

# *french bliss*

Museums, art, fashion and a leisurely pace make Lyon a charming destination, but it's the city's 2,000-plus restaurants that confirm its place as France's foodie capital.

WORDS FELICITY CARTER PHOTOGRAPHY BRETT STEVENS



## global kitchen.



Lyon, as its residents say, is not Paris. Like the capital, it offers art, culture and great food, but unlike Paris, Lyon adopts a slow, friendly pace. This, they say, is the real France, where lunch takes three hours and strangers are greeted warmly.

Uniquely, rather than demolishing buildings to make way for new ones, the Lyonnais have always chosen to expand outwards, creating a cascade of architecture down the hill and across the river.

The oldest point is the Montée de Fourvière, the hill to the city's west. Once the capital of Roman Gaul, it still has its amphitheatre, while later residents added the Basilique Notre-Dame de Fourvière. At the foot is Vieux Lyon, a UNESCO heritage area. Largely built with Italian money, it used to be one of Europe's banking centres, and boasts street after cobble-stoned street of well-preserved Renaissance buildings. Then came the silk trade, followed by the Lumière brothers and the invention of cinema. In WWII, during the time of Nazi 'Butcher of Lyon' Klaus Barbie, the same silk weaver's alleyways became highways of the Resistance.

Vieux Lyon continues on to the Presqu'île business and shopping district, a three-mile-long peninsula between the Rhône and the Saône rivers.

Today, Lyon is only two hours from Paris on the high-speed TGV train. The silk is mostly gone, although a few workshops still produce light-catching, intricate work for the luxury trade. Instead, Lyon has pharmaceuticals, biotech and software as well as engaging museums, seductive fashions and a dynamic arts scene.

When it comes to food, Lyon is acknowledged by even the Parisians as France's capital, boasting more than 2000 restaurants – many sprinkled with Michelin stars. The gastronomic community is tight-knit, having trained, fought and married one another for generations, which makes tracing the city's culinary history like researching a family tree. If you understand the food, you understand Lyon.

## king of cuisine

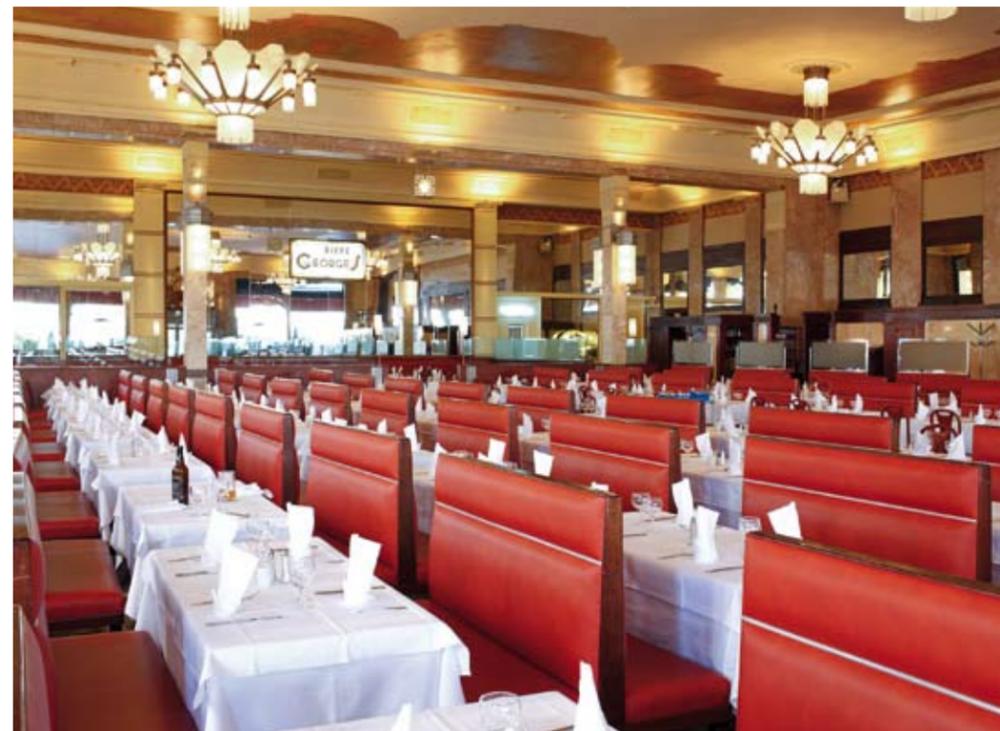
For anyone interested in food history, a visit to a Paul Bocuse establishment is a must. Now in his 80s, Paul is a titan of the 20th century. The belief that the best taste comes from the best produce seems obvious today, but it started with him. As France recovered from wartime austerity, it luxuriated in creamy, fatty foods. Bocuse believed the same experience could be achieved from simpler dishes with better ingredients, launching the Nouvelle Cuisine movement. Today, the signature dishes served at his three-star restaurant **L'Auberge de Pont de Collonges**



