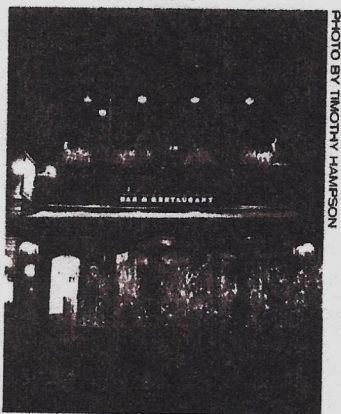


Bistros and Brasseries

The delicious differences between them and several to sample.

By BARBARA ANN ROSENBERG



Trendy Trois Jean in New York is a bistro known for its truffles.

Let's meet for lunch at that new bistro down the block, gushed a trendy friend eager to try anything new. "Bistro?" I asked, clueless.

The place the lady had in mind was not a real bistro. Instead, she had used a voguish term for any small, informal place that serves food of any sort, including sandwiches or pizzas. Her choice might be called a café, but a bistro? Never!

So, what are bistros? More importantly, how do they differ from those other classic Gallic eateries, brasseries?

BISTROS' BEGINNINGS

The most commonly accepted legend is that bistros began in the early 19th century, during the Napoleonic Wars. Ravenous Russian soldiers billeted in Paris would rush into the city's small eating places and demand their food "*bistro, bistro*," Russian for "quickly, quickly." Many family-run restaurants began to specialize in foods that were kept simmering on the stove and could be served in a flash or produced in just a few minutes. Among the more or less standard dishes were *pot au feu* (literally, pot-on-the-fire) made from whatever meats, vegetables, and seasonings happened to be in the kitchen; *blanquette de veau*, veal simmered with shallots and herbs, and finished with cream and egg yolks; and *soupe à l'oignon au gratin*, onion soup topped with Gruyère cheese.

Frequently this simple bistro food was prepared by the man in the family, casually called "Papa" by the patrons. He often tended the stove while his wife, affectionately called "Mama," usually handled the bar, pouring well-chosen small vineyard wines, often from the family's home region.

Even after the wars, these small restaurants, primarily in the Parisian neighborhoods inhabited by students and members of the working class, continued serving in the bistro style. Some of these same bistros are still in business: Benoit, La Tour de Monthlery (now commonly called Chez Denise for its personable owner, Madame Denise Benaret), and Josephine Chez Dumonet, to name a few.

The bistro was too appealing to be confined solely to Paris, however. In time, these small, family-run, and relatively inexpensive restaurants sprang up throughout France. Most met with success. Local people were attracted by the rapid service and homey food, while students favored the generous portions and modest prices. In time, tourists found that bistros offered a respite from the elaborate fare served in expensive restaurants, and provided opportunities to observe French people who frequently took their meals there. Eventually bistros became chic, and searching them out became a mission for travelers to France.

FROM BREWERY TO BRASSERIE

Brasseries began as breweries. They came into being roughly in the middle of the 16th century in Alsace, the northeast corner of France that borders Germany.

People frequented these breweries for a quick thirst quencher or to linger for hours with friends. In time, owners realized the benefits of offering food. Because no formal mealtimes were observed, the fare tended to be simple. Local sausages, smoked meats, and long-simmered sauerkraut cooked in a single pot resulted in a regional delicacy called *choucroute*. Onion pies known as *flammerkuchen* were also popular. Thus brasseries earned a reputation for a good time and for good food.

IN PARIS TODAY

Have brasseries and bistros changed over the years? The answer is yes, no, and sometimes.

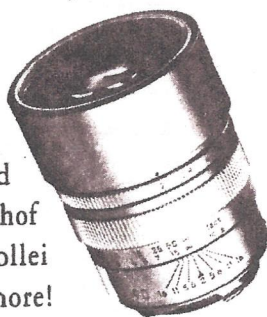
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FOOD & WINE

While most of the original bistros closed, many that survived have retained their original character and cooking style. It has been estimated that there are about 1,200 bistros in Paris today. Two of the most notable traditional ones are Benoit in the 4th arrondissement, also known as Le Marais, and La Tour de Monthlery (Chez Denise) in the old market area known as Les Halles.

Neither the decor nor the menu has changed much at Benoit since the bistro opened about 100 years ago. Today, although the food remains simple, the cost of a meal rivals the prices in many Michelin multistar restaurants. Because of its nostalgic atmosphere, however, Benoit maintains a large band of loyal followers.

Chez Denise is busy 24 hours a day, serving food for determined trenchermen. At lunchtime, fashionably attired stockbrokers and lawyers often sit next to meat purveyors attired in their long blue smocks. Everyone, it seems, has a favorite dish: richly varied house pâtés and other charcuterie; tender tripe cooked overnight in a slow oven; slabs of grilled *côte de boeuf*; and bowls of a traditional custard, *oeufs à la neige*. The house wine, a flavorful Brouilly, a specialty Beaujolais, is pumped directly from wooden barrels into unlabeled liter bottles just as it was a century ago.

Even in Paris, however, everything old can be new again. A few years ago, some savvy French investors joined forces to mass-market the bistro concept. The result is the citywide chain, Batifol. Though many of the locations are uncommonly large and standard in their decor, the food served every day until 1 am is as traditional as any. While these restaurants are more institutional than many classic bistros, both Parisians and visitors appreciate their consistent quality and moderate prices.

As to brasseries, they are on nearly every street corner in Paris. Each advertises its specialty beer on a canvas awning outside, and many offer oysters and shellfish in addition to snacks and traditional dishes. The atmosphere in many corner brasseries tends to be ordinary, in contrast to the ebullience of the grand brasseries that evolved in Paris shortly before the turn of this century. These Art Nouveau establishments, with their chandeliers, mirrored walls, and painted ceilings, were the



*Chef Jean Jobo has brought bolsterous
Brasserie Jo to Chicago.*

favorite meeting places of many famous artists and writers. Jean-Paul Sartre, Ernest Hemingway, Colette, Henry Miller, and others frequented the Brasserie Lipp (a typical Alsatian brasserie still operating at its original location on boulevard St. Germain in the 6th arrondissement), Bofinger (one of the city's oldest, on a side street near the Bastille), Brasserie Flo (in the 10th arrondissement), La Grand Colbert and Vaudeville (both in the 2nd arrondissement), and La Cupole (in the 14th arrondissement). As a result of all the attention trained on them by celebrity watchers, these brasseries achieved celebrity status in their own right. Today, theirs continue to be some of the most sought-after tables in Paris.

B'S & B'S ABROAD

Before long, restaurateurs in other countries began to copy the French bistros and brasseries. While they were able to replicate the decor, the food sometimes changed en route.

New York City's Le Veau d'Or (which celebrates its 60th anniversary this year) is an example of an early U.S. bistro. It is a haven of East Side locals and visitors longing for a taste of Paris—but it is not the only option.

In 1992, chef Jean Louis Dumonet, along with two other men named Jean, opened Trois Jean in Manhattan. Dumonet's father, Jean, is the founding chef of Josephine Chez Dumonet, a classic bistro in Paris' 6th arrondissement. Foodies and epicures alike admire the Paris restaurant for its signature dishes made with truffles.

Following in his family's footsteps, Jean Louis recently introduced a year-round truffle menu at Trois Jean. It has been