



TALES OF THE TAGINE

ELIZA REID
TOURS THE FLAVORS
OF PARIS'S NORTH AFRICAN
CULINARY SCENE



Photos by
Páll Stefánsson

“*Amorous. Generous. Voluptuous.*”

The adjectives on the menu are suggestive, but the next sentence goes a step further, inviting me to “a sensual celebration, like nature which spreads into a carnival of colors, scents and flavors.”

Well, I’m game.

The menu in question belongs to 404, one of dozens of North African restaurants on the international Parisian dining scene. After decolonization, particularly in Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia, the capital had an influx of immigrants who brought with them coveted family recipes for the fluffiest couscous and the flakiest pastry. Today, France is home to over five million people of Arab and African descent.

High and low-budget North African eateries have opened and closed over the past three decades, adding a gastronomic dimension to Paris which, while popular with the locals, is easily overlooked by many of the city’s roughly 25 million annual visitors.

Paris’s multiculturalism reflects a national trend: in 1999, 19.4 percent of the French population was born outside France. But the nation’s efforts to integrate different cultures haven’t always been successful. For instance, the unemployment rate for North African university graduates is 26.5 percent, compared to 5 percent for the similarly

educated French population. The ethnic tensions got international attention in November 2005 when riots broke out in Paris’s overlooked suburbs and spread to cities throughout the country, causing extensive damage and at least one death. The situation has returned to normal for the time being, but the underlying grievances remain and the issue is a delicate subject for the French.

Stepping into cuisine offers visitors a window into Paris’s internationalism. A friend of mine used to lead tour groups on whirlwind trips around France. “I always told them to eat traditional French cuisine in Beaune,” he says. “But for the nights out in Paris, I recommended something international.”

And so, in the midst of a sweltering July heat wave, armed with a small map and a large appetite, I begin an epicurean adventure across the *arrondissements* to some of the city’s best North African haunts.

GOODBYE GARLIC, HELLO COUSCOUS

It may have endless regional variations, but North African cuisine can be generally said to rely on slowly cooked meats, often prepared with fruits such as apricots, quince or preserved lemons, and a subtlety of spices rather than an aggressive addition of hot chili. Couscous is the carbohydrate of choice from the region, although it’s prepared dif-



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ferently in each country. It is usually served with vegetables and a mild but flavorful broth to pour on top. Spicy harissa paste, made from ground chilies, is served on the side so you can self-regulate your level of fire.

Tagine is the other dish most associated with North African cooking. A tagine is both a slowly cooked stew with meat or fish and vegetables, and the earthenware dish in which it is prepared. The conical lid of the tagine allows the air within to circulate in a way which enhances the taste of each dish.

Side salads, sometimes flavored with sugar or orange flower water, and bread are served alongside a hearty tagine or couscous. Tea, prepared with mint and sweetened, is also an important part of a North African meal. It's traditional to pour it from as high as possible into the waiting cup.

Because of its 30-plus year history, North African cuisine in Paris has developed its own nuances. At café Au P'tit Cahoua on boulevard Saint Marcel, for example, the chef is Bengali, so instead of the traditional ground ginger, fresh

is used. “And the broth we serve here is much less fatty than in Morocco,” Monsieur Pétris, the owner, proudly tells me. “We do this to suit Parisian tastes.”

Pétris says that North African cuisine in Paris is becoming increasingly specialized. “Several years ago there were generic restaurants that served couscous, but now there are restaurants with different regional specialties,” he explains to me as I bite into the *salade du jour*, a concoction of mashed vegetables tinged with cinnamon, one of the many spices the owner imports directly from suppliers in Morocco.

MORE THAN JUST A MEAL

Across the river in the Pigalle neighborhood, Wally le Saharien is one of Paris's oldest Saharan eateries. The pricey establishment is operated by Wally the Saharan himself, a middle-aged, affable, gray-haired (tucked into a ponytail) entrepreneur who is happy to talk about what makes his restaurant work.

“I come from the south of Algeria, right in the Sahara,” Monsieur Wally, as everyone calls him,

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“It’s not up to the client to choose,” says Monsieur Wally, firmly. “It’s up to me. I think one of the best things about my restaurant is that there is no menu.”

