PARIS notes

November 2005

Volume 14 Issue 9

The Little Beltway

By Mary McAuliffe

Closed for years, a small railroad called the Petite Ceinture once ran to connect and supply Paris

Long ago, a small railroad called the Petite Ceinture, or Little Belt, encircled Paris. It has been closed for years, but its tracks still remain, a quiet reminder of the past located just inside Paris' thunderous beltway, the Périphérique. Every time I explored the outer reaches of Paris, whether on the Right Bank or the Left, it seemed that I encountered this tantalizing piece of the past. And yet it remained securely out of bounds, its elevated and sunken portions alike fenced off and locked.

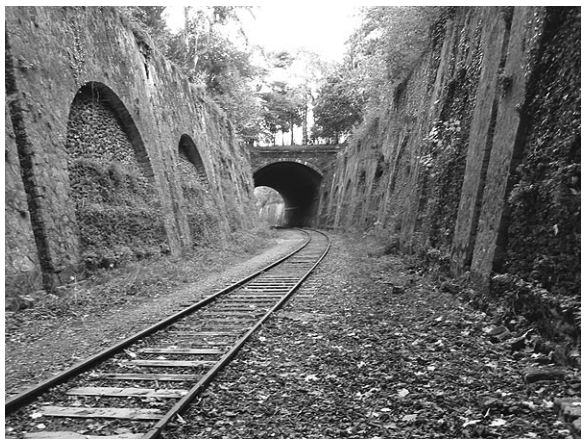
I asked around, looking to see if there was some way I could legitimately enter this old right-of-way, just to walk along its neglected tracks. Then one day, some friends—who, as it turned out, had a passion for railroads as well as a measure of access—asked if we would like to join them for a hike along the Petite Ceinture. It would be entirely legal, they assured us, but a bit strenuous. Would we be interested?

Would we? Equipped with our sturdiest hiking boots, along with a backpack filled with munchies and water, we sallied forth, ready for adventure.

We met up with our friends at the Cour St-Emilion Métro stop at 9am sharp, as arranged. One passed around a bag of pastries, while another handed out high-visibility vests, to wear over our jackets. Not that anyone expected any of the Petite Ceinture's engines to come roaring up behind us. Freight service on the line was discontinued over a decade ago, and there has been no passenger service since 1934. Still, we were starting our journey in the vicinity of an operating railroad, and it made sense to take safety precautions.

As I looked out over the old tracks, I recalled that the Petite Ceinture had its origins, back in the mid-nineteenth century, as an answer to military need as well as commercial opportunity. Railroad lines were already converging on Paris, while a new fortification (Thiers) was rising on the city's outskirts, along the course of today's Périphérique. This massive fortification never did the defensive job it was supposed to, and after World War I, it was simply torn down. But earlier in its career, when it still looked like a winner, many were concerned about how best to connect and supply this lengthy defense-works, including its sixteen fortresses just outside the wall.

By 1852, the Petite Ceinture had begun to provide an answer to all these questions, serving as a connecting link between the various railroad lines entering Paris, much like the rim on the spokes of a great wheel. Located just inside the Thiers fortification, it could safely connect and provision Paris' defenders during times of war. During peacetime, it would serve as an essential assist to Paris' commercial flow.



Piece by piece, the marvelous new Little Belt emerged, with spurs leading to major commercial ventures such as the massive slaughterhouses of La Villette. It was a huge undertaking, requiring the excavation of lengthy tunnels beneath the hills of Belleville and Charonne. After numerous accidents with pedestrians and street traffic, the entire system was then completely reconstructed away from street level, and moved into trenches or onto elevated tracks.

At first, the Little Belt served solely as a freight-carrier, but during the 1860s, it opened to passengers, and its glory days began. By the turn of the century, when floods of visitors to the Universal Exhibition increased the passenger traffic to almost forty million riders, it looked like the Little Belt's future was assured.

But technology has a way of humbling today's success stories, and soon the construction of the Métro system sounded the Petite Ceinture's death knell. Passengers flocked to the new subway and bus lines, abandoning the Little Belt to freight. Passenger service was stopped in 1934, and although freight use trickled on, it was eventually shut down as well.

It's a sad story, but the day was bright and beautiful, and our group of adventurers was there to celebrate the Petite Ceinture, not to mourn it. Our leader pointed out the place where the Little Belt tracks divided between the northern (Right Bank) and southern (Left Bank) lines. Heading off along the northern line, we soon found ourselves in a kind of wilderness growing up and around the tracks. Curiously, as we learned, many of these plants are not native to the region. Their ancestors blew off coal and other open freight cars, some from as far away as Poland. As a result of this random bit of sowing, some of the plants growing here are found nowhere else in Paris.

Contemplating this information, we plodded on along the rusting rails, enjoying this ribbon of wilderness that winds through the back yards and rooftops of Paris. "Look at that," one or another of our colleagues would tell us, pointing out a nifty conjunction of roofs or an unusual street perspective. I felt as if I was observing everyday life in Paris from a secret vantage point.

Sometimes people would wave as we passed, and a couple members of our group carried on a brief conversation with a young man leaning out a window, who was interested in what we were about. Further along the tracks, we encountered a man who had (quite unofficially) made his home in the remains of one of the Little Belt's deteriorating stations. Upon seeing a group of strangers in (continued on page 7)

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In many ways, this is one of the most fascinating periods in modern French history. The country is at a crossroads. Which direction it chooses will in part be decided in the 2007 presidential elections. With the left clearly in disarray and with no prominent figurehead ascending, it appears that the right will determine France's future course. President Chirac is all but out of the picture, while his prime minister, Dominique de Villepin, and his interior minister, Nicolas Sarkozy, are engaging in an ongoing battle of one-up-manship to replace their boss.

Mr. de Villepin, regal, establishment-oriented, smooth, represents a more moderate, more Chiraquian path. He thinks the "French model" works, but it needs some tweaking. Mr. Sarkozy, brash, results-oriented, fearless, is a man of action who believes things in France are not working and that the country is falling behind the rest of the world.

