

# THE SWEET LIFE IN PARIS

*Delicious Adventures in the World's Most  
Glorious—and Perplexing—City*

DAVID LEBOVITZ





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**Also by David Lebovitz**

*Room for Dessert*

*Ripe for Dessert*

*The Great Book of Chocolate*

*The Perfect Scoop*

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**THE SWEET LIFE**

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Delicious Adventures in the World's Most  
Glorious—and Perplexing—City

**DAVID LEBOVITZ**

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The last thing I thought while frantically cramming everything I owned into a couple of suitcases was that I'd ever write a book about my life to come in Paris. But as I acclimated to my new home, I started writing about Paris, turning my Web site into a blog, chronicling my travails (which included learning to live by arcane rules and rituals that haven't changed for centuries), meeting a lot of marvelous people, and most important, discovering an abundance of wonderful things to eat along the way.

Many of my French friends and readers enjoyed and commented on my observations, which were always written with humor and in the spirit of goodwill, even when critical. Despite what many tourists think, Paris is not a museum; it's a big city with flaws just like any other major metropolis, and any frustrations and negative impressions I encountered are balanced by my love for the city and its people.

Well, most of them.

Thanks go to all who helped smooth out the rough edges and who contributed something special to my life in Paris: Gideon Ben-Ami, Paul Bennett, Lani Bevaqua, Anne Block, Randal Breski, Cliff Colvin, Lewis Fomon, Julie Getzlaff, Rik Gitlin, Mara Goldberg, Dorie Greenspan, Jeanette Hermann, Kate Hill, Dianne Jacob, David Lindsay, Susan Herrmann Loomis, Nancy Meyers, *la famille* Pellas, John Reuling, Mort Rosenblum, Lauren Seaver, Heather Stimmler-Hall, David Tanis, and Claude and Jackie Thonat.

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I'd also like to thank the people who read my writings, left comments that made me laugh, and followed along while I began a new life in Paris. To all of you who said that I should write a book about Paris—here it is!



## INTRODUCTION

I distinctly remember the exact moment when I became Parisian. It wasn't the moment when I found myself seriously considering buying dress socks with goofy cartoon characters on them. Nor was it the time I went to my bank with €135 in hand to make a payment for €134, and thought it completely normal when the teller told me that the bank didn't have any change that day.

And I'm sure it wasn't when I ran into the fifty-something receptionist from my doctor's office sunbathing topless by the Seine, *à la française*, and I didn't avert my eyes (much as I wanted to).

It wasn't when my shoulder bag caught the sweater of a young boy in La Maison du Chocolat and, as it started to unravel, I ignored his woeful cries. "*C'est pas ma faute!*" I reasoned to myself before walking away. After all, who in their right mind would wear a sweater to a chocolate shop, anyway?

It could have been the moment when I listened intently as two Parisian friends explained to me why the French are so determined to clip the pointed tips off *haricots verts* before cooking them. Was it because that's where the radiation collects in the green beans, as one person insisted? Or was it to prevent the little points from getting stuck in your teeth, which the other one assured me would happen? Even though I didn't remember ever getting a string bean end lodged between my teeth, nor did I think radiation had the ability to slide around in vegetables, I found myself nodding in agreement.

No, the exact moment happened just a few months after I'd arrived in Paris. I was spending a lazy Sunday in my apartment lounging around in faded sweatpants and a loose, tattered sweatshirt, my ideal outfit for doing nothing in particular. By late afternoon, I'd finally mustered the energy to take the elevator downstairs to the inner

courtyard of my apartment building to empty the garbage.

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With the elevator door exactly three steps from my front door and the garbage room just five steps from the elevator landing at the bottom, the trip involves basically four movements—walk out the door, take the elevator down, dump the garbage, and go back up.

The whole process should take maybe forty-five seconds.

So I extracted myself from the sofa, shaved, changed into a pair of real pants, tucked in a clean wrinkle-free shirt, and slipped on a pair of shoes and socks before heading toward the door with my little plastic *sac* for the *poubelle*.

God forbid I should run into someone from my building while wearing my Sunday worst.

And that, *mes amis*, was when I realized I had become Parisian.



The unspoken rule if you plan to live here—but equally good to adopt even if you’re just coming for a visit—is knowing that you’re going to be judged on how you look and how you present yourself. Yes, even if you’re just dumping your garbage. You don’t want anyone else, such as a neighbor (or worse, one of those garbagemen in their nifty green outfits), to think you’re a slob, do you?

