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# In the Heart of Paris, an African Beat

By SETH SHERWOOD

THIN, dark-haired and dressed entirely in black, the Belgian fashion designer Valérie Barkowski cuts a Ninja-like figure against the racks of red-orange-purple ethno-chic garments in her Right Bank boutique, Mia Zia.

"I like crossing one country's style with another country's style and combining the techniques of the West and East," Ms. Barkowski says, holding out an unusual hat that suggests a fez sewn together with bands of soft Lego. Like nearly everything else in the store - Western-style jeans embroidered with arabesque swirls, North African robes in electric-tangerine terrycloth, funky plastic handbags made from food packages inscribed with Arabic - the hat is a Barkowski design executed by her team of seamstresses in the Moroccan city of Marrakesh, her residence for 14 years and base of operations for stores in Barcelona, Ibiza, Rome, St. Bart's and other global hot spots.

"It's a culture that makes people dream," she says of her adopted North African home and muse. "That part of the world dazzles the eyes."

Thanks to a new generation of similarly inspired designers, chefs, D.J.'s, club owners and entrepreneurs like Ms. Barkowski - some European, some North African, some a mixture - the styles of Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco are dazzling Parisian eyes as never before.

Streets all over the French capital bear the mark of these former French colonies, often referred to collectively as the Maghreb. Their influence glows from the richly colored designer babouches (slippers) and tea sets behind the windows of fancy boutiques. It pulses from nightclub sound systems throbbing with hybrid Euro-North African beats. It sparkles from L'An Vert du Décor, Le Trait d'Union and other top coffeehouses decorated by Jonathan Amar, who has almost single-handedly transformed the prototypical Parisian cafe from an Old World smoke-filled den to a plush, neo-sultanate lounge.

"You see it in the food, you see it in the music - it spreads everywhere," says the restaurateur Hakim Mazouz about the North African influence in the city. As co-owner of the stunningly decorated Arab-kitsch cocktail lounge Andy Wahloo and the cult-favorite Moroccan-Algerian restaurant 404, Mr. Mazouz is one of [Paris's](#) main impresarios of North African chic.

In a broad sense, North Africa's imprint on the French capital is nothing new. Napoleon's military campaign in Egypt brought back the Rosetta stone and gave birth to an Orientalist vogue that lasted for much of the 19th century, influencing the poetry of Victor Hugo, the paintings of Eugène Delacroix (visible at the Louvre) and - indirectly - France's ill-fated colonialist incursions into North Africa.

Today, with hundreds of thousands of Algerians, Tunisians and Moroccans living in greater Paris, the sights, smells and sounds of the Maghreb are quite familiar to Parisians. (The Goutte d'Or district, in the 18th Arrondissement, long the heart of Arab Paris, boasts the city's most colorful and multicultural outdoor market.)

Nevertheless, the social integration of France's Muslim population remains a touchy domestic issue. Last year the

government passed a highly controversial ban on head scarves in public schools. And violent antipolice riots, complete with the burning of thousands of cars, flared recently in a number of the city's immigrant-heavy suburbs, bringing to a boil a long-simmering tension between North African youths and the Chirac administration over the youths' feelings of disenfranchisement.

Yet the significance of Arab culture in Paris is unmistakable. Landmarks like the Old World mosaic-ringed minaret of the Paris Mosque and Jean Nouvel's postmodern Institut du Monde Arabe soar over the mansard roofs and wrought-iron balconies. The streets tell the same story. "Every neighborhood has its Arab cafe, every neighborhood has its Arab grocery store, every neighborhood has an Arab CD shop," observes Hakim Mazouz.

What has changed is the depth and range of cross-pollination between France and its Arab constituencies, especially those from North Africa, in what the French call *l'art de vivre*: clothing, home décor, dining, music, night life and even spa culture. To an unprecedented degree and with increasing sophistication, these two cultures - the City of Light meets the 1,001 Nights - are mingling styles, blending aesthetics, exchanging techniques and mutually shaping each others' sensibilities in myriad ways.

AN Arabian night in Paris can follow myriad trajectories. Twenty-somethings enamored of Algerian *raï* - a soulful, funk-infused pop music that mixes drum machines with exotic stringed instruments and horns - hit Wednesday's "1,001 Nights" party at the Garden Club or frequent the dazzling Moorish interiors at the Hammam Club.

