

Supermarkets? Non merci

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When I read last year that the Paris department store Printemps was opening "Le Food Hall" on its second floor, I couldn't help but wonder if Parisians were turning away from their classic open-air markets towards British-style food halls. After all, Left Bank retailer Bon Marché has an emporium, La Grande Epicerie, dedicated to wonderful vegetables, great French meats, vintage wines and over 200 kinds of cheese, as well as exotic basics from around the world.

At Galeries Lafayette, perhaps the grandest of the city's grands magasins, Lafayette Gourmet has all that and about 10 specialist food bars where you can sit and nibble foie gras, oysters, pasta or Spanish ham. Then there are the mid-range Monoprix stores, with their own supermarket-like food departments. The irony would be as rich as hollandaise: Parisians shopping in Harrods-style food halls while Londoners and tourists increasingly flock to places like Borough Market.

That would make for a better story, but it is not the case. For one thing, Printemps sells no fresh meat or vegetables. It is less food hall than food pantry for the gourmet brands on offer: Ladurée pastries, Mariage Frères teas and O&Co olives. For another thing, Paris's traditional markets are thriving.

One reason for their continued popularity? Markets sell food – fresh, authentic, unprocessed fruit, vegetables, poultry, meat and eggs. This is exactly what we should eat for optimal health, according to best-selling author Michael Pollan. Markets do not typically sell pre-packaged, laboratory-created food-like substances that claim various health benefits. Supermarkets do. "A health claim on a food product is a good indication that it's not really food," Pollan wrote in the New York Times Magazine recently. "And food is what you want to eat."

And food is exactly what you can buy in a Parisian market every day of the week (except Mondays). Each district or arrondissement has at least one marché (the 19th arrondissement has nine), usually open two days a week from early in the morning until 2 or 3pm. Recently the city created some afternoon markets, "to better adapt to evolving modes of consumption" – recognition that women work and the family midday meal is history. The Bourse market, for example, is open on Tuesdays and Fridays from 12:30 to about 8pm.

Although I have explored many markets beyond my quartier, I have tended to frequent the one nearest my apartment, the Bastille market. Neighbours have tried to persuade me to change my allegiance to the nearby Marché d'Aligre.

The prices are better, they say, the clientele more ethnically varied and the tourists less obvious. In addition, the Marché d'Aligre is open every day (except Monday), has a beautifully preserved covered market (highlight: the suckling pigs being spit-roasted at the butcher P. Hayée), a wonderful biologique bakery (Moisan), a flea market and a wine bar, Le Baron Rouge, that is a neighbourhood institution.

For all the charms of the Marché d'Aligre, I am religious about my Sunday mornings at the Bastille market, one of Paris's oldest (over a century) and biggest (more than 100 stalls). I am accustomed to its rhythms, know which fishmonger will sell out first and where the free samples are likely to be (like Petite Périgourdine for a bite of foie gras). I know many of the vendors, even if they don't always recognise me, and I enjoy the personal banter (being told exactly how long to roast a chicken, or whether the cheese is ripe enough to eat now or which oysters my husband will like best).

On a recent Sunday, a cheerful African busker tossed juggling pins with a container of gold fish on his head, a should-have-been-on-TV showman demonstrated a €10 knife sharpener (yes, I bought one), and volunteer workers for various French presidential candidates handed out promotional flyers.

But there was something else. Posted at many stalls was an A4 computer-printed notice. "The Marché Bastille is in mourning for one of its own," it said, in tribute to Gérard Turban "a courageous, unassuming, helpful man." The stall where Turban, his wife, sons and, until not so long ago, mother had toiled was almost empty. A simple table held bouquets of flowers and a condolence book instead of the high-quality fruits and vegetables for which the family was known.

He was either 51 or 52, depending on whether you asked a woman at the mushroom stand across the aisle or the bread-seller next door. Everyone in this section of the vast market seemed subdued in their communal grief. As another posted tribute said: "The shopkeeper's life is difficult and demands laborious hours." However, those who accept this hard work and all its constraints, like Gérard Turban, "are proud of their service to the people of the quartier."

How could I buy food, real food, anywhere else?

Fonte: Financial Times, USA, April. 1 2007. Food and Drink, p. W11.