Since only 20 percent of Americans have passports, we don’t get out as much as we should, and our dealings with foreigners are usually on our own turf where they have to play by our rules. We’re not so good at adapting to others, since we’re rarely in a position that requires us to do it. I’ve heard a variety of complaints from visitors (and uttered a few myself) expecting things to be like they are back home: “Why don’t they have doggie bags?” “How come there’s no ice?” “Why can’t I pick something up off the store shelf?” or “Why is our waiter flirting with those Swedish girls and having a cigarette when we asked for our check over thirty minutes ago?”

I wonder why when we travel outside the United States we expect people to behave like Americans—even in their own country. Think about it for a minute: how many waiters, taxi drivers, hotel clerks, shopkeepers, and others in your hometown could or would respond to a French person who spoke only French? If you don’t speak French and have traveled to Paris, you were probably helped by a number of people who speak pretty good English. And almost all Europeans coming to our shores make it a point to adapt to our customs. Well, almost all. Don’t ask a waiter who’s just been stiffed on his 18 percent tip.

Every culture has certain rules. In America for some unknown reason, you can’t get wine at fast-food restaurants, and spending a few minutes digging deeply inside your nose on public transit is frowned upon. In Paris, the rules dictate one shouldn’t dress in grungy jeans and a ripped T-shirt, unless it says “Let’s Sex!... NOW!” painted in gold lettering across the front. To life in a foreign country you need to learn the rules, especially if you plan to stay. And I had to learn plenty.



Like so many other people, I dreamed about living in Paris ever since my first visit in the '80s, during that rite of passage every American student fresh out of college used to embark upon, before kids decided it was less of a hassle to explore the world with RAM rather than a Railpass. Why bother getting lost in the labyrinth of historic cities, dining on regional delicacies, sleeping with total strangers in youth hostels, and soaping up in communal showers with a team of Italian soccer players? Yes, I suppose it's far better to stay home and experience Europe though a computer screen. But back then, I had quite a time doing most of those things. (I'll leave it to your imagination to guess which ones.)

But explore I did. I spent almost a year traipsing around the continent after college doing nothing in particular except learning about European cultures, primarily by pulling up a stool or chair and eating what the locals ate. During that time, I made it through almost every country in Europe and tried whatever local delicacies were to be had: oozing raw-milk cheeses in France and hearty, grain-packed breads in Germany; Belgian milk chocolates that when sniffed, could transport you to a dairy farm in the countryside; and crispy-skin fish grilled over gnarled branches in the souks of Istanbul. And of course, lots of buttery pastries and crusty breads smeared with plenty of golden-yellow butter in Paris, the likes of which I'd never tasted before.

After months of criss-crossing Europe, in the need of a good, deep scrubbing and a proper haircut to rein in my unruly mop of curls (which definitely earned me the term dirty blond), I eventually ran out of steam—and money—and returned to the States. During the carefree time I'd spent traipsing from country to country, I hadn't given any thought to my future and what I'd do after I returned. Why spoil the fun? Back in America, after seeing a world outside of our sometimes isolating borders, I didn't quite know where I would fit in and hadn't a clue as to where to go or what to do with my life.

I'd read about "California cuisine," which was a new and exciting concept just emerging back then. And something to do with food seemed like an interesting option, since I didn't see Europe through my eyes, but my stomach. Everything I'd tasted was a far cry from my college days, when I worked at a vegetarian restaurant ladling out peanut butter-thickened soups and dishing up desserts made by our long-haired baker, who added his own unique touches to anything he baked. In fact, I can still smell his fruit cobblers filled with apples and kidney beans, baked and scented with his signature handful of cumin, which gave them a distinctly unpleasant odor.

On second thought, that might have been him.

Fortunately, the European style of cooking was gaining a foothold in northern California, and there was a new appreciation for fine foods and cooking *du marché*: buying locally produced foods at their peak of freshness, which was a daily ritual in Europe. It seemed like common sense to me, and simply the right way to eat. So I packed up and moved to San Francisco, just across the bay from Berkeley, where an exciting culinary revolution was simmering. And I hoped cumin-scented desserts weren't a part of it.

