



# Paris has changed, but its food is still a comfort



The dessert tray at Le Dali in Le Meurice hotel. ALEXANDRA HALL FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

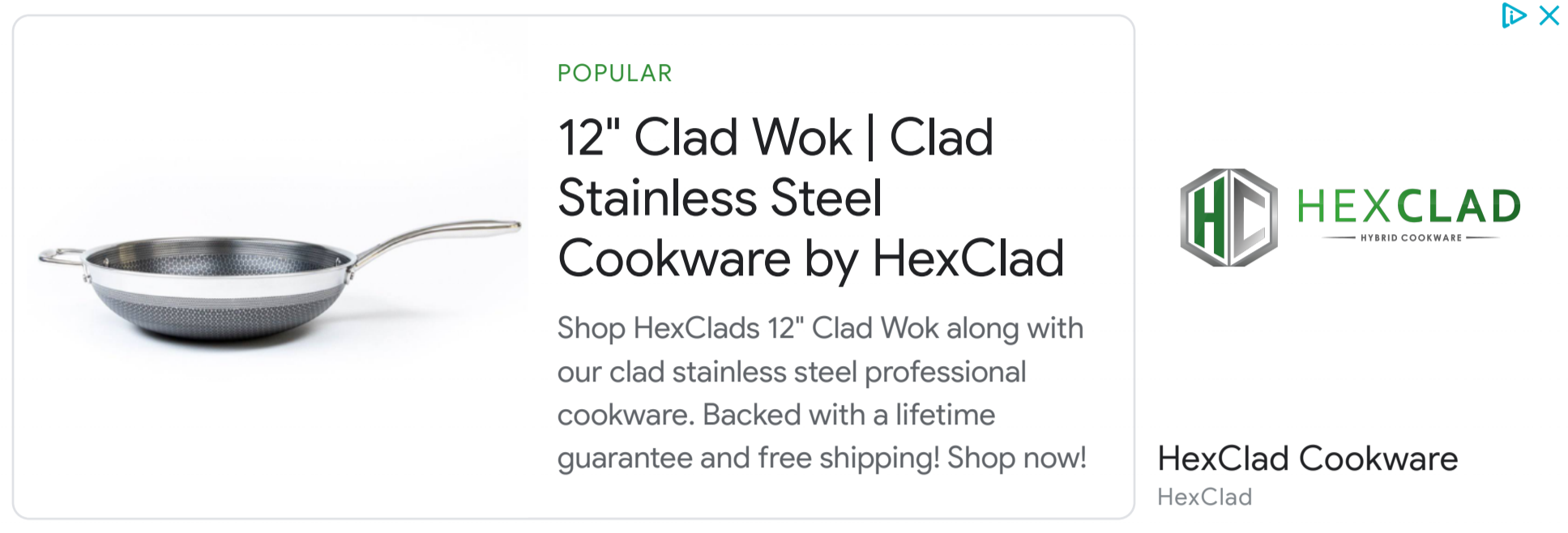
By **Alexandra Hall** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT APRIL 25, 2017

A few minutes before my plane took off from Logan, I noticed I'd been shifting and sighing in my seat. It was anxiety. And not about flying, either. It was about returning to Paris.

It was ridiculous: If I were to ever agree to the notion of having a safe space, Paris would be it. I reminded myself of that eight groggy hours later in the car from Charles de Gaulle Airport, as we slid past the familiar gleam of wet cobblestones lining the Seine.

That was when my driver piped up. "We're happy you're here," he said soberly. I sat up a little. "Americans. Boston and New York people. They aren't coming as much anymore. They're afraid."

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Of course I knew what he was talking about: the violence that has come to the City of Light in recent years — 2015's terrorist strikes, last week's attack by a gunman on the Champs-Élysées. And France now faces a May 7 election in which a centrist, pro-EU, pro-immigration candidate, Emmanuel Macron, faces off against the far-right Marine Le Pen.

