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A LETTER FROM PARIS

"The French have an honest but somewhat misguided sense of transcendent superiority in every sphere of human activity, which has little basis in actual accomplishment and is perhaps best exemplified by the Western world's veneration of French haute cuisine, which has been accurately characterized as the creation of madmen for the delectation of fools."

- Jay Jacobs

(Paris, France) –

I have just landed on French soil after an absence of several months – far too long. For, although I have fun with the place, if truth were known, it still feels like the world's absolutely best large city. I have never really resented the French sense of disgust at the poor manners and style of dress exhibited by American visitors. I have, however, had a bit more trouble with the French attitude toward some of their fellow EEC members, like the Italians, for instance.

The French have generally been able to "walk the walk" as their attitude reflected a certain "talk the talk" negativity about all manner of things foreign. If your food is better than mine, if your people pay more attention to their appearance, if your streets are cleaner, if your crime is better controlled, and if you have an adult view of sex, then I am going to allow you some slack when it comes to self-inflated bouts of national pride and inbred condescension. But I'll tell you, I'm starting to see some cracks in the French armor.

We are here for just forty-eight hours, en route to Italy where Angela and I will lead my annual restaurant tour of Tuscany and the Italian Lakes. We have stopped off in Paris to visit a roster of hotels that don't know we're coming. Or to put it more accurately, we're here to visit a number of hotels that could care less about our surprise inspections. The American tourist is no longer required to keep the hotel safes filled with francs. It seems as though all of Europe is on the move, streaming through one another's country like neighbors during a Christmas Open House walk. But although the streets and parks are full in the crisp October air, everyone has that mournful look and the Parisians could be seen casting an occasional wistful glance up at the sky. The full Japan Airlines 747's from Tokyo and Osaka, the land of the once big spenders, are sorely missed. The Japanese saleswomen in the Hermes store on the Rue de Rivoli, actually have time to take a lunch break.

We took the American nonstop flight into the smaller of Paris' two airports, Orly.. The flight was full and the two-engine plane was once again able to demonstrate that while it may be a fuel saver, the long lines for the restroom and the need for those in front to walk the length of the plane to get in line, hardly make it passenger friendly.

Service was what you get with an experienced flight crew. We had a choice of chicken or beef. I, along with everyone else in my section of the plane,

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looked with envy at the passenger whose travel agent had ordered the cold shrimp platter. I usually do as I say but, I must confess, one bit of advice that I rarely take is my admonition to reject airline food and substitute a picnic hamper from your favorite restaurant. How I would have enjoyed some of Chinn's 34th St. Fishery's Coconut shrimp, or a bit of roast lamb from Montparnasse crusted with a mustard sauce. Imagine a double order of Granada's potato and garlic salad with a baguette from the Corner Bakery. But instead I simply asked for the "chicken" or whatever.

They showed the movie *Les Miserables*, an appropriate selection since one could easily identify the fact that the French penal institutions of the past served their guests food that was quite similar to what we were eating at the moment.

We landed in a gentle drizzle at Orly after our central casting pilot explained that he had made up our lost time by brilliant flying in a duck pattern over the Atlantic. But after our wheels touched down, at the seemingly deserted airport, things slowed down quite a bit. We sat on the runway and then the pilot came on to explain, with not a little sarcasm etched in his voice, that the French were not going to actually allow us to use a gate. After several minutes, we were parked in the middle of nowhere, with our tail feathers facing the terminal. Welcome to Paris.

* * *

We took a limo into town, a functional option that makes as much sense arriving in Paris as it does at O'Hare. I can't prove that all Paris taxi drivers are terrorists on sabbatical, but the percentage is high enough to make me avoid them. The exception are the cabbies who have the German Shepherds riding shotgun in the front seat. For some reason I always find dog lovers simpatico.

Our hotel of choice in Paris is the Le Parc, set quietly along a quiet, tree-lined street in the ever so chic 16th arrondissement. There are only 116 rooms and Joseph, the famed Concierge, pretty much knows the what and where-alls about each of their occupants.

Some guests choose Le Parc for its bar, an English Club look-alike just off the small lobby. Here, two barkeeps keep watch over three couches and some comfy chairs. Most of the guestrooms look out over a quiet and rather elegant inner courtyard with beautiful gardens.

And on the other side of the garden stands the greatest restaurant in the western world.

One would deduce this from the point of sheer logic. Alain Ducasse is currently the most famous and most respected chef in France, inheriting that mantle from Joel Ruberchon, whose restaurant he took over in 1996. Ducasse managed to hold on to the impossible three-star Michelin rating, gaining notoriety for the astounding creativity in his kitchen. I do recommend staying at Le Parc and calling Joseph a few weeks ahead of your arrival to dine at Ducasse. Before making this decision, however, I should tell you just a little something about the

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pricing on his menu. The night we looked in, a lobster thermidor was featured on the menu at 630 francs. At about five francs to the dollar you can see that this is a tad expensive, especially after you add a few side dishes, appetizers, wines, dessert, and gratuities. Be forewarned. They do not have a salad bar.

We slept on a canopied bed, eager to set off in the morning on a trudge through hotel lobby's and unoccupied rooms in various other arrondissements. For our part, we saw no reason to leave the 16th.

* * *

In the afternoon of our second day, we found ourselves wandering down the Champs Elysee' in the sunshine. It was chilly but the street still holds some level of fascination. Much has sadly changed. It is virtually impossible to dine anywhere on this great avenue without feeling that you are being elegantly ripped off. The side streets hold much greater culinary promise. We did enjoy looking at the commerce; there are always a few stores on the Champs that are ahead of their time. Our favorite this time, was a store called Sephora, a magnificent perfume store with elegant, modern, floor to ceiling displays highlighting each manufacturer and without any counters to block interaction between customer and product. Cashiers in high-buttoned tunics and Philip Morris manservant hats handled the purchases from behind a sweeping desk while elegant quadrilingual salesgirls offered subdued assistance.

Just a few doors down we visited the multi-story Virgin store, an elegant visage with lots of listening posts and a high-strung security force of young karate masters.

I sought quieter pursuits and I was sticking to my admonition that one should never spend more than thirty minutes in any building in Europe that does not serve food. So we walked all over the city, eventually ending up in the small, friendly, and elegant Carita Spa for some facial rejuvenatives that would last far longer than one of Duclasse's meals.

As we walked we came upon the now infamous flame statue just across from the Pitone Metro stop. A small, rather jovial crowd was reading the graffiti on the concrete wall atop the entrance to the Alma tunnel. There were all sorts of sentiments by wanderers who had come to see this spot. And in the middle was a note from a local in French that roughly said "idiots – you're standing at the wrong end of the tunnel".

At night we had an uneventful dinner in a small bistro run by Guy Savoy, a long-time French culinary star who has finally figured out that if he wants real people to taste his food he will have to lower the price by several hundred dollars. The pumpkin-mushroom soup served with morels and a cream sauce was memorable, the veal ragout with braised cabbage was not. The ending, figs baked in a dark chocolate sauce with raspberry is to apple pie what Mozart is to John Philip Sousa.

We walked back in the chill night air, passing a man playing an accordion and two women standing under a street light for no apparent reason. We caught

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glimpses of people and places, and small little shops filled with delicious morsels resting in the window. But we saw few smiles and we heard little laughter. I think that finally, what I like least about Paris, is my feeling that it has no quantifiable sense of humor.

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