Shopping the outdoor markets of the Bay Area, I discovered farmers who were raising things like blood oranges with tangy, wildly colored juices and tight bunches of deep-violet radicchio, which people at the time assumed were runty heads of cabbage. Laura Chenel was producing European-style moist rounds of fresh goat cheese in Sonoma, which were so unfamiliar that Americans were mistaking them for tofu (especially in Berkeley). And viticulturists in Napa Valley were producing hearty wines, like Zinfandel and Pinot Noir, which had a great affinity for the newly celebrated regional cuisine, which was liberally seasoned with lots of fragrant garlic, branches of rosemary and thyme, and drizzled with locally pressed olive oil—a big improvement over the bland “salad oil” I grew up with.

I was thrilled—no, *astounded*—to find the culinary counterparts to everything I had eaten in Europe. I savored the hand-dipped ultrafine chocolates of Alice Medrich at Cocolat, which rivaled those I had swooned over in swanky French chocolate boutiques. I’d line up daily for a *boule* of *pain au levain* that Steve Sullivan would pull out of his fired-up brick oven every morning over at Acme Bread, and was ecstatic to find many of the pungent cheeses I remembered so fondly from Europe stacked up at the Cheese Board Collective in Berkeley, just across from Chez Panisse.

Since I believed that if I was really going to pursue a restaurant career I should start at the top, I applied for a job at Chez Panisse, where Alice Waters was leading this culinary revolution I wanted to enlist in. I sent a letter to the restaurant, waited a few weeks, and got no response. Despite the lack of acknowledgment or enthusiasm on their part, I presented myself at the now-famous redwood archway, ready to embark on my lifelong career as a chef. I marched inside, where a busy waiter, who was rushing by holding a tray of wineglasses and wearing a white shirt, tie, and long apron, looking remarkably like a *garçon* in Paris, pointed me toward the bright kitchen in the back of the dining room.

The kitchen staff was working at full throttle. Some were maniacally rolling out ultrathin, nearly transparent sheets of pasta. Others were painstakingly trimming carrots tinier than a baby’s pinky, their peelers thwacking against the countertop at warp speed, spewing bright orange curlicues, then tossing each denuded root into a stainless steel bin with a little plunk before seamlessly moving on to the next one.

One cook was busy layering moist rounds of goat cheese in well-worn earthenware crocks, ripping apart bunches of thyme and layering them between whole cloves of garlic and pinelike branches of rosemary. In the back, I noticed some women intently guarding the oven doors, checking inside every few moments. I had no idea at the time that they were scrupulously watching the progress of Lindsey Shere’s famous almond tarts—making sure they didn’t cook a second too long and were taken out just when they reached their precise degree of caramelization.

I went over to speak with the chef, who was at the epicenter of it all, directing the chaos around her. Overwhelmed by it all, I asked in my most timid voice if there was any possibility...any way at all...she could perhaps find a place for me at Chez Panisse—the Greatest Restaurant in America.

She closed her eyes and put down her knife midslice, then turned around to look at

me. And in front of the entire kitchen staff, she proceeded to tell me off, saying she had no idea who I was and how could I think that I could just walk into the restaurant unannounced and ask for a job? Then she picked up her knife and started chopping again, which I took as a pretty good indication that I should leave.

And that was the end of my first job interview in laid-back California.

So I went to work at another restaurant in San Francisco, where I found myself in way over my head and in a job that was downright horrible. The chef was a complete nutcase and should have traded his chef's jacket for a more restrictive padded one, with buckles in the rear. My Sunday brunch shift would begin with his breaking open and smashing to bits all the scones I had carefully rolled out, cut, and baked that morning, verifying that each one was, indeed, flaky. And by my last shift (ever), I was so flustered by it all that, as I struggled to keep up with the barrage of orders that came streaming in, I neglected a pot of simmering fryer oil, which turned into a raging fire.

Cumin-scented cobblers were beginning to seem not quite so bad after all.

(I do have a few good memories of that place, though. I still get a chuckle when I think how one of my coworkers, who was teaching me a few words in Vietnamese, taught me how to say "sweet potatoes" in his native language, which actually meant "blow job." Nowadays I wonder what the other prep cooks were thinking when I called downstairs and asked one of them to come upstairs because I desperately needed some "sweet potatoes.")

After each day of work, I'd drag myself home and collapse in a defeated heap, near tears. Waking up the next morning, I found myself filled with so much dread that I could barely heave myself out of bed. So when I heard the news that the chef at Chez Panisse was leaving to open her own place, I plotted my escape—a triumphant return to where I rightfully belonged. At least *I* thought so. After scoring an interview with the new chef and undergoing the final scrutiny of Alice Waters herself, I was soon proudly working at Chez Panisse.