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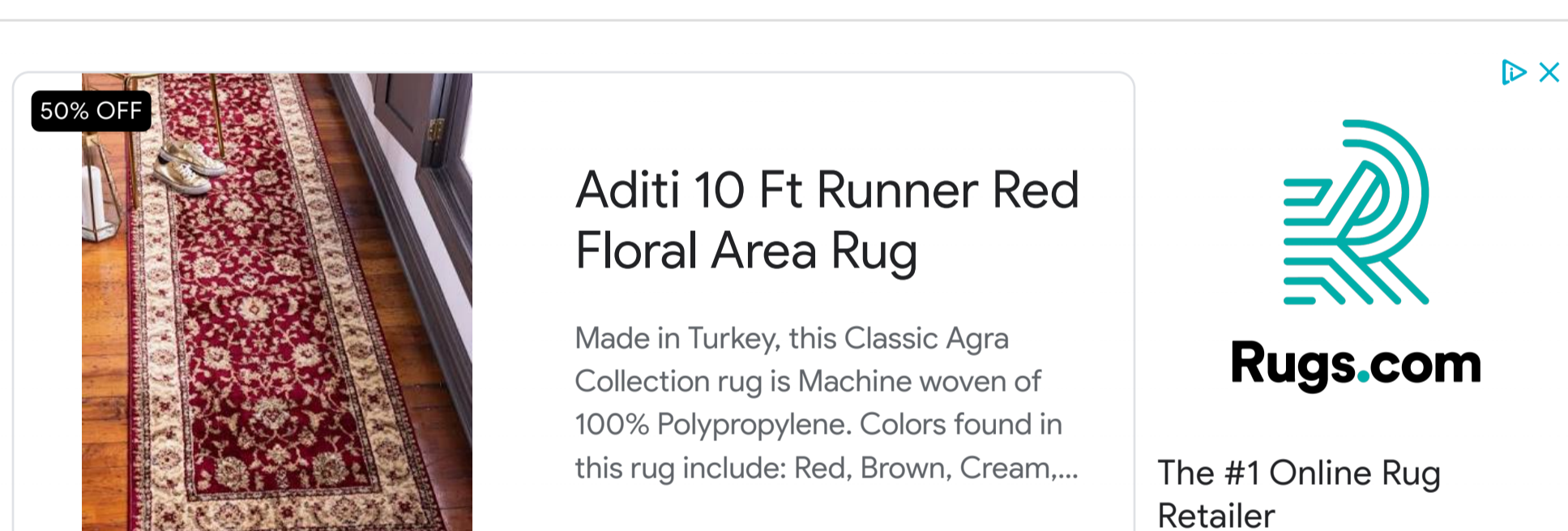
But this was part of why I'd come back: When some people feel in jeopardy, they turn to adrenaline, mind-altering substances, psychotherapy, sometimes all of the above. Me, I turn to comfort food — specifically of the Parisian variety. This is the city where I learned to cook as a young student at Le Cordon Bleu two decades ago. I have returned every couple of years to soak up some joie de vivre and bring it back to Boston. What would I find this time around?

I dive right in, heading straight for Le Relais Plaza in the 8th arrondissement, housed in the ultrachic Plaza Athénée hotel. The Alain Ducasse brasserie is home to the most incredible sole meunière I've ever tasted, and I can't wait to get a fork into it once again. There in the dim, candle-lit Art Deco room, the maitre d' constantly scans the scene — on the lookout for the tiniest thing that might be amiss.

Fresh from a 10-month renovation, it is a bit sleeker and more serene than it used to be. The once-garnet carpet and bright walls have been replaced with neutrals, but the grand, gilded mural over the bar (a registered historic landmark) remains, and it still looks every inch the gastronomic temple I remember. Most important, the sole meunière is still here. Even given its simplicity — butter, parsley, lemon — it is one of the most challenging fish dishes in the classic French repertoire, a feat of physics and texture. Our server performs the deboning ritual exactly as I recall it: on a tableside cart, with the lightning-quick precision of a surgeon. Some things never change.

Other things do. The room is more packed than I've ever seen it, with diners as boisterous as they are elegant: multigenerational packs of families, women in flowing silk, businessmen ordering bottle upon bottle of champagne. Laughter and live piano music float over the tables. A middle-age couple to our right asks where we're from, and inevitably politics comes up. They are worried, the husband tells me, but also hopeful about the election. "But we remember, too, that we have been through so much," he says, between bites of truffle risotto. At first I think he's talking about the recent terrorism, but instead he brings up history. Ancient and modern. I take his point: This is a city, after all, that has survived its share of tyrant kings, bloody wars, revolutions, and occupations. Compared to that, one election seems like a blip.

