

Backing the Bouquinistes
 Le Hide Restaurant
 Backstage with Guignol
 Collège des Bernardins
 Le Centquatre
 Putting on the Ritz

Euro Nov 28: .788
 Euro Oct 27: .797
 Rain Days: 16
 High Temp: 44°F/7°C
 Low Temp: 36°F/2°C
 Nat'l Holidays: Dec 25, Jan 1

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THE MARAIS TODAY

By Amanda MacKenzie

It's a neighborhood, it's an attitude, it's a lifestyle, it's an identity, it's today's Marais

You know the Marais. It's hip. It's historic. It's everyone's favorite slice of Paris, served up on a bagel. Just thinking about it is liable to draw you into a vortex of cliché. Pity the humble guidebook writer, sighing as he reaches for his thesaurus. With the Marais' "maze" of streets, its "elegant" "hôtels particuliers," its "trendy" designer shopping, there is surely nothing new to be said on the matter. All that remains is to say it all again, only differently.

Or so I used to believe. These days, I've come to realize that the more you get to know the Marais, the more it seems to slip out from under your feet, rather like the swamp it takes its name from. A handful of clichés may be enough to attract tourists in the millions, yet few guidebooks manage to capture a real sense of the place. Come to think of it, most city maps remain vague about where it is—and who can blame them, given the Marais' spongy frontiers?

For simplicity's sake, let's just say that it covers roughly three-quarters of the 3rd and 4th arrondissements, that it is governed by two mayors and that it has the dynamics of a town-within-a-town. Recently, it has been re-branded as two entities: the Bas (Lower) Marais and the Haut (Upper) Marais, loosely situated on either side of the Rue des Francs-Bourgeois. It's an intelligent division. To the south is "le beau" Marais, with its overlay of historic splendor. To the north is the more working-class Marais, clustered around the old Quartier du Temple. Only a hair-splitter like me would point out that there aren't merely two Marais, but many: Jewish Marais, Expatriate Marais, Wholesaler Marais, Urban-Cool Marais, Cashmere-and-Pearls Marais (tucked inside the elegant Place des Vosges). Will the real Marais please stand up?

I ponder this multiplicity from my ringside seat at the edge of the vortex—or, rather, from the terrace of Le Petit Fer à Cheval, an appealing old "zinc" on Rue Vieille-du-Temple. This street, fast becoming one long lifestyle statement, is currently the unofficial center of the

Marais. Urban chic and designer labels—APC, The Kooples, Vanessa Bruno and Eritokritos—have put it on the fashion circuit. A colony of galleries led by Yvon Lambert has established its contemporary art credentials. Around the corner from where I sit sipping my espresso, the boutiques of little Rue du Trésor are a treasure trove of "needful things," while at the north end



of the street, Café La Perle throngs with the in-crowd on weekends.

But, of course, it's not just the vibe that makes this such a quintessentially Marais street. It's the nonchalance with which it wears its past. There's no getting away from history here. Take the great carriage gates (shown) at 47 Rue Vieille-du-Temple: their carved gorgons routinely stop first-timers in their tracks. (U.S. visitors have even more reason to pause here, for it was from behind these doors that Caron de Beaumarchais trafficked arms to the rebels, thereby swinging the War of Independence in their favor.)

Today, such architectural flourishes are so much a part of the ethos of the Marais that it's easy to forget what a staggering legacy they represent. There are over 40 hôtels particuliers alone, most dating to the aristocratic building frenzy of the 17th century. It's ironic that so many of these fabulous private mansions are now in collective ownership, either as admin-

istrative offices (Hôtel d'Albret) or as museums (Hôtels de Guénégaud, de Carnavalet and de Salé). The Rue des Francs-Bourgeois is a roll call of splendor that culminates in the harmonious Place des Vosges.

It's hard to see how today's Marais renaissance could have taken place without that historic aesthetic—and easy to forget how close it came to being bulldozed away. The turning point came in 1962, with Minister of Cultural Affairs André Malraux's radical Plan de Sauvegarde et de Mise en Valeur du Marais. By this time, the area was a crumbling, unsanitary slum, in which the now-partitioned mansions were home to a multitude of immigrant families and sweatshops. Under the Malraux plan, the area was for the first time treated as an integral conservation area. Investors were encouraged to buy up, restore and renovate, with tax breaks to enable them to recoup their comparatively modest outlay. In the real-estate scramble that ensued, the existing population was squeezed out—sometimes with a heavy hand. With it went a whole economy based around small ateliers that turned out everything from leather goods to spectacles.