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A hammam in Paris

PHOTO BY ASALUIS SHORROGOTTER

BOBO INDULGENCE



“*Ça sort bien*,” grunts the stooped old woman approvingly, her massive bosom towering over my prone body as she scrapes my arms with a glove. Tiny gray rolls of excess skin are collecting at my extremities as the hammam’s employee enthusiastically scrubs away the day’s accumulated grime.

“*Ça sort bien*,” she repeats, proud of her achievement, and flaps off in her mismatched flip-flops to another customer. I am clean again, and thoroughly exfoliated.

The sweaty dampness of a hammam, the public bathhouses made famous under the Ottomans and popular throughout the Islamic world, is the perfect interlude from a strenuous schedule of filling myself with couscous and pastries.

For Paris’s many residents of North African descent, hammams are a vital link with the past.

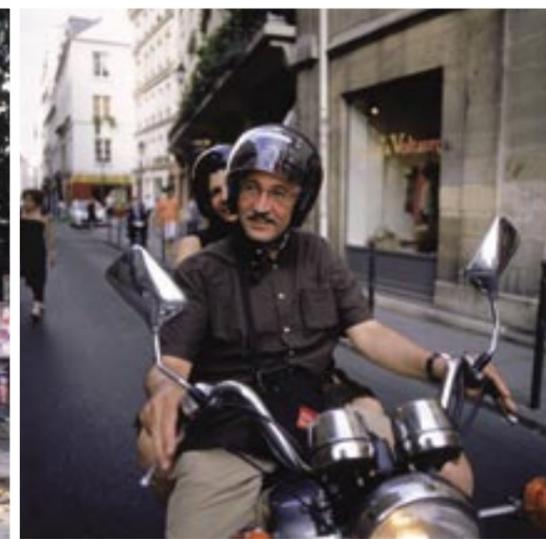
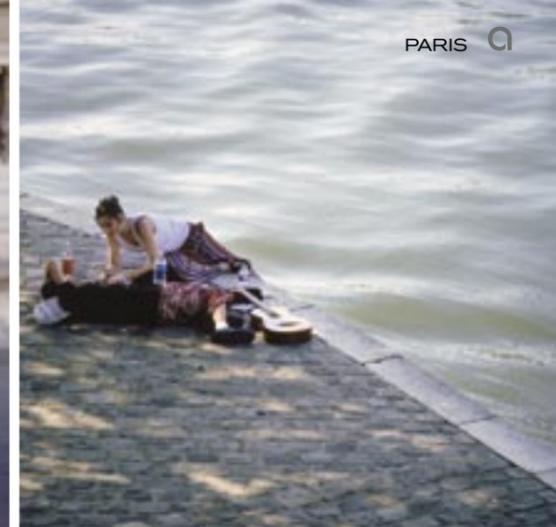
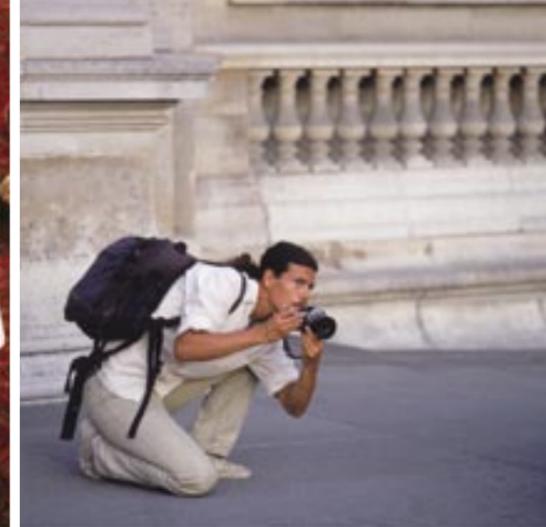
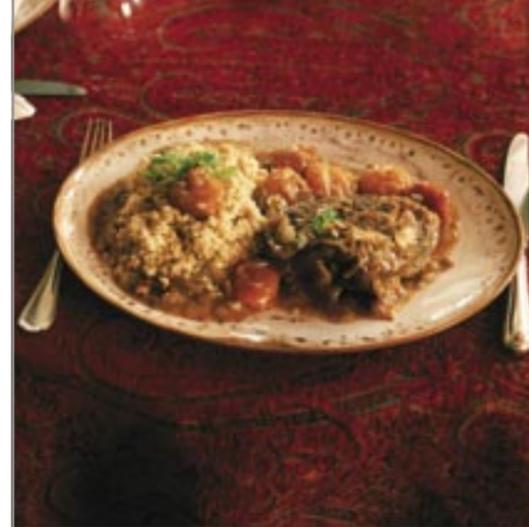
“For my parents’ generation, visiting a hammam regularly is part of their culture and traditions,” explains an elegant woman of Algerian origin who I meet inside the mosaiced room. “But I just come once or twice a month for esthetic reasons.”

