

# How very French

Divine food, art and history — all things Gallic, Napoleon included, are dynamite in Melbourne, writes **Patricia Maunder**.

**M**elbourne. Capital of Terre Napoleon, or Napoleon Land. Oui, mes amis, it was not the British but the French who first mapped Victoria's coast and gave French names to many landmarks. Nicolas Baudin, who led this 1802 expedition, proudly declared the whole of south-east Australia Terre Napoleon, after Bonaparte himself.

During the 18th and 19th centuries, France was fascinated by Australia's flora, fauna and indigenous people, but as the British colonials bedded down, the link between these two lands was all but severed.

Today, anyone looking for Melbourne's French connection down the so-called "Paris end" of Collins Street could be forgiven for thinking there isn't any — unless the stores of international mega-brands such as Chanel and Louis Vuitton count.

What once made this part of Melbourne reminiscent of Paris — heritage architecture, footpath tables and chairs — largely disappeared during the city's mid-20th century modernisation. Even that Parisian-inspired fashion icon, Le Louvre, recently decamped to South Yarra.

Delve deeper into Melbourne's laneways and suburbs, however, and you will discover numerous petit pockets of France — and even more people, whether Francophiles or French expats, eager to discuss their *deux amours*.

Someone who can't choose between her "two loves" is Melburnian Jane Webster. She spends half of each year in her home town and the other in her French chateau.

"Right through school I did French," says Webster, author of two books about her French life; the most recent, *French Ties*, was published in March. "I thought I had a good grasp of the language, but realised pretty quickly on my honeymoon — which was my very first visit to France — that actually I didn't."

Even so, the newlyweds "fell madly in love with the countryside". Most visitors fall in love with France, but Webster became a true Francophile. In the early 1990s she opened a French cafe in Armadale, La Gare, and in 2005 fulfilled her dream of living in France. And yet, it was "absolutely gut-wrenching" to leave Toorak's Hawksburn Village behind.

"You get a real sense of relationships

between shopkeepers and locals in that village", she says, "and there's lots of lovely French influences as well" — particularly that charming slice of France, *Bistro Thierry*.

Hawksburn's friendly, authentic atmosphere of greengrocers, florists, bakers and leisurely meals was precisely what drew Webster to the other side of the world.

"There's a real immersion into just enjoying the simplest of things [in France]," Webster says. "Whether it's a fresh croissant from a boulangerie (bakery) or sitting on the steps of a beautiful church and watching the world go by, or scrounging around in a little brocante (antique) market in a side street in Paris — the whole thing just appealed to me.

"We can do all of these things here but ... you're just surrounded by it there."

Nevertheless, Webster returned after two years, so Melbourne must have just enough of this French style of living. She feels that same *joie de vivre* here "every Saturday morning when I go to a farmers' market ... The artisans that are bringing their produce and home-made goods to those markets are doing it so beautifully, and that reminds me so much of rural France."

Webster's other favourite "French" experiences in Melbourne include *Armadale cafe Rouge*, *Gaudion in Prahran* for home furnishings, and *Anna Thomas boutiques*, where classic Parisian-style tailoring is *de rigueur*.

About this time every year, Webster and her family exchange autumn for spring by relocating to *Chateau de Bosgouet*. There, she operates the *French Table*, a cooking school (with many cultural distractions) aimed at Francophiles. Her guests come from around the world but most, Webster says, are fellow Melburnians.

Melbourne's French fanciers are entranced by different things — food, wine, art, design — but Webster believes the unifying force is "that French love of life and that passion for ... beautiful things, without being materialistic."

Perhaps that's why French-born Melbourne chef Philippe Mouchel always notices a significant increase in customers at his restaurant, *PM24*, during the *Tour de France*.

They are inspired, he believes, by the broadcast's aerial views of bucolic landscapes, majestic mountains and grand chateaus.