But for Paris's self-styled cognoscenti, true desert decadence unfurls on the slender Rue des Gravilliers. There, the brothers Hakim and Mourad Mazouz have planted their flag, opening the restaurant 404 and its neighbor, Andy Wahloo. (They also operate Momo and Sketch, trendy restaurants in London.) In the otherwise quiet quarter, the two establishments sprout like a nocturnal oasis.

"She's shaking it!" yells Jonathan Taquu, an expatriate American working for an Internet company in Paris, as he jumps onto his chair and joins the rest of the diners in the packed 404 in clapping to the rhythm of a sultry, electro-Oriental beat.

"She" is a young woman in black who is celebrating a birthday in official 404 fashion: by gyrating on top of the bar with her shirt halfway raised in an attempt at belly dancing. Throughout the stylish restaurant-lounge - a perennial hot spot done up with casbah-cool décor - tables of media and fashion types abandon their bottles of Algerian Château Tellagh red wine, take out their digital cameras and mount the banquettes.

With the birthday celebration ended, much of the 404 crowd moves next door to Andy Wahloo, where the energy is turned up even higher. Simply entering the small establishment reveals an eye-popping medley of tangerine-hued light panels, richly striped harem cushions, metal tables made from highway signs in Arabic and walls lined with rows of colorful soda bottles, detergent boxes and food packages.

"It's like [Andy Warhol](#), only we call it Andy Wahloo," explains Hakim Mamouz as he sits at the noisy bar, adding that "Andy Wahloo" means "I have nothing" in Arabic. "It's 70's décor with some reclaimed Moroccan goods mixed with the hues of the Arab world."

Throughout the bar, a velvet-rope-worthy multinational crowd swirls like charmed snakes to arabesque club beats. When the sound system spills out the first few seductive notes of an old but enduring Egyptian club hit called "Nour El Ain," the small dance floor becomes a blur of whirling dervishes in designer eyewear.

"They know how to bring the funk," says Wassan Chaaban, a black-clad Lebanese-Canadian woman marveling at the décor and the fray. "It seems like this hole in the wall, then you walk in and you're blown away."

To fuel their wee-hours itineraries, more and more of Paris's nocturnal nomads frequent the city's growing ranks of Moroccan restaurants. As abundant as pizza places in New York, Paris's offerings range from holes in the wall to shrines of exquisite Moorish décor and equally exquisite menu offerings.

The ascent of North African cuisine has been impressive. Some 20 years ago, says Moroccan-born Fatéma Hal, a restaurateur and cookbook author, the cuisines of Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria were all lumped together by the French gastronomic establishment as "Oriental restaurants" or "little couscous places." (Couscous, made with steamed semolina topped by grilled meats and vegetables, is the unofficial national dish of the Maghreb.) "We struggled a long time to get people to recognize that Moroccan cuisine had a unique and separate identity," she says, drinking espresso at the Café Bastille, a smooth and subtle Moorish-modern hangout from Jonathan Amar.

Today, Ms. Hal's restaurant, Mansouria, is considered by many to offer the most authentic couscous experience. As the woman who literally wrote the book on the subject - her "Livre du Couscous" explores the history of the dish and contains some 150 recipes - Ms. Hal has assembled a menu of much-researched regional variants from Fez (made with lamb, raisins, almonds, onions and chick peas), Casablanca (made with mixed vegetables, raisins, chick peas and chicken or lamb) and beyond. Call it semolina scholarship.

The restaurant's star attraction, however, is la mourouzia. Though not a couscous dish, it's perhaps the most distinctive Moorish meal available in Paris: A little-known 12th-century Arab-Andalusian lamb concoction seasoned with an esoteric blend of 27 spices known as ras el hanout. "You need to know the right doses" is all Ms. Hal will say about the secret recipe. "I could give you the ingredients, but you could never recreate it."

Couscous may be the most popular North African dish, but tajine undergoes the most alchemical flavor transformations in the hands of Paris chefs. Named for the distinctive two-piece earthenware dish that it's cooked in - the conical lid catches flavorful vapors and maintains the tenderness of the ingredients - tajine is a sweet-savory medley of meats, fresh fruits, dried fruits, nuts, vegetables and spices. The permutations and combinations open to a clever cook are manifold.

"There exists an infinite number of tajine recipes," says the French chef and ethnologist Marie Chemorin in her cookbook "Tajines et Pastillas," one of the scores of slick, brightly illustrated bibles of Maghrebi cuisine in Parisian bookstores. "Each family has its own, which it transmits in secret like a magic formula."