I find hammams the perfect blend of pampering indulgence and practicality. I love the slippery cleanliness of the marble slabs where I relax, pouring buckets of cold water over my shoulders, and the pervasive steam that seems to cajole every last drop of dirt from my body.

This hammam is housed in a working mosque near the Latin Quarter of Paris. Today is one of the four women’s days (hammams are single sex), and the two marble steam rooms and shower room have a steady trickle of visitors. The woman I speak to tells me that more people go on weekends for fun and to chat. “But I always go alone,” she explains. “It’s too hot to talk here anyway.” I take the hint.

In addition to a thorough exfoliation, I am treated to a 20-minute massage by another generously portioned, flip-flopping woman. She chats in Arabic with her colleague while she massages away, dousing me in menthol oils. I block out the noise of the background traffic until the very end when it merges with the entrancing sounds of the afternoon call to prayer, which floats through the brightly stained windows to my ears.

Part of my EUR 38 fee is a free glass of mint tea after the steaming, served in the café adjoining the hammam. I drink it in the shade of a giant fig tree, still within the limits of the mosque. Cedo, a young student sitting at the table next to me, describes the regular crowd here as very “bobo,” a term meaning *bourgeois bohème* which was coined by American journalist David Brooks to refer to descendants of the 1990s yuppies. Judging from the crowds of students gathering from the nearby Sorbonne, I agree.



tells me over a delicate lamb tagine. “And people in Paris used to say to me: ‘Wally, take me to the Sahara’. They were not interested in the food then. They wanted the sand and the camels.” M. Wally became a successful tour operator, taking French tourists into the deep desert until the troubles in Algeria made the area unsafe for visitors.

So M. Wally returned to his adopted city and opened its only restaurant specializing in food from the Sahara. He has had a lot of press coverage over the almost 30 years he has been in business, and a wall on one side of the restaurant is devoted to words of praise by journalists who love his take on the region’s cooking.

“Our couscous is much fluffier,” he offers by way of explanation. “You don’t need any broth with it.” Obliging, I try a forkful of the mound sitting at my place. It is the best I have tasted,

fluffier and softer than any of the drier versions in other restaurants that I need to hydrate with broth.

M. Wally’s cooking is so famous that he doesn’t even have a menu to speak of. Patrons show up and he serves them the same Saharan specialties he has been preparing since 1970: stuffed sardines, couscous and pastille, a traditional pigeon-filled pie. “It’s not up to the client to choose,” says M. Wally firmly. “It’s up to me. I think one of the best things about my restaurant is that there is no menu.”

Our conversation moves to talk of the legendary Saharan hospitality. “In the Sahara there is no water, and so of course there is no fish,” he begins. “So when strangers or friends come to stay, we give them water and we give them fish, to show our hospitality. If we find a man wander-

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The menu at 404 waxes lyrical on the romance of North African cuisine: “It can enchant and delight, and even cure.”



FOOD FOR THOUGHT



It's possible to learn more about North African culture than the food on even a short visit to Paris. The Institute of the Arab World, designed by legendary architect Jean Nouvel, has an extensive library, numerous exhibitions, and an outdoor summer cinema series. Take the glass elevator to the top floor to see a stunning view of Paris from the roof.

Further along the river Seine, virtually next to the Eiffel Tower, the musée du quai Branly, a pet project of President Jacques Chirac, opened in June this year in an impressive new building also created by Nouvel.

The museum features numerous exhibits and 300,000 objects on non-European cultures, including various African artifacts. Controversy surrounding the museum before its opening (the original working title was the obviously questionable "Museum of Primitive Art") does not seem to have diminished interest, however, and there is a long snaking queue to gain admission and up the winding path to the display areas. The long, narrow Africa section is a delight for anyone with an interest in the continent. The collection includes carved wooden masks from West Africa, with puckered mouths and closed slanted eyes, plainly decorated funeral urns from East Africa, colorfully embroidered marriage garments from the north, and creepy fetishes from the Congo, including a fierce one-foot figure covered in rusty nails for armor and wielding a carved spear.



