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Sent: Wednesday, August 3, 2016 6:12 PM
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Subject: Tramps Abroad

Once in a great while it's OK to blow it out in Paris.

Here's an account of how to order wine at the world's most expensive tourist trap while you're making a fool out of yourself – while also, I must add, you're having a ball.

In the summer of 1996 when my travel companion and I first ate at La Tour d'Argent in Paris overlooking the roofs of Notre Dame, we knew we were supposed to order the restaurant's signature dish, pressed duck. Aperitifs and appetizers and side dishes were entirely our own personal picks, as were dessert and cognac.

Wine was also a matter of choice, but we had too many choices. Charles de Gaulle asked in the early '60s, "How are you supposed to govern a country with 246 different varieties of cheese?" Well, at La Tour d'Argent the wine question could be even more frustrating: How are you supposed to order wine with almost 500,000 bottles of wine in the cellars directly below? The La Tour d'Argent wine list was a hardcover book more than three inches thick.

My travel companion let me have the wine list and the full responsibility for selecting and ordering, one of the few times I had her in a position of complete cooperation.

I had a plan.

Let's take this year, 1996, and go back 25 years to 1971, I said with questionable authority and confused confidence. Thus began our wine search. I then suggested since we had agreed on the pressed duck, we could agree on red Bordeaux. Now we had it narrowed down in a matter of seconds, and the next step carried the possibility of fame, a story we could tell for years to come. We would become the South Carolina couple who turned back a bottle at La Tour d'Argent.

How? I found the cheapest red Bordeaux among the 25-year-olds. Our sad little label sat among wines costing a five-star hotel bill for a week or two. Our wine cost \$150. The chances of pouring really bad Bordeaux were within reach. I was on a journalism gig, so I had my travel companion prepped to sip and say, "Waiter, maybe we can cut the oil in our salads with this vinegar, but we can't drink it." That sounded printable enough to me.

The sommelier took our order of one \$150 bottle of 1971 Philippe de Rothschild, not to be connected or confused with Mouton Rothschild or Lafite Rothschild, two first growths priced in the thousands of dollars after only a year or two. The price after 25 years: Beyond imagination.

The sommelier returned with our bottle. For the benefit of everyone around us looking on, he took a napkin and wiped the label clean so I could read it and accept it. Dust, cobwebs, spider cadavers and the like covered our bottle, much to the approval of our surrounding diners. Their bottles didn't have all that, but they hadn't committed to thousands of dollars for one bottle of dinner wine. Neither had we, but our audience didn't know any of that. All they knew was that my travel companion and I were about to drink a really old and presumably rare and expensive bottle.

Our bottle was opened, and I was offered the cork. The candle was lit to illuminate the flow of wine through the neck of the bottle on its way to the decanter, showing the sommelier any unwanted bits passing through. Our \$150 bought us quite a show.

My travel companion offered her glass for about a finger's depth of poured red Bordeaux. She took a sip, let it flood across the top of her tongue while she drew in air for a little evaporation to expose the taste.

Oh, no, Temple, this is good, she whispered to me. What do we do now?

I declared we two lucky charlatans had stumbled across the best buy in the house, and I asked the sommelier to proceed to pour the decanted wine. I guess I could have asked to keep the ancient bottle, but that would not have looked too cool to our surrounding admirers who still didn't get the joke. We looked like spoiled regulars who couldn't be intimidated by price or by cobwebs and dead spiders and a coat of dust.

Maybe two hours later at the end of the meal as we were having our cognac, one of our waiters brought us our record of our pressed duck, a count began in 1890. Each time pressed duck was ordered, a numbered card was printed. We had just eaten duck #845,192.

That was 1996, and I pulled the same stunt in 2003 with two women from Columbia who were in La Tour d'Argent for the first time. I was on another journalism jaunt, and for the second time I failed to find the vinegar. After the second try, Claude Terrail, the restaurant's owner, came to our table to congratulate us on our wine research technique. He flattered the women and inscribed his memoir to me.