If so motivated, you could spend weeks traversing Paris in search of the holy grail of tajines. Start at the Souk, whose playful, ersatz spice-market interior attracts hipsters who haunt the design boutiques along the trendy Rue Keller. The tajine sahraoui (chicken, lamb, onions, apricot, figs and prunes) is a main course and dessert tray slid together into one roiling, magnificent, meaty-sweet mass.

The trail goes sleek at La Villa Mauresque, off the Champs-Élysées. The contemporary dining room suggests SoHo via the Sahara and offers a jazzy Gallic-Moorish menu that's a victory of taste-bud diplomacy. The flavors of Occident and Orient merge first in a pastilla (Moroccan pastry) filled with Gallic goat cheese then sprinkled with cinnamon - a very North African touch. A flavor peak is reached with a tajine of scallop, honey, raisins and basmati rice.

Then, the culmination. Founded by Maria Seguin, a Fez-born chef and co-author of "Moroccan Flavors," Oum El Banine is a 10-table restaurant whose restrained décor hides an overachieving kitchen. Ms. Seguin has retired, but patrons still snap up grilled sardines stuffed with chermoula (made with red pepper, garlic, lemon juice and olive oil) and the dozen specialty tajines.

Let the suit-clad waiter sprinkle orange-blossom water on your hands before he brings out the lamb tajine with pears, almonds and raisins. When the lid comes off and the fragrant steam billows, it's as if a jinni has been loosed from its bottle to work culinary magic. The pears are perfectly caramelized. The succulent lamb tastes slow-cooked since the

Mitterrand years.

ARABIAN nights can require Arabian therapies the next day. As Sunday morning dawns, well-dressed Right Bank residents arrive in a slow but steady stream at Les Bains du Marais, pass the parking valet, strip to their swimsuits and enter the boutique spa's hammam area.

Influenced by North Africa's long tradition of hammams (public steam baths) and their associated wellness rituals, spas in Paris have begun adapting the age-old facilities for a modern clientele. In the last few years, opulent hotels like the Hilton Arc de Triomphe have developed hammam-spas with various North African decorative touches and beauty treatments.

Small boutique hammam-spas have similarly proliferated, offering Parisians even more places to sweat amid polychromatic mosaics, get rubbed down in Maghrebi black soap, be exfoliated with North African kassa gloves and receive massages in Moroccan argan oil (made from the nuts of a rare heat-resistant tree).

Simmering within the humid, dreamy, eucalyptus-scented haze at Les Bains du Marais is a veritable human tajine of yuppie couples, young things in bikinis and a healthy dollop of pot-bellied old men. Some, red-eyed and sunken, are clearly detoxifying after late nights. Others, reclining on tiled ledges or under the vaguely arabesque arches, cheerfully chat and gossip.

When steam time is completed, many of the white-robed masses move quietly to the next stage of beauty treatments. A few sit languidly in the lounge drinking mint tea or sipping Bordeaux. As old friends from the neighborhood get up and slowly take their leave, new arrivals push through the front doors, remove their clothes and their cares, and vanish into the mist.

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## DINING

Prices reflect a three-course dinner for two, without wine.

**Le 404**, 69, rue des Gravilliers (Third Arrondissement), (33-1) 42.74.57.81, serves a fairly standard dinner menu of couscous and tajines, as well as some nice Algerian red wines, to a packed house of fashion addicts and beautiful people. About 80 euros, or \$96 at \$1.20 to the euro. Sunday's Berber Brunch (21 euros) is more creative, with an "Oriental hamburger," sweetened couscous, Berber pancakes and more.

**La Villa Mauresque**, 5-7, rue Commandant-Rivière (Eighth), (33-1) 42.25.16.69, combines sleek, ethno-contemporary décor and a refined French-Moroccan menu. Couples and businesspeople make up the primary clientele. Around 90 euros.

**La Bague de Kenza**, 106, rue St.-Maur, (11th) (33-1) 43.14.93.15, is [Paris's](#) top Algerian patisserie and provides desserts - sticky mini-masterpieces of almond paste, honey and pistachio - for many of its North African restaurants. You can try some (at 1.50 1.90 and 2.20 euros each) in the adjacent tearoom.

**Le Souk**, 1, rue Keller, (11th) (33-1) 49.29.05.08, draws rocker-hipster types to its playful covered-bazaar confines. The 14 tajines and 11 types of couscous pile on the meat, vegetables, nuts and fruits with everything-but-the-kitchen-sink aplomb. About 60 or 70 euros.