(I have to mention that the original chef who disparaged me turned out to be a terrific person, warm and supportive of up-and-coming chefs, and someone I like and respect very much. Although not French, she was my first encounter with a short-fuse French-style temperament and good practice for things to come.)

In all, I spent nearly thirteen years cooking at Chez Panisse, most of it working in the pastry department, joining the select few who've mastered Lindsey's famed, and notoriously tricky, almond tart. I'm not one for hero worship, but I will certainly say that Alice Waters was a formidable force, and she kept the hundred-plus cooks who worked there on their toes at all times. Someone once said, "You don't know terror until you've heard the sound of Alice's footsteps coming toward you."

And how true that was. I quickly learned that the faster those little feet were racing toward me, the more trouble I was going to be in. For all my smart-alecky retorts, though, Alice was almost always right, and each upbraiding was actually a valuable lesson for a young cook like me. Alice was committed to instilling in us her ideas for using seasonal and local ingredients long before the idea became such an overused cliché

that airline menus are now touting “locally grown” ingredients. And she inspired us to put those ideas into action in the food we were cooking.

Lindsey Shere, the co-owner of the restaurant and executive pastry chef, was also a constant, and lasting, source of inspiration. From Lindsey, I learned that making our deceptively simple desserts was often far more difficult than creating complex, multitiered, over-the-top sugary extravaganzas. Simplicity meant our ingredients—fruits, nuts, and chocolates—needed to be absolutely top-notch, and sourcing the best of them was an integral part of our job.

Lindsey constantly surprised me with a taste of something new and unexpected—like fresh, tender apricots gently poached in sweet Sauternes to complement their tang, or a scoop of freshly churned rose-flavored ice cream, its perfumed aroma infused with the fragrant petals she’d plucked from her dewy garden that morning. There were golden-brown biscotti with the crunch of toasted almonds, each bite releasing the curious scent of anise, and what became my absolute favorite: wedges of very dark chocolate cake, made with European-style bittersweet chocolate, which were barely sweet. I gobbled up hunks of it every chance I could.

Each day was a revelation to me, and I learned restraint in a profession where the prevalent wisdom had always been not to let guests leave unless they were gut-bustingly full. I knew I was in the right place when I was told “This is the one restaurant where the customer isn’t always right.”

When I started, I worked in the café upstairs, and learned how to let the leaves of just-picked lettuce fall from my hands into an airy heap on the plate just so. Later, when I moved to the pastry department, I reveled in the *fraises des bois*, tiny wild strawberries raised especially for us, each one a tiny burst of the most intense strawberry flavor imaginable, which we’d serve with just a scoop of nutty crème fraîche and a sprinkle of sugar, letting the flavor of the wild berries shine. We were making food that was meant to inspire, not be mindlessly ingested. With each flat of picture-perfect fruit or berries I tore into, I realized I was part of something very special.

While I happily learned dessert making surrounded by the most dedicated cooks imaginable, as the years wore on something else was happening: My back and brain were suffering under the stress and brutal demands of restaurant work. Cooks are known to move rapidly from job to job, but they stay put at Chez Panisse. When only the highest-quality ingredients are available to you and you’re surrounded by a terrific crew of people with the same passionate interest in sending out the best food possible, where do you go next? What do you do?

So after over a decade, I left Chez Panisse. But then had to ask myself, “What should I do?” I didn’t really know, but Alice suggested I write a book of desserts. So I started by plucking my favorite cookbooks off the shelf and seeing what features appealed to me most. I had created quite a few recipes and adapted some that were inspired by others, and I wanted to share them in a friendly, approachable style. Most of them were simple to make and didn’t require an arsenal of fancy equipment.

I also wanted to shift people’s perception of dessert from being the rich overload, the proverbial “nail in the coffin” that seals one’s fate after dinner, to simpler sweets that

concentrated on the pure flavors of fresh fruits and dark chocolate. I was delighted when people reported back that my recipes had become part of their permanent repertoires and happy to be carrying on with the foundations that Lindsey and Alice had instilled in me.

