

A scenic view of a river with lush green trees and a train in the background. The river is in the foreground, with several small boats and docks. The trees are dense and green, with a large weeping willow tree on the right. In the background, a train is visible on a bridge or overpass.

# Take me to the River

Just outside Paris, a secret world has offered city dwellers  
an escape for centuries.

by Gayle Keck    photographs by Tara Donne    lettering by Alejandro Solórzano



The bridge to La Guinguette de l'Île du Martin-Pêcheur leads to a place where class distinctions fade and generations mingle, as Parisians of all types eat, drink, and dance.





**“WHEN YOU CROSS THE BRIDGE,”**

Baptiste Leveillard leans in close to tell me, “it’s another world.” He’s on the dance floor, bathed in spangled light from a revolving disco ball, boogying with his year-old son, Valentin, in his arms. As the band plays a bouncy tune, the rest of the crowd starts line dancing. French people, line dancing! Another world, indeed.

I’ve just crossed the wooden footbridge to La Guinguette de l’île du Martin-Pêcheur (The Guinguette of Kingfisher Island) on the Marne River, a 20-minute train trip southeast of Paris. The geranium-lined bridge leads to a terrace bordered with 100-year-old chestnut trees. Strings of colored lights zigzag overhead. Young people, older folks, and multigenerational

families sit at long tables covered in red-checked oilcloth. Beyond, there’s a simple wooden building with more tables and a dance floor that opens onto the terrace. Dancers spill outside.

The scene (sans disco ball) could be right out of a Renoir painting. In fact, *guinguettes*—riverside pavilions offering simple food, cheap wine, and live music and dancing—have been a part of French culture for centuries. Their heyday came during the Belle Époque, around the turn of the 20th century, when hundreds lined the rivers outside Paris.

Today, only a handful remain. But the *guinguettes*’ mystique—as magical, carefree places where strict social rules don’t apply—holds a powerful place in the French psyche. If you’ve ever been mesmerized by a dreamy, sun-splashed impressionist painting showing women in frothy dresses being twirled about by men sporting jaunty boater hats, you’ve gotten a taste of it. And that feeling is what still draws nostalgic city dwellers seeking a summertime escape.

“Everybody in France knows the banks of the Marne,” declares Leveillard, raising his voice over the lively music. “Everybody

knows the *guinguettes*.”

The term *guinguette* (pronounced gan-GET) most likely comes from the word *giguer*, “to dance a jig.” That verb spawned the nickname *guinguet* for the cheap beverage of choice—“a wicked little green wine,” according to a 1750 dictionary—served at the *guinguettes* and said to be so sour it would make goats dance.

Tonight, the wine is better, but the scene is still hopping. I’m dining outside with local historian Michel Rioussset and my husband, Paul. Rioussset, in his early 60s, is small and wiry, with curly gray hair. His family has lived in Joinville-le-Pont on the banks of the Marne since 1896, and we’ve rented his *chalet des canotiers*, a boating cottage built in 1882, nestled amid roses in his garden.

In true French style, we begin with a sparkling aperitif. Rioussset explains that *guinguettes* come to us thanks to a fine heritage of French tax evaders. As far back as 300 years ago, and up until 1943, wine entering Paris was subject to a hefty tax, the *octroi*. So establishments serving tax-free wine began popping up just beyond the city limits. Each time Paris expanded, the *guinguettes* would leapfrog over the border



and Parisians would party on.

In 1860, Napoleon III gobbled up enough surrounding territory to expand Paris from 12 arrondissements (districts) to its current 20, and sent railways shooting out to the bucolic hinterlands. When the guinguettes were forced to uproot that one last time, many settled along the Marne River, within easy access of the new railroad stations. And with that, the next era of Parisian leisure was born. On Sunday afternoons, nature-starved Parisians would flee the grimy, stifling city for canoeing, canoodling, and the chance to spin and spin to a giddy *valse musette*, forgetting the week's troubles.

I start my guinguette meal with a traditional *friture d'éperlans* (fried smelt), lightly battered and served whole. It resembles a plateful of shoestring fries with eyes. Following Riousset's lead, I use my fingers to dip them in aioli, then pop them—heads, tails, eyes, and all—into my mouth.