Lyon's heritage-listed old town. Opposite, clockwise from top left: Lyon has a long history of silk trade; the Bartholdi Fountain at the Place des Terreaux; chicken liver flan in tomato sauce at Café des Fédérations; the Café is a traditional Lyonnaise bouchon.



Clockwise from below left: Chez Paul is another well-regarded bouchon; colourful macaroons at Pignol; scallops and oysters at Nicolas Le Bec; Brasserie Georges; traditional *coussin de Lyon* chocolates at Voisin; making sweets at Bernachon.



## global kitchen.



(40 Rue de la Plage, Collonges au Mont d'Or, +334 72 42 90 90) may seem old-fashioned by contemporary standards, but nevertheless represent a decisive historical break from what came before. One standout dish is the pastry-capped black truffle soup, first created for a presidential dinner in 1975, which manages to be aromatic and savoury, without being overwhelmed by truffle. Another to try is the red mullet with the potato baked into fish scales. Paul himself is always on hand, so if your French is good enough, this is your chance to ask questions of a great master. The restaurant is located outside the city centre, so before you visit, check with the tourism office about transport – taking a taxi from the Presqu'île costs about \$80 each way!

If you prefer less heavy food, visit the Bocuse brasseries, designed to showcase specific aspects of French cuisine. **Le Nord** (18 Rue Neuve, +334 72 10 69 69), with its copper pans and clockwork waiters, offers Lyonnais food with a light touch – the grilled fillet of cod on mashed potatoes is simplicity itself. **Le Sud** (11 Place Antonin-Ponçot, +334 72 77 80 00) concentrates on the Mediterranean; **L'Est** (14 Place Jules Ferry, +334 37 24 25 26) serves international cuisine; **l'Ouest** (1 Quai du Commerce, +334 37 64 64 64) gives French food an international twist; while **Argenson** (+334 72 73 72 73, 40 Allée Pierre de Coubertin) dishes up home-style cooking.

## fine dining

One of France's most famous restaurants, **La Mère Brazier** (12 Rue Royale, +334 78 23 17 20) came under the ownership of chef Matthieu Viannay in 2008. Founded in 1921 by one of the famous *Mères Lyonnaises* (female cooks), the restaurant was a popular institution that closed in 2004, so Viannay has had to tread a fine line between retaining tradition and carving his own path. The decor alone is a triumph, with an elegant and understated nod to the 1920s. The food is of equal quality, from the nettle soup starter to the truffled Bresse chicken with mashed potatoes and oysters. It's no surprise that it has two Michelin stars.

emphasise the fish's own flavour; while Chinese cabbage adds piquancy to quail melting off the bone. Set in an austere ex-Jesuit refectory and offering superb service, this restaurant is a rising star.

**Nicolas Le Bec** (14 Rue Grolée, +334 78 42 15 00) is the eponymous restaurant of a quietly spoken local celebrity chef. Nicolas combines old-school skill with modern style, creating dishes such as spit-roasted lamb with grilled capsicum sauce and a salad that comes unexpectedly rolled in rice paper.

Standing between heavier traditionalist cuisine and the experimentalists' fusion food, Anthony Bonnet's outstanding fare at **Les Loges** (2-8 Rue du Boeuf, +334 72 77 44 44) bridges old and new. The restaurant is housed within the Cour des Loges hotel (see Where to Stay), with a menu focusing on traditional ingredients used sparingly – think tender frog legs poached in a herb stock or delicate breast of pigeon with truffles.