"Our customers say, 'We watched the Tour



## A taste of France right here

### FOOD

- **France-Soir**, france-soir.com.au, 11 Toorak Road, South Yarra. Melbourne's veteran of *joie-de-vivre* dining.
- **Bistro Thierry**, bistrot Thierry.com, 511 Malvern Road, Toorak. A very Parisian casual-dining experience, minus the airfare.
- **Breizoz French Creperie**, breizoz.com.au, 49 Brunswick Street, Fitzroy. Traditional crepes and galettes, plus distinctive French cider.

- **La Parisienne Pates**, 290 Lygon Street, Carlton. Charcuterie, cheese and other French delights, including take-home boeuf bourguignon.
- **French Fantasies**, frenchfantasies.com.au, 15 Toorak Road, South Yarra. No, not a sex shop but a feast of fresh bread, pastries and gateaus.
- **La Belle Miette**, labellemiette.com.au, 30 Hardware Lane, Melbourne, and 432 Church Street, Richmond. Macarons are everywhere in Melbourne, but these colourful French treats look the part here.

### LANGUAGE

- **Alliance Francaise**, afmelbourne.com.au, 51 Grey Street, St Kilda. Melbourne's only language school dedicated to French.
- **La Petite Ecole**, members.optusnet.com.au/stephaniepaul/LaPetiteEcole, 710 Inkerman Road, Caulfield North. French-language preschool, from two hours to two days a week.
- Go online to find informal French conversation groups including *Les Amis du Mercredi* and *French in Melbourne*.

May 20, 2012

de France last night, it's so beautiful!" Mouchel says, with an accent to make Francophiles swoon. He has lived in Melbourne since 1991 but hails from Normandy — coincidentally, the same region in northern France for which Webster regularly abandons Melbourne.

She is drawn north by the "slower pace of life" in France, which for her is in stark contrast to our tendency "to be in a hurry; we don't take the time on a daily basis to stop and smell the roses". Mouchel likes living in Melbourne because "people are more relaxed. In France, people are not always very happy."

How could there be such contradictory views about the same Australian city and French region? A matter of the grass being greener on the other side? Or could Mouchel be right, given Australia's reputation for being laid-back, while the French are well known for their formality, elaborate bureaucracy and rigid education system? And yet he is the first to admit that we tend to work hard here, while France is famous for its long lunches and extravagant annual leave.

Perhaps their contrary views have something to do with Webster being attracted to the French countryside, and Mouchel's preference for big cities. While Webster's ideal, whether in France or Melbourne, is strolling through small markets with a wicker basket on one arm and a bunch of flowers on the other, Mouchel relishes the fact that in "big cities like Melbourne, there's a lot of things happening".

Melbourne's abundant sporting experiences are typical of lively cities, Mouchel says, and while he admits that "I miss going to the soccer to see Lyon play, I get to see Melbourne Victory." Same, same but different.

Another key similarity between Melbourne and cities in his homeland is our passion for dining out, though working long hours means he rarely has that pleasure. When the opportunity arises, a favourite destination is South Yarra restaurant France-Soir.

Another Mouchel indulgence is just a few doors down at French Fantasies, where he enjoys buying a baguette in the morning and "a small cake in the afternoon ... like afternoon tea in Paris".

Despite his preference for city life, including classical music concerts and visits to the museum, Mouchel often drives to the country on those rare days off. "I visit a winery," he says. "Usually I go to the Yarra Valley or the Mornington Peninsula because it reminds me a bit of the countryside in Normandy."

Perhaps Mouchel is not so different from Webster after all. Certainly, they are both eager to promote all things French. Mouchel, for example, is a regular guest on fellow French-Melburnian Gabriel Gate's cooking sessions for SBS's *Tour de France* coverage.

He is also one of several chefs behind the National Gallery of Victoria's forthcoming French degustation dinners. These banquets are among various French-themed events presented in conjunction with the gallery's *Napoleon*:



(Above) chef Philippe Mouchel; (left) *Napoleon: Revolution to Empire* opens at the NGV in June. PICTURES: SIMON SCHLUTER, EDDIE JIM

“Our customers say, ‘We watched the *Tour de France* last night, it’s so beautiful!’”

