

R E P O R T E R

Nighthawks at the Brasserie

When dining at Paris's Au Pied de Cochon, arrive hungry—and stay late

BY JAY CHESHES

BEFORE THE SO-CALLED *forts des Halles*—the strong men who worked nights lugging meat and produce at Paris's famed Les Halles wholesale food market—decamped for the suburbs, Au Pied de Cochon at five in the morning was the wildest party in town. As Paris awoke and the market disgorged its blue-collar workers, the nearby brasserie's dining room and bar heaved with life; haulers and off-duty butchers took their seats alongside Paris's nocturnal creatures, who were only just winding up their revelries, and slurped oysters and chilled beaujolais. Musicians working for tips helped fuel the festivities, and it wasn't unusual in those days to find patrons passed out on the banquettes at sunrise. "I remember nights when you would arrive at one in the morning and still be there eight hours later, re-making the world at nine in the morning," says Pierre Rival, a French food critic who has recently written a book, called *Au Pied de Cochon*, about the restaurant, which celebrates its 60th anniversary this year.

Stars of French film and song could frequently be found ensconced at corner tables. Rival remembers the time several decades ago when the famously louche and mercurial singer-songwriter Serge Gainsbourg walked in with a coterie of hangers-on just before dawn. The place was bustling, and Gainsbourg ordered lavishly. "He got the best oysters: huitres de Belon—twice the price of all the others," recalls Rival. When

A hearty bowl of French onion soup, like the one shown at right, remains a signature dish at Au Pied de Cochon.

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RECIPE

Soupe à l'Oignon

(French Onion Soup)

SERVES 6

Braised onions, bread, and melted cheese are the main components of this timeless dish, which epitomizes the robust cuisine of Parisian brasseries. To make it, you'll need six sturdy ceramic bowls that may be safely placed under the broiler. This recipe is based on one in *Bistro Cooking* by Patricia Wells (Workman, 1989).

- 1 cup white wine
- 1/2 cup plus 3 tbsp. sherry
- 10 tbsp. butter
- 1 tsp. sugar
- 3 large yellow onions, thinly sliced
- Kosher salt and black pepper, to taste
- 6 sprigs flat-leaf parsley
- 6 sprigs thyme
- 2 fresh bay leaves
- 2 qts. beef stock
- 12 1/2"-thick slices baguette
- 2 cloves garlic, smashed
- 6 cups grated gruyère cheese
- 2 cups finely grated parmigiano-reggiano

1. Heat oven to 425°. Combine wine, 1/2 cup of the sherry, 8 tbsp. of the butter, sugar, onions, and salt and pepper in a 9" x 13" casserole dish and braise, uncovered, stirring occasionally, until the onions just begin to brown, 40–45 minutes. Remove casserole from oven, cover with foil, and continue braising in oven, stirring occasionally, until caramelized, about 1 hour more. Keep the onions warm.

2. Meanwhile, tie parsley, thyme, and bay leaves together with kitchen twine to make a bouquet garni (see page 94). Put bouquet garni and stock into a pot and bring to a boil. Reduce heat to medium-low and simmer, partially covered, for 30 minutes. Remove and discard bouquet garni. Stir in remaining sherry and cook for 5 minutes more.

3. While the broth simmers, spread the baguette slices with the remaining butter. Toast in a skillet over medium heat, turning once, until golden, 5–7 minutes. Rub the slices generously with garlic and set aside. Discard any remaining garlic.

4. Heat broiler with rack 6" from element. Arrange 6 heatproof bowls on a foil-lined sheet tray, divide onions and broth between bowls, and stir together. Place 2 baguette slices in each bowl; top each with about 1 cup gruyère and about 1/3 cup parmigiano. Broil until cheeses are browned and bubbly, 3–5 minutes. Serve immediately.

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the bill arrived, Gainsbourg, in one of his moods, refused to pay. "Come, Monsieur Gainsbourg," beseeched the waiter. "Be nice." The singer pouted: "I don't feel like paying." Though Gainsbourg was a regular, the management was hardly prepared to forgive the tab. When a few gendarmes walked through the door, he finally relented, but only on the condition that the police officers sit down and dine with him. "Then the police drove him home in the back of their van," Rival says.