After a few years in the pajama-clad workforce of folks who work at home (or in my case, specifically, in the kitchen), I had a life-changing experience: I unexpectedly lost my partner, who had been the vision of health and vitality. It was one of those unimaginable experiences in life where everything around you stops and you go into shock, able to do only what's necessary to stay afloat. I was devastated, and as Joan Didion wrote in *A Year of Magical Thinking*, I found myself in that “place none of us know until we reach it.”

Eventually, after months and months of numbness, I realized I needed to rejoin life. After learning that life can take an unexpected turn when you don't think it will, I sought to regain my footing and felt ready to move forward.

It was an opportunity to flip over the Etch A Sketch of my life, give it a good shake, and start again. I had so much: a job in one of the best restaurants in America, a few well-received cookbooks, a beautiful house in San Francisco with a professionally equipped kitchen, and lots of really close friends who meant the world to me. But all that wasn't fueling me anymore. After all I'd gone through, I was emotionally exhausted and in need of something to recharge me.

So I decided to move to Paris.

My friends reacted by saying, “You can't run away, David.” But I didn't feel like I was running from anything; I was heading in a new direction.

Why would anyone run from a beautiful city like San Francisco, where I had lived most of my life, and where all my friends were? Well, because there was Paris.

I had fallen in love with Paris when I had attended some advanced pastry classes at the prestigious Ecole Lenôtre a few years earlier. One night after a lively dinner with friends, I was walking alone across one of the graceful bridges that cross the Seine. If you've ever walked through Paris at night, you can't help noticing that its beauty is magnified in the darkness; lights glow softly everywhere and frame the centuries-old buildings and monuments in spectacular ways. I remember that evening breathing in the damp air rising off the Seine, watching the Bateaux Parisiens gliding on the river, loaded with awestruck tourists, and illuminating the monuments in their wake, the dramatic light hitting a building for just a few moments before moving on to the next.

It's the life of the city, though, that held the most appeal for me and inspired my move. Paris is a major metropolis, yet has all the peculiarities and charms of a small town. Each neighborhood has a special personality, its butchers and bakers, the *marâchers* at the open-air stalls selling fruits and vegetables piled high, and the cafés, which Parisians use as makeshift living rooms to mingle with friends over a glass of wine, or just to sit by themselves with a chilled kir, content to do nothing more than gaze off in the distance.

It all seemed good to me. So off I went.



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## KIR

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MAKES 1 SERVING

Kir is a popular apéritif named after the former mayor of Dijon who dedicated himself to reviving the café culture in Burgundy after it had been devastated by World War II. He was a big proponent of this apéritif, which featured a splash of crème de cassis, a fruity liqueur made with locally produced black currants. This further endeared him to the locals, as well as to me.

Substitute Champagne for the white wine and you've got a kir royale. Just be sure to serve it in a Champagne flute, which even the humblest and funkiest café in Paris will do. I prefer my kir on the lighter side, although it's very *au courant* to use a bit more cassis than suggested here.

1½ to 2 teaspoons crème de cassis

1 glass well-chilled dry white wine, preferably Aligoté, or another tangy-dry white wine, such as Chablis or Sauvignon Blanc, will also do

Pour the crème de cassis into a wineglass. Add the wine and serve. The accompaniment of choice, in Paris, is salted peanuts.

### NOTES ON THE RECIPES

All the recipes in the book were tested in my Parisian kitchen using a combination of French and American ingredients, and in an American kitchen using all-American ingredients.

Where certain items may be unavailable, I've offered substitutes that will yield excellent results no matter where your kitchen is. I've listed mail order and online sources (see Resources, page 271), although almost everything should be available in well-stocked supermarkets, and I encourage you to use local ingredients whenever possible.

Because there are so many kinds of salt to choose from, I often call for "coarse salt." Kosher salt and sea salt are both appropriate. If not specified, you can use whatever you prefer. I don't use fine table salt, which I find too harsh and acrid. If that's what you prefer, cut the amount of salt in half to compensate.

If sugar is called for in recipes, it's white granulated sugar, similar to what's called "castor sugar" in some countries. Powdered sugar, also called confectioners' sugar, is known in other English-speaking countries as "icing sugar." Flour is always all-

purpose, unless noted otherwise.

While prevalent wisdom has decreed that we should use only unsalted butter for baking, you can use salted butter and omit the salt in the recipes. (I'm considering leading a return-of-salted-butter movement.)

