

LES·SENTEURS

THE SPECIALIST PERFUMERY

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# Joie de vivre

Romance, sophistication, quality... what is it with all things French with that we love so much? Natasha Higgins investigates restaurants, cafés, cinemas and a perfumery among others

**W**hen it comes to 'love-hate' relationships, the rosbif and froggy partnership is an exemplary model. Separated by only a fine line of coastal seaweed, these two nations have made a sport of pointing out each other's 'differences'. Be it our prim nature, or their philosophical ways.

It therefore comes as something of a revelation that, 'les Anglais', are in fact huge fans of all things French – their cuisine for one, their quaint little cafés, their baguettes, just about every patisserie out there and their way of life. After all, Peter Mayle's *A Year In Provence*, which describes the art of the French 'joie de vivre', became a best-selling memoir with more than 1 million copies sold in the UK alone!

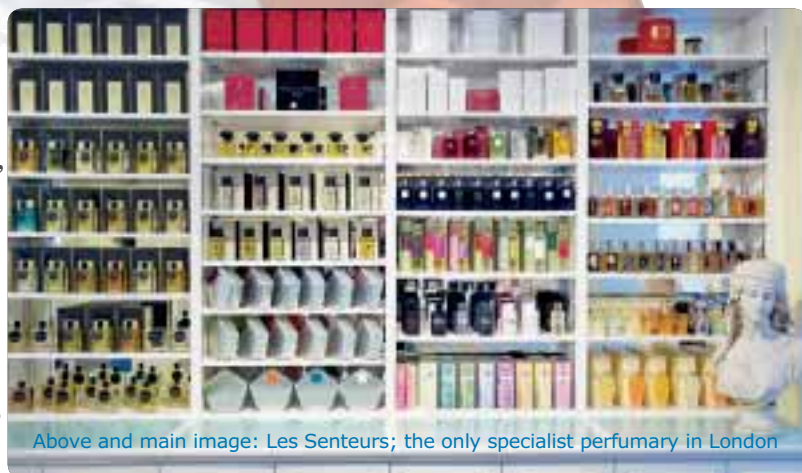
Thus, the question beckons – what

exactly resonates so profoundly about the French way of life apart from their women who never get fat? Judging by the number of restaurants, cafés, shops, cinemas (showing French films) and wine tasting sessions in London, we're definitely chasing something.

Perhaps the answer to this lies somewhere in the German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche's short quote: "As an artist, a man has no home in Europe save in Paris". On some level he's probably right – the creative flair in their cooking, their language and vivacity has captured

our imagination as much as our palates, leading us to crave that soft centred pistachio macaroon or an éclair au chocolat!

"I think that Brits mostly associate romance, sophistication, quality and



Above and main image: Les Senteurs; the only specialist perfumery in London





Above left: The two Michelin starred 'Le Gavroche', the oldest French restaurant in London, which has been running for five decades and continues to serve haute cuisine. "French classics have become like comfort food to the British," says Michel Roux Jr, Chef Patron at 'Le Gavroche' (above right)

perhaps a little arrogance with French restaurants and cafés; all of which they love," explains Alexis Gauthier, Chef Patron at Gauthier Soho (21 Romilly Street, W1D 5AF, 020 7494 3111, [www.gauthiersoho.co.uk](http://www.gauthiersoho.co.uk)), the Michelin starred restaurant which opened in 2010 and is fast becoming known for its fun and effervescent flavours. "I think they buy into the feeling that whoever you happen to be sitting with in a French café, will turn into the sultry and broodingly attractive lover you've always wished for," concludes Gauthier.

Talking of 'broodingly attractive lovers', there's a scene in the 1950s classic *An American In Paris* when Gene Kelly pursues Leslie Caron who works in a Parisian perfumery. "This very much resembles our perfume shop 'Les Senteurs', the only specialist perfumery in London," (71 Elizabeth Street,

SW1W 9PJ, 020 7730 2322, [www.lessenteurs.com](http://www.lessenteurs.com)), explains Claire Hawksley, the owner.

She continues: "Many of the companies we source our perfumes from are based in Paris with small plants or warehouses on the outskirts". The best selling French fragrance here is Editions de Parfums by Frederic Malle, a master perfumologist.

Pascal Aussignac, an award winning chef describes opening French deli, Comptoir Gascon, in Smithfield, in 2001: "When we opened Comptoir Gascon 11 years ago, we were one of the first French delis in East London," explains Aussignac. "We offered products that one couldn't find elsewhere such as foie gras, terrine, French cheeses, cassoulet and confits or even seasonal products such as white asparagus from the Landes."

Over a decade later, and Comptoir Gascon has become an award winning bistro-deli. Authentically French, it continues to specialise in food and wine exclusively sourced from the South West of France. Dishes on offer range from Grilled Duck Hearts to Duck Burgers or Crispy Squid Basquaise. "What makes Comptoir Gascon popular may also be the fact that we care about the products we put forward and are very demanding in terms of quality," says Aussignac.

