

# MARSEILLE'S MIGRANT Melange

France's second city is a polyglot melting pot of enticing flavours.

BY TRISTAN RUTHERFORD

Step off the airport bus at St Charles train station for an aroma assault. Senegalese cinnamon donuts sizzle street side. Tunisian *brick à l'oeuf* – delicate savoury pastries with a molten yolk middle – are served next door. You can communicate in English or Arabic. Italian will take you a long way; Spanish further still. Marseille is a *ville carrefour*, a crossroads city. One hundred nationalities are united by Brazilian *coxinha* chicken fritters, Vietnamese *nem* and Moroccan *tajine*.

It has always been thus. Marseille was founded by Greeks and Phoenicians 2,500 years ago. Julius Caesar moved in half a millennium later. Genoese brought pasta and pesto in the 1400s. Armenians gifted patisserie a century ago. A French population depleted by war invited Senegalese, Mauritians and Malians en masse from the 1950s. In 1972 football hero Zinedine Zidane was born in the suburb of La Castellane to Algerian parents. In every case the refrain is the same. "I'm not from Comoros." "I'm not from Laos." "I'm from Marseille."

For most new arrivals, the city's magnificent Vieux Port was their first sight of home. Seagulls follow fishing boats as visitors follow the scent of steaming couscous to the Tunisian quarter near the quay. Here restaurants like La Kahena (2 Rue de la République) have served up spicy *salade mechouia* since the 1970s. Curiously, the diners don't originate from North Africa. They hail from every cultural centre under the sun.

"Couscous is everywhere in our city," says artist and food guide Bénédicte Sire. "For people here it's not exotic. It's normal food." Sire leads gourmet food tours through the atmospheric Noailles market, a microcosm of Alexandria, Dakar and Palermo in the heart of France. "Exchanges between Mediterranean neighbours continued throughout the centuries," she explains. "The cuisine in Marseille is therefore greatly influenced by other countries – a mosaic of flavours and tastes."

Stores like Saladin (10 Rue des Capucins) are cross-cultural *entrepôts*. It stocks a suitcase full of stories to take home. There's *helva* from Izmir.

Sun-dried tomatoes from Sicily. Za'atar from Qatar. Chorizo from Cape Verde. "Most importantly, everyone here has a tale to tell," says Sire, who translates for her guests. Some are love stories. Others are tragic tales. But every vendor has found a safe haven here.

The streets around Noailles have become a foodie magnet. Tourists from Germany and China Instagram the street eats fiesta. Loaves of Algerian *mahjouba* bread, Cambodian rice paper rolls, Italian orange blossom *chichi* pancakes. It's worth remembering that you can grab a kebab in Marseille, then take a direct train to London, a boat to Algiers or a plane to Antananarivo. It's a cross-cultural mash-up. And a very tasty one at that.

Gourmet tourists are also a sign that once-maligned migrant flavours are moving upmarket. Le Mina Kouk (21 Rue Fontange) is a hip North African tearoom in the cool Cours Julien neighbourhood. The cuisine is 100 per cent Berber (North Africans whose origins pre-date the Arab conquest of the Maghreb). Pull up a black recliner then munch on cumin carrots and artichoke dips. As a *traiteur* Mina Kouk also offers tasty take-outs of almond *croquantes* and acacia honey *baklava*. Chez Jeannette (48 Avenue de Saint-Jérôme) is run by a family of Turkish-Armenian descent. Stuffed *manti ravioli*, Istanbul *mussels farcis* and Anatolian beef pastrami sing of

flavours that link the Aegean with the Caucasus.

One address that has lifted Marseille's far-flung flavours to heady levels is Restaurant AM (9 Rue François Rocca). This global epicurean fantasy was recently crowned with a Michelin star. "I am typical Marseille," says chef-proprietor Alexandre Mazzia. "A Frenchman born and raised in Congo. Sweet potato and tapioca are part of my DNA!" Amuse bouches of Ghanaian peanut crisps with cucumber flowers, and seaweed with Madagascan *combawa* citrus hint at African roots.

"The city is all about diversity," says Mazzia. "Our kitchens evolve with the changing times."

Mazzia's thoughts on Marseille's progressive cuisine are twofold. Currently the city is a place of unique culinary pilgrimage. "Moroccan *méloui* pancakes, *fataya* meat pockets from Lebanon, the list is endless. My culinary signature, Raspberry-Harissa dessert, is a blend of cultures only possible here." But this coastal city is inspiring gastronomic changes nationwide. Just as Europe spurned Italian exports like pizza and pasta until the 1990s, now migrant recipes are becoming commonplace across the country. "In Marseille, *tajine* is a family meal eaten by everyone, regardless of origin," claims Mazzia. Cosmopolitan cities like Paris, Lyon, Nice and Toulon are the same. Dishes like *Maghreb merguez* lamb sausage have crossed the Channel to Britain – making Marseille a model of tastes to come.

There's time to ponder millennia of migrating flavours back at the Vieux Port. The harbour's landmark building is MuCEM (Promenade Robert-Laffont), a museum of Mediterranean civilisation, suspended above the sea. It's entered by a 130m-long footbridge that spans from medieval Fort Saint-Jean to the contemporary restaurant atop museum's roof – a pathway from old to new. Inside the vast glass cube Marseille's globalised history is laid bare. Olive oil amphorae from Ibiza. Grain urns from Greece. Sculptures of Arabian merchants trading under palms. Navigational aids that promise safe passage to Algiers. The world has migrated to Marseille since time began. Their cultures – and recipes – live on. ♦

## NEW FOODIE MELTING POTS

Uphill from the Vieux-Port, Marché Saint-Victor (33 Rue d'Endoume) is an experimental food factory. Half a dozen 'culinary ateliers' have set up shop in a 200sqm warehouse. Each has his or her own kitchen but their customers share a beaten-up centrepiece table. Vendors include harbour-fresh crustacean specialists Jean-Chri and Josiane, and Spanish *épicerie* proprietor Patricia. Each mini-establishment offers a lunch special. The hottest food opening in 2016 was culinary emporium L'Épicerie L'Idéal (11 Rue d'Aubagne). Run by former food journalist Julia Sammut, it's an endless array of fig jams from Italian fruit house Fratelli Chiaverini, to chestnut confitures from Corsica. There's also a mini gourmet lunchtime restaurant thrown in.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A wicker basket with cookies on sale in the old town; freshly caught sea urchins at the fish market in Marseille; exotic fruit at the bustling market; a rustic wall with restaurant signage at the seaside in Marseille; traditional bouillabaisse, a seafood fish soup with prawns, mussels and tomato; the Saint-Victor market; Saint Jean Castle and Catedral de la Major and the Vieux Port in Marseille.

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