



LE BARON ROUGE

by John Brunton

Le Baron Rouge is a bar I discovered many years ago, when I first came to live in Paris. It was my introduction to the city, where I found my friends, where I discovered why the French love wine so much, and why non-smoking zones may never catch on in Paris, even though the government is threatening to impose a ban sometime next year. This was my first "local", and I've never had cause to go and search out another watering-hole. It is simply a mythical bar. I have often written about the Baron, to the amazement of my friends here, who take immense pleasure in blaming me for the regular invasion of tourists, who nervously turn up most weekends, never quite sure what to make of the place.



"People at the bar are not embarrassed to tell you that they are a philosopher or an inventor"

Genieve, petite Olivia, seductive Manon, and the jolly, red-faced Olivier - and you'll always find them on the customer's side of the bar on their days off. Most weekends, there's some impromptu concert or other - any excuse to dance - with local saxophonist, Claude, invariably dressed, whatever the weather, in faded dungarees and bare-footed in sandals, joined by an accordion player and guitarist for a jazzy swing session. A walrus-moustached barrel organist sets up his antiquated machinery on the pavement, and cranks out Edith Piaf favourites. On big fetes, like 14th July or the launch of the Beaujolais Nouveau, the owner, Dan, who would probably rather be a professional drummer than running the Baron,

We regulars may all moan at them, but the present owner, Dan, is quite happy to have a new source of income. This is simply the Catch-22 factor of all travel journalism: if you don't write about a place, then the next day another hack will turn up and do your job for you. But against all the odds, the real feeling, the spirit of Le Baron Rouge has never been altered by its innumerable citations in guide books, dragging in tourists and trendies like a magnet.

Le Baron Rouge is first and foremost a market bar. It lies a few hundred metres from the Place de la Bastille, next to a huge, sprawling fruit and vegetable street market, a tatty 'marche aux puces', and a splendid covered market showcasing the finest products of French gastronomy. This neighbourhood is known as Aligre, and it's no cliché to describe it as a village within Paris. Butchers, bakers, fishmongers and greengrocers all pop into the Baron for a quick glass of wine at the long zinc bar as the morning progresses. There are no tables or chairs on the pavement outside, but as you enter, there's always a crowd of people around the huge wooden barrels, piled one on top of the other, that covers most of one wall, while the other is lined with bottles of fine wines from all over France. Old ladies queue up for a litre of Gamay from the barrel to take home at lunchtime, while the nouveau-chic yuppies now flooding the Bastille area, debate which expensive bottle of wine to take back to impress their dinner guests. The locals take little notice of either group, and head straight for the back of the bar, eschewing the bistrot tables for a strategic place at the end of the zinc to ensure they get served before anyone else.

There are many great things about the Baron Rouge. The decor resembles the set of a faded Brassai photograph, the smoke-stained walls decorated with ever changing, eclectic art shows, and the music is seriously good - everything from funk to salsa, jazz to the blues. The staff are part of the family - flaxen haired

gets together his own combo, "Le Baron Rouge Blues Band", belting out extremely loud 1960's R&B standards. In the cold winter months, each Saturday and Sunday turns into a fiesta, as Bernard Delis, an oyster farmer from the Bay of Arcachon, drives 600 kilometres up to Paris, and sets up a stall outside the Baron, selling the most delicious oysters imaginable, heading back down south late on Sunday night. It's not unusual on one of these Sunday lunchtimes for a couple of hundred people to spill out of the bar onto the street, using parked cars as makeshift tables, much to the annoyance of local police.

But what really makes this bar so special, which you won't discover on a first visit, are the regulars. The French would describe the crowd here as "marginal", and the nearest English translation would be bohemian, a word that has sadly lost most of its real meaning. Popping in for a drink at the Baron, you might meet the mysterious looking Gilles, whose macabre job is to plastinate bodies at the Paris medical school, artisan furniture makers from the ancient ateliers around the Bastille, or the shaven-headed, vociferous film director, Gerard, who often holds court over numerous bottles of his favourite Pinot Noir wine from Alsace. People at the bar are not embarrassed to tell you that they are a philosopher or an inventor, while even when film stars like Beatrice Dalle turn up, they just blend in unnoticed with the crowd.

Over the last few years, social commentators have been predicting the decline, the demise of the famous Parisian bar, bistrot, troquet, cafe - call it what you will. Well, the statistics may say that, and there does seem to be a MacDonald's on every street corner these days, but head down to the Baron Rouge and you'll see that some things just don't change.

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