The past five months have seen Gallic establishments sprouting up all around London: France's most famous culinary institution, Le Cordon Bleu, has opened its flagship school in Bloomsbury Square (15 Bloomsbury Square, WC1A 2LS, 020 7400 3900). Behind the school, nestled away in a courtyard, is its very own café serving bread and patisseries from 7am to 7pm daily as well as light lunches made freshly by Le Cordon Bleu master chefs.

Further west is the newly opened Aubaine Mayfair (31 Dover Street, W1S 4ND, 020 7368 0955, [www.aubaine.co.uk](http://www.aubaine.co.uk)), the latest addition to the stylish bistro chain that serves traditional patisseries and fresh bread as well as Provencal classics. Hani Nakkach, Aubaine founder, explains he was disappointed by the bread he found in



Left & right: delights from Le Cordon Bleu





Left & right: Award winning Comptoir Gascon; authentically French, it continues to specialise in food and wine exclusively sourced from the South West of France



burgers.

In contrast, establishments such as the two Michelin starred 'Le Gavroche' (43 Upper Brook Street, W1K 7QR, 020 7408 0881, [www.le-gavroche.co.uk](http://www.le-gavroche.co.uk)), the oldest French restaurant in London, has been running for five decades and continues to serve what is known as haute cuisine. "French classics have become like comfort food to the British," says Michel Roux Jr, Chef Patron. The

London. He decided to bake his own in 2005 with the aim of creating a modern and stylish bakery that celebrated the French traditions of bread-making. "We can now enjoy an authentic slice of France here, and relive a memory of Paris or imagine Marie Antoinette biting into that perfect macaroon, without having to cross the Channel!" he exclaims.

Further west, still, in the heart of Chelsea, is Apollonia Poilâne's latest brainchild – Cuisine de Bar by Poilâne, (39 Cadogan Gardens, SW3 2TB, 020 3263 6019, [www.poilane.com](http://www.poilane.com)), a cosy spot to enjoy a sit-down meal. The restaurant opened last November and continues the bakery's tradition of sourdough bread as well as some new options such as soups and duck

reason French food is so popular in this country is "not only is it extremely good, but also steeped in history, classism and heritage which the British public like," he explains.

A Parisian success story to hit the streets of London, also tied up in history and heritage, is Ladurée – the French style tea rooms famed for their exquisite macaroons. Ladurée was first established by Louis Ernest Ladurée, a Miller from Southwest France on Paris' Rue Royale as a bakery in 1862. 150 years on, and four of those outlets have sprung up in London – Harrods, SW1X 7XL, Burlington Arcade, W1J 0QX, Covent Garden, WC2E 8RA and most recently Cornhill (14 Cornhill, EC3V 3ND, 020 7283 2161, [www.laduree.fr](http://www.laduree.fr)).

Unlike the rustic Provencal style

cafes, Ladurée offers a more decadent experience and aims to recreate the feel of Parisian tea salons of the late 19th century. The interiors of the various London shops are decidedly ornate with chandeliers hanging from the ceiling, a blend of rich colours, period style furniture and the signature green and gold colour scheme.

If you're in a really nostalgic mood, longing for some scenes of France, there's a growing choice of French films being shown in London at any one time. Later this month a youthful Alain Delon will appear in *Plein Soleil* (Purple Noon) alongside Marie Laforêt in the first adaptation of Patricia Highsmith's *The Talented Mr Ripley* released in 1960. Every Sunday, Ciné Lumière (17 Queensberry Place, SW7 2DT 020 7073



Several cinemas in London specialise in European Arthouse with strong leaning toward French cinema







Clockwise from bottom left: Two shots of the wonderful creations on show at Ladurée at Burlington Arcade: An impressive display at Ladurée in Harrods (above) and finally, tables for two and what's on offer! at Aubaine in Mayfair (right & below right)



1350, [www.institut-francais.org.uk](http://www.institut-francais.org.uk)) runs a series of French classics. The Curzon Cinemas ([www.curzoncinemas.com](http://www.curzoncinemas.com)) and Ciné Lumière specialise in European Arthouse film with strong leaning toward

#### French cinema.

And no piece on French culture in London would be complete without the mention of one or two of the best wine bars and wine tasting events town. The Davy's chain, have a newly designed wine bar at Canary Wharf (31-35 Canary Wharf, Fisherman's Walk E14 4DH, [www.davy.co.uk/canarywharf](http://www.davy.co.uk/canarywharf)) with fantastic riverside views. Wines range from a Sancerre Cuvée to a Chablis Grand Cru Les Clos. It's the perfect place for an evening out or lunch. If, on the other hand, you'd like to get serious about your wine, the Wine Education Service is holding a series of wine tastings until May: French Wine & Cheese (March 1) and The Lafite of the Langedoc (March 29).

Sessions are held at South Hampstead



High School. For further details visit: [www.wine-education-service.co.uk](http://www.wine-education-service.co.uk)  
Right, time for a pistachio macaroon! Au revoir et à bientôt.



Left: The impressive façade of Ladurée in Harrods. Right: Comfort and Joy to be found at Ladurée in Mayfair

