

Election Rejection  
Noshing at Nobu  
Fruit for a King  
Mike's Two-Wheel Tour  
Art for the Masses  
Eat Here First

JUNE 2002

# PARIS

## n o t e s

Euro May 14: 1.109  
Euro April 11: 1.133  
Rain Days: 12  
High Temp: 73°F/23°C  
Low Temp: 55°F/13°C  
Nat'l Holidays: none

VOLUME 11 ISSUE 5

By David Downie

## BEAU MARAIS

The Marais, home to Beaumarchais—clockmaker, musician, playwright, pamphleteer, arms dealer, spy

You can walk across the Marais in half an hour. Or, like me, you can spend a lifetime exploring the leafy squares, arm-span-wide alleys and mossy courtyards of one of Paris' most atmospheric neighborhoods. They're woven along imperfectly traced arteries between the Bastille and Beaubourg, the Seine and Temple, in the 3rd and 4th arrondissements. *Le shopping* may be what draws most visitors to this self-consciously chic theme park for what Parisians call *Bobos*—Bohemian Bourgeois. Wall-to-wall boutiques, art galleries and faux-bistros are shoehorned between museums and administrative offices in landmark Louis-something townhouses. Behind the scrubbed facades and under the cobbles lurk layers of history, mystery and lore. Since the mid-1980s, I've lived near Saint-Paul and the Place des Vosges, the neighborhood's centerpiece, and when it comes to understanding and appreciating the Marais I've barely scraped the icing off this luscious layer-cake.

Despite its inauspicious name—*marais* is old French for swamp—and equally murky early days as a floodplain, the neighborhood has long lured a mixed bag of humanity. Some contemporary admirers like to hark back 1,000 years or more, but in my wanderings I've never heard the rumble of chariots on the Rue Saint-Antoine, the neighborhood's ancient Roman backbone, or the clatter of medieval knights en route to their fortresses at the Bastille, La Force or Temple. Some echoes from the Marais' past—especially those from the 17th and 18th centuries' Golden Age—do still resonate, though, above the white noise of cell phones and street-corner jazz ensembles. One voice in particular often calls out to me, the voice of Pierre-Augustin Caron, better known as Beaumarchais. "I make myself laugh at everything," Beaumarchais famously quipped, "for fear of having to weep."

Clockmaker, musician, playwright, pamphleteer, arms dealer and spy, Beaumarchais was born in 1732 on the Rue Saint-Denis, a few blocks west of the Marais, and later lived in a Rue Vieille-du-Temple mansion in what's now the Marais' gay district. He died in 1799, having made and lost several fortunes, in an extravagant palace he'd

built on what's now the Boulevard Beaumarchais, abutting the Place de la Bastille and Boulevard Richard-Lenoir. Beaumarchais certainly loved the Marais he knew. Would he love it today?

A bronze statue on the Rue Saint-Antoine in a small square on the corner of the Rue des Tournelles shows a handsome, vigorous Beaumarchais. His sword is bent: for the last 100 years people have been hanging bouquets from its tip—during the protest marches that start at the Bastille and, traditionally, move up the Rue Saint-Antoine or Boulevard Beaumarchais. There's a hotel just off the Rue de Rivoli, and plaques on walls scattered



here and there. They remind the Marais' window-shoppers and museum-goers that Beaumarchais was the author of *The Barber of Seville* and *The Marriage of Figaro*. Like the neighborhood's facades and cobbled recesses, these physical reminders of the man's passing open the doors of speculative fancy. To my mind what makes Beaumarchais ever present amid the Marais' bumper-to-bumper trendies is his eerily contemporary, disconcertingly ambiguous character. In a single person are merged the brutal contradictions and wild paradoxes of an age more like our own than many might think. If such a thing as "spirit of place" exists, then Beaumarchais' might very well have been—and may still be—the spirit of the Marais and its denizens: ambitious, litigious, subversive, licentious, arrogant, nostalgic, progressive, en-

lightened, opportunistic, self-important, and at once aristocratic and thoroughly *parvenu*. Sound like the designers, architects, statesmen, fashion models and starlets who make the Marais home today?

If Beaumarchais were alive, he would probably be director of the Opéra Bastille, receiving a salary plus subsidies (as a librettist, musician and playwright) from the Ministry of Culture, while at the same time trying to dismantle the old-boy bureaucracy sustaining him. Since the Boulevard Beaumarchais is traffic-clogged and undistinguished nowadays, he might choose to live in, say, the quietly posh Place des Vosges, perhaps in the same restored townhouse as Socialist minister Jack Lang. Or maybe he'd gut and reconvert a historic property in the Rue des Francs-Bourgeois, like celebrity architect Jean Nouvel. More likely, Beaumarchais would knock down a landmark mansion or two and build something vast and provocative—after all he was a passionate innovator, and he did help bring down the sclerotic Ancien Régime despite his closeness to Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette.

