

ADVENTURE & TRAVEL

Paris Rising

Le Forum des Halles, Paris's once-forsaken commuter rail hub, is emerging as a destination in itself. A guide to the revival

BY JAY CHESHES

ONE AFTERNOON this fall, Parisians seemed a bit less frantic than usual as they rushed toward the subways and suburban train lines of le Forum des Halles. The concrete chasm in central Paris, its rail platforms long surrounded by chain stores and fast-food spots, had finally begun to emerge from years of construction dust. Above the main entry hung a vast golden canopy. Sun rays, refracted through its metal and glass grooves, illuminated spiffy new boutiques and restaurants. Trays of savory soufflés teetered toward tables outside the new Alain Ducasse brasserie, Champeaux, while a jackhammer droned in the distance.

The new Forum is still a work in progress. The first phase of a massive overhaul, above ground and below, made its debut last spring to much fanfare—and scrutiny. One French newspaper likened its 250,000-square-foot canopy, designed by architects Patrick Berger and Jacques Anziutti, to a “vulgar flying saucer.” Another compared its hue to “yellow slop.” The complex, when it opened in 1979, received similarly mixed reviews, replacing the city’s wholesale-food market known as Les Halles (a shorthand for the area that’s stuck) with a shopping mall and transport hub derided by many as a soulless hole-in-the-ground. By the 1980s, though, it had become a magnet for Parisian youth, drawing skateboarders and hip-hop dancers to the concrete park above the mall. “It was really the cool area,” said Jean-Pierre Marois, a film producer turned hotelier who grew up nearby. But while new parts of the city took off, the Forum and its neighborhood became a place most Parisians zipped by before heading elsewhere. A decade ago, the city government decided to do something about that, launching what would balloon into an almost billion-euro refurbishment project designed to re-establish the neighborhood as the heart of the city. “Everything around Les Halles is starting to wake up,” said Mr. Marois.



GOLD RUSH A glittering new canopy now stretches across le Forum des Halles, a rail hub and revamped shopping complex in central Paris.



STATION MASTER Alain Ducasse's Champeaux brasserie.

Eat

1. CHAMPEAUX

Superstar chef Alain Ducasse has brought a long vanished neighborhood institution back to life under the new Forum canopy, reviving—in name and spirit—the 19th-century working-class brasserie Champeaux, a favorite haunt of Emile Zola (who once described Les Halles as the “belly of Paris”). The casual, all-day restaurant announces the arrival of its sweet and savory soufflés du jour on an old-fashioned train-station board (“cheese soufflés, coming out of the oven at 1 p.m.”). *Forum des Halles La Canopée, restaurant-champeaux.com*

2. ZA

Philippe Starck channeled his inner George Jetson in conceiving the retro-futuristic design for this fast-casual “café littéraire” across from Champeaux in the Forum. Soups, salads and open-face sandwiches (including a golden Croque Madame with a runny egg on top) are ordered through an app on your phone, then whisked from the kitchen to your communal dining spot along a mechanized rubber belt. Video screens overhead flash names of books you can buy from the restaurant’s collection of titles stored in glass cases. *Forum des Halles La Canopée, za-paris.com*

3. CHEZ LA VIEILLE

American chef Daniel Rose, a pioneer in the Les Halles neighborhood, opened his third restaurant in the area this fall, taking over this classic comptoir (a simple eatery with counter dining)—once popular with theater folk—a few blocks from the Forum across the street from his flagship, Spring. He’s kept the original’s name, facade and stand-up counter dining intact. You can still lean against the bar after a show for a quick sturdy meal, digging into the expat chef’s riffs on the simple French

food of Julia Child’s generation (rustic terrines, veal blanquette, a pot de crème for dessert). 1 Rue Baillevé, 33-1-42-60-15-78

Drink

4. BAR LE FORVM

The city’s second-oldest cocktail parlor (after Harry’s New York Bar), the original Le Forum opened in the swanky 8th arrondissement in 1931. Last spring, after losing a real estate battle, it moved across town near Les Halles, bringing along its vintage

jukeboxes and cocktail shaker collection. Head barman Xavier Laigle, who spent 30 years at the old location, makes his own syrups and tinctures from verbena, hibiscus and toasted green tea, among other fanciful ingredients. 29 Rue du Louvre, bar-le-forvm.com

5. DANICO

The cocktails come with a healthy sense of humor at this cozy drinks den, tucked behind the city’s sexiest new pizza parlor, Daroco, in the former home of a Jean-Paul Gaultier boutique. Mixmaster Nico de Soto, who also runs Mace in New York, has conjured up some of the most playful drinks in Paris. One combining bourbon, tobacco essence and “hipster bitters”—implausibly named “7AM: 1 Northside Piers After Verboten”—winks at late nights clubbing in Brooklyn. It’s served in a coffee cup. 6 Rue Vivienne

Shop

6. L'EXCEPTION

This brick-and-mortar incarnation of an online clearinghouse for French fashion (also called L'Exception) opened under the Les Halles canopy last spring. The shop stocks a curated selection of some 800 pieces for



COUNTER CULTURE From top: At Les Bains, the neighborhood’s most stylish hotel; Le Forum barman Xavier Laigle; honey at Le Petit Duc.



salted caramels, pistachio-studded nougat bars, and almond-paste calissons, among other old-fashioned confections, all of it easily stashed in a carry-on bag. Scarf down Berthillon ice cream on site. *Forum des Halles La Canopée, petit-duc.com*

Stay

9. LES BAINS

Jean-Pierre Marois opened Paris’s funkier new luxury hotel last year on the site of an old public bathhouse where, a century ago, market workers (les forts des Halles) used to freshen up, after lugging crates of produce, with a hot soak and stiff drink. In 1978 those basement baths became the city’s hottest nightclub, a Studio 54 by the Seine, which closed in 2010. The club, built around an indoor pool, has returned as part of this new bathhouse-themed hotel. Guest-room balconies feature outdoor showers and the lobby’s tile floors appear to shimmer underwater, thanks to trompe l’oeil trickery. Grace Jones, a denizen of the old boîte in its heyday, held her memoir-release party there last spring. From about \$350 a night, *lesbains-paris.com*

Listen

10. LA PLACE

The city of Paris opened a government-run hip-hop center under the Les Halles canopy this fall with a festival of music, dance and graffiti exploring the cultural ties between Paris and New York. The complex, with performance halls, rehearsal rooms, recording studios and its own bustling bar is run by a hip-hop dancer and music festival organizer from Lyon—under the guidance of fashion designer, and chairwoman of its board, Agnes B. Recent events have included a “Beatbox” documentary screening and a concert celebrating Universal Zulu Nation. 10 passage de la Canopée, *Forum des Halles, laplace.paris*



PARIS MATCH Danico is home to some of the most playful and delicious cocktails in Paris.