What nobody seems to be denying is that France needs to change. The questions now are how much and at what pace? Mr. de Villepin says baby steps and slowly, while Mr. Sarkozy says leaps and yesterday. Both men have their work cut out between now and 2007 as the French public tends to distrust all politicians, especially those who want to change things. Now the public's choices are a little change or a lot, rather than the status quo or rearranging the deck chairs.

France, at this crucial moment, is in essence deciding what it will become in the new century. This, of course, is up to the French public, and I am confident they will choose wisely. But if I had any words of, well, encouragement, I would say one thing: Change is good.

—Mark Eversman, Editor
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- One-year subscription (10 issues): $44
- Paris Notes Subscription Services
  P.O. Box 15818
  North Hollywood, CA 91615-5818

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petites notes

Business as Usual

A little competition always hurts. For over twenty-five years Paris has been the world's top convention city as measured by total number of annual international conventions. But, if the current trend continues, Vienna will soon take the top position. In 2003, Paris hosted 275 conventions versus 221 in 2004 (Vienna had 219 in 2004), an alarming twenty percent drop. City officials, once confident that no city could touch Paris—Paris, after all, is Paris was their attitude—have begun to worry. And, with good reason. Tourism is responsible for eleven percent of the City's jobs. Business people spend on average about 265E per day in Paris, while the average tourist spends about 208E. Paris being Paris is no longer enough in the international convention world. Paris is Paris, but Paris is also very expensive, its public transportation access to major convention venues is poor, and, according to an industry organization's latest study, Paris does a poor job of welcoming conventioneers. But, the main problem that Paris faces is competition. What Paris has been doing poorly for years, other cities have figured out how to do well, and they've overcome Paris' considerable competitive advantages.

The Mayor's Malaise

Ever since Paris lost its bid for the 2012 Olympic Games in July, which was a stomach punch to the city, the newspapers have been running stories about Mayor Delanoë's flagging enthusiasm at work. Some have even said he was bored. Before July, there was great speculation that his star was rising as a 2007 presidential candidate, but since July, he has had trouble even mustering majority support in the city council. To prevail in city-council voting, he needs votes from the council's twenty-two Greens. He is no longer getting them, which means for the moment he is a lame duck. The mayor needs some good days.

Les Halles Redefined

Last year's biggest Paris story was the controversial renovation plan for the Forum des Halles and the Les Halles area (1st). The City had decided that the twenty-six-year-old center—which comprises a large above-ground open space and a below-ground shopping center, and which is roundly disliked by most Parisians—needed to be replaced. The City held an architectural contest that produced four designs nobody liked. After several delays, Mayor Delanoë selected a design by French architect David Mangin last December, but he hedged his decision by saying that he had selected a loose interpretation of the design. No one was happy, especially residents of the area, and the Les Halles discussion seemed to come to a halt. Recently, however, the mayor made another announcement meant to clarify the timeline of the project. If anything, this confused everyone more. He gave the official green light to the project, and appointed Mangin to "advance ideas for the refitting of the gardens and the surrounding streets." For the actual Forum, the architectural part of the project, he announced a new architectural competition that would take place in the beginning of 2007—so it appears that Mangin's design has been rejected. At the end of 2007, a new architect would be selected and work on the gardens would commence. In 2009, construction on the new Forum (now being called Le Carreau des Halles) would begin. The mayor of the 1st arrondissement, where Les Halles is located, had a few words about Mayor Delanoë's plan: "la confusion totale."

Real Estate Rising

Real estate prices in Paris continue to rise briskly. Overall, according to the Fédération Nationale de l'Immobilier, property values in the second quarter of 2005 went up 12.5 percent over the same period last year (last year the rise was 13.4 percent over the previous year). The average square meter cost is 4,869E (about $5,850 at current exchange rates). A small studio apartment in Paris is about fifty square meters, which would cost on average about $243,000.

Getting Cleaner

Do you think Paris is a clean city? Parisians do more and more. A recent study done by the city showed that sixty-two percent of Parisians thought their city was clean, which is up from fifty-five percent in 2002. This has not happened without some concerted efforts by Yves Contassot, the city's sanitation czar. In the last five years the number of trash receptacles has been increased from 16,000 to 30,000. Most are metal rims with plastic sacs attached, for security reasons; these sacs have just gone from green to brownish-orange. The number of tickets issued for all forms of littering (these can cost from 183E to 450E) has gone from 10,000 in 2001 to an estimated 33,000 in 2005. There are now about a thousand sanitation officers patrolling the streets—eighty are undercover, so watch out. And, if we are to believe the respondents to a survey of a sample of the city's 200,000 dog owners, sixty percent of them clean up after their dogs, which Mr. Contassot claims is an impressive number. That leaves, however, 80,000 people who don't, which must account for the fifteen-plus tons of dog do that is collected from the streets every day.

•PARIS• BITES

By Rosa Jackson

My son Sam's "crèche" employed two cooks, who sat down with the children each day to see how they were enjoying dishes

Ever felt nostalgic for your school cafeteria? Clearly, you didn't grow up in France. Since the opening of former Crillon chef Christian Constant's Café Constant two years ago, cafeteria food—albeit glorified—has taken on a glamorous new image. Rather than whip up a simple meal at home (sadly, most know the layout of the frozen foods supermarket Picard better than that of any cookbook), Parisians happily tuck into this chef's versions of childhood classics such as jambon-purée or veal cordon bleu, washed down with a carafe of house wine.

I'm not sure how long this fondness for canteen fare can last, given that the current generation of French schoolchildren is lunching on soulless food assembled in central kitchens and reheated in the schools. My son Sam's "crèche" employed two cooks, who sat down with the children each day to see how they were enjoying dishes such as homemade endive and blue cheese salad (admittedly not a huge hit with two-year-olds), macaroni and meatballs, baked fish with green beans, and freshly made cake. This year, in kindergarten, the human element has vanished—all in the name of saving parents a few euros.

The menu, provided by the industrial food giant Sodexho, sounds convincing enough, with dishes such as wheat salad, fish in coconut sauce, turkey scallop with rosemary and broccoli, and île flottante with almonds, but I can't help wondering why France is tearing the kitchens out of its schools when other European countries are doing just the opposite. Finland, for instance—a country that Jacques Chirac has undiplomatically ridiculed for its cooking—serves only food made on the premises from fresh ingredients in its school cafeterias. Curious to compare the two, I visited a school while in Helsinki recently and saw children helping themselves to tomato salad, heaps of brown rice and delicious meat-and-vegetable stew (yes, I tasted it), followed by fresh seasonal berries. Several alternate meals were available for those on special diets, and low-fat milk was on tap—obesity is a problem in Finland because of what the children eat when they are not in school.