Doubtless, a modern Beaumarchais would dine regularly at such Michelin-starred Marais perennials as Ambroisie or Benoit, breaking bread with politicians from left and right, needling and wheedling both, soliciting and dispensing kickbacks, making and breaking his allies and enemies. Perhaps he would lobby the Greens to turn the Marais into a car-free zone, as some misguided inhabitants are currently trying to do, while ensuring that he could still drive his SUV or Ferrari to his sumptuous digs (and those of his many mistresses). "Drinking when we're not thirsty and making love year round, Madame, that's all that distinguishes us from other animals," sang Figaro the libertine. And, as Beaumarchais' biographers agree, Figaro and his creator were one and the same.

If I step out of my courtyard, turn left then right into the arched Place des Vosges, I find myself facing one of the Marais' touchstones, an antique shop called Balmès-Richelieu. It occupies the first pavilion (continued on page 7)

Beau Marais, continued from page 1

on the north side of the square as you enter from the Rue des Francs-Bourgeois and inevitably conjures up Beaumarchais and his world. Pierre Balmès, octogenarian specialist in timepieces even older than himself, opened for business here in 1949. He's an anchor in the maelstrom of blanket restoration and gentrification sweeping the Marais. I can't help fantasizing that the shop, with its dusty displays of clocks and centuries-old tools, is the current incarnation of the establishment owned and operated by Beaumarchais' father in the 1730s. It was among the clocks, jewels and musical instruments that Beaumarchais, barely out of his teens, invented a spring mechanism that made watches run more accurately. And it was in defending his invention from Lepaute, the royal watchmaker who stole his idea, that Beaumarchais demonstrated his preternatural talents as writer and orator. He won his case before the Academy of Sciences and soon replaced Lepaute at Louis XV's Versailles court, quickly becoming, among other things, harp instructor to the king's daughters, the associate of the kingdom's biggest arms dealer and protégé of the king's official mistress, Madame de Pompadour. (To get a feel for Beaumarchais' Versailles life, visit de Pompadour's recently restored and reopened "secret" apartments.)

The young Beaumarchais craved respectability, and while the city's best addresses at the end of Louis XV's reign were being built in the Left Bank's Saint-Germain neighborhood, the Marais was still a fashionable enclave, just as it is now, for bluebloods and professionals at the top of their career. Only after years of social climbing, court intrigue, spying on the king's behalf, gun-running and two marriages (the first to a rich widow with a property named "Beaumarchais") did the watchmaker-become-nobleman manage to move from Versailles via London to a Marais townhouse, the luxurious Hôtel Amelot de Bisseuil, often called the Hôtel des Ambassadeurs de Hollande, on the Rue Vieille-du-Temple.

If you stroll up this café-lined street from the Rue de Rivoli you'll see immediately on your right the three-star Hôtel Caron de Beaumarchais. It liberally derives its name and theme décor—a 1792 Erard pianoforte in the lobby and cozily faux-Ancien Régime-style rooms—from the proximity of Beaumarchais' residence, two blocks north. Hidden among the bookshops, accessory stores and specialty food boutiques, you'll recognize the mansion at number 47 for its grimy exterior and heavy carriage doors elaborately carved with writhing Medusa heads. Rebuilt in the 1650s atop medieval foundations, and many times remodeled by the time Beaumarchais rented it in 1776, the townhouse was more than merely the budding playwright's dream residence. It was here, in the gilded, frescoed salons frequented by emissaries and artists, that Beaumarchais headquartered Rodríguez, Hortalez et Cie, a cover worthy of a modern spy novel that was at the heart of an intricate clandestine operation to supply American revolutionaries with ships, arms and gunpowder. With one adroit hand Beaumarchais

brought Figaro to life in this townhouse, while with the other he spent over 6 million *livres* of French and Spanish gold to help the insurgents beat the British. Without Beaumarchais, historians say, the decisive Battle of Saratoga couldn't have been won. Without Figaro, add others, the Bastille might never have fallen. It shouldn't detract from his achievements that Beaumarchais undertook both his arms-dealing and playwrighting to turn a profit—his motto ran, roughly, "Do the public good while lining your own pocket." He was prototypically modern, with eyes firmly on the bottom line. That explains why, in the *salons* of this mansion in the heat of July 1777, he also created the Société des Auteurs Dramatiques, paving the way for the first laws on intellectual property and royalty payments. It was here too that Beaumarchais became publisher of Voltaire's collected works, a ruinous venture that also heightened hereditary, divine-right Ancien Régime aristocrats' and plutocrats' suspicions of Beaumarchais' subversive atheism and beliefs in meritocracy. "You made the effort to be born," says Figaro to Count Almaviva, "but nothing more than that."

