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Les Hamburgers in the City of Light and Strikes and Floods

by Alison Grambs

It was hard not to take it personally.

The moment my mother and I stumbled off the plane onto Parisian soil this past June, the city was getting away from itself in a most unusual way.

Too-close-for-comfort terrorism alerts were being issued to Americans traveling to France. Torrential and relentless downpours of rain were pummeling the streets. The Seine was flooding to a historic level. A strike by transit workers and airport employees was looming. Unseasonably cold temperatures were forcing us to forego wearing the Paris-style fashions we had dreamily packed in our matching luggage sets. And, in an emergency act of protecting its antiquities from drowning, the Louvre had the nerve to close its doors - literally as we were arriving at the ticket booth - rendering us unable to so much as snap a prized selfie of us surrounded by hundreds of other tourists snapping selfies of themselves snapping selfies with Ms. Mona Lisa.

Frankly, the City of Light was looking more like the City of Uh-Oh, and I'm fairly certain my mother wanted to cry. After all, this was the highly-anticipated mother-daughter trip she'd been planning for a year now. A vacation to celebrate our triumphant survival through a previous year of abysmal woes. A vacation that had already been postponed once and had a lot riding on it emotionally and spiritually. A vacation that, at this point, seemed would have been better spent in the Bahamas. Or Trenton, New Jersey.

It was a hunk of meat that turned things around for Mom and me.

After an arduous day of observing the architectural wonders of Paris through the nylon of our half-broken parapluies - navigating rather crookedly and grumpily through soaked streets with our equally soaked map - we were feeling lost and dejected. None of the plans we had set forth were working out, in a city defined by its cuisine and dotted with myriad cafes and bistros, we had managed to forget to eat for twelve hours. So, we dipped into a hole-in-the-wall eatery next door to our understated hotel and were confronted with an alarmingly limited chalkboard menu. Once again defeatedly, we ordered the only entree we could decipher with our Rosetta Stone vocabulary: Le Hamburger.



"Sounds so Frauuuuunch, doesn't it?" my mother and I snorted in mocking unison - laughing for the first time that day as we waited for our presumably un-French food to arrive. The dig was directed at ourselves; two women who had been so sure they'd been dining on frogs legs & snails and steak tartare. Such delicacies had so far eluded us. Mere pipe dreams now. All we wanted to do was shove something down our gullets and go to bed to sleep until our flight the following week.

The jovial owner, a man with a slightly rounded belly and doughy face, brought us wine. Neither of us drinks, per se, so to be honest, those two glasses could have been filled to the brim with Tang, and Mom and I would have gulped it down with delight. But it was the gesture that we noted.

"Red or white?" he had asked us sweetly en français.

"I think we're supposed to drink red with meat, non?" my mother had replied, sheepishly employing her best Rosetta Stone French speaking skills. After a day of taking wrong turns and wrong buses and wrong trains, she just wanted to get one damn thing right. "Is that what you recommend, Monsieur?"

"Yes," I had added for emotional support in my best Rosetta Stone French. "Please provide whatever you think is best. Pretty much everything that could go wrong has gone wrong for us today. We cannot be trusted to make such an important decision. We are idiots."

The owner had smiled genially, shooing away our self-consciousness with a swift wave of his hand in the air. Then he had disappeared behind the bar only to reappear with two bottles of wine. One white. One red. "Vous boire ce que vous voulez boire," he had declared with a warm smile. "Qu'est-ce qui vous rend heureux!"

Then, realizing from the twisted expressions on our fatigued faces that we had no idea what he had just said, the owner had repeated his declaration in perfect English. "You drink what you want to drink. What makes you happy?"

And there it was. In one fell swoop, this lovely stranger had given my mother and me permission to relax. To go easy on ourselves. To enjoy.

And enjoy we did. Les hamburgers arrived a few moments later. Outfitted on buns so perfectly toasted, doused in a sauce so superbly balanced in both seasoning and consistency, and garnished with a side of potatoes-something so glorious that it redefined the words pomme de terre, it was as if these magical mounds of meat had been touched by the hand of God. Mom and I groaned with delight as we took in bite after bite. Who knew hamburgers could be life-changing? We asked the owner to extend our compliments to the chef... who, as it turned out, was him.



For a good two hours my mother and I sat at that hole-in-the-wall restaurant. Sipping our red wine, sipping our white wine, feasting on our very French hamburgers, and enjoying. Enjoying despite the terrorism alerts. Enjoying despite the torrential downpours. The Seine flooding, the looming strikes, the unseasonably chilly air. And from that night forward, my mother and I enjoyed every inch of Paris, delightedly exploring all corners of the City of Light and Floods and Strikes. If there was a Metro line to explore, we explored it. If there was a water-logged street to stroll, we strolled it. If there was an architectural site to admire, we admired it. If there was a local to chat up, we chatted him/her up. And yes, we even got to eat frogs legs and snails and steak tartare.