## best bouchons

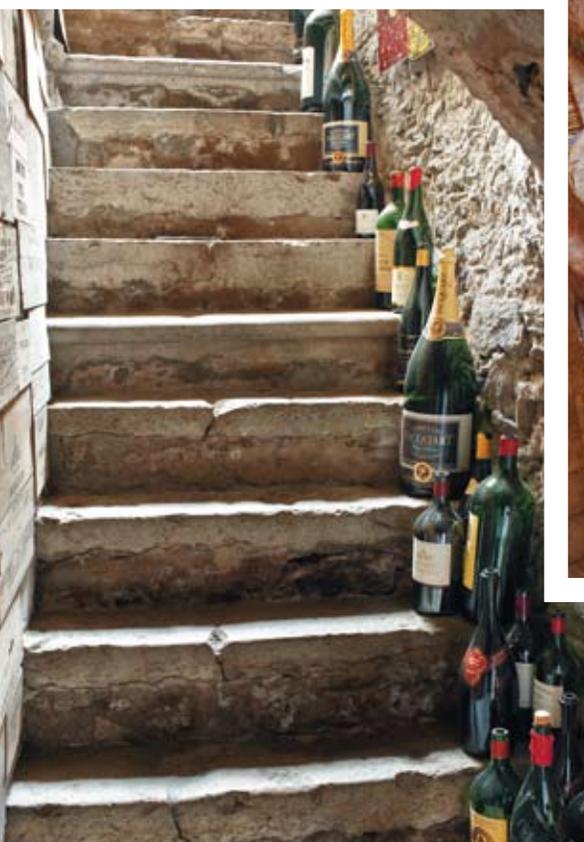
If the Michelin-starred restaurants are the glamorous face of Lyon's gastronomic wealth, the city's *bouchons* (pronounced 'boo-shons') are its heart. Although these traditional inns date back to the Middle

Ages, the modern bouchon evolved with the silk trade, whose workers needed cheap, calorie-rich food. They turned to sausages and offal, disguising the rough ingredients with clever preparation.

Although more than 200 restaurants in Lyon now call themselves bouchons, fewer than 20 are members of the official Association de Défense des Bouchons Lyonnais. Its members agree to serve a specific range of classic dishes and buy their ingredients in fresh, which is why you won't find a freezer in their kitchens. Before you enter one, check they have the 'Authentique Bouchons Lyonnais' plaque displayed near the door – despite the seemingly authentic interiors of pink walls, check tablecloths and rustic furniture, many so-called 'bouchons' are actually tourist traps.

While the heritage-listed Vieux Lyon area has some genuine ones, the majority of good bouchons are found on the Presqu'île. Put aside several hours for lunch, as the owners – many of whom are women – will be offended if you rush them. The meal begins with a Kir Royale-like aperitif, with *cassis* (blackcurrant) liqueur added to local wine, followed perhaps by a lentil salad and slices of Lyonnaise sausage, plus a bowl of pork crackling. Wine is served in a *pot*, a thick-bottomed 460ml glass bottle.

## global kitchen.



Cheeses for sale at Les Halles de Lyon Paul Bocuse. Below: Georges Dos Santos of Georges Five and Antic Wine (left).



A well-loved bouchon is **Café des Fédérations** (8-10 Rue Major Martin, +334 78 28 26 00), where sausages dangle in the windows like festive culinary decorations. Their *gâteau de foie de volaille*, a gamey chicken liver flan served in tomato sauce, is as airy as a soufflé, while the *savit de joues de porc* (pork cheeks) are almost melting.

Across the road is **Chez Paul** (11 Rue Major Martin, +33 4 78 28 35 83), whose *tête de veau* (head of veal) is so soft it's almost gelatinous. For afters, try the rice pudding with prunes in Beaujolais and apple sauce, with its cinnamon-spice tang.