Ring the bell on the right of the carriage door and push past the Medusas into the mansion's outer courtyard. The concierge will intercept you—this is still private property. By a series of flukes the building has changed little since Beaumarchais' day. Even the low-relief sculptures surrounding the court have survived (they show Romulus and Remus Nursed by the She-Wolf; allegories of Strength, Truth, Peace and War; plus the goddesses Ceres and Flora). You can only peer through the vaulted passageway at the tantalizing main courtyard, freshly restored, with more sculptures, masks and garlands. If you're lucky, you might glimpse through parted drapes the dazzling ceilings the playwright-spy knew so well.

Imagine Beaumarchais' gold-encrusted carriage rattling down the Rue des Francs-Bourgeois, past the sumptuous Hôtel Carnavalet (now the History of Paris Museum), across the Place des Vosges, to the wide boulevard that now bears his name. For several hundred yards along the boulevard's east side stretch the landscaped grounds of the estate Beaumarchais and his third wife have been building since the late 1780s for the phenomenal sum of 1.6 million *livres*. Inheritances and settlements, plus real estate speculation and a controlling interest in Paris' first-ever water utility, have made Beaumarchais fabulously rich. Known as the "Mansion of the 200 Windows," Beaumarchais' estate is a *parvenu's* paradise, with a semi-circular colonnade, temples to Bacchus and Voltaire, a Chinese humpback bridge, and a waterfall. The Bastille rises to the south, an ominous theatrical backdrop. The main house is not yet finished when, in April 1789, Beaumarchais and a party of aristocratic friends, including the future king Louis Philippe, watch with horror as rioters ransack a nearby mansion and then take on royal guards, with a loss of 200 lives. Have Figaro's spiritual heirs gone mad? Beaumarchais can't help wondering. A few months later, on July 14, Beaumarchais again watches from his terrace as

rioters from the Faubourg Saint-Antoine storm the Bastille. And the rest is history.

"If we were to allow that play to be performed," the otherwise unperceptive Louis XVI remarked in 1784 about *The Marriage of Figaro*, "we would have to demolish the Bastille." Fittingly, when the demolition began on July 15, Beaumarchais, as president of the Marais' Blancs-Manteaux district, was sent with other dignitaries to supervise. With his typical pragmatism and aplomb he bought—or requisitioned—some of the Bastille's stones and sent them trundling to the work site of his theater at 11 Rue de Sévigné, between Saint-Paul and the Carnavalet.

There's nothing left but the facade of the Théâtre Beaumarchais (sometimes referred to as the Théâtre du Marais), demolished in the mid-1800s. The chameleon citizen-playwright staged the third of his Figaro series, the little-known *La Mère Coupable*, at this theater in 1791 and 1792. More recently, from about 1960 to 2000, a Hungarian delicatessen was ensconced in what was the theater's foyer and sold some of the best salami in Paris. A boutique is now moving in to replace it. Like Balmès-Richelieu antiques, and dozens of unglamorous shoe repair and hardware shops, the deli was one of those Marais touchstones from the blue-collar age. When I look up at the former theater's pilasters, my mind's eye sees a slice of the Marais' layer-cake. First there was a swamp here, then came Philippe-Auguste's medieval city wall, part of the La Force prison, a theater built with the stones of the Bastille, a Hungarian deli and now a trendy boutique.

Rewind to Beaumarchais' speeding carriage—by now a nondescript vehicle sans glittering gold, in keeping with Revolutionary etiquette. Who knows how many times it rumbled from the theater to the Mansion of the 200 Windows, racing past carts loaded with prisoners on the way to the guillotine? Ironically, the Committee of Public Safety and Robespierre almost managed to execute the subversive author of Figaro. True to character, he had reinvented himself as a gun-runner for France's new despots. Only by luck, chance and intrigue did Beaumarchais, declared a "counter-revolutionary" and exiled, keep his head on his shoulders. During his absence, troops stormed his estate expecting to uncover weapons. All they found were thousands of unsold volumes of Voltaire's collected works.

There's nothing left of the mansion and grounds where Citizen Beaumarchais spent the last years of his life, still rich and full of fire but no longer a hero. He died in the last year of the 18th century, on the cusp of the modern age, and was buried in his garden near Voltaire's temple, on the edge of the Marais. The final irony, a postscript to this extraordinary life, is that, before the estate was demolished to make way for the Canal Saint-Martin and Boulevard Richard-Lenoir, Louis XVIII's men dug up the playwright's bones, in 1822, and moved them to Père-Lachaise, a Catholic cemetery. Even in death the itinerant iconoclast knew no rest. Over the rumble of the traffic on his boulevard I sometimes hear Beaumarchais chuckling, reminding me that if you don't laugh, you're destined to cry.