



# Leah Travels France December

By Leah Walker

In the Loire-Atlantique department, on the cusp of Brittany, is Domaine de La Bretesche. This 15th century château-turned-resort is on the outskirts of Missillac, near Brière Regional Natural Park. As a Relais & Château property owned by Bessé Signature, Domaine de La Bretesche is a welcomed escape in the French countryside.

The massive estate has many outbuildings that have been repurposed, yet still retain their original charm. The horse stable is now the bar, complete with the original stalls, as well as marble feed and water troughs. The former washing house is now a place for meetings and conventions. Domaine de La Bretesche is a step back in time with every modern luxury—an 18-hole golf course designed by Henry Cotton, indoor and outdoor pools and the Cour Carrée spa, which features the first infrared sauna in France.

Awarded one star by Michelin, Le Montaigu is a gourmet delight, offering dishes made with local ingredients and seafood from the nearby sea. The dining room is casually elegant and overlooks the historical Chateau de la Bretesche

and its lake.

Rooms, suites and villas have been refurbished using an array of fine fabrics and finishings in both traditional and contemporary style. With its hospitable staff, Domaine de La Bretesche is a tranquil retreat worth the trip. Domaine de La Bretesche, 44780 Missillac

## Christmas in Paris

Paris is magical almost any time of the year, but there is something very special about the Christmas season; the City of Light is even brighter. The Champs-Élysées, Place Vendôme and Rue Saint-Honoré are dripping with lights, as are neighborhoods such as Montmartre, the Marais and Saint-Germain-des-Prés. Along Boulevard Haussmann, the window displays at Printemps and Galeries Lafayette are always spectacular, but also worth a visit is the massive tree inside Galeries Lafayette.

One of the many Christmas markets is found from Place de la Concorde to Rond-point des Champs-Élysées. The rows of wooden chalets sell everything from food to arts and crafts. Along the city's Historical Axis in Place de la Concorde is La Grande Roue. As part of the Christmas landscape since 2000, the

giant Ferris wheel offers a marvelous view of the city, especially during the Golden Hour. Stop by Notre-Dame, Madeleine and Sacré-Coeur to see the nativity scenes. They change each year, ranging from contemporary to traditional.

## Meander this Market

If you think Paris is the capital of cuisine in France then you'd be wrong. That title goes to Lyon, as any good Parisian will admit. With over a dozen Michelin-starred restaurants and an all-star roster of chefs, Lyon has cemented its place in French food lore. Named after one of its favorite sons, Les Halles de Lyon Paul Bocuse is a temple to Lyonaese food.

Created in 1971, this indoor market is home to over fifty stalls selling a variety of regional culinary delights. Wander the aisles and feast your eyes on the selection of freshly baked breads, meats, cheeses and seafood. Small restaurants are scattered about, and there's plenty of seating to sample your purchases if you can't wait. The market is a gathering place for visitors and locals alike. In fact, you might just see chef Paul Bocuse chatting with his vendors. [www.halles-de-lyon-paulbocuse.com](http://www.halles-de-lyon-paulbocuse.com)

## Sip on This

Along Paris' bustling Rue de Rivoli, across from the Tuileries Garden, is Hôtel Le Meurice. As one of the city's Palace Hotels, Le Meurice is just as elegant and exquisite as you'd imagine. Of course, the beauty also extends to the hotel's food. Beyond the three-star Michelin restaurant by Alain Ducasse, Le Meurice has an exceptional tea time.

Served in Le Dalí, a space designed by Philippe Starck and named after one of the hotel's most famous former guests, tea time at Le Meurice is more than just tea. It's an event. Beneath the massive canvas painted by Arna Starck is where the pastry chef, Cédric Grolet, showcases his artistry in the form of sugar, chocolate and crème. Only in his early 30s, Grolet was named the French pastry chef of the year for 2015.

Indulgent in every sense of the word, the tea time menu is filled with British classics such as scones, fruit jams and clotted cream, but rather than the typical cold finger sandwiches, Le Meurice serves theirs toasted with fillings such as foie gras. French pastry classics such as St. Honoré and lemon tarts sit beside





innovative creations like the hazelnut. Beyond the delicious eats, tea time isn't complete without a glass of Champagne and tea. And as you'd expect, there's a wide selection of both. Le Meurice, 228 Rue de Rivoli, 75001 Paris

### Special Souvenir

The words Marseille and soap are now synonymous, thanks to Middle Eastern trade in the 11th century. However, it wasn't until the 16th century that the first savon factory in Marseille was created. A royal edict from King Louis XIV and a Gold Star at the 1855 World Exhibition in Paris helped perpetuate the French product's worldwide reputation. Made with 72% vegetable oil, savon de Marseille is traditionally made in cauldrons. Today, there are only five soap masters in France making it in the traditional manner, including one at La Grande Savonnerie.