Philippe Mouchel, PM24

*Revolution to Empire* exhibition, which opens on June 2. Which brings us back to the extraordinary fact that Melbourne was once in Terre Napoleon.

"People seem to be shocked that Victoria is Napoleon Land," says Dr Ted Gott, the NGV's senior curator of international art. "Hopefully after this show they will believe it."

A first-edition Terre Napoleon map, complete with hundreds of French place names, is one of the exhibition items that reveal Australia's forgotten French connections.

There will also be artworks produced during the various French voyages to the region: exquisite portraits of indigenous people and remarkably accurate drawings of native flora and fauna. (These expeditions also brought live plants and animals back to France; Napoleon took some to his country property, Malmaison, where the menagerie included black swans, emus and kangaroos).

Another exhibition highlight is a book that belonged to Napoleon: Captain Cook's 1771 bestseller describing his voyage of discovery to Australia. One of Napoleon's favourite reads, it was with him when he died in exile on the island of St Helena.

How did the NGV acquire this book, and why is there a suburb on Melbourne's north-eastern fringe named after the island?

Napoleon became close to his British hosts on St Helena, the Balcombes. They moved to Australia in 1824 when William Balcombe was appointed colonial treasurer, "bringing their memories and souvenirs of Napoleon with them", Gott says. One of the Balcombe boys built a house at Mount Martha, naming it the Briars after the family home on St Helena.

His granddaughter, Dame Mabel Brookes, added to the family's Napoleonic collection, which she bequeathed to the NGV.

Consequently, the gallery has about 300 works related to the Frenchman. "There are many, many books ... letters, diaries, and personal objects given to the family by Napoleon," Gott says.

The Briars, "a bit of Napoleon on our doorstep", as Gott describes it, is open to the public. Furniture brought from St Helena by the Balcombes is on display, as well as Napoleonic memorabilia.

As for Melbourne's St Helena, the area was named by a man who was born on the island and migrated to Australia in 1839.

"The intriguing thing to speculate upon is what would Australia have been like if the Battle of Waterloo had gone the other way," says Gott, a self-confessed Francophile. "Would we now be in a country that is like Canada?"

Melbourne. Capital of Terre Napoleon and, like Montreal, a bilingual city. "How groovy would that be?" Gott says, with a slightly wistful laugh.

*French Ties* is published by Penguin, \$59.95. penguin.com.au. PM24 is at 24 Russell Street, Melbourne, pm24.com.au. *Napoleon: Revolution to Empire* opens at the NGV on June 2, ngv.vic.gov.au.

## BEAUTIFUL THINGS

- **Galerie Montmartre**, galeriemontmartre.com, rear 197B Brunswick Street, Fitzroy. Vintage advertising posters, from Billecart Champagne to Air France.
- **Gaudlon**, gaudlons.com, 602 High Street, Prahran. Furniture and home accessories inspired by antique European — especially French — designs.
- **Le Louvre**, lelouvre.com.au, 2 Daly Street, South Yarra. The fashion institution's new take on the Paris haute-couture salon experience.

## CULTURE AND ENTERTAINMENT

- **SBS**, sbs.com.au. Tune into the French radio program, while on television there is French news and films. On June 30, the ever-popular *Tour de France* cycling race, won last year by Australia's Cadel Evans, begins its 99th event in Province de Liege.
- **LBF**, lbf.com.au. More than 35 channels of French digital television.
- **Melbourne French Theatre**, mftinc.org, 213 Canning Street, Carlton. Now in its 35th year, MFT presents several French-language plays annually.
- **So Frenchy So Chic**. Created in Melbourne, these French music compilations developed into a live event in January.
- **Paris to Provence**, www.paristoprovence.com.au, Como House, November 23-25. A pop-up French village with food, entertainment and even French property seminars.
- **French Film Festival**, frenchfilmfestival.org. The annual bonanza of Gallic cinema in March.

Patricia Maunder