The proprietor, Jean-Yves Dupin, a friend of Riousset, stops by to visit. "I had to turn down 200 or 300 people who called today for reservations," he tells us. On this beautiful, warm Saturday night, the whole world wanted to be here. But he has room for only

about 300. "*La guinguette est vie*," he says, his tired face lighting up: "The guinguette is life."

I ask Dupin why his guinguette is thriving when so many others have closed over the past hundred years. "Many have failed due to economic reasons," he explains. "They are part of French popular culture, but they're a demanding business. You work very much in the summer but little in the winter." Two world wars and the introduction of the automobile made it impossible for guinguettes to sustain their Belle Époque glory days. "After the war, in the '60s, Parisians had cars," he adds. "They could go farther away. We lost them." (Today, in central Paris, a new wave of summertime-only "modern guinguettes" has sprung up along the Seine, offering food and music if not a total escape from the city. See "Get Yourself to a Guinguette," page 87.)

But Dupin developed a formula for success. "A guinguette is one of the rare establishments that embraces all the generations, from children right up to grandmothers," he explains. Dupin caters to them all, with an eclectic blend of live music ranging from traditional accordion standbys to pounding rock. "We have here much joy, many good

surprises!" he exclaims. "Everyone comes to a guinguette. The miracle, that's it!"

The band beckons us to the dance floor. Paul and I join in for a rousing, hip-swiveling French rendition of "Let's Twist Again." A man in snazzy two-tone shoes jives with a woman sporting red high-top sneakers. There are party dresses, blue jeans, and boys with their hair slicked into place by persnickety moms. It feels like we've landed in the middle of *My Big Fat French Wedding*.

Back at our table, I ask Riousset if the clientele at guinguettes was always like this. "Yes, the classes and ages mixed in the past," he replies, adding, "but some guinguettes were not recommended for young girls of good families. Remember, in those days, it was considered vulgar to be sunburned. A woman without a hat, it was terrible!"

The banks of the Marne were an escape from those strict social mores, a place where beaux might steal a kiss and bohemians could mingle with millionaires. "Outside of Paris, it was incognito," Riousset says. "Men could meet with women of lesser virtue. Directors of companies would come here with their secretaries, as late as the 1960s. It was mentally very far from Paris." What hap-



*à guinguette,  
Life is always,  
always rosy*

Just 15 minutes from central Paris, on the banks of the Marne, Chez Gégène was immortalized in the 1950s hit song "À Joinville-le-Pont" and remains a destination for Parisians who want to dance a *valse musette*.

Oh, la-la-la  
c'est magnifique!



Chez Gégène looks much as it did back when it was a favorite haunt of French film stars such as Simone Signoret, who shot scenes from the movie *Casque d'Or* here.

pened on the banks of the Marne stayed on the banks of the Marne.

Early the next morning, we stroll along the river through greenery punctuated by cascades of tiny wild roses and spikes of hollyhocks. The fanciful houses lining the water were built as weekend and vacation homes, most toward the end of the 19th century. There are little châteaux, art nouveau manses, faux-rustic villas, and overgrown elfin cottages. Some have turrets, sited to watch the sleek rowing sculls that glide by every few minutes or so. Boating was France's first popular leisure sport, and members of 100-year-old boating clubs still ply the Marne.

Later in the morning, at the nearby Nogent-sur-Marne marina, we hire an electric boat to explore the river's green waters. I want to feel what it must have been like for weekend revelers in times past, taking a *promenade sur l'eau* (river excursion) before pulling up at the dock of a guinguette.

As we putter along, we have a prime view of grand villas on the banks, as well as a few modern buildings sully the terrain here and there. We pass by the leafy Île des Loups (Island of Wolves) and the Île d'Amour (Island of Love), once home to long-gone guinguettes and still accessible only by water. Boating offered sunshine, fresh air, and a bit of privacy back in the days when a proper single woman couldn't be alone with a man in the city. Seen from our little craft, the trailing branches of willow trees look like curtains that would be perfect for hiding a canoe during a romantic interlude.