In the spring of 2012, following Phileas Fogg's footsteps, I went back to La Tour d'Argent – not that Fogg had been there, but since I had one night in Paris, I argued with myself, I might as well blow it out at a table for one.

I walked to the restaurant down memory lane, Henry IV Boulevard, where I had walked from my favorite affordable hotel, Les Sans Culottes near the Bastille Opera House, several times before. I was intentionally about an hour early so I could stay downstairs at street level, sip house Champagne and watch the crowd come in.

The arriving diners made for a little UN – well, the better paid at the UN, anyway.

I was served something to sample with my Champagne, and after my two glasses I asked for a very dry martini with one olive. The two glasses of Champagne and the one martini were listed on my bill as 72 euros. When I stepped into the elevator to take my table on the sixth floor, I had already spent about a hundred dollars just to warm up.

I came on a good night, March 27, 2012. The sommelier on my night was also the head guy for wine at La Tour d'Argent, David Ridgway. David's "e" is missing.

David and I kept it simple this time. The only complication was I couldn't get a window table by myself. He put me down in the middle of the place looking out past the window crowd directly to Notre Dame. When Elizabeth II was a young married woman but still a princess, she and hubby came often to La Tour d'Argent. They always had the corner window table, kind of like sitting at the prow of a ship.

When I first came to La Tour d'Argent in the summer of 1996, we were put next to Elizabeth's table – not bad, not bad at all. I guess Terrail always gave us distinguished members of the Fourth Estate the benefit of the doubt. He rarely knew where the writers planned to shop their stories or who was a writer, for that matter. To be

treated like other diners, food critics and travel writers tended not to introduce themselves. But in my case I faxed the reservation on Columbia Star stationery. And upon my return more than 20,000 readers in central South Carolina knew all about it. I had to guess Terrail knew my 20,000 were about 20,000 more readers than most diners had.

After David and I agreed on a 2006 Chateau Labegorce, a red Bordeaux, for 135 euros, my waiter took my order for Le Grand Menu Tour d'Argent, another 190 euros. I finished with an espresso, as my bill put it – I say espresso, but I'm not French – for 10 euros.

Altogether, 15% service included, I spent 407 euros at the world's most expensive tourist trap. That's about \$560.

Before I checked out at Les Sans Culottes the next morning, I got up early and took a few tourist walks. One was to the Rice University School of Architecture. They have a Paris outpost about halfway between the Bastille Opera House and the rail station for points south, Gare de Lyon. According to the magazine Architectural Record, Rice's undergraduate program is #3 in the country, while the graduate school is ranked #5. Well, fine. These things are hard to quantify, certainly, but the rankings make for effective recruiting tools. Point being, there's not a dull conversation anywhere in the architecture compound, either in Houston or Paris. These kids are interesting, period.

Back in the Dark Ages when I went there, I enjoyed the emphasis on football. There was none. Rice built a 70,000-seat stadium in nine months in 1949 when it had about 1,500 students and when it had the #2 football team in the country. Then big-time football fell in favor. It was almost a University of Chicago situation where they dropped football altogether, leaving the emphasis on academics. During home games when I was there, every now and then some students would walk into our studio to see if anyone wanted to walk the few hundred feet, less than a city block, to the game. We left the studio, walked to the stadium, paid nothing and sat on the 50-yard line. Not a problem.

The only problem was Rice never won. A winning season was one win.

The Rice architecture students I met were in Paris to study French language and culture. I didn't see much in the way of an architecture studio.

The Clemson architecture program has a compound in Genoa, Italy. The study of architecture probably has more opportunity for resources in Italy than France. But the fuller cultural offering might well be in France.

Thomas Jefferson said, “Every man has two countries - his own and France.”

Philiass Fogg might have agreed, but he and Passepartout were not pursuing French culture. They were pursuing an 80-day deadline. They left Paris for Italy by train just as soon as they arrived in Paris. Don't forget: That balloon business was Mike Todd's idea for his movie. In Jules Verne's book, Fogg and Passepartout took the train. They were going to the heel of the Italian boot for a boat to Suez.

So was I.