Despite my misgivings about French school food, I had high hopes for the restaurant **Le Réfectoire** (meaning The Canteen), opened by the team behind the hip restaurant La Famille in Montmartre. The tongue-in-cheek décor is clever, with a chandelier of giant light bulbs, a mosaic tile floor, colorful rubber coat hooks, plastic water jugs and magnetic letters announcing the daily specials: "lundi c'est ravioli, mardi tomates farcies...." I visited with fellow restaurant critic S. on a Friday, which according to Catholic tradition always means fish. What you feel like eating in this setting is a really great version of breaded fish, with perhaps a homemade tartar sauce. S. settled for Le Réfectoire's more adult creation of roast sea bass fillet with braised fennel and sweet potato chips with arugula, while I ordered the day's pasta special with a sauce of hazelnut cream, cabbage and Serrano ham.

Even less familiar-sounding were our starters of marinated squid with grilled veal kidney—a successful match, but like nothing you would ever find in a school cafeteria—and a vegetable terrine with goat cheese that failed to taste of the fashionable "forgotten" vegetables it contained (forgotten in the fridge perhaps?). The sweet potato "chips" that had sounded so promising in the fish special turned out to be a single chip, while the fish itself tasted rather too authentically bland. S. perked up only when I asked him to try his arugula salad, declaring it "the best thing on the plate." My pasta was simply depressing—like something I would have thrown together on a busy weeknight from the contents of my fridge, then burnt while answering the phone. Oddly, the ham arrived a few minutes later on a separate plate.

"There is not a single dessert I want to eat on this menu," said S. glumly—and he loves dessert as much as I do. "Yes, there must be," I protested. "There's... uh..." Pink lady fingers with rhubarb and mojito sorbet, anyone? Hazelnut dacquoise and Bailey's cream with Carambar mousse? "See what I mean?" said S., so we skipped dessert—and still paid 60E for this meal with a couple of glasses of wine. Why am I even bothering to write about Le Réfectoire? It's a perfect example of the kind of gimmicky restaurant that's becoming all too common in Paris, and that is lauded by the French press (particularly the crew that invented the "fooding" movement) for being innovative. If what matters to you is how the food actually tastes, beware. Which brings me to this column's second, more successful, restaurant.

Like Le Réfectoire, **Goupil le Bistro** has had good press, but the similarities stop there. Way out by Porte de Champerret in the 17th arrondissement, this restaurant is everything you imagine a traditional French bistro to be with its burgundy-and-cream color scheme, wooden tables and chairs, bunches of flowers, and scribbled chalkboard menu. You picture a curly-mustachioed owner—yet the man behind this restaurant is a 23-year-old chef with an obvious passion for classic French cooking.

The short selection of dishes reflected the autumn season, with plenty of wild mushrooms and warming dishes to combat the chill in the air. The tarte fine aux maquereaux made the most of this omega 3-rich fish, the cook having layered the mackerel fillets on buttery puff pastry topped with taste-bud-tingling mustard sauce. Beet carpaccio with mâche (lamb's lettuce) and egg mimosa—really a spruced-up cafeteria dish—again elevated its humble ingredients thanks to elegant presentation and a perfectly balanced dressing. Just as impressive was the more luxurious monkfish meunière (cooked in butter) with sautéed artichokes and chanterelles (the fish retained its tenderness, which is no mean feat), and rounds of pork tenderloin with more chanterelles and a tiny quantity of rich potato purée. Because the high quality of the pork was so obvious, I didn't object to it being served slightly pink in the center.

Satisfied by these dishes, we indulged in a shared île flottante more out of curiosity than hunger, and again a French school lunch staple rose to new heights.

Was this the meal of a lifetime? No—it was a very good bistro dinner, the kind that in an ideal Paris would be the norm and not the exception. What makes this restaurant exceptional is the tiny open kitchen, which would look at home in a space shuttle, its out-of-the-way location not far from Porte Maillot, and the age of its chef, who we can only assume has a bright future. Comfort food of this standard comes at a price, however—expect to spend at least 80E for two with wine by the glass, or 100E and up if you order by the bottle.

•Le Réfectoire: 80 Blvd Richard-Lenoir, 11th. Tel: 1-48-06-74-85.

•Goupil le Bistro: 4 Rue Claude-Debussy, 17th. Tel: 1-45-75-83-25.

Note: Rosa Jackson now offers accompanied tours of Paris food highlights in addition to her popular Edible Paris written itinerary service. You tell her about your food interests and she will lead you to the best producers, artisans and chefs, offering insider's tips all along the way. The price of a one-day tour (10am-5pm) is $500 for up to four people, not including the cost of lunch. For more information, see www.edible-paris.com.

Mozart and Haydn

Both composers added to their repertoires with Paris symphonies

With the 250th anniversary of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's birth approaching (on January 27), I decided to do a little sleuthing into his past, especially into his visits to Paris. I knew that he had made several lengthy stays in Paris, and had even written a symphony here—one that most appropriately has become known as his Paris Symphony (Symphony No. 31 in D Major, K.297/300a).

I had also passed and re-passed the lovely seventeenth-century Hôtel de Beauvais (shown, 68 Rue François-Miron, 4th), where I knew he had once been an honored guest. What other traces could I find of this beloved composer's footprints in the City of Light?

Fortunately, the literature on Mozart is enormous, and I soon learned that he visited Paris on three occasions—the first two as a child prodigy, and the last as a young man, when he was looking for work. Actually, the first two visits were both part of the same concert tour that his father, Leopold, had arranged to show off his musical children (Wolfgang and his sister Nannerl) at the courts of Europe. In 1763, the family set off in a coach from their home in Salzburg, Austria, and didn't return for more than three years.

