

QUINTESSENTIAL FRANCE

Café Society

Along with air, water, and wine, the café remains one of the basic necessities of life in France. You may prefer a posh perch at a renowned Paris spot such as the Deux Magots on Boulevard St-Germain or opt for a tiny *café du coin* (corner café) in Lyon or Marseilles, where you can have a quick cup of coffee at the counter. Those on Paris's major boulevards (such as Boulevard St-Michel and the Champs-Élysées) will almost always be the most expensive and the least interesting. In effect, the more modest establishments (look for nonchalant locals) are the places to really get a feeling for French café culture.

And we do mean culture—not only the practical rituals of the experience (perusing the posted menu, choosing a table, unwrapping your sugar cube) but an intellectual spur as well. You'll see businessmen, students, and pensive types pulling out notebooks for intent scribbles. In fact, some Paris landmarks like the Café de Flore host readings, while several years ago a trend for *cafés philos* (philosophy cafés) took off.

And there's always the frisson of history available at places like La Closerie des Lilas, where an expensive drink allows you to rest your derriere on the spots once favored by Baudelaire and Apollinaire. Finally, there's people-watching, which goes hand in glove with the café lifestyle—what better excuse to linger over your *café crème* or Lillet? So get ready to settle in, sip your *pastis*, and pretend your travel notebook is a Hemingway story in the making.

Street Markets

Browsing through the street markets and *marchés couverts* (covered markets) of France is enough to make you regret all the tempting restaurants around. But even though their seafood, free-range poultry, olives, and produce cry out to be gathered in a basket and cooked in their purest forms, you can also enjoy them as a simple visual feast. Over at flea and *brocante* (collectibles) markets, food plays second fiddle. With any luck, you'll find a little 18th-century engraving that makes your heart *go trotinant*.

Bistros and Brasseries

The choice of restaurants in France is a feast in itself. Of course, at least once during your trip you'll want to indulge in a luxurious meal at a great haute-cuisine restaurant—but there's no need to get knee-deep in white truffles at Paris's Alain Ducasse to savor the France the French eat. For you can discover the most delicious *French-Women-Don't-Get-Fat* food with a quick visit to a city neighborhood bistro.

History tells us that bistros served the world's first fast food—after the fall of Napoléon, the Russian soldiers who occupied Paris were known to cry *bistro* (“quickly” in Russian) when ordering. Here, at zinc-top tables, you'll find the great delights of *cuisine traditionnelle*, like *grand-mère's* lamb with white beans.

Today the bistro boom has meant that many are designer-decorated and packed with trendsetters. If you're lucky, the food will be as witty and colorful as the clientele. Brasseries, with few exceptions, remain unchanged—great bustling places with white-aproned waiters and hearty, mainly Alsatian, food, such as pork-based dishes, *choucroute* (sauerkraut), and beer (“brasserie” also means brewery). Bon appétit!