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Which may explain why no one here appears terribly rattled by the pervasive military presence. I first notice it at stop No. 2 on my gastronomic pilgrimage: the crepe stand just to the side of Notre Dame. That always-swarmed cart is the source of more late-night snacks than I care to admit, filled with my favorite combination: banana, Nutella, and Grand Marnier. Waiting in line for one, I glance across to the legendary cathedral. Something has indeed changed here: Among the tourists milling about with selfie sticks are clusters of young men — many look no more than 20 years old — in full military gear, including semiautomatic rifles.

In fact, they're almost everywhere I go in the city — by the hallowed doors of Le Cordon Bleu on the day I visit its new location in the 15th arrondissement, standing guard on the street corner next to sidewalk tables at nearby Brasserie Lola. Diners barely look up from croque-monsieur sandwiches as the men with rifles pass, in the shadow of the Eiffel Tower — which itself will soon see two new security-boosting glass walls built at its base.

Even so, there is comfort here still, along with dishes I won't soon forget: The soul-warming oeufs en cocotte or the classic, rich soupe de poisson at Brasserie Lipp, which one rainy afternoon is filled to its brim with couples reading, flirting, and sometimes singing. The country pork pate encircled by its gloriously rich (yet somehow also feather-light) crust at the Ritz Bar — preferred watering hole of Hemingway decades ago, and of the designer-clad brunching crowd today.

Before I go home, I find myself — as I almost always do when I visit the city — at Le Meurice hotel. Americans and Parisians alike fill the dark-wood bar here, to take in martinis beneath a trompe l'oeil sky ceiling. We follow suit, tucking into a Paris-Brest (the miraculous choux pastry with praline cream that I crave continuously back at home but can never find) and gazing out to Le Dali, the hotel's sparkling jewel box of a restaurant, aglow with lamps dripping in glass teardrops. The restaurant has changed decor and menus some over the years, but the unapologetic splendor of the space always seems frozen in time, no matter what is happening outside.

And whatever that is, Parisians take it in stride — mostly. "It's been sometimes painful in our hearts to walk around knowing what has happened, that we've been hurt," confides Francois Lenne, who has run the front desk at Le Meurice for years. "But we've decided to refuse to let it stop us from doing what we love every day."

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At the heart of that, you will almost always find food. To Parisians, giving up the joy of eating — in groups of friends, alone in cafes, with family in the park — might just as well mean giving up on being French altogether. In 2015, after 130 people were killed by ISIS militants, many while out at cafes and restaurants, nearly all of Paris rallied in response. Their chosen act of defiance? Just days later, under the rallying cry "Tous au bistrot!" ("Everyone to the bistro!"), they all went out to eat at once, flooding the city's restaurants. Vive la resistance.

Where to go

**The Ritz Bar** Hotel Ritz Paris, 15 Place Vendome, 75001, Paris, +33 1 43 16 33 74, [www.ritzparis.com/en-GB/fine-dining-paris/ritz-bar?tid=17](http://www.ritzparis.com/en-GB/fine-dining-paris/ritz-bar?tid=17)

**Brasserie Lipp** 151 Boulevard Saint-Germain, 75006, Paris, +33 1 45 48 53 91, [www.brasserielipp.fr](http://www.brasserielipp.fr)

**Brasserie Lola** 99 Rue du Theatre, 75015, Paris, +33 1 45 78 22 35, [www.facebook.com/brasserieolaparis](http://www.facebook.com/brasserieolaparis)

**Le Meurice** 228 Rue de Rivoli, 75001, Paris, +33 1 44 58 10 10 (Bar 228), +33 1 44 58 10 44 (Le Dali), [www.dorchestercollection.com/en/paris/le-meurice](http://www.dorchestercollection.com/en/paris/le-meurice)

**Le Relais Plaza** Hotel Plaza Athénée, 21 Avenue Montaigne, 75008, Paris, +33 1 53 67 64 00, [www.alain-ducasse.com/en/restaurant/le-relais-plaza](http://www.alain-ducasse.com/en/restaurant/le-relais-plaza)

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