After playing for the nobility throughout Germany and in Brussels, they arrived in Paris in November 1763, receiving such a warm welcome that they remained until the following April. Young Wolfgang was only seven at the time, and he took Paris by storm, providing what can only be called musical spectacles. He improvised on difficult themes, sight-read whatever was put before him, and (a real audience-pleaser) played on a cloth-covered keyboard.

Soon the very heavens seemed to open for this pint-sized prodigy. The Bavarian ambassador welcomed the Mozarts to his Paris residence, the Hôtel de Beauvais. The Mozarts dined with the royal family at Versailles, where the children played before Louis XV. The Queen made much of little Wolfgang, inviting him to talk with her while she fed him tidbits and encouraged him to kiss her hands.

Dazzled with such attention, and showered with expensive gifts, the Mozarts finally departed Paris for London, where they met with similar success. Two years later, they returned to Paris en route home. By this time, Wolfgang was ten years old and a seasoned performer as well as a fledgling composer (he had published his first sonatas on his earlier Paris visit, and composed his first symphonies in London). Once again, he performed for the wealthy and the highborn, including the Prince de Conti. The Palace of the Grand Prior, where Wolfgang performed for the prince, no longer exists (it once stood at the corner of Rue du Temple and Rue de Bretagne, 3rd). Still, Michel Barthélemy Ollivier's painting of the event (which now hangs in the Louvre) nicely captures something of the grandeur of the occasion.

But unfortunately for Mozart, the grandeur and the glamour did not last. By the time he returned to Paris in 1778, he was twenty-two, and public interest in him had evaporated. "People pay plenty of compliments," he wrote to his father, "but there it ends." The problem, as he clearly recognized, was that everyone still thought of him as seven years old, "because that was my age when they first saw me."

Not finding anyone willing to offer him a permanent position, Mozart kept knocking on

doors. At last a prestigious musical group, the Concert Spirituel, commissioned a symphony (his Paris Symphony), which was enthusiastically received. In fact, Mozart was so pleased with the audience's response that he dashed off after the concert to the Palais Royal, where he treated himself to a large ice!

But Mozart's world soon darkened with the illness and death of his mother, who had accompanied him on this (his last) trip to Paris. After her burial at St-Eustache Church (1st), Mozart escaped his sad little apartment on today's Rue du Sentier (2nd) for the residence of his long-time benefactor, Baron von Grimm, at 5 Rue de la Chaussée-d'Antin, 9th. (Only a few decades later, Mozart's fervent admirer, Frédéric Chopin, would live at the same address.) But although Mozart was grateful for the "pretty little room with a very pleasant view," it did not compensate for the loss of his mother. Nor did it salve his pride, for Baron von Grimm clearly regarded Mozart as little more than a faded child star. "M. Grimm may be able to help children," Mozart testily wrote his father, "but not grown-up people...."

After several more months of trying to land a job, Mozart at last left Paris for home. Salzburg could not contain him, and soon he made his way to Vienna. There, he met Joseph Haydn, who by then was one of the most popular composers in Europe. Haydn immediately recognized Mozart's worth and praised him as the greatest composer of the age, while Mozart in turn revered Haydn, to whom he dedicated six extraordinary string quartets (K.387, 421, 428, 458, 464 and 465). Instead of becoming rivals, the two composers became devoted friends—much like father and son.

Unlike Mozart, Haydn never visited Paris—and in fact, until late in life, scarcely traveled at all. For many years his career was centered on the castles and musical programs of his princely patrons, in the heart of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and by his own account he had felt "cut off from the world." Yet this son of a humble Austrian wheelwright, who almost by chance found his way into a musical career, had by the 1780s developed a substantial European following for his published scores. Some of his most enthusiastic audiences were in Paris, and in 1784 this led to an important—and highly lucrative—commission for six symphonies from the prestigious Parisian musical group, the Concert de la Loge Olympique.

Flabbergasted by the sum that the group offered, and inspired by the prospect of having his work performed by such a large and well-regarded orchestra, Haydn composed what have become known as his Paris Symphonies (nos. 82-87). The performances of these works, which took place in the Tuileries palace, were so successful that one of the group's leaders, Claude-François-Marie Rigoley, Count d'Ogny, commissioned three further symphonies (nos. 90-92). Unfortunately, Haydn completed this last commission in 1789, just as the French Revolution was erupting. Count d'Ogny (who died in 1790) may well have gone to his death without even hearing them.

Tragically, Mozart soon died as well (1791), at the age of 35. His premature death stunned Haydn—and many others. "I could not believe," Haydn wrote a friend, "that Providence would so soon claim the life of such an indispensable man."

Yet despite such an early death, Mozart was able to bequeath a remarkable musical legacy to the world, one that continues to uplift and delight audiences today. This is why, after 250 years, so many people still celebrate the anniversary of his birth. And this is why I wanted to look for traces of this beloved composer's footprints in the City of Light.

—By Mary McAuliffe

Note: Mary McAuliffe is the author of "Paris Discovered: Explorations in the City of Light," to be published in spring 2006 by Elysian Editions, Princeton Book Company. Site: www.parisdisc.com.

Galerie J. Kugel

By Paul B. Franklin

While moseying along the ancient arteries of the 7th arrondissement, you cannot help but notice the many handsome establishments offering rare objects and furnishings of yore. One in particular stands out. Around the corner from the Assemblée Nationale, neighborhood newcomer Galerie J. Kugel is not only perhaps the world's largest antique dealer; it also happens to be among the most exclusive and illustrious. An outing to its showrooms is like a visit to a major museum except that everything is for sale, provided you have deep enough pockets.

Russian-born Jacques Kugel began selling antiques in Paris after World War II, following in the footsteps of his father, grandfather and great-grandfather. In 1970, he opened a gallery on fashionable Rue St-Honoré to international acclaim. His two sons, Nicolas and Alexis, took the helm upon his death in 1985 and in December 2003 acquired an imposing four-story neoclassical hôtel particulier overlooking the gurgling Seine. Louis Visconti, the celebrated architect responsible for such A-list monuments as the Bibliothèque Nationale, Napoleon's tomb and the western expansion of the Louvre, designed the Palladian-style palazzo in 1840. The Kugel brothers initiated a restoration project, and the glamorous edifice, offering an array of European furniture and decorative arts from the Middle Ages to the mid-nineteenth century, opened as their new headquarters in September 2004.