Awarded Best Bouchon of 2009 is Joseph Viola's **Daniel et Denise** (156 Rue de Créqui, +334 78 60 66 53). Joseph belongs to an elite club of chefs acknowledged as 'Meilleur Ouvrier de France' (best craftsmen of France). He wants to run the first Michelin-starred bouchon and is off to a good start. His *quenelles* (pike dumplings in eggs and cream) are so light it's tempting to order a second round. The wine list is extensive compared to most bouchons.

wine, costs less than \$40 and might include something like a salmon and spinach starter, with three pieces of grilled fish for the main, followed by a trio of desserts. Bookings are a must.

**Brasserie Georges** (30 Cours de Verdun, +334 72 56 54 56), which has played host to everyone from Edith Piaf to Jacques Chirac, is a fast-moving, classic French brasserie in a spectacular Art Deco setting. A local favourite is the seafood platter, with lobster, prawns, oysters and mussels all piled over ice.

## sweet things

Saying **Bernachon** (42 Cours Franklin-Roosevelt, +334 78 24 37 98) makes good chocolate is like saying Van Gogh paints well. Considered the greatest chocolatiers in France, the Bernachon family imports their own cocoa beans, then they roast, blend, pound and pour ingredients with the greatest skill. They produce rich and spicy chocolates with a complex, haunting flavour, without the binding agents used in most modern chocolate. Next door is Bernachon's unpretentious patisserie, where locals come to enjoy a pot of beautifully dense hot chocolate and share a selection of sticky mini gateaux.

Another well-known chocolatier is **Voisin** (24 Place des Terreaux, +334 78 28 28 46), maker of *coussin de Lyon*, a ganache encased in a hard green candy shell, which is made to resemble a silk cushion made as an offering to the Virgin Mary during the 1643 plague. Many of Lyon's chocolatiers, including **Bouillet** (5 Place du Change, +334 72 07 67 80), also have patisseries and tea salons attached. Almond macaroons sandwiched with ganache are a local staple, with patisseries offering multi-coloured options.

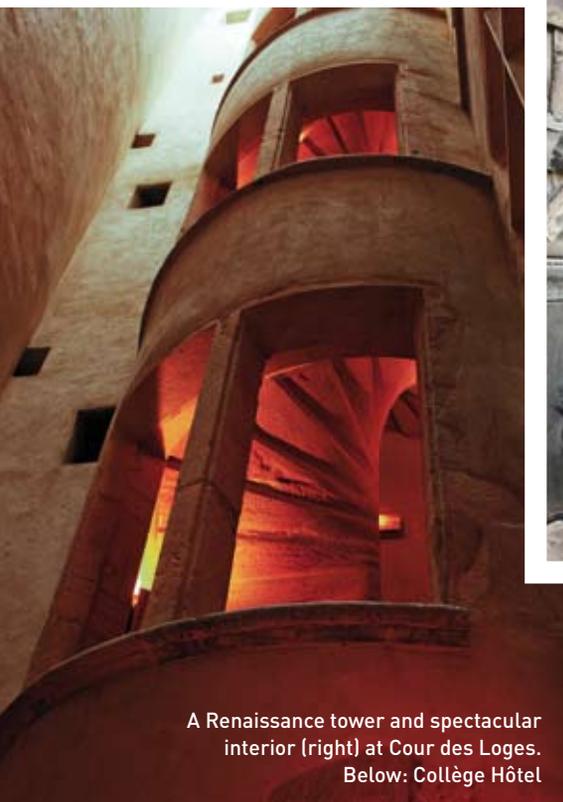
An outstanding patisserie is **Pignol** (17 Rue Emile Zola, +334 78 92 43 92), who say their own favourite pastry is their *tarte écossaise* (Scottish tart), named for its tartan yellow-and-red icing. For a lunch on the run, visit their **Boutique Pignol Traiteur Place Bellecour** (8 Place Bellecour, +334 78 37 39 61) for its tempting array of sandwiches, stews, salads, cheeses and savoury tarts.

## something casual

**Magali et Martin** (11 Rue des Augustins, +334 72 00 88 01) is so tiny it's easy to miss, but it's worth tracking down. The white linen decor is simple and the menu offers beautifully prepared classic dishes, such as beef stroganoff, that are full of flavour as well as reasonably priced – a three-course meal costs around \$50.