In this shop near the Old Port, La

Grande Savonnerie is not only a place to pick up genuine, hand-crafted soap for the body and clothes, it also offers soap making workshops. In about an hour's time, you'll learn the product's history and transform soap pellets into a customized, handmade souvenir. La Grande Savonnerie, 36 Grand Rue, 13002 Marseille

### Sample this Service

One of the questions I am asked most is: "Where should I eat in Paris?" Inevitably, I draw a blank. With hundreds of good (and thousands of average) places in which to dine in the City of Light, giving restaurant suggestions is quite difficult. However, I think that a meal is just as much about the experience as the actual food. And since I'm a sucker for new experiences and the somewhat unconventional, I say give VizEat a try.



meal with wine. Not just an opportunity to learn classic French cooking techniques, a class at Le Foodist is a look inside the history and culture of food in France. LeFoodist.com; + 33 6 71 70 95 22

**Chat with a Concierge**

I sat down with Sonia Papet, the Head Concierge at Le Bristol in Paris, for insight on some of her favorite things from the City of Light.

**Leah Walker: What restaurant would you choose for a special dinner?**

**SP:** That’s a difficult question to answer, even when the guests ask. If I’m looking for romantic, I like Le Jules Verne, because this is where I met my partner of five years. It’s an Alain Ducasse restaurant located on the second floor of the Eiffel Tower. Otherwise, I like little places like the Italian restaurants Ida, located in the 15th arrondissement. I also like yam’Tcha on rue Saint Honoré. There’s a set menu with wine and tea. What I’m looking for is to be surprised at what I see on the table. That doesn’t mean it has to be gastronomic, rather it can be a small restaurant with attention to detail and who is passionate about welcoming you. yam’Tcha, 121 Rue Saint Honoré, 75001 Paris

**LW: What is an ideal Saturday in Paris for you?**

**SP:** Since I work in the hotel business, I rarely have time off. However, when I do, I love to go shopping. I go mostly to Saint-Germain-des-Prés, though I also like the Marais. I like to shop for clothes, since I wear a uniform at work, and prefer small boutiques. I go with a friend for lunch with wine and then shop. She has children, so we look at children’s shops, which is good for me to know about. Recently, I discovered Bleu comme gris on Boulevard Saint-Germain. The brand began out of a mother being frustrated by not being able to find proper-fitting blue and white school uniforms for her

children. She started making clothes for her children, followed by other parents and this boutique. It’s very important as a concierge for me to know about French products and the stories behind them. Bleu comme gris, 208 Boulevard Saint-Germain, 75007 Paris

**LW: What classic Parisian experience never goes out of style, even for Parisians?**

**SP:** There are several, but if I had to choose one, I’d say the Bateaux Mouches along the Seine. Even if you’re Parisian, sometimes you want out of the crowds and go on the boat. You see Paris differently, even if you know Paris well. Of course, it’s better to go on a private boat; a cruise on the Seine is a cliché experience, but Parisians do it. Another thing that the visitors don’t know much is Palais Royal. It’s very old now and has boutiques. I like this area very much, with children playing and people sometimes playing patonk. Chez Janou in the Marais is a small, noisy place serving food from Provence. They have 80 types of pastis and the mousse de chocolate comes in a big bowl and spoon. It’s a simple meal, followed by a walk around the Marais. Chez Janou, 2 Rue Roger Verlomme, 75003 Paris

**LW: What is your favorite café in the city?**

**SP:** A place close to the hotel is Honor Café in the courtyard near Damir Doma. It’s away from the tourists, and you can take your coffee here or take it away. This outdoor kiosk was started by two Australians and will remain open even in the winter. Also, it’s not a café, but I like to be by the Seine, just looking at the boats in the morning. I’ll have something from La Pâtisserie des Rêves, which is my favorite pastry shop in Paris. Now, Philippe Conticini has several locations in the city. Honor Café, 54 Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré, 75008 Paris

**LW: What’s trendy in Paris now?**

**SP:** Regarding fashion, now the Parisians don’t want to have brands on their clothes. Maybe it’s a small designer learned about through others. For instance, there’s a designer from Bordeaux with a shop near Le Bon Marché only selling scarves. Hermès is nice, but you have many people having the same thing. I think uniqueness is something that more and more people are looking for, especially because of the Internet. In regard to food, there are restaurants that are only around for a few months or have a guest chef appearing for a week or a month. More and more, chefs are doing this.

Not a restaurant per se, VizEat is a service that brings locals together with travelers. The concept is simple: Parisians with a passion for cooking and a desire to share their culture play host to hungry visitors from around the globe. VizEat is an opportunity to step into the lives of Parisians, while enjoying their company and home cooking. It’s a chance for those who don’t want to just visit Paris, but experience the city in a deeper, more meaningful way. Not just in Paris, this France-based company also has hosts in over 50 countries. VizEat.com

**Class is in Session**

A man with a PhD in Chemical Engineering isn’t the person you’d expect to open a cooking school, but this is France where food is more than sustenance; it’s a passion. After living and working abroad for a decade, Fred Pouillot left his corporate life to return to his home country and eventually created Le

Foodist. Part historian, storyteller and chef, Pouillot has assembled a team of experts, including his British-born wife, Amanda, to offer a variety of cooking experiences.

Make macarons, croissants, cream puffs and chocolate éclairs or learn about French wines and cheeses. The six-hour class begins with petit déjeuner, followed by a trip to buy lunch ingredients at an open-air market. The two-hour, hands-on instruction results in a four-course

