

More about Lyon and Beaujolais



By Terry Sheehan

Last month's column was about several days spent in Lyon back in October, en route to a series of winery visits and wine tastings in the Piemonte region of north-western Italy.

As I said in that column, my visit to Lyon was intended to let me see whether Lyon is still deserving of its reputation as the gastronomic capital of France. Since my wanderings through Lyon allowed only a brief look at the city's restaurants, of which there are said to be about 600, my comments are based on but a narrow slice, but our restaurant meals were thoroughly enjoyable: good food and service, and pleasant surroundings.

Eating out in Lyon can indeed present a challenge. There is a wide range of choice, with something for every budget. Paul Bocuse is still there, of course, at his elegant place just outside town. It has won all of the awards for culinary excellence, including recognition in the top category in the Michelin Guide, and attracts highspending visitors from all over the world. But you may not meet the man himself, who may, on any given evening, be elsewhere: perhaps doing a presentation at a multiple-star restaurant in Tokyo.

And at the other end of the scale, in price but not necessarily in quality, there are many small unpretentious Lyon restaurants, some with charming decor that has been unchanged for decades, that serve good meals at reasonable prices. To appreciate that side of Lyon, you have to understand that Lyon is a big city that is still in some ways a working-class town, where genuine home cooking is still found in cafés, bistros and restaurants. You shouldn't approach them without a healthy appetite, because the residents of Lyon enjoy their food, lots of it, and expect visitors to do so as well. Two people can find a very decent threecourse meal, with a pot (rhymes with 'go') of Beaujolais, for about \$75. The pot, incidentally, is a carafe, sort of, but it's actually a thick-bottomed clear bottle that's filled from a barrel or some other large container, and that contains the curious

amount of 46 centilitres. They're part of the Beaujolais culture, and you'll see them on almost every table in the bistros and cafés in Lyon at mealtime. I inquired why 46 centilitres; I was told: that's the traditional measure! When you're a visitor, why argue, especially when a pot of wine is so reasonably priced.

I'm always amused to hear someone say: I can't stand Beaujolais, and to hear the same person, in the next breath, talk about the great bottle of Morgon or Brouilly he had recently. I bite my tongue as I recall driving through the villages of Morgon, Brouilly, and others nearby, because they're Beaujolais villages, albeit the better ones, hence able to market their wines under the village names. But they're Beaujolais wine, made from the Gamay grape that's the only grape allowed by law in that area of France.

To finish off, there's something to be said about a big city that has vision and the ability to see it carried out. Lyon is roughly the size of Ottawa in population and, with its two rivers that run right through the city centre, it has difficult geography in which to work. But they've managed to achieve something that's still only a dream for Ottawa's city managers and squabbling politicians: they have put together a remarkable transit system, an integrated system of buses, trolley buses and state-of-the-art trams – light rail, I think we call them these days. And all of this is only the surface, since they have also built an ultra-modern Métro that serves a large part of the city area, with quiet clean underground trains gliding smoothly through modern functional stations. Passengers can transfer among all of the modes of transportation, and a single fare is well under three dollars. And the centre of Lyon has many blocks of pedestrian-only shopping streets; the level of commercial activity on those streets on a Saturday afternoon is something to see.

But I digress.

The trip back to Lyon from Piemonte, to drop off the rental car, offered a chance to spend a night in a delightful 15th century château that's now a hotel: Château de Comtes de Challes, just outside Chambéry, near Grenoble. Good accommodation, with an excellent restaurant.

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