The visit begins in the ground-floor lobby, where a colossal early-nineteenth-century French timepiece occupies center stage. This elaborate horologe of three female muses supporting a porcelain globe was commissioned for the King of Spain, but he was deposed before it was completed. Two large front rooms on the hôtel's first floor feature other priceless treasures. The majestic reception room possesses its original parquet of exquisite geometric marquetry (see photo). A unique ormolu and brass-mounted mahogany desk (1783) by David Roentgen, the renowned German furniture maker who counted Marie-Antoinette among his patrons, sits in the middle of the room. Rumor has it that this one-of-a-kind writing table belonged to Catherine the Great. On a nearby wall hang a pair of monumental silver-gilt mirrors (1717-18) from the throne room of Augustus the Strong's Dresden palace. Beneath them stand two ornate ebony consoles (circa 1700) inlaid with brass, pewter and tortoiseshell by André-Charles Boulle, Louis XIV's favorite cabinetmaker. The adjacent salon sports Louis XVI wood paneling rescued from the Hôtel Botterel-Quintin, one of Paris' most lavish pre-Revolution residences. In this room, you'll also notice a petite sycamore secretary (1787) with delicate lozenge-form marquetry. First-class artisan Jean-Henri Riesener custom built the piece for the Pavillon de St-Cloud at the behest of Marie-Thérèse de Savoie, Comtesse d'Artois. On the first floor, you'll also encounter an outstanding ormolu and patinated bronze guéridon with an octagonal Sèvres porcelain polychrome top (1790), most likely commissioned by the future Czar Paul I for his St. Petersburg palace. Highlights on the second floor include a Louis XIV rock crystal chandelier, an immense mahogany table that belonged to Napoleon's brother, and a 110-piece Viennese china table service.

Prices for the countless wonders at Kugel range from several thousand to millions of euros. While the gallery's blue-chip clientele is a well-guarded secret, it prides itself on having dispatched portions of its inventory to numerous venerated museums (the Louvre, Getty and Metropolitan, for instance). No matter who you are, you'll receive an old-world welcome at Kugel.

•Galerie J. Kugel: 25 Quai Anatole-France, 7th. Open: Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm and 2:30-6:30pm. Site: www.galerie-kugel.com.

▲ PARIS VISITS ▼

Goumanyat et Son Royaume

By K-Rae Nelson

The colorful Kingdom of Goumanyat, located in an uncharacteristically calm section of Paris' hip Marais district, is a world dedicated to scents and rare flavors. The old-fashioned wooden drawers lining the walls of this spice shop give it the allure of a pharmacy, an impression reinforced by the sight of the bespectacled owner, Jean-Marc Thiercelin, swirling large beakers as if in a laboratory. Spices are taken very seriously here, yet a sense of playfulness is evident in the whimsical window decorations, which include plush toys and a large plaster statue of the cult cartoon character Asterix standing among carved Indian spice bowls.

The Thiercelin family has been importing saffron for over a century. The current Thiercelin has considerably widened the family's initial focus to include a panoply of spices, reflected in the name of the shop, a play on the words for taste, "gout," and mania. His stash of Indian curios and Venetian masks, also for sale, evokes the exoticism of spice merchants of old. Quality, careful selection and attention to detail are the hallmarks of Goumanyat. The spices are stored in labeled drawers, apothecary style, on two walls. For the aficionado, a range of spices in large beakers is always on hand to be twirled and sniffed, much as wine at a tasting.

Jean-Marc Thiercelin will gladly share his knowledge and answer any questions you might have about his spices. He provides flyers describing the origins, characteristics and uses of different spices, including tempting recipes. One unique offering is the vast array of true and false peppercorns he proposes. It was here that I was introduced to "long" pepper, the most prized pepper in Europe in the Middle Ages. Mr. Thiercelin offers pepper mixtures such as the classic five-pepper blend in addition to more esoteric ones. My current favorites are the "Four Ages of Pepper" and, in a nod to Stendhal, "Le Rouge et Le Noir." The first is in homage to the four stages in the life of a pepper, from the youthful green pepper, to the fragrant Muntoc and Malabar white peppers whose skins have been removed, and the more mature and potent dried Sarawak and Kerala black peppers. "The Red and the Black," which exudes an overall spiciness rather than a strong peppery flavor, is a mixture of aromatic black Tasmanian pepper, flowery pink peppercorns and heat-packing red Pondicherry pepper. Goumanyat is also an excellent source for so-called false peppers, such as the fiery Sichuan and the fragrant Cubeb.

Mr. Thiercelin also creates spice mixtures in collaboration with well-known chefs for use in their restaurants. After a period of exclusivity to the chefs, these blends are released for sale to the public. My favorites are the Mélange Phénicien, a blend of oregano, mint and toasted sesame seeds, and two others that complement tagines and other Middle Eastern-inspired dishes: "Raz El Hanout du Roy" and "1001 Nuits," with its dried rose petals, a mixture that Scheherazade of the Arabian Nights would surely have endorsed.

Other items I stock up on are Thiercelin's unparalleled wild fennel seed; the ultra-hot cayenne pepper, dubbed piment enragé, or "enraged pepper"; tiny dried morels; powdered bourbon vanilla; and the exotically scented almond-shaped Tonka bean, which exudes a heady perfume akin to crystallized vanilla. For those who are intrigued by this wealth of spices and would appreciate ideas on how to use them, cooking classes featuring dishes that highlight spices in their many forms are offered in the store's lower-level professional kitchen.

•Goumanyat et Son Royaume: 3 Rue Dupuis, 3rd. Tel: 1-44-78-96-74. Open: Tue-Fri 2-7pm, Sat 11am-7pm. Site: www.goumanyat.com.

Doyens of Design

Three designers define Paris' contribution to contemporary design

Ever since 1925, Paris has been a beacon in the world of contemporary design. It was in this year that the city hosted the Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes, that famed fair where the trendy French "style moderne" (a.k.a. Art Deco) first made a splash. Today, New York may consider itself the dominant force in this domain, while London prides itself on being less stodgy, more of the moment than either conurbation. Paris, however, remains an international hub for contemporary design, thanks in particular to the efforts of Andrée Putman, Jacques Garcia and Philippe Starck. Three locales around the city handsomely showcase the unique talents of these doyens of design. All are publicly accessible, so you can stroll in, tip a glass or have a bite and appreciate the full effects.