Last, a few of the recipes in this book may appear in another form on my Web site. Recipes evolve over time, and it's interesting to go back and see how my tastes and techniques have progressed. In spite of the fact that technology makes it possible to "turn back time" and make changes, I chose to keep them intact online since those entries are a record of what I made at that particular time. Any recipes in this book that originally appeared on the site are the result of revisions and refinements.



## JE SUIS PARISIEN

My first day in Paris, I was already in a fight—with three ridiculously overstuffed suitcases containing everything I couldn't bear to live without. For most people, it would be clothing, a stockpile of their favorite shampoo, and maybe a photo album or two. Me? My suitcases were jam-packed with Sharpies, crunchy peanut butter, and measuring cups. The four of us wrestled through the massive wooden doorway of my unfamiliar apartment building and landed in a deserted courtyard. After twenty years of living in San Francisco, I had sold virtually everything I owned, and the rest I brought with me.

In addition to the cherished items in my suitcases, a few weeks earlier I had packed up two cases of my absolute favorite, most cherished cookbooks from a collection that I'd amassed over the years at Chez Panisse, all signed by the authors whom I'd met and cooked with, timing the boxes' arrival to coincide with mine.

This year marks the sixth anniversary of my expectation that any day now, *La Poste* will knock on my door and reunite me with my long-lost collection of cookbooks. I refuse to give up hope. As a Frenchman at a dinner party said to me shortly after I arrived, and recounted my first troubled weeks in Paris, "I love Americans. You're all so optimistic!"

Realistically, I have to assume by now that somebody, somewhere, has a fabulous library of personally autographed cookbooks by Julia Child, Richard Olney, and Jane Grigson. I just hope his name is David, he's into cooking, and he treasures them as much as I did.

After stuffing myself and my luggage into the impossibly cramped elevator, the suitcases wobbling one on top of the other in a space half the size of an airplane bathroom, the door struggled to close, and I prayed I'd make it to the top floor without being crushed to death.

The door opened at the top and we all stumbled out. I dug out of my pocket the grandiose key that had been mailed to me for my dream *appartement*, which I'd optimistically fallen in love with from the pictures on the Internet. The place had looked perfect—ceilings mirroring the mansard roof, a compact but wide-open kitchen, an expansive rooftop view of Paris, and a peaceful, Zen-like bedroom.

Turning the key in the little slot, I swung open the door.

I stepped inside and pushed my way through the vastly overgrown and spindly tendrils of a dried-up and long ago given-up-for-dead plant whose withering branches were nailed firmly in place across the entryway. Once I managed to hack through the urban jungle, I looked around and took in my new home.

Where one might traditionally find, say, ceilings, big pieces of crumbly stucco dangled instead, collapsing in shards of papery stalactites, littering everything with dusty flakes of plaster. I kicked aside some of the debris and looked down at the carpet, which was so dank and filthy I didn't want to soil the bottoms of my shoes by walking on it.

The Japanese-inspired bedroom was indeed an oasis of tranquility, except for the futon bed, which was splattered with some stains that made me more than a little uneasy. And the previous tenant had left a collection of beer bottles by the bedside. Ever the optimist, I wanted to assume they were intended as a welcome-to-Paris gesture, but since they'd been polished off before my arrival, I could feel my optimism slipping away. At least my predecessors were kind enough to dispose of their stinky cigarette butts, which filled the inside of the bottles, rather than messing up the floor.

So what does one do when faced with this kind of situation?

In Paris, there's only one thing you can do: eat. And have a glass of wine. Or maybe two. So I left, closing the door and locking it behind me. (As if anyone was going to steal my old socks and measuring cups.) Hungry for my first Parisian lunch, I took a walk and stopped at a small café. Flustered and overwhelmed by my less-than-successful arrival, I ordered a *salade* and the first of many glasses of wine, which I quickly surmised would become a good coping strategy for any problems that were to come.

After lunch, I went back to the apartment and made an anguished call to the landlord, who lived abroad. He managed to find a painter to rehabilitate my two-room apartment, which meant I had to move out before I could move in, the first of many mind-skewing French paradoxes. I expected a small job like painting two rooms might take a normal painter about a week.

Except the landlord hired a French painter.



One of the most important things I would tell anyone moving to France is not to expect anyone to be particularly concerned about finding the most expedient path to the end result.

If you don't believe me, join the queue of Parisians waiting for their baguettes at the *boulangerie* and you'll see what I mean. You've never heard so many elaborate

discussions over which baguette is better: *pas trop cuite* or *bien cuite* (pale and soft versus well-baked and crunchy), *traditionnelle* or *ordinaire*, *demie* or *entière* ...

