surprised people in other kebab stores would not speak to you,' he said. 'Most are not chefs. Many do not

have papers. They are like people in factories. They have no passion. With me, it is different.'

He continued carving, working blindly, but with the precision of a surgeon. Not an ounce of flesh was being wasted of the chickens he was filleting.

'I have worked as a chef in many restaurants. In Turkey and in Paris. I have done everything. I *can* do anything. So maybe you want to know why I only make kebabs? There is no need for kebabs to be bad, my friend. And it is an inexpensive way to start a restaurant. Even if you buy the very finest meat, which I do.'

'Do you have any advice for me, then, if I want to make a kebab from scratch?' I asked.

'Impossible. Can you do this?' he nodded down to his carving.

'No.'

'You cannot learn it either. After a year, perhaps two. But to leave here now, there is nothing I could tell you.'

'Oh,' I said.

'Listen,' Adel said, 'you cannot ask a man who makes kebabs for a living how to make a kebab. Those who do not take it seriously will not know, and those who do will not tell you. Understand?'

This was, to put it mildly, deflating. Still, I was not about to walk out. Besides, I wanted to say, isn't it just meat on a stick?

'The marinade is the important thing,' Adel said. 'The technique is unteachable, the marinade is the secret.'

'Ah.'

'And I will not tell you my secret. But if you insist on trying to make a kebab for yourself, go to a butcher. Go to

the best butcher. Get him to prepare the meat. At least that will be a start.'

No need to ask him if there was a particular Paris butcher that he would recommend; I already knew where to go.

Doner Kebab

Makes 8–10 sandwiches

Ingredients:

800g lamb belly
800g turkey thigh
Salt
Pepper
Olive oil

Serve in a fresh baguette with chopped romaine lettuce, sliced tomatoes and sliced onion.

There was a severed-head-in-a-box quality to the plastic bag of raw meat I set down in my friends' kitchen.

'We're really doing this?' said Lucie, one of the kitchen's owners, eyeing the package with obvious revulsion.

'We're going to try.'

I had come to the north-eastern suburb of Noisy-le-Sec because I was not about to fork out €200 for even the most basic kebab grill, and so I needed to build a fire. Inadvisable in my third-floor apartment, but thankfully (by no means a given in Paris) I had friends with a garden.

'What meat did you go for?' Lucie dared to peer into the bag.

'Turkey leg and lamb belly,' I said. 'Though technically it was chosen for me.'

I'd arrived at the Abattoirs de la Villette that morning in time for the Saturday rush, a fast-moving queue crowding out the entrance. Inside, I could spy a six-metre-long meat counter was staffed by a team of seven, their white overalls dotted by blood. Reaching the front of the queue, I told the dome-headed giant at the counter that I wanted to make a kebab for eight people, but I needed him to prepare it. He answered with a grunt, and at once began to search his counter for cuts. I watched as he took out the lamb and turkey, weighed them for price, then turned his back to me to work them with speed that was all the more frightening because it involved a razor-sharp blade. The very thing Adel had told me I would not be able to do, he did for me in seconds. The lamb belly, which began as a ribbon of sinew, marbled by rib and fat, was fast sculpted down to a half-dozen swatches of lean and unblemished pink. He trimmed a huge turkey leg to the last millimetre, leaving nothing but naked bone. He arranged the meat into a gelatinous pancake stack and wrapped it all together in white paper.

'C*ourage*.' He passed me the bag.

'Wait,' I said. 'Do you have any advice for a marinade?'

'And,' Lucie asked, 'did he?'

'No,' I said. 'Not exactly. Just lots of salt and pepper. He said keep basting it in its own juices. That with the quality they sold, the important thing was to taste the meat.'

The Noisy-le-Sec house came with a basement of old junk from which we requisitioned a curtain pole to act as a skewer, punching it through a cheap baking tray for a base. Then, it was as simple as pulling the seasoned meat over it one swatch at a time, layering turkey then lamb, turkey

then lamb into a jowly mound half a foot high. It looked disgusting, like something that could block the plumbing of a whole neighbourhood. It looked like a failure. After all my research into kebabs, I had been left with this. Nevertheless, I had come this far …

The fire, I confess, I had researched on YouTube. The barbecue situation in Noisy was just a pit formed by loose bricks, which could be reconstructed into a wall. In front of this we pinned chicken wire to buttress a half-bag of charcoal which we set aflame. Soon, all that was left was to place the kebab monstrosity in front of the heat, and to rotate it by hand. While drinking beer.

The night was unseasonably warm, and this combined with the heat of the fire meant we were able to tend the meat in relative comfort. Which was lucky, because the kebab cooked slowly. One beer gave way to two, and soon enough, two became five. At least this felt an appropriate appetiser. Meanwhile, something magical was taking place.

The transubstantiation of raw into cooked is a low-grade miracle. You witness in real time something repellent become its opposite. Never, though, had I seen a change as profound as I did then. Raw, the kebab had looked like a prolapse, but now it was starting to resemble, well, a kebab. The layers of turkey and lamb were drawing into one another: sizzling, browning, beads of flavour escaping from within. And the smell: that commingling of proteins which hits somewhere at the top of the nose, combined with a base note of smouldering charcoal. It was actually working! Of course it was working. It was meat on a stick.

At last, the time came to carve, a little unsteadily now because of the beer but with a good knife. The action

seemed to be the only small contribution I could offer to all the expert butchery that had got us to this point. The meat fell into the tray like manna from hell. I scooped it up and transferred it to a frying pan set up on an electric hotplate we'd trailed outside. I'd never fully understood this stage, common to all kebab shops. But now I recognised it for what it was: a safety precaution. Just in case something in the roast kebab is not fully cooked, the frying stage kills off any lingering microbes. Whatever added flavour it imparts is almost incidental.

We had lettuce, tomato and onion, and fresh baguettes, ready to go. I muttered the call and response to myself as I assembled the sandwich. '*Salade, tomate, oignon?*' '*Oui*.' '*Quelle sauce?*'

I paused. Though I had gone out of my way to find a bottle of *sauce algérienne* in a supermarket, it no longer seemed appropriate. For the 19th, for the history of the 19th, for all the animals slaughtered there for the benefit of Parisian stomachs, I should taste the meat. So I let the condiment stand. And I took a bite. It was delicious. And wasn't this the paradox I'd discovered about kebabs? That their creation, good or bad, is shrouded in secrecy, and yet they are among the most meritocratic and accessible of foods in the city. Which is another way of saying: it was slow-grilled meat. Of course it was delicious.

18ème arrondissement

I was diagnosed with type-1 diabetes a month before my thirtieth birthday. Checking into the Hôpital Lariboisière, following weeks of stomach cramps and excessive thirst, I was told I had so many ketones in my blood that I should be in a coma. Or dead.

After an initial treatment, I lay in A & E for hours. Gurneyed deeper into increasingly forgotten corners, growing hungrier and weaker, I felt trapped in a tightening vice of anxiety about what my newfound condition would mean for my life, and more specifically, my diet. Diabetes was like being surprised into an arranged marriage; I knew it would be with me the rest of my life, but understood nothing of its