The work of octogenarian **Putman**, the grande dame of French design, oozes chic. Taking up design only in the late 1970s, her notable commissions include chum Jack Lang's office in the Palais Royale, where he presided as Minister of Culture in the 1980s; Manhattan's Morgans Hotel (1984), which precipitated the boutique hotel craze; and the revamped Concorde (1993). Her penchant for whites, blacks and grays, not to mention streamlined thirties furniture, has led some to hail her as the Mama of Minimalism. Putnam is a topnotch stylist as much as a designer, and her studied arrangements of objects and materials imbue her interiors with consummate harmony.

In recent years, Putman's signature sobriety has given way to a more theatrical style. Take Pershing Hall (49 Rue Pierre-Charron, 8th). In 2001, she gutted this former residence of the commander-in-chief of U.S. forces during World War I, transforming it into an intimate but pricey twenty-six-room hotel with an airy ground-floor restaurant and upstairs bar. The walls of the hallway leading to the elegant eatery are nothing more than weighty strings of transparent glass beads running from floor to ceiling. Similar filaments as well as tresses of pearly white fringe divide and festoon the interior. Boxy seventies-style armchairs, banquettes and barstools covered in faux alligator skin of chocolate or taupe vinyl hold court among sleek brushed-steel tables. Pinstriped mauve and cranberry carpets bedeck floors of flecked gray stone. Murano-like crimson glassware and light fixtures pep up Putman's otherwise unobtrusive palette. The effect is especially dazzling in the bar. But the hotel's most dramatic feature is the garden in the main dining area, an enclosed three-story courtyard. Hundreds of green plants sewn into individual burlap pockets and fixed to a hanging woven support creep up the wall toward the glazed roof. With its mod, simmeringly sexy décor à la Pulp Fiction, Pershing Hall exemplifies Putman's sage edict that hotels "should be like geishas. They distract and enchant you with their beauty, but they're not reality."

Unlike Putman and her cool, understated designs, **Jacques Garcia** is a master of baroque excess. Steeped in the eclecticism that was the nineteenth century, the designer-decorator gleefully pirates the past, telescoping styles and motifs to fashion over-the-top but sophisticatedly appointed retro rooms. "If people throw themselves head first into modern art," Garcia laments, "I think it is because we have failed to show them that old things still have a lot of potential for the future." From Café Marly in the Louvre and Fouquet's, a historic Champs-Elysées brasserie, to the singularly original Hôtel Costes (239 Rue St-Honoré, 1st), he has proven his point by way of example.

Garcia's most celebrated confection, the Hôtel Costes is a veritable tour de force, even today, some ten years after its completion. Framing a modest courtyard are cozy reception areas dressed up in the Napoleonic splendor that defined the Second Empire (1852-70). These venues exhibit distinct personalities, like the famous Frenchmen after whom Garcia christened them. The Mérimée features gilt mirrors, a stuccoed ceiling, crystal chandeliers and an inviting "confident," that S-shaped seat meant for discreet tête-à-têtes. The Gounod conjures an herbarium, antique pages of dried botanical specimens dotting the walls. The bulky Egyptian-style columns and neoclassical prints decorating the buttery yellow Lesseps reference the ancients, while the Morny's ornate ceramic fireplace evokes exotic Siam. Finally, the sunken bar, with its dark woodwork, gray-green vaulted ceiling and butch black color scheme, suggests a men's smoking lounge. Patterns, surfaces and colors playfully clash throughout. Burgundy and plum striped silk curtains vie for attention with busy Oriental wool carpets, sculpted boiserie and parquetry. One style of chair unites these bustling décors, the design of which has become Garcia's calling card. Based on a model owned by Napoleon III's mother, the wasp-waisted seat sports a high back edged with brass studs and detached elbow rests trimmed in fringe, like its skirt. Garcia's chairs and his pendant tripod tables are deliberately low-slung, so you feel you are nibbling or imbibing on the hoof, without pretension. Covered in lush black or blood-red velvet upholstery, they are the ultimate accent in these audacious rooms.

Philippe Starck's joyful pursuit of the new provides a foil to Garcia's boundless passion for the old. The fifty-something Parisian's bad-boy attitude coupled with his love of pop culture, his clever use of common materials and his idealist belief in design as a vehicle for social equality have made him an enfant terrible to some and a celebrity hipster to others. "One of the most positive things a designer can do," he goads, "is refuse to do anything." Starck himself has done it all, designing bistro, boutique and museum interiors along with sneakers, eyewear and toothbrushes. In his capacious œuvre, functionality, fun and funkiness rule.

The café-restaurant Kong (1 Rue du Pont-Neuf, 1st) is one of Starck's most recent accomplishments. Occupying the two uppermost floors of a building overlooking the Pont Neuf, it opened in 2003. (A scene in the final episode of the cult series Sex and the City was filmed here.) The designer looked to Japan and ancien régime France for inspiration, envisioning the interior as "a battle between the Moderns and the Classics." On the lower floor, the café's arresting aluminum bar runs two-thirds the length of the room. Beneath its glass top lie orchids bathed in a fiery orange light. The oval-backed barstools, also aluminum, derive from Louis XVI chairs at Versailles. Straddling the walls are sixties-style, tufted, cream vinyl sofas, their glass dividers modeling the floating faces of a geisha, a punk Japanese teen and an Audrey Hepburnish brunette. These three girly mugs, in the form of plastic holograms, also play peek-a-boo on the backs of the quirky maple rocking chairs at the far end of the room.

A chartreuse-colored spiral staircase leads to Kong's upstairs restaurant. Its bowed walls and ceiling are entirely of glass (see photo), offering spectacular city views. The monumental image of a recumbent geisha, her kimono teasingly hiked up, looms overhead. The aluminum and glass-topped tables down the center of the room as well as the booths that flank them flaunt more Louis-inspired Starck seating. Made of transparent plastic and decorated with the same feminine visages found in the café, these chairs echo their glazed surroundings. Upstairs and down, pebble-motif charcoal carpeting runs wall-to-wall, a coy allusion to Japanese rock gardens.