Pierre Aidenbaum, mayor of the 3rd arrondissement, is philosophical about the passing of those small trades. They were already in decline, he believes—and as the son of a Rue des Rosiers hatter, he's a case in point. But he recalls the period that followed as a particularly uneasy one for the Marais: "By the 1980s, there had been a change of population and, in my view, the quartier was taking a very bad direction. On the one hand, the artisans were leaving, taking with them the human quality they gave to the area. On the other, it was becoming a museum quartier—it was losing its soul. Shops were closing, blinds were coming down. It was absolutely tragic."

Today's Marais is no sleeping beauty—but opinions vary as to what has helped it climb out of its torpor. Some point to the arrival of the gay scene from the 1980s onwards. The community in residence isn't large (continued on page 7)

but it's the epicenter of "Gay Paree," so its influence goes well beyond the confines of the Rue des Archives (conclusive evidence that size really doesn't matter). Certainly, it has given rise to a vigorous sub-culture, from the nightly soap-and-shower antics of the Raidd Bar, through to tasteful, gay-friendly holiday rentals and a variety of dedicated retailers, including the delightfully named Les Dessous d'Apollon—which has put a whole new spin on divine lingerie.

For Mayor Aidenbaum, the catalyst was rather the arrival of the art galleries, led by the internationally inclined Denise René, whose Haut Marais space opened in 1991. Hand in hand with art came fashion in the widest sense, as the affluent classes began to follow trendsetters such as John Galliano and Jean Nouvel into the quartier. Suddenly, a city-central pad in the "Francs Bour" or Rue Charlot began to look like a vibrant alternative to posh-but-dull Neuilly.

Mayor Aidenbaum has been at the forefront of the Haut Marais' regeneration. In 1995, he won by a narrow margin on a single-issue campaign: to bring the Marché des Enfants Rouges back from the dead. Claimed to be Paris' oldest market (the name comes from the red-cloaked children of the orphanage that once stood here), it's now a Mecca for Marais gastronomes and picturesque enough to attract international fashion shoots. All agree the market has breathed new life into the Rue de Bretagne, which Aidenbaum has in turn enhanced, Champs-Élysées-style, with wider pavements and an avenue of trees.

Indeed, follow the fabulously fluctuating fortunes of Marais neighborhoods if you can. Not long ago, the Rue St-Paul was a magnet for weekend strollers. Then, with re-zoning (fewer brocanteurs, more interior design), the buzz shifted to Vieille-du-Temple and the Francs Bour' on Sundays. Now it's on the move again, and a trio of streets south of Rue de Bretagne is increasingly where it's at. On Rue de Saintonge, a new gallery is all set to clean up from the former Office Public d'Hygiène Sociale. On Rue Charlot, angry mannequins pose in the windows of Gaspard Yurkievich. Rue Poitou may just be the hippest of the bunch, harboring, among other things, a brace of Chinese contemporary art dealers, the Hôtel du Petit Moulin and a boutique selling rock 'n' roll rags for little Johnny Hallidays. The latest arrival, Tiger Sushi Furs, is a concept boutique selling none of the above. Aidenbaum, however, is quick to challenge claims that it's all sliding into soulless retail. "People say there are too many clothes shops along these streets, and it's true. But what they can't really see is that within all the offices and courtyards, there are creative agencies, designers, architects. We have some of the best designers in the world right here," he says.

His next big job concerns the Carreau du Temple, an iron-framed, 19th-century market hall whose future hung in the balance until the Mairie intervened to have it listed as a historic

building. Inside, some six or seven leather and garment stall-holders are the last stalwarts of the hundreds who traded here in the market's heyday. Following an exhaustive referendum on its future purpose, the dafter proposals (a gigantic greenhouse, a swimming pool) were weeded out in favor of a combined culture/sport/conference facility, complete with a 250-seat auditorium. The consultation and planning have taken a long time but, counters Aidenbaum, "This was the last emblematic Paris building where there was really scope to do something. We couldn't risk blowing it." Work begins in 2009 and is scheduled for completion in 2012.