Despite a fierce attachment to the latest fashions, Parisians have always been loyal to their most enduring institutions—Brasserie Lipp, Les Deux Magots, Le Dôme, La Coupole. Au Pied de Cochon is no exception. It's the best-known all-night restaurant in Paris and probably the least stuffy of the city's old-time brasseries; it has been in continuous operation, 24 hours a day, since it opened, in 1947. Though its beau monde heyday ended in the 1970s, when Les Halles was paved over to make way for an underground shopping mall, it has preserved its reputation as a night owls' redoubt. A wee-hours visit to sample the restaurant's namesake pig's foot entrée or its famous onion soup remains obligatory for anyone who pines for bygone Paris.

MY MOST RECENT MEAL at Au Pied de Cochon, last winter, began at a shamefully early hour: that is, well before midnight. I arrived sometime after nine in the evening, hoping to recapture the magic of a previous visit, years before, when I'd had a memorable 5:00 A.M. "dinner" with friends after a boisterous night out. That time, I'd ordered the pied de cochon farci périgourdine, a boneless pig's foot stuffed with foie gras, which had seemed to me, at that pre-dawn moment, like the world's most decadent meal.

Everything looked more or less the same on my recent visit. Pig was still the dominant motif; likenesses of the animal were hidden in the restaurant's wall panels, etched into the façade of the bar, stitched into the carpet, and tucked away in vitrines along the stairs. Even the legs of the dining tables were shaped like pigs' feet, as were the handles of the restaurant's front doors. (The restaurant goes through some 85,000 real pigs' feet a year.) The dining room had begun to fill up, with big groups of out-

of-towners and couples on dates. I was led to my table, and the maître d'—tall, debonaire, prematurely gray—offered me a *trou des Halles*, the house cocktail of sparkling wine and crème de cassis, garnished with a sour cherry and named for the big hole in the ground that persisted for years while the market was being dismantled. I commented that the atmosphere seemed more subdued than on my last visit, but I was assured that the late crowd still gets as out of hand as ever, especially after rugby matches at the Stade de France, when fans flood in from the nearby subway station. The maître d' told me he keeps a rugby schedule on hand so that he can anticipate the rush.

I began my meal with the celebrated French onion soup. In her 1989 book *Bistro Cooking*, Patricia Wells divulged the restaurant's hitherto secret recipe, which involved braising the onions in the oven and using chicken stock as the base. In recent years, the kitchen has reverted to the more customary beef stock, but I found the soup to be no less a restorative, drenched-in-cheese delight. The oysters, too, were top-notch. I ordered a half dozen, each of a different kind, and all arrived fat and briny and coddled in ice.

Hoping to reprise my inaugural pig's foot experience from years earlier, I ordered as my main course what seemed a similarly indulgent choice: the tentation de Saint Antoine, named for the patron saint of butchers. A combination plate of the pig's snout, ear, tail, and trotter, roasted and served with a side of french fries, the dish was brought to my table on a copper-domed platter. To my disappointment, I found it to be more gimmick than gourmet; the pork parts were chewy and gristly, and the fries were soggy.

But then, for regulars, not the tourists who populate the place at the conventional lunch and dinner hours, food has never ranked high among the reasons for dining at Au Pied de Cochon. Indeed, if you've been eating here for decades, the charm of the place is about much more than what comes out of the kitchen. Sitting next to me at dinner as I considered dessert were an elderly couple celebrating their anniversary at the restaurant for the 59th time. Or was it the 60th? "The first time we ate here was 1948," said the elegantly dressed gentleman.

