

THE FULL MONTY

A neighborhood experiment that works—the Quartier Montorgueil

From shabby to chic, the Quartier Montorgueil has been busy reinventing itself.

Tucked behind the church of Saint-Eustache and the grassy expanse that covers the Forum des Halles, the Quartier Montorgueil neighborhood was, until recently, completely unknown to me. Apart from occasional visits to the Pompidou Center and the Agnès B. store on Rue du Jour, I rarely headed for the Beaubourg/Les Halles district, and I had never ventured into the streets that bordered it. Then I discovered that I'd been missing out on one of the city's hippest neighborhoods.

It was my quest for the perfect croissant that led me there. I was temporarily installed in a studio off the Rue Etienne-Marcel, so I decided to check out Stohrer, a bakery I'd read about but never visited, on the Rue Montorgueil. What I found was a bustling market street crowded with pedestrians and lined with tempting shops: florists and butchers, fruit markets and bakers, fishmongers and cheese makers. It was as though the spirit of the city's old central market, Les Halles, had taken refuge there. Like the Rue Mouffetard, my other favorite market street, the Rue Montorgueil is closed to traffic. But unlike Mouffetard, it has a spacious feel. White cobblestones give it a bright, clean look, and the outdoor tables of the many cafés and small restaurants are front-row seats on the animated street scene.

The Quartier Montorgueil (Rue Montorgueil and its extension, Rue des Petits-Carreaux, along with some of the cross streets) is a Paris success story. Once primarily a center for the "métiers de la bouche"—the secondary food service industries that grew up around the old market—it lost its focus when Les Halles relocated to suburban Rungis in 1969. By the late '80s it was shabby and neglected. Then the City stepped in. It decided to make the quartier a model for other neighborhood upgrades. The City put in cobblestones, benches and even a Baltard-inspired entrance arch announcing the Marché Montorgueil. Today it has the feel of a real Paris village.

I found Stohrer, complete with very good croissants, at 51 Rue Montorgueil. Even better, I found the puits d'amour, a crispy shell of pastry filled with luscious custard and topped with a brittle burnt-sugar glaze. Not only is this "well of love" one of the best pastries I've ever tasted, it also has an interesting history. When Maria Leczynska came to Paris in 1725 to marry Louis XV, her entourage included her father's pastry chef, Monsieur Stohrer. After five years at court, he opened this shop, quickly becoming known for his specialties: babas au rhum and puits d'amour. In the mid-19th century, painter Paul Baudry, newly famous for his work on the Opéra Garnier, decorated the boutique.

The small but elegant shop with its tempting windows is worth visiting for the décor alone. A gold crown embedded in the floor near the entrance recalls its founder's royal connections. One

of Baudry's diaphanously clad nymphs holds sheaves of wheat; another displays the finished product, trays of pastries and babas. Stohrer also offers perfect picnic food: quiches, terrines, salads and even a whole ham ready to be sliced for sandwiches. Just don't leave without a puits d'amour.

Stohrer is not the only picturesque shop on the street. Follow the fragrance of roasting chicken to No. 54, where butcher Alain Tribollet stocks regional specialties like Limousin beef and poulet de Bresse. If you can turn your eyes away from the glistening rows of poulets rôtis turning on their spits, notice the old-style "peintures sous verre"



on either side of the door, and the large painting of a stag above the entrance.

Several of the street's restaurants are also as notable for their looks as for their food. Le Rocher du Cancale, at No. 78, boasts a mid-19th century neoclassic décor, with delicately carved woodwork on the facade and a curious sculpture on the corner of the building that shows oysters growing on rocks. An earlier version of this restaurant, located at No. 59, was a favorite rendezvous of the Parisian elite, including Balzac, who came here for its specialty oysters. At that time, the Rue Montorgueil was the terminus for carts that hauled shellfish from the northern coast to Paris, and Cancale oysters were (and remain) among the best.

For a startlingly original décor, check out the black and gold facade of L'Escargot Montorgueil (No. 38), one of the finest examples of 1830s commercial decoration in Paris. A large golden snail stands proudly above the entrance, with a bevy of smaller snails flanking it. The restaurant's interior, though small, looks like a film set from the Moulin Rouge, with plush red banquettes, cut glass mirrors and chandeliers. The escargots are served in traditional bourguignon style, or with other sauces like Roquefort and mint.

Among the street's many good dining spots is Aux Tonneaux des Halles (No. 28), a bistro from the old market days that had gone downhill until it was rescued by Patrick Fabre in 1991. He updated the menu while keeping the traditional fare, transforming it into a comfortable and friendly wine bar. (Try the delicious wild rabbit terrine if it's on the menu.) For coffee, try the cool Léopard Café, whose tables spill into the leafy triangle formed by

rues Tiquetonne and Etienne-Marcel.

Other neighborhood survivors are the shops devoted to the "arts de la table" that have catered to professional chefs since the early 1800s. One of the best-known is Dehillerin, at 18 Rue Coquillière, a floor-to-ceiling jumble of cookware and utensils that is far too user-unfriendly for my taste. I prefer A. Simon, with two stores at 48 Rue Montmartre. Spacious and well organized with a friendly, helpful sales staff, Simon deals mostly with professionals but is happy to sell to amateur cooks. Here I was delighted to find a set of the green-stemmed Rhine wine glasses I'd admired in Alsatian restaurants.

But the Quartier Montorgueil is not just about food—it's also about fashion. With the Sentier garment district to the north, the designer shops of the Place des Victoires to the west and the Rue Etienne-Marcel (with the likes of Barbara Bui and Joseph) cutting straight through it, the neighborhood was always on the fashion fringe. Now it's become the center for streetwise urban chic. The impetus may have come from The Shop, one of the early concept stores. It's not far away, at 2 Rue d'Argout. With its pulsating music and in-store piercing stand, it attracted only teens when it first opened in 1995. Now their mothers shop there too.

Others quickly followed The Shop's lead, offering the latest in unisex style. Kiliwatch, a newcomer at 64 Rue Tiquetonne, has quickly become the Parisian mecca for "branché," or trendy vintage clothing. Although it stocks some designer labels, the old leathers, faded jeans and velvet blazers are the big draws. Even Gwyneth Paltrow was recently spotted looking through the racks. And Lollipops, at 60 Rue Tiquetonne, specializes in wild accessories and unusual handbags, including one covered in red fabric roses.

The shop that best sums up the "new" Quartier Montorgueil may be Replay (36 Rue Etienne-Marcel), where a stunning interior design has transformed a former china emporium. The facade still carries the sign Dépôt Céramique, but inside, expensive (140E) jeans and studded biker belts are displayed on luminous shelves surrounded by fiber-optic sculptures, and the stairway is lined with slabs of rough stone moistened by trickling water.

While the average age of shoppers at these cutting-edge boutiques hovers somewhere under 30, the neighborhood's newest newsmaker has a much broader appeal. A brand-new spa, named for its address, 32 Montorgueil, raises the quartier to a whole new level of cool. Combining "luxe" with Zen, it features exposed stone walls, lots of fresh orchids and the murmur of a tiny stream flowing through the treatment rooms. John Nollet, the coiffeur responsible for Amélie Poulain's sleek bob, transforms heads on the main floor, while massages and facials, done with deliciously scented Nuxe products, take place downstairs under the vaulted ceilings of the medieval "cave."

It's trendy, it's talked about, and it's rapidly achieving cult status. Just like the Quartier Montorgueil itself.

—By Vivian Thomas