Listen as you wait in line at the *volailles*: Is that *poularde* in the case going to make a more flavorful bouillon than the *poulet fermier* in the window? Could that chicken on the left be exactly the same size as the one next to it? Is it *really* the same price? Can you weigh them both and check just to be sure? Do you have others in the back?

The negotiations, gesticulations, and debate are far more important than the final result, which is getting the goods and getting out of there. And when it's time to pay, that simple act can last an eternity too, as each precious centime is extracted and painstakingly given up to the cashier. For some reason, to the French, it always seems like a total surprise when the time comes to pay up. As if the customers are saying, "After all that, you expect me *to pay*, too?"

"What do you do all day in Paris?" is something I'm often asked by people who think I spend my days hopping from chocolate shop to patisserie. I know it's not very interesting or romantic for them to hear, "Well, yesterday I bought paper clips." Or "On Monday, I tried to return something that was broken. Tuesday, I went searching for shoelaces."

I've learned to give myself p-l-e-n-t-y of time to run errands, and I realized the rule, rather than the exception, is that either the place will be closed when I get there (albeit with a polite *excusez-nous* taped to the door) or it will have every item, such as each and every kind of herb tea imaginable, *except* for the most common one of all—like chamomile. Which, *of course*, is the one my queasy tummy desperately needs.

The first time I had to return something in Paris, I naively thought I could take care of it in just a few minutes. The phone battery I had bought to replace the dead one in my new apartment at the electronics chain, Darty, didn't work. Since the store advertises in big letters painted on the wall: *Notre Objectif: 100% de clients satisfaits*, I thought it would be a breeze. I'd pop in, get a replacement, and join the happy ranks of the 100 percent satisfied customers.

I entered the store and waited in the short line at the *acceuil* counter, which, even though the word means "welcome," is, paradoxically, the most unwelcoming place in France. There I waited and waited...and waited and waited...and waited and waited. Even though there were just a couple of people in front of me, a half-hour passed before it was my turn. Each transaction seemed to take forever, with lots of back-and-forth negotiations on both sides, ending with either reluctant acceptance by the cashier, or an admission of defeat by the customer, who would shrug his shoulders and walk away.

Americans don't like to accept defeat, which is why the phrase, "Can I speak to the manager?" is so often used. In the United States, the manager sides with the customer and usually clears up the problem in your favor. In France, the manager isn't there to help customers. His job is to watch out for fellow employees. So you're better off not asking, unless you're confident enough to take on two adversaries instead of one.

When it was my turn, I figured I'd hand off the bad battery and they'd simply hand me a new one, or give me a refund. Instead, I was directed downstairs, to the *service clients* desk.

After shuffling through a mound of paperwork jammed into several bulging three-ring binders, the clerk began to compile a dossier. A stack of forms was filled out, date-stamped multiple times, then photocopied. Afterward, a manager was called to sign his approval, which he grudgingly did after studying the contents of the thick folder for a few minutes, suspiciously looking for some clue that I was fudging my bum battery claim. Then I was directed back upstairs, presumably to pick up my refund.

Relieved to be done, I proudly presented the supremely uninterested woman behind the register with my folder of paperwork, expecting to be united with a new battery. Instead, I needed to go to *another desk*, where my dossier would be reinspected and a new battery *might* be located for me.

The woman at that desk spent what seemed an inordinate amount of time searching for my replacement on her computer. When she couldn't find one in stock, I asked, optimistically, "Could I please just get a refund then?"

Let's just say that if there's supposed to be truth in advertising, they need to lower their 100 percent *satisfait* number by one.



Back at home, equally low on my customer-satisfaction scale was my resident *artiste*. After two weeks, he'd nearly finished the painting but was finding it impossible to make that last definitive brushstroke and leave. I could again feel my cheery optimism slipping away day by day. After leaving him alone to work and camping out at a friend's apartment, I'd foolishly assumed that if I moved back in and started setting up house around him, he'd take the hint, finish up, and split.

Instead, he left all his gear lying about, and would come back daily to do something—anything—no matter how trivial: repaint the bottom of a door, give the ceiling of the closet another coat, or touch up the baseboard behind the refrigerator. Then he'd leave, saying he'd be back tomorrow to finish up a few more critical areas. After a couple more weeks of this I realized that the concept of "finishing" wasn't part of his agenda, which was odd, since he'd already been paid and I'm sure he had better things to do than spend his afternoons dragging his ladder and drop cloth around my apartment looking for obscure corners to repaint.