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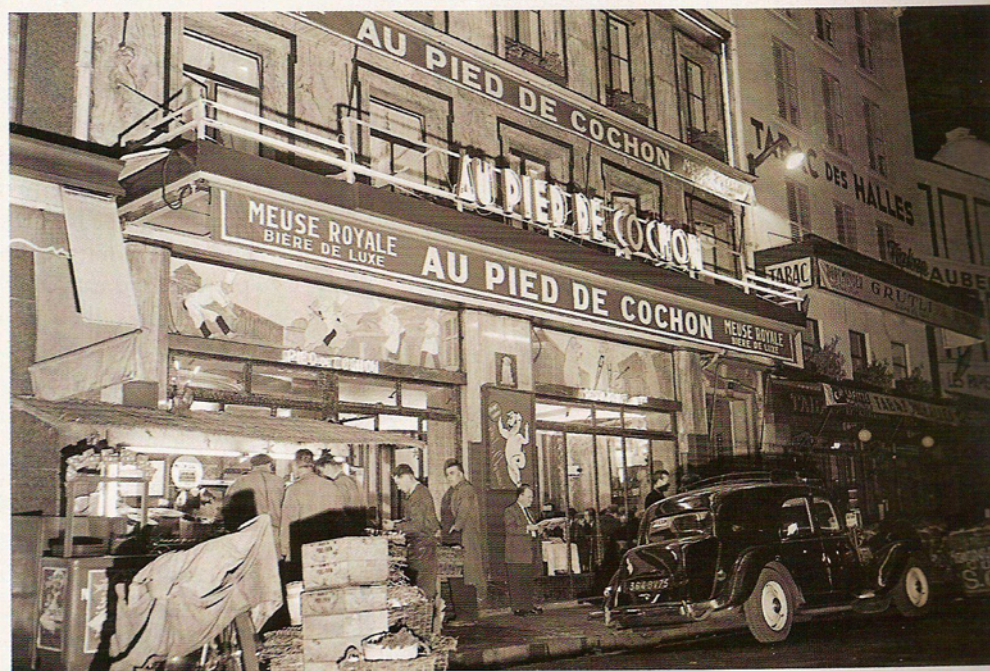
“No,” insisted his wife. “Don’t you remember? It was 1947.”

IT WAS AT THE BEGINNING of that year that Clément Blanc, a successful meat merchant, turned what had been a no-frills bar across from Les Halles into a full-service brasserie. By the mid-1950s his gamble had become the hottest spot in town, attracting politicians, actors, artists, and athletes. Soon, Au Pied de Cochon had its own popular ditty (“At Pied de Cochon, day and night we find ourselves”), sung by rowdy late-night patrons, and its own live mascot, a baby pig named Oscar, who lived in a pen in front of the restaurant.

“We used to walk Oscar like a dog, like a little dog,” recalls Jose Surreira, a Portuguese-born oyster shucker who has worked at the restaurant’s raw bar for the past 30 years. “At three in the morning the butchers would come to dine, and Oscar would put his feet on the table, like he was waiting for them.” Paraded through the dining room by the owner, Oscar subsisted on handouts from guests. “He ate a lot,” says Surreira. “When he got fat, we took him to the butcher, and they gave us another little one, two or three months old.” Eventually Oscar, in his many incarnations, attracted the attention of one particularly famous patron, the actress turned animal rights crusader Brigitte Bardot, who declared that the pig—which Monsieur Blanc allegedly kept up all night long in order to entertain guests—was being mistreated. The management retired Oscar, of its own accord, in the 1980s.

By then, Clément Blanc had ceded control of the business to his sons Pierre and Jacques. Faced with the disappearance of Les Halles, the brothers diversified, acquiring a historic brasserie near the Opéra, another on the Champs Élysées, and, within a few years, several more restaurants, whose success allowed the brothers to hold on to Au Pied de Cochon as the jewel in the crown of their expanding empire.

By the time the Blancs sold Au Pied de Cochon and their other properties to a French financial-services company in 2005, they had amassed one of the largest privately held groups of restaurants in Paris. Today, Au Pied de Cochon, in what could only be described as an American-style transformation, has become as much



Workers from Les Halles, Paris’s late, lamented wholesale market, at the bar of Au Pied de Cochon in the 1950s, top; above, the brasserie’s façade, which faced the market, during the same era.

a brand as a place. The company that owns the original brasserie now also owns an Au Pied de Cochon in Atlanta and another in Mexico City. A third is planned for Miami. (None of these restaurants is affiliated with the celebrated Au Pied de Cochon restaurant in Montreal.)

That so little seems to have changed inside the original restaurant is a testament to its resilience and to Parisians’ potent sense of nostalgia. Across from the pedestrian

walkways and souvenir shops that have replaced the market stalls of Les Halles, the brasserie’s neon sign still glows like a beacon to hungry passers-by. As winter sets in, Au Pied de Cochon’s management and staff are hunkering down for the feast-packed holiday season, their busiest time of the year. It’s as good a time as any to find a cozy booth, order a bottle of the house beaujolais and a platter of oysters, and “remake the world” until the early morning hours. 🐷