



LA BONNE FRANQUETTE--The Miracle of Finding Good Food in Montmartre

As much as I love wandering the steep stone-paved lanes of Montmartre very early in the morning, on a rainy day, in the dead of winter or maybe in August--all times when the tourist throngs are gone and you can feel the bawdy past of this perched hilltop village before it was engulfed by Paris a century ago, the one thing I never expect to find anywhere near the Place du Terte is good food. Why? Because the sheer volume of tourist foot traffic means that local rents are sky high, which drives most restaurateurs to use every trick in the book to make a profit--bought in salads, pre-prepared sauces, industrially baked desserts, all of these sad cheats are on lavish display in this micro neighborhood (they're other parts of Montmartre with some terrific restaurants, the zone I'm referring to centers on the Place du Terte).

So it was with real dug-in reluctance that I went to meet a bunch of Australian friends for dinner at **La Bonne Franquette** the other night. To be sure, I'd tried to steer them away from a meal in this neighborhood, but they were quite adamant about lingering in what they referred to as "the artists's quarter," so I backed off, because hard though it is for me to believe, some people have priorities other than good food when they go to a restaurant, in this case, the 'experience' of haunting an artists's haunt (Gauguin painted his famous 'La Guinguette,' today displayed in the Musee d'Orsay, in the garden of this auberge, a cozy old house that's been in existence for several centuries and is located at the highest point in Paris).

Arriving, I met the gang in the charming little wine bar of this multi-settinged address and was surprised to see that they were having a Corsican wine promotion. I love Corsican wines, and since they were unknown to my Aussie pals, I chose a nice crisp white from Luri in the northernmost Cap Corse region of the island and we enjoyed a terrific apero (aperitif) together, which was made even better when we ordered a wooden tray of smoked ham from the Jura. During our sip, we fell into conversation with a charming couple at the table across the way, Patrick and Anne, both of whom spoke excellent English and who seemed to share my half-mad love of good food and wine.

Ushered into the main dining room for dinner, I noticed that there was a big function room in back filled with a happy, noisy crowd of tourists, and my heart sank. Oh well, I thought, at least the Corsican wine had been a treat. Opening the menu, however, I was heartened to see their excellent wine list and then surprised by two pages of acknowledgements of their suppliers (everything from anchovies from Collioure to *confit de canard*), all of whom are among the *creme de la creme* of French producers.

Frankly, these two pages of pedigrees left me a little baffled. If this was the type of restaurant that served tour bus lunches, what was the point in working with such good produce? And then I realized that I'd been hoisted by my own petard. The point of serving good food is, of course, to serve good food, regardless of who may be eating it. Chagrined by having fallen into a mental fox hole of my own making, I studied the menu and decided on *soupe a l'oignon* and agreed to split a "poire de boeuf Charolais" (steak) for two with a friend who was hankering after a taste of Charolais, one of the greatest breeds of French cattle.

Others ordered spinach-and-goat cheese tart with mesclun and escargots to start, so we decided to team our first courses with a moderately priced Domaine de l'Ecu Muscadet by Guy Bossard, and it was fresh, slightly green and perfect drinking on a Spring night. My soup was delicious, too, as were the tart and the escargots, and I finally got over my wariness and decided that we might just end up having a good meal here. To be sure, the groups in back were a little noisy, but so what, they were having a good time.

Next, I tucked into one of the most delicious pieces of meat I've ever eaten in France, simply served with sauteed rattes potatoes and a mixed green salad. Succulent, flavorful, tender--it's this meat alone that will send me back to La Bonne Franquette. My friends were in a similar swoon over their boudin noir with espelette pepper by Christian Parra, one of the great charcutiers of the Basque country, and a pig's foot stuffed with foie gras. With the mains, we drank another wine the Aussies didn't know--a Basque country red, a Domaine Arretxea Irouléguy by Thérèse & Michel Riouspeyrous, and its broad shoulders and earthy nose of wet roots were ideal with our food.

I finished up with a perfect slice of Brie de Meaux, while the others swooned over their Fontainbleau (a creamy fresh mild white cheese) served with a sublime chestnut cream with Provence. Over coffee, I confessed that I'd been highly dubious about the gang's restaurant choice, and just at that moment, the nice guy we'd chatted with in the wine bar section of the restaurant, Patrick Fracheboud, showed up with complimentary glasses of a spectacularly good Cremant de Bourgogne (sparkling

wine from Burgundy). It turns out he's the owner, and a passionate lover of good food and wine who travels all over France in search of great bottles and is a member of the French chapter of Slow Food. Who knew?

Now persuaded of the quality of the kitchen at La Bonne Franquette, I can't wait for the good weather, since they have a charming little garden out back and two spacious sidewalk terraces. I'll definitely be back, and leaving, I thanked Fracheboud and told him that he was one of my new heroes. "Quoi?" (What?), he parried, and I explained that it struck me as a miracle to find good food in such a touristy neighborhood. "But what I do is perfectly normal. I'm a tourist sometimes myself, and when I am, I want to be well-received and well-fed, too. The pleasure of my work is sharing the great food and wine of France. I suppose you could say that I'm a man on a mission," he said with a grin, and what a wonderful mission to be embarked upon.

WOULD I GO AGAIN? With pleasure.