Despite the odds, the trip my mother had dreamed would be the mother-daughter trip of a lifetime proved to be exactly that: the mother-daughter trip of a lifetime. The only thing we didn't get to do was visit the Louvre, which remained closed for the duration of our stay. (Apparently, that sulky Mona Lisa chick is a scaredy-cat when it comes to a little water.) But we took one heck of an awesome selfie with les hamburgers!

Alison is the author of *"The Man Translator: Your Essential Guide to Manland"* and *"The Smart Girl's Guide To Getting Even"*, and has a new book coming out this Fall. Her website is www.AlisonGrambs.com.

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Comments

#1 **Nan Mitchell** 2016-09-06 20:13
Hi Ali
I just loved your story about Paris! I could just see the both of you there. How perfectly you drew the picture of the two of you starving and finding that small hole in the wall. I can hear how you both took such joy in the simple burger!
I'm also glad you had such a great Mother Daughter trip! I think of you often and the fun we had on the road! Love, Nan

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Happy Thanksgiving!

Duckhorn Merlot
Veuve Clicquot Pink Champagne

Caviar Pie & Salted Crackers
Assorted French Cheeses & Sliced Apples

Perfect Roast Turkey
Smokey Sweet Potato Souffle
Mashed Potatoes
Green Beans with Almonds
Brussels Sprouts with Bacon
Corn Bread Stuffing
French Meat Stuffing
Apricot Jello Mold
POM Cranberry Sauce
Old Fashioned Cranberry Sauce

Pumpkin Pie
Deep Dish Apple Pie
Cherry Pie
Gingersnaps

Brandy & Coffee

Senator Biden's Favorite Oatmeal Raisin Cookies

1 cup shortening or butter
1 cup firmly packed brown sugar
1/2 cup granulated sugar
2 eggs
1 teaspoon vanilla
1 1/2 cups all-purpose flour
1 teaspoon baking soda
1 teaspoon cinnamon
1/2 teaspoon salt
3 cups old fashioned oats
1 cup raisins
nuts (optional)

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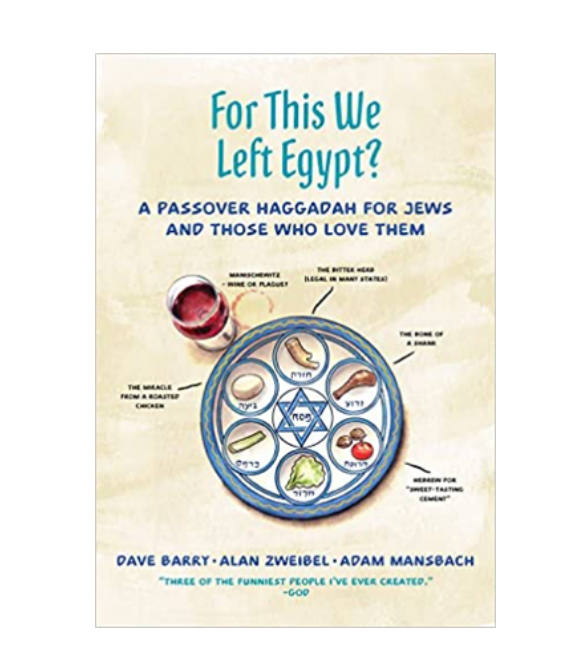
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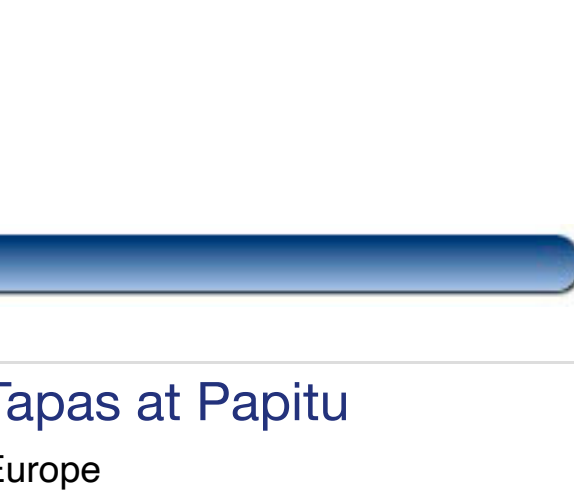
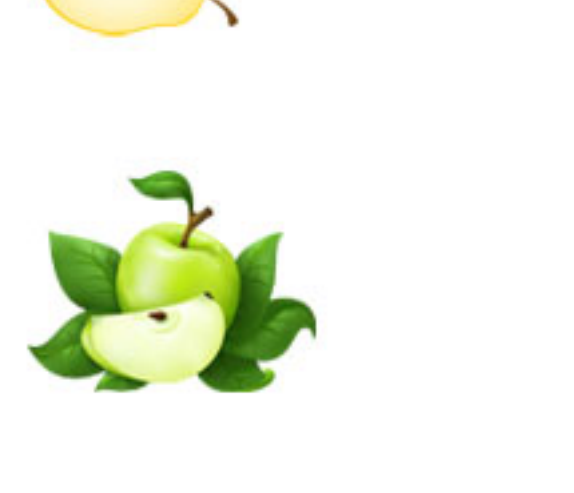
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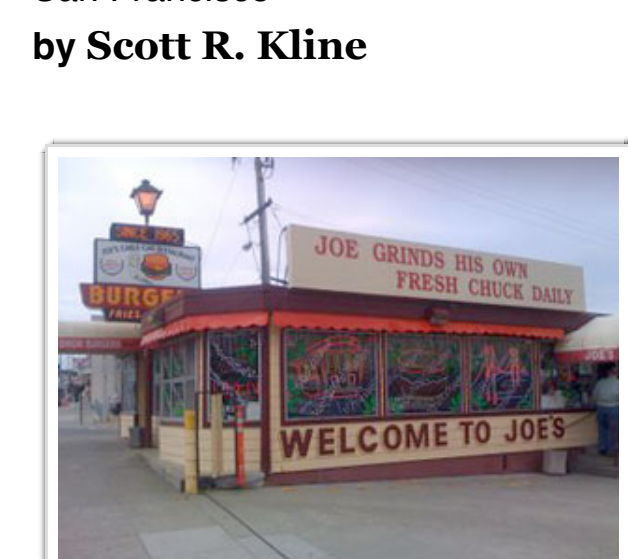
Lunch at Maggie's Farm in Middleton
New England
by **Kitty Kaufman**



