

STREETS OF PARIS

Style Over Sustenance

Les Halles lost its distinction as “the belly of Paris.” Now it’s in danger of losing its soul.

by ISABELLE BOUCQ

To the thunderous tones of the organ, several priests and a dozen cape-wearing officials representing the *charcuterie* guild walk down the central aisle of St-Eustache. The imposing church bordering Les Halles in the center of Paris is packed for the celebration of the 197th Messe du Souvenir de la Charcuterie Française, an annual Mass in memory of *charcutiers* who have died in the previous year.

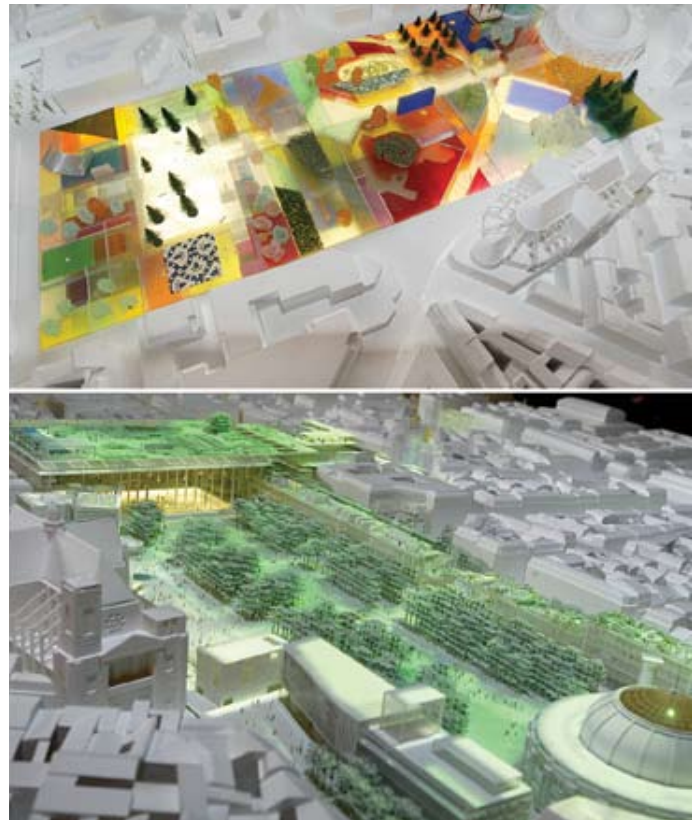
What more fitting location to honor people who dedicated their lives to food, in this case all manners of pork products, than Les Halles, which was the main Parisian food market for eight centuries? All that changed in 1969 when the “belly of Paris” left its cramped quarters in mid-city for the modern wholesale food market of Rungis in the suburbs.

Health-conscious charcuterie

Charcutiers like traditions. Twenty years ago, they revived the custom of sharing food in church at the end of the service. “In the Middle Ages, people walked a long way to church, arriving



One of the few remaining charcuteries ©Office du Tourisme Paris/David Lefranc



Redevelopment projects for Paris Les Halles ©AFP/Getty Images/Pierre Andrieu

on an empty stomach,” explains Nicole Janssoone, director of the Confédération Nationale de la Charcuterie, the national association representing the trade. “It was not unusual then to eat in the church.” Today’s Mass, too, ends with a mad rush for tables laden with scrumptious bite-size snacks.

Janssoone also explains that the profession is changing. In response to modern tastes and health concerns, charcutiers have lowered the salt and fat content of their products. In the 1970s, they also started offering other items such as salads, prepared dishes and sometimes desserts. Yet the number of *charcuteries* is slowly declining, with only about 8,000 left in France. “Even though French people eat a lot of *charcuterie*, they are buying more and more shrink-wrapped products in supermarkets,” Janssoone acknowledges. “When a charcutier retires, he often can’t find a young colleague to take over the business—and anyway there is more money to be made selling the shop for another use like clothes or shoes.”

Designer stilettos replace fish fillets

The trend is all too obvious around Les Halles and the adjoining Montorgueil area. One by one, the few wholesale food shops that had survived the move to Rungis are being replaced by fashionable cafés, designer clothing stores and flashy jewelers. Elisabeth Bourguinat, a resident of the area for nearly 20 years and an active member of a neighborhood group, is worried. “The *quartier* is in danger of becoming a mega shopping mall, a place where people come to shop, eat and party, but with no local residents left.”