Weekends are the best times to visit guinguettes, when most have live music. After our boat ride, Paul and I head to the Marne's best-known spot, Chez Gégène, for Sunday lunch. The riverside tables are packed on this hot, sunny afternoon, so we sit indoors with our expat friend Luz, who has made the 15-minute train ride from Paris to join us, along with her shih tzu pup, Pierre.

A couple of older women at the next table, spying little white fluff-ball Pierre, bend down to fawn over him. Our jolly waiter, clearly feeling a bit envious, kneels on the floor, raises his hands like begging paws, then tilts his head and starts panting. The women play right along, patting his head and scratching him under the chin. Pierre is nonplussed.

In a touch that seems handed down from the era when Chez Gégène was the hangout for stars from the nearby Pathé film studios, a photographer circulates, snapping souvenir photos. The band—conga, bass, keyboards, drums, and accordion—plays a

variety of ballroom and old-school French favorites. There are some serious dancers, as intimidating as they are fun to watch.

Later, Chez Gégène's manager, Bernard Nicolau-Bergeret, walks me around the interior, explaining the photos and murals lining the walls. "This," he says, pointing to a painted frieze around the smaller of two dance floors, "depicts all the amusements that were here in the past. It was the Disneyland of its day!"

During the Belle Époque, guinguettes tried to outdo each other by offering more and more outlandish attractions. One, called Robinson after *Robinson Crusoe*, had platforms built in trees, with curtains you could close for privacy; waiters would send food and drink up in baskets by pulley. Slides, swings, and shooting galleries were all common. At Chez Gégène, it was possible to ride a camel, play on adult-size seesaws ("We call them 'ass bangers' in French," Nicolau-Bergeret informs me in his resonant, chain-smoker's voice), race donkeys, or ride on wacky tandem bicycles with seats facing opposite directions. You could also

demonstrate your strength by punching the stomach of a formidable-looking mechanical boxer. "In those days, it was easy to impress a woman," Nicolau-Bergeret observes. "Now, you have to iron, wash, and change babies!"

A more modern mural gets kinkier and funnier the more I examine it. There are couples dirty dancing, a woman standing on her hands in a rowboat, revealing stockings with garters—and whoa, I've just noticed a dominatrix in a bustier brandishing a riding crop while sitting atop a man on all fours. "That's the imagination of the painter!" Nicolau-Bergeret claims.

"So did these things ever go on?" I pry.

"*Non!* It's proper here!" Nicolau-Bergeret maintains, flashing a slightly wicked smile. The bawdy pictures are all part of the fantasy, the sense of escape.

**AFTER EXPERIENCING** the Marne's pleasures, we head up the Seine. Guinguettes northwest of Paris were among the favorite haunts of the impressionist painters, whose late 19th-century emergence coincided with the guinguettes' heyday. Caillebotte captured

## Get Yourself to a Guinguette

Take the RER (Paris's commuter train system) and you can be at a guinguette in less than 30 minutes. Most establishments are seasonal, with music only on weekends, so make reservations before setting out. If you want to stay in the city, try one of the modern guinguettes that are popping up along the Left Bank of the Seine.



### On the Marne

#### **La Guinguette de l'Île du Martin-Pêcheur**

Live music lures guests to a magical island setting.

41 Quai Victor Hugo,  
Champigny-sur-Marne,  
33/(0) 1-49-83-03-02,  
guinguette.fr

#### **Chez Gégène**

A full band fires up the crowd at the grande dame of guinguettes.

162 Bis Quai de Polangis,  
Joinville-le-Pont,  
33/(0) 1-48-83-29-43,  
chez-gege-ne.fr

#### **Chez Fifi**

Owner Philippe "Fifi" Pannier makes this slightly scruffy spot thoroughly entertaining.

2 Rue Marx Dormoy,  
Neuilly-sur-Marne,  
33/(0) 1-43-08-20-31,  
guinguettechezfifi.fr



### On the Seine

#### **Maison Fournaise**

Dine where Renoir painted his *Luncheon of the Boating Party*.

3 Rue du Bac, Chatou,  
33/(0) 1-30-71-41-91  
restaurant-fournaise.fr

#### **Guinguette Auvergnate**

A jolly, accordion-playing owner serves dishes from his native Auvergne region.