The fertile imaginations of Putman, Garcia and Starck promise to keep Paris at the forefront of contemporary design for years to come.

—By Paul B. Franklin

The Little Beltway, continued from page 1

what amounted to his front yard, he emerged from his shelter to greet us courteously. Our group replied in kind, had a pleasant exchange, and then departed with good wishes all around. It added an interesting element to an already intriguing day.

Few of the Petite Ceinture's stations still remain. For the most part, all that is left are their platforms, covered in weeds. One station that you can still enjoy, though, is the Gare de Charonne. This picturesque edifice, bridging the tracks, has been completely renovated and now houses a lively café, La Flèche d'Or (102 bis Rue de Bagnolet, 20th). Another renovated station on the other side of Paris, the Gare de Passy, houses a trendy restaurant, La Gare (19 Chaussée de la Muette, 16th).

Immediately after crossing under the Gare de Charonne, we spotted the opening to the Tunnel of Charonne, a full kilometer-long excavation that passes directly under Père-Lachaise Cemetery. Turning on my flashlight, I started forward, not fully prepared for the claustrophobic darkness ahead. Kicking my way through discarded cans of spray paint (this is a graffiti-artist's paradise) and tangles of wiring (pulled down and stripped of their copper), I ploughed ahead, striding from railroad tie to railroad tie, all the while watching out for gaps or unexpected holes. It was with a distinct feeling of relief that I saw a pinpoint of daylight ahead, at the tunnel's end.

Emerging into sunlight, we were greeted by Ménilmontant's lovely Passerelle, or pedestrian overpass (near the foot of Rue de la Mare, 20th). After taking picture after picture of this photogenic beauty, we plunged into yet another tunnel, the Tunnel of Belleville—at well over a kilometer in length, the longest on the Petite Ceinture. Here, as we crossed beneath the Buttes-Chaumont, our leader informed us that perhaps the trickiest thing about excavating this tunnel was the fact that it pierced a hillside networked with quarries, subject to cave-ins. Armed with this happy information, we trudged on, eyes glued on the spot of daylight directly ahead. As it turned out, that bit of encouraging light was deceptive, since the tunnel was so straight that we could see the end all the way from the entrance.

Still, we made it through in good spirits, emerging at the far edge of the Parc des Buttes-Chaumont and near the old spur line leading to the former slaughterhouses of La Villette. We had reached the end of our journey—or, so we thought, until our leader discovered that his key to the exit didn't work.

Pressing on across the Canal de l'Ourcq to Pont de Flandre, we took a moment to photograph its still-standing nineteenth-century station. Then we clambered over a wall and down a staircase. There, built into the Petite Ceinture's viaduct, was the surprisingly high-tech African Communications Center, offering cheap phone calls to families and friends back home. Quite unexpectedly, the head of this outfit insisted that we tour his enterprise, which he showed us with considerable pride. Much amused, one of my colleagues whispered, "I think that you have not seen this side of Paris before!"

We celebrated our morning's adventure over a lunch of moules frites, at which we raised our glasses to "Paris et l'Amérique!" And then my husband and I prepared for the rest of our journey. Ah, yes—the Left-Bank side of the Petite Ceinture! This was yet to come, and another of our colleagues had kindly offered to take us.

After wisely deciding to postpone this segment until the next morning, we met up at the Porte de Vanves Métro stop. Our guide wanted to show us the nearby Parc Georges Brassens (15th), a lovely new expanse of trails and greenery on the site of the notorious old Vaugirard slaughterhouse. The Petite Ceinture once served as a vital link for Vaugirard, but now both slaughterhouse and railroad are gone, and the many closed butcher shops in this part of town testify to the vast gentrification going on here.

After wandering through the old covered horse market (now an outdoor market selling everything but horses), we entered the park through its main gate, on Rue des Morillons, glancing up at the huge sculptured steers on either side. The park has retained and restored several of the original slaughterhouse buildings near its entrance, including one that still boasts the bell that opened the cattle auctions (note the "Vente à la Criée" carved below).

Following one of the footpaths, we made our way to the belvedere at the park's southern edge. From here, we had a clear view of the Petite Ceinture, submerged in a jungle of greenery. We hadn't expected such total wilderness in the heart of Paris, and we stood there for a long moment, taking it in. Then we headed for the park's southwest corner, where we stood on the viaduct above the Petite Ceinture, gazing down once more into its green abyss. The Petite Ceinture is well below street level here, and is securely fenced off. Fortunately, it is easy to enjoy its beauty from this vantage point, and we remained here for a long while, enjoying the view.

But our guide had other plans for us, and soon we found ourselves following him to a more accessible entrance. After trudging along for a bit, we dove into a tunnel, where we encountered yet a new adventure—bats. Not just any old bats, mind you, but an important collection of pipistrelles bats, sleeping it off in tiny interstices in the tunnel walls. Our guide knew all about them, for it turned out that he and another of our colleagues, along with an expert from the Musée de Jardin des Plantes, had recently counted them all, establishing that this is indeed the largest colony of these little guys in Europe.

I gamely peered into the wall and saw a much larger and browner creature than I was prepared for, complete with two tiny ears. Around me, I heard soft squeaking noises and wondered if the little fellows squeak in their sleep. Despite the colony's importance, I was relieved to learn that this was the only tunnel along the Petite Ceinture that was congenial to our small friends.

Emerging from our bat experience, we followed our guide past sealed entrances to the quarries, which lie just below the train tracks. When we looked closely, we could see ladders leading downward into filled-in entryways, going nowhere.

We also saw stairs leading upward, to a vanished station, and waited beneath a viaduct for a Métro to stream impressively over our heads. In yet another tunnel, we saw old vents, called "volcanoes," which once siphoned smoke from passing trains up into Parc Montsouris. And then we emerged into daylight, where the Little Belt courses through the park's woodsy embankments. There, at the far edge of Montsouris, we bid our guide adieu.