Today's adventure begins as I leave Boston over the Tobin Bridge to Route 1 North to Middleton. I go by giant box stores and chain restaurants I've only read about. Although people drive fast in...

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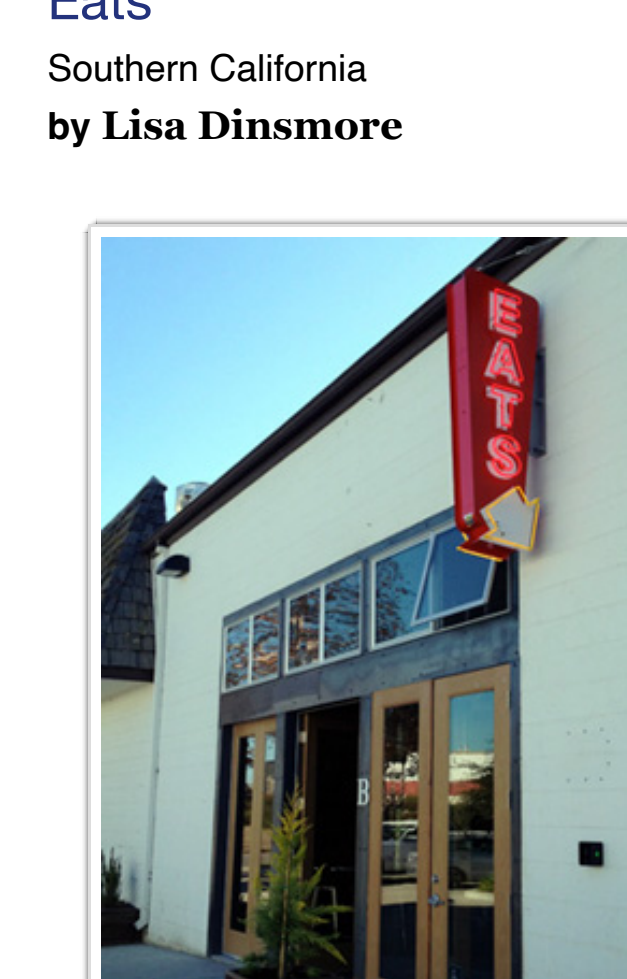
Joe's Cable Car Restaurant
San Francisco, California
by **Scott R. Kline**



Joe's Cable Car Restaurant in San Francisco is where "Joe Grinds His Own Fresh Chuck Daily". A large sign on the outside of the restaurant declares this in bold type. Joe's has been around since...

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A Santa Ynez Wine Country Find: Industrial Eats
Southern California
by **Lisa Dinsmore**



I just love the food and wine community on social media. They find all the coolest and latest places to go when you head out on the road. While our trips to wine country always center on finding...

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Tapas at Patitu
Europe
by **Michael Tucker**



We took a break from olive picking to hop across the pond to Barcelona to attend the Catalan International Environmental Film Festival. We were invited through our friend, Will Parinello, who was...

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