19 Avenue de Choisy,  
Villeneuve-Saint-Georges,  
33/(0) 1-43-89-04-64,  
guinguette-auvergnate.fr

#### **Musée de la Grenouillère**

See absinthe spoons, vintage posters, and other memorabilia from a guinguette where Monet and Renoir painted.

12 Grande Rue,  
Croissy-sur-Seine,  
33/(0) 1-30-53-61-02,  
grenouillere-museum.com



### In Paris

#### **En Attendant Rosa**

This modern guinguette opens for breakfast and offers a buffet with meats, cheeses, and homemade ice cream.

Port des Invalides,  
lesberges.paris.fr/places/  
rosa-bonheur

#### **Faust**

At the foot of the Esplanade des Invalides, you'll find a heated riverside terrace, a restaurant and bar, and a performance space.

Near the Alexandre-III bridge,  
lesberges.paris.fr  
/envies/faust



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men paddling along in simple, tippy boats known as *périssoires* (death traps). Monet and Renoir set up their easels side by side at La Grenouillère (The Froggery), so called because of the young women swimmers, nicknamed “frogs,” who hopped about in the water. But Renoir’s *Luncheon of the Boating Party* is perhaps the most famous depiction of guinguette life. This masterpiece, a scene on the balcony of Maison Fournaise in Chatou, illustrates how the classes mingled: There’s the wealthy art patron Charles Ephrussi, three actresses, a poet, a journalist, a bureaucrat, a couple of painters (including Caillebotte), and a seamstress who would become Renoir’s wife.

The city of Chatou has restored the once derelict Maison Fournaise, though today it’s strictly a restaurant, with no music or dancing and a pricey menu that might make you wish Ephrussi were picking up the tab. As part of the project, the city added a museum and a boathouse for historic craft. I meet up with museum curator Anne Galloyer for a tour. On the famous *balcon* of the restaurant, the modern-day crowd is more like *Luncheon of the Business Party*, yet the diffuse light, soft breeze, and huge, overhanging plane tree

still enchant. “It’s so sweet to be here on the riverbank,” Galloyer says. “It’s like a vacation. We are on an island. And the people had the feeling that they were adventurers for one day. It’s important, because it’s a dream.”

**BEFORE HEADING BACK** across the Atlantic, we hop back on the RER (Paris’s commuter railway) and head along the Marne for one last guinguette visit, this time in Neuilly-sur-Marne, about eight miles east of central Paris. Chez Fifi is an indoor-outdoor joint, set along the pedestrian quayside. A tree grows through the roof of its enclosed terrace, next to the petite dance floor. Fifi, the namesake proprietor, greets us at the door wearing his trademark flat cap and a long white apron. “What can I do for you, my young ones?” he asks, instantly endearing himself.

We opt for a table outside along the Marne. Spending five euros—the cost of a fat glass of sangria—entitles you to hit the dance floor, but I’m not sure we’re up to it. We sip the cool, fruity wine and lean back in the sunshine with the river on one side, a parade of bicyclists, dogs, and ice-cream-

cone-licking kids on the other. The accordionist launches into a rendition of “C’est Magnifique.” The crowd joins in on the chorus, “Oh, la-la-la, c’est magnifique!” And yes, the whole scene is truly *magnifique*.

We order plates of wide-eyed éperlans and grilled sardines and watch the dancers. When we spot our waitress going for a few twirls, we realize why the service isn’t exactly efficient. We’re not brave enough to attempt a quick-spinning valse musette. But then the opening notes of “La Vie en Rose” waft out from the bandstand. Something comes over Paul. “Do you want to dance?” he asks. We sway and shuffle to a slow, dreamy beat that even we can manage. We’re drifting through time, dancing with bohemians and boaters, shopgirls and movie stars. And suddenly, I understand the simple secret that has endured for three centuries: At a guinguette, life is always, always rosy. And just like that, we dance across into another world. **A**

Writer Gayle Keck is profiled on page 14. Photographer Tara Donne has shot stories on Swiss wine, Paris fashion, and Salt Water Farm in Maine for AFAR.

# La guinguette est vive

Maison Fournaise, opposite left, was the setting for Renoir's *Luncheon of the Boating Party*. Le Verger, opposite right, dates back 120 years. At Chez Gégène, this page, you might spot boats cruising along the Marne.