It had been an extraordinary two-day adventure, and we were sorry to see it come to a close—especially as the Petite Ceinture, as we had seen it, may not be around a whole lot longer. Currently, Parisians are debating whether to bring the Little Belt back to life as a tramway (a portion of it is already used by the RER), or to transform it into an extended series of parks.

Parisians will be wrestling with these questions in the months and even years ahead. But for the moment, we were simply grateful to have been given the opportunity to hike along this extraordinary old railway line, which offers a unique peephole into the past, even while it continues to encircle and embrace today's Paris.

Note: Mary McAuliffe is the author of "Paris Discovered: Explorations in the City of Light," to be published in Spring 2006 by Elysian Editions, Princeton Book Company. Site: www.parisdisc.com.

PAPER OR PIXELS?

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PICK OF THE MONTH

The Golden Age of Science
From the seventh to the fifteenth centuries, when most of Europe was plunged into the gloom of the "Dark Ages," scholars from Andalusia to Central Asia, North Africa, the Middle East, Persia and India pursued their scientific studies in Arabic. Divided into three themes—the sky and the world; the living world and man in his environment; and science and art—this exemplary expo presents the discoveries of that fertile period. •Institut du Monde Arabe. Until March 1. Site: www.imarabe.org.

ON THIS MONTH

Renoir-Renoir, Father and Son
The work of Renoir, the painter, and his son Renoir, the filmmaker: a splendid beginning for the new film center. •Cinémathèque Française, 51 Rue de Berry, 12th. Until Jan 9. Site: www.cinemathequefrancaise.com.

Dubo, Dubon, Dubbonnet
The graphic art of Adolphe Mouron, better known as Cassandre (1901-1968), is celebrated here. The understated elegance and beauty of his work are thrilling. •Bibliothèque Nationale, Galerie Mazarine, 58 Rue de Richelieu, 2nd. Until Dec 4.

Willie Ronis
A fine tribute to ninety-five-year-old photographer Willie Ronis. His photos of Paris (1937-2001) are of special interest. •Salon d'Accueil de l'Hôtel de Ville, 29 Rue de Rivoli, 4th. Until Feb 18. Site: www.paris.fr. Free.

African Brazil
Between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries some four million African slaves were shipped to Brazil, carrying with them the cultural heritage of the Yoruba, Fon/Ewe and Bantou kingdoms: this is their mysterious and magical work. •Musée Dapper. Until March 26. Site: www.dapper.com.fr.

Le Smoking
Called "Smoking Forever" this is an elegant display of formal evening wear, "Le Smoking," by Yves Saint Laurent. Both men's and women's. •Fondation Pierre Bergé-Yves Saint Laurent. Until April 23. Site: www.ysl-hautecouture.com.

Miss.Tic
Her poetic wordplay combined with saucy stencils have enlivened the walls of Paris for the last twenty years: this is the work of street-art activist "Miss.Tic." •Espace W, 44 Rue Lepic, 18th. Nov 14-27. Site: www.galeriew.com. Free.

Kupka
Frantisek Kupka (1871-1957), Czech painter, engraver, book illustrator and draughtsman, is shown here as a forerunner of symbolist and abstract art. •Musée d'Art et Histoire du Judaïsme. Until Jan 8. Site: www.mahj.org.

DaDa
This retrospective is dedicated to one of the most curious, influential movements of the twentieth century: Dadaism, 1916-1924. Works by fifty international artists show the gleeful impertinence with which they attacked all the accepted conventions of the art world. This is a treat. •Centre Pompidou. Until Jan 9. Site: www.centrepompidou.fr.

Jacques-Louis David, 1748-1825
Delacroix called him the "father of modern painting"—this retrospective shows why. •Musée Jacquemart-André. Until Jan 31. Site: www.musee-jacquemart-andre.com.

Camille Claudel
Sculptures by Camille Claudel (1864-1943), Rodin's cast-off mistress, are presented here. All the passion of her despair is in these works. •Musée Marmottan-Monet. Until Jan 31. Site: www.marmottan.com.

Picasso
The Picasso Museum is celebrating its twentieth anniversary with a fine display of 210 rarely shown graphic works by Picasso. •Musée Picasso. Until Jan 9. Site: www.musee-picasso.fr.

The "Pleated" Liberation of Women
"Big Bang" is fun, even for visitors uninterested in haute couture. For this is a question not only of design but of engineering: how does one elegantly drape a female figure, with minimum weight and expense of material, and still produce an exquisite, unstructured silhouette? The Japanese designer Issey Miyake and his "Pleats Please," along with Arman, Fontana and Ingo Maurer, are presented here. •Pompidou Center. Until Feb 28. Site: www.centrepompidou.fr.

Wine
"At the Time of the Guinguettes"; i.e., when the open-air café-dance-halls along the Seine attracted the poor people excluded from affluent Belle-Epoque Paris. Numerous painters (Renoir, et al.), writers, photographers and filmmakers have always been attracted to this milieu. This is their story. •Musée du Vin. Until Nov 30. Site: www.museeduvinparis.com.

Russian Art: Searching for an Identity
Here is nineteenth-century Russian art—Répine, Kramskoï, Savistsky et al.—presented in all its glory. •Musée d'Orsay. Until Jan 8. Site: www.musee-orsay.fr.

Girodet (1767-1824)
"Politically unclassifiable, sexually enigmatic, a romantic hero, a truly prodigious talent": such were the comments made about Anne-Louis Girodet in the early 1800s. Now we can judge for ourselves the Baroque structure and rich chiaroscuro of his strangely seductive paintings. •Louvre. Until Jan 2. Site: www.louvre.fr.

Klint, Schiele, Moser, Kokoschi
"Vienna, 1900": Viennese treats from the masters of the curious and erotic. •Grand Palais. Until Jan 2. Site: www.rmn.fr.

Melancholia
"Génie et Folie en Occident": extraordinary and strange things as seen (or imagined) and interpreted by artists. •Grand Palais. Until Jan 16. Site: www.rmn.fr.

COMING SOON

The Phillips Collection
Renoir, Matisse, Van Gogh, Bonnard, Gauguin, Nicolas de Staël and Picasso: sixty splendid examples of French painting and sculpture from the Duncan Phillips collection. •Musée du Luxembourg. Nov 30-March 26. Site: www.museeduluxembourg.fr.

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