At **Les Adrets** (30 Rue du Boeuf, +33 4 78 38 24 30), the restaurant feels buried under the weight of old timbers and the toilet is in a tower, which only adds to its charm. A three-course lunch, including

## global kitchen.



A Renaissance tower and spectacular interior (right) at Cour des Loges. Below: Collège Hôtel



If you haven't kicked the nicotine habit, then visit **Café 203** (9 Rue du Garet, +334 78 28 6665), where management is so militant about smokers' rights, they prefer to pay fines rather than conform to the non-smoking regulations. For a more upmarket cocktail or glass of wine, visit the bar at **Le Passage** restaurant (8 Rue de Plâtre, +334 78 28 11 16), and take the weight off in their comfortable leather chairs.

Wine lovers take note that Lyon is within a short distance of both the Rhône Valley and the Beaujolais wine regions. But if you've no time for a tour, try **Antic Wine** instead (18 Rue du Boeuf, +334 78 37 08 96). Visiting the box-filled cellar is like dropping in on an episode of *Seinfeld*, thanks to garrulous owner Georges Dos Santos, who also owns the wine bar **Georges Five** (32 Rue du Boeuf, + 33 472 40 23 30). Georges speaks excellent English (rare in Lyon), has fond memories of Australia, and always has a bottle of something special open for tastings.

### where to shop

**Les Halles de Lyon Paul Bocuse** (102 Cours Lafayette, +334 78 60 32 82) looks like an unprepossessing structure of glass and concrete from the outside, but inside it's a foodie's treasure trove, from the wheels of cheeses piled high at **Mère Richard** and **Alain Martinet**, to the chocolates and salt macarons at **Sève** and the caviar at

**Petrossian**. Then there's the charcuterie of matriarch **Colette Sibilla**, who can be found at the market every day, despite her advancing age. She's renowned for her 'Jesus' sausages, so called because they resemble a sleeping infant, and her Rosette de Lyon, a classic dried sausage. Try a plate of the dozen or so oyster varieties on offer at **Chez Léon**, or browse the poultry stalls selling Bresse chickens with heads and feet intact, to guarantee authenticity. Other stall holders offer tiny meals in a glass known as *verrine* cooking. This trend sweeping Lyon involves placing three different layers, each with a different texture, into a single glass. Make one yourself with a lesson from Philippe Lechat at **Toqués des Halles** (toquesdeshalles.com).

Catch up on your reading at **Badiane** (1 Place Bellecour, +334 72 41 18 00). It offers a wide range of cookbooks, including many in English, along with chefs' outfits for children. At the back is the kitchen where chefs come to give courses; they run for one-and-a-half hours and cost from \$15 to \$80. No French is no obstacle.

### where to stay

A good, basic place to stay is the **Elysée Hotel** (92 Rue Président Edouard Herriot, +334 78 42 03 15, from \$135 per double), where the rooms are small, but clean and inexpensive. Within walking distance of Lyon's major sights is the **Grand Hôtel des Terreaux** (16 Rue Lanterne, +334 78 27 04 10, from \$215 per double), more down-to-earth than its name suggests but with a wonderful swimming pool enclosed in historic walls. Or try the quirky **Collège Hôtel** (5 Place Saint-Paul, +334 72 10 05 05, from \$210), inspired by the school room. You take breakfast in the 'study hall' and can stay in a bright white 'undergraduate' or more lavish 'postgrad' room. For something extraordinary, it has to be the **Cour des Loges** (2-8 Rue du Boeuf, +334 72 77 44 44, from \$535 per double). Consisting of four Renaissance houses, each room is different; you might find yourself staying in one that resembles a hunting lodge, or in a tower. **d.**

*Thanks to Lyon Tourism and Cour des Loges for assistance. For more on Lyon, visit: lyon.fr.*



### where to drink

For a sedate cup of coffee, or a glass of something stronger, locals and tourists crowd into **Grand Café des Négociants** (Place Francisque Régaud, +334 78 42 50 05), in the heart of the peninsula.