WHERE TO GO



Au P'tit Cahoua, 39, boulevard Saint Marcel 75013 Tel. +33 1 47 07 24 42

404, 69, rue des Gravilliers 75003 Tel. +33 1 42 74 57 81

Wally le Saharien, 36, rue Rodier 9^{ième} Tel. +33 1 42 85 51 90

Hammam de la mosquée, 39 rue Geoffroy St. Hilaire, place du Puits-de-l'Ermite Tel. +33 1 43 31 38 20

Musée du quai Branly, 222 rue de l'Université 75007, quai Branly.fr

Institut du Monde Arabe, 1, rue des Fossés-Saint-Bernard, Place Mohammed V, 75236 Tel. +33 1 40 51 38 38, imarabe.org



ing in the desert we will feed him and clothe him and shelter him. We will even offer him a wife." He shrugs his shoulders in what is perhaps an adopted Gallic mannerism. "But of course if that does not seem to interest him, we could also offer him a man – it happens, you know."

WHERE PEOPLE WATCH PEOPLE WATCH PEOPLE

Monsieur Wally's traditional Saharan couscous and unflinching menu are a contrast to another stop on my culinary tour. Deep in the trendy Marais district, identifiable only by a discreet red flag outside the entrance, is the incredibly atmospheric 404, billed by my *Time Out Eating & Drinking* guide as a place to spot celebrities.

To get there, it's a far walk along rue des Gravilliers, past the multi-colored Vespas parked on the sidewalk, past countless tall flats overlooking the street with narrow wrought iron balconies, and past Jean Claude Groussain's patisserie (the one with the *pains au chocolat* in the window).

Inside the darkened restaurant, the tables are already filling up with patrons, even though, at 7pm, it's still early to be heading out to dinner.

Fortunately I have made a reservation and am seated extraordinarily quickly by a waiter with very long sideburns. He presents the menu only after I have convinced him that I am indeed eating alone and not waiting for anyone to join me.

The 404 menu waxes lyrical on the romance of North African cuisine, saying it is created in the image of North Africans: "It is spicy and soft, simultaneously co-existing, sugar and salt, spices and honey... It warms and it refreshes. It can enchant and delight, and even cure."

Dining out in Paris feels more like a pastime than a necessity. On this night, 404 has attracted a dynamic crowd of young and old, couples and friends, and several Japanese tourists. Nimble waiters are bustling around, like the young fellows who are shaking ice for the restaurant's signature aperitif, the 404, their vodka-based twist on a caipirinha.

The menu is crammed with Moroccan classics – pastilla with pigeon, tabbouleh, various tagines, and of course couscous. I start with crispy skinned sardines stuffed with lemon, cumin, garlic and coriander. For the next course, the waiter presents my tagine and removes the cone shaped lid with a great flourish, revealing the flaky chicken, slices of

Dining out in Paris feels more like a pastime than a necessity.

pears and delicate spices inside. There is plenty of cumin-flecked bread on the side to mop up extra sauce. Colorfully painted dishes of couscous are on the tables to my side, served with extra bowls of chickpeas and harissa sauce.

My after-dinner mint tea is served in the gold painted glasses, and my side-burned friend pours it from the traditionally elevated position. "Don't forget to mention me in your story!" He winks at me and dashes off.

The next day, I take a stroll along boulevard Saint Marcel where people in fashionable suits discuss fashionable subjects on their mobile phones. A dreadlocked backpacker overloaded with two rucksacks and dirty clothes gazes down the boulevard in the direction of the Gare d'Austerlitz, the heat of the mid-day July sun beating down on her.

At a nearby café, a group of three ladies in their 60s order tall glasses of sparkling *kir royale* at 11.30am, cigarettes dangling from their manicured fingers. Is this their defense against the unrelenting summer heat, I wonder? I imagine Monsieur Wally would tell them to try a pigeon pastille and some mint tea instead. ☐

Icelandair flies nine times a week to Paris from Keflavik.