For Bernadette Vitrac, it can't come soon enough. She's owner of the nearby Kakeboton gallery, with a portfolio of designers working in graphics, leather, zinc and glass. As an ex-resident of 30 years, she leapt at the chance to open here three years ago, when the quartier began to show signs of new life. Others have been quick



to follow. "For me, it's a village that still has a soul," says Vitrac. "That's something the [Bas] Marais has lost a little, with all its chain stores and tra-la-la ... With the square and the café terraces and the Mairie du 3e sitting there like a great big cake, the atmosphere is calm, almost provincial—and yet it's very, very Parisian. When I walk here through the Passage [Vendôme], I feel as though even the air's different."

It strikes a lot of people that way. Here, behind the roar of the Place de la République, the local park attracts Chinese Tai Chi practitioners, office workers and lines of infants from the local "école maternelle." Those few tourists who trickle in are delighted to discover a burgeoning cache of designers, galleries and eateries. For now, this is Wannabe Marais, a quartier-in-waiting. I sense the wait won't be long now.

So much for the future—but what of that guidebook staple, the historic Jewish quarter, the Pletzl? Increasingly, tourists who touch down on the Rue des Rosiers hoping to find all the color and flavor of Tel Aviv risk being a little disappointed. Prêt-à-porter boutiques are proliferating. H&M will soon open a new store in the old Hammam St-Paul, opposite the legendary Goldenberg deli, now gone for good.

"The Rue des Rosiers is in the process of dying," says Penelope Le Masson, owner of the Red Wheelbarrow bookshop on Rue St-Paul and a keen observer of Marais neighborhoods. "Pletzl shops can sell their leases for up to a million euros. They can retire on that. But the big-name stores don't attract the same people,

and often they don't open on Sundays. There's a huge turnover in shops, and it's becoming a less interesting place."

Overstatement, perhaps? In one sense, yes. The area is home to a dwindling number of Jewish residents. Nevertheless, the symbolism of the quartier, as the haven for thousands fleeing the pogroms of Eastern Europe, is, at the least, undiminished—as is its association with Nazi Operation "Spring Breeze" (when over 7,000 people were rounded up for Auschwitz via the Vel d'Hiv). Visitors still pause at the plaques commemorating the 165 Jewish schoolchildren seized from the school on the corner; another remembers their head teacher, who resisted and thereby saved dozens. Meanwhile, on Shabbat and holidays, worshippers from across the city flock to the synagogue on Rue Pavée. It's appropriate, then, that the Mairie plans to create an official place of remembrance at number 17, the Café des Psaumes. Although this measure won't stem the departure of traditional Jewish retailers, it does address the resonance that this quartier has for many, both French and foreigners.

I'd love to own an apartment in the Marais (any Marais would do), but my chances are slim. Property here is some of the most exorbitant in the city. Nevertheless, two socialist mayors are battling hard to prevent the area from becoming just another well-heeled ghetto. Around the corner from the birthplace of the International Workers' Movement, Mayor Aidenbaum has a marginally easier task than his colleague in the 4th. By offering preemptive bids on available blocks and negotiating with private developers for a share of apartments in the last seven years, he's succeeded in creating 450 housing units for low- and middle-income families. (Seventy-five such apartments fringe the Place des Vosges.) The population of the 3rd, declining for decades, is on the increase again. What's more, it's getting younger, reflected in school enrollment, which this year has risen for the first time.

Over in the 4th arrondissement, Mayor Dominique Bertinotti has deployed a similar strategy to double the share of affordable housing to eight percent. "We aspire to make that 11-12 percent by around 2014," she confirms. Part of that effort enables the likes of teachers, nurses and other public-sector workers to live in an area that would otherwise be far beyond their reach. "This is the oldest quartier in Paris, but we're committed to keeping its character alive and to anchor it in the modernity of the 21st century," sums up Mayor Bertinotti. "C'est un très beau défi," she adds, in the tone of one who relishes such things.

Dusk is falling on the Marais as I leave. In the Place des Vosges, spruced-up waiters prepare for their shift at the Ambroisie (soft-boiled eggs, €120). Under the arcades, a vagrant warms his hands at an upturned paint can anointed with lighter fuel. The Carreau du Temple traders pocket their takings and reflect on the good old days. Mme Vitrac surveys her festive window; tomorrow's another day. Will the real Marais please stand up? On second thought...