Because it's kind of pathetic to see a man in his forties cry, my friends David and Randal offered to perform a "French-painter intervention" and get rid of him once and for all. They called him up and gave him his marching orders, informing him they were piling all his gear outside the apartment door and that he'd better come over to get it as soon as possible. Then we left for a very long walk, stopping in a café for a glass of wine. And when we came back, he and his equipment were out of my life, for good.

Or so I thought.

Fortunately, this was also the same time that I got a new number and learned about *la liste rouge*, a telephone feature that allows you to block your number from anyone you choose, including hostile French painters. And with the touch of a few buttons on my

brand-new telephone, I began to feel like I just might be home.

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SALADE DE CHEVRE CHAUD

## WARM GOAT CHEESE SALAD

MAKES 1 SERVING

The very first thing I ate on my first day in Paris was a *salade de chèvre chaud*, while I dined alone at the Café Le Moderne in the Bastille and pondered my predicament.

After I sat down, I gathered up my courage, linked together the few words of French I knew, and ordered a simple salad topped with rounds of warm goat cheese along with a glass of crisp white wine, the first of many to come.

### Coat cheese toasts

2 slices of hearty bread, such as pain au levain, or good white bread

Extra virgin olive oil

3-ounce (90 g) round, or crottin, of goat cheese, sliced in half horizontally

### Salad

½ teaspoon red wine or sherry vinegar

2 teaspoons extra virgin olive oil

⅛ teaspoon Dijon mustard

Coarse salt

2 cups (100 g) torn green lettuce leaves, rinsed and dried

Freshly ground black pepper

¼ cup (25 g) walnut halves, toasted, optional

1. Preheat the broiler and set the oven rack 4 inches (10 cm) below the heating element.
2. Brush the bread with just enough olive oil to moisten it. Place half of the cheese on each slice. Broil on a baking sheet in the oven until the cheese is soft, warmed through, and a little browned on top. This should take 3 to 5 minutes, depending on your broiler.
3. While the toasts are baking, make a vinaigrette in a large bowl. With a fork, stir the vinegar, olive oil, mustard, and a nice pinch of salt.
4. Toss the lettuce in the vinaigrette and pile on a plate. Grind fresh pepper over the top, rest the warm toasts over the lettuce, and scatter with walnuts, if using.

**SERVING:** Serve with a chilled glass or *fillette* of white wine, such as Muscadet, Sancerre, or Sauvignon Blanc. Enjoy by yourself.



## MA PETITE CUISINE

In order to finalize some of my affairs stateside, later that same year I had to head back to the States for six months. So I decided to sublet my recently painted, state-of-the-art telecommunications-equipped apartment. I posted a listing on a popular Web site and got a few encouraging responses. The most enthusiastic of the lot was from a potential *souslocataire* who “couldn’t wait to be cooking and baking away in the well-stocked and professionally equipped kitchen of—*David Lebovitz!*”

I must not be that good with a camera, because the pictures I sent in response didn’t quite seal the deal, and I never heard from him again. Even with my wide-angle lens, it’s hard to hide the fact that my kitchen is barely big enough for one person, let alone any professional equipment. And apparently my renown with this fellow wasn’t enough to overcome my kitchen’s shortcomings.

Coming from America, where the average kitchen is the size of my entire apartment (and often larger), it was quite an experience learning to bake on a counter so small I had to lift one bowl up before I could set down another. I wasn’t baking so much as practicing crowd control. People see my kitchen and think it’s so cute: “*C’est très parisien!*” they say as they lunge forward in excitement. It’s not until they lift their heads back up and thwack it hard on the sloped ceiling that they begin to understand some of the challenges I face. I learned to watch out for the ceiling eventually. But in the beginning, my head got banged more times than the gals up in Pigalle.

When I moved in, the kitchen was no different from the rest of the apartment: a complete disaster. The refrigerator looked as though it hadn’t been cleaned since the all-out strikes of May 1968. The dishwasher pipes were so caked with Paris’s insidious *calcaire* that when you switched the washer on, instead of humming to life, it would start off with a hopeful buzz that soon led to convulsive wheezing, with plates clattering inside. Shortly afterward, it would progress to violent shaking and begin body-slamming



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