Accomplir, her association, has been very vocal in the raging debate about the *réaménagement des Halles*, a major renovation project launched by Mayor Bertrand Delanoë and designed by architect David Mangin. For example, Mangin wants to get rid of the Jardin Lalanne, a unique garden where children can roam in a tangle of vegetation, climbing structures and varied landscapes. He would also displace a children’s library. “For police and shop-

keepers, the sign of a safe neighborhood is the presence of strollers," notes Bourguinat. These could become an endangered sight if climbing real estate prices and efforts to turn the neighborhood into an annex of the trendy Marais area are left unchecked.

Amid the uncertain future of Les Halles, a positive sign arose in 2005. On Rue Montmartre, at the foot of St-Eustache, an open-air market now convenes twice a week, on Sunday mornings and Thursday afternoons. For the first time since the giant wholesale market closed nearly 40 years ago, vendors once again fill the street with their crates of vegetables and fish stands. ■

Isabelle Boucq is a journalist who has lived in the quartier Montorgueil for 10 years. In defense of Jardin Lalanne, her two children joined a protest for the first time in their lives.

Renovation project: www.projetleshalles.com
Accomplir: www.accomplir.asso.fr

STILL A PARADISE FOR FOODIES

Dehillerin The shelves are piled high with copper pots, specialized utensils and many odd-shaped objects whose use is a mystery to the untrained. The smock-clad clerks are helpful, if brisk. The store sells the real thing, items professional chefs and caterers use in their own kitchens. 18 and 20 rue Coquillière, 1er, 01.42.36.53.13, Métro: Les Halles, www.e-dehillerin.fr

Mora Recently remodeled by the young heiress to the Mora domain, this store has been catering to professionals since 1814. The 6,000 articles on sale, artfully displayed, include large-size equipment (pots and pans, whisks and spoons) as well as molds of all shapes and materials for pastry and chocolate. 13 rue

Montmartre, 1er, 01.45.08.19.24, Métro: Les Halles, www.mora.fr

La Bovida The last store left for professional cooks at this intersection, which has been taken over by a hip café and clothing stores. On three levels, it offers a profusion of equipment (ham slicers, knives), pastry equipment (piping tips, decoration) and party supplies in large quantities. Also sells herbs and spices. 36 rue Montmartre, 1er, 01.42.36.09.99, Métro: Les Halles.

G. Detou This food store is like Ali Baba's cavern, filled with treasures such as candied violets, baking chocolates, extracts and flavorings, preserved fruits and vegetables and much more. G. Detou deserves its name, which in French sounds like "I've got everything." Beware: Many articles come in restaurant-size quantities, but the prices are usually quite good. 58 rue Tiquetonne, 2e, 01.42.36.54.67, Métro: Les Halles.

Marché St-Eustache-Les Halles The 20 regular vendors include two fishmongers, several produce stands including an organic one, rôtisseries and charcuterie stands, a wine seller and stands offering olives and dips. The new market is located on Rue Montmartre, between Rue Turbigo and Rue du Jour. Thurs noon-8 p.m., Sun 7 a.m.-3 p.m. Métro: Les Halles.

Piètlement Lambret This store specializes in game and fowl: pheasant, wild boar, venison, duck, goose, turkey, capons, guinea fowl and of course plain old chickens. Except they are not plain at all, but top-quality free-range poultry. 58 rue Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 1er, 01.42.33.30.50, Métro: Les Halles.

La Fermette A wide variety of French cheeses and a few foreign ones. Be sure to check the blackboard where owner Daniel Rigattieri lists his current recommendations. He can vacuum-pack purchases for travelers wishing to take cheese home. 86 rue Montorgueil, 2e, 01.42.36.70.96, Métro: Sentier.

L'Épicerie de Bruno This new store on restaurant-lined Rue Tiquetonne uses the word épicerie literally. It is not a grocery store, but a small boutique specializing in spices from all around the world. 30, rue Tiquetonne, 2e, 01.53.40.87.33, Métro: Les Halles, www.lepiceriedebruno.com

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