**Mansouria**, 11, rue Faidherbe (11th), (33-1) 43.71.00.16. Elegant and venerable shrine to couscous by the cookbook author Fatéma Hal, probably the city's leading scholar on the dish. Around 70 euros.

**Oum El Banine**, 16 bis, rue Dufrenoy (16th), (33-1) 45.04.91.22, hides in a chichi residential neighborhood in western Paris. The intimate restaurant does top-notch textbook takes on stuffed and fried sardines, harira (a spicy soup), pastilla (sweet pastry stuffed with quail and guinea fowl) and tajine (more than 12 varieties). About 90 euros.

## SHOPPING

**2 Mille et 1 Nuits**, 13, rue des Francs Bourgeois (Fourth), (33-1) 48.87.07.07, [www.2001nuits.com](http://www.2001nuits.com), is a two-level treasure-trove of hand-blown Tunisian glass bowls (60 euros), highly wrought sultanic chairs (195 euros) and the like, some of it by the Dutch-born proprietor Pauline Van Veen. If Aladdin had a playful hippie-bohemian streak, this would be his cave.

**Kim and Garo**, 7, rue des Quatre Vents (Sixth), (33-1) 40.46.89.29, is a sleek, minimalist jewel box by the Marrakesh-based designer Ludovic Petit, whose style suggests the Marrakesh Express by way of Tokyo and Stockholm. Silvery beaten copper bowls (15 to 100 euros), swirly cushions (55 to 115 euros), tea glasses (4 to 5 euros) and other Zen-tranquil, Scandinavian-sleek creations line the small shop.

**Marhaba**, 30, rue Faidherbe (11th), (33-1) 43.70.59.44, sells spangly slippers (20 euros), colorful three-quarter-length embroidered tunics (55 euros), beaded leather belts (42 euros), tea sets (26 euros), Moroccan olive-oil soaps (7 euros) and other products created or imported from Morocco by the owner-designer Soraya Lolli. Born in France to Moroccan parents (her mother owns Mansouria down the block), Ms. Lolli splits her time between Paris and Morocco, using the influences of both countries to create coolly modern garments, accessories and décor.

**Mia Zia**, 4, rue de Caumartin (Ninth), (33-1) 44.51.94.45, [www.miazia.com](http://www.miazia.com), showcases Valérie Barkowski's colorful, funky clothes and accessories inspired by North Africa and India. You might walk out with a silk fez (33 euros), full-length tangerine terrycloth djellaba (200 euros) and a flamboyantly striped scarf with tassels (140 euros).

**Barbès market:** Held every Wednesday and Saturday morning under the elevated Métro tracks along the Boulevard de la Chapelle (take the Métro to the Barbès-Rochechouart or La Chapelle stop), this is the main market for the largely Arab and Francophone African populations of Paris. The surrounding Goutte d'Or neighborhood is full of cheap North African restaurants, public hammams, halal butchers and other Maghrebi trappings.

## NIGHT LIFE

**Andy Wahloo**, 69, rue des Gravilliers (Third), (33-1) 42.71.20.38. No cover.

**Garden Club**, 4, rue Arsène Houssaye (Eighth), (33-1) 45.61.20.20, [www.le](http://www.le)

[-gardenclub.com](http://-gardenclub.com). The Wednesday "1,001 Nights" features Algerian raï music, electro-Oriental mixes and other styles. Cover is 20 euros and includes one drink.

**Hammam Club**, 94, rue d'Amsterdam (Ninth), (33-1) 55.07.80.00, [www.hammamclub.com](http://www.hammamclub.com). Cover is 20 euros; includes one drink. Free entry for women until 1 a.m.

## SPAS

Paris's new generation of boutique-style hammams (Middle Eastern steam baths) typically offer a classic sequence of treatments - steam session, rubdown in black soap, exfoliation with a rough glove, massage and glass of mint tea - in jazzy mosaic-rich steam rooms and arabesque treatment areas. Many offer modern spa treatments like wraps and facials.

**Les Bains du Marais**, 31-33 rue, des Blancs Manteaux (Fourth), (33-1) 44.61.02.02, [www.lesbainsdumarais.com](http://www.lesbainsdumarais.com).

Using the tiled hammam at this coed facility runs 30 euros. A traditional exfoliation treatment and massage cost another 30 euros (reservations suggested).

**Mosaic Spa at the Hilton Arc de Triomphe**, 51/57, rue de Courcelles (Eighth), (33-1) 58.36.68.09, [www.spamosaic.com](http://www.spamosaic.com). Nonguests can use the hammam for 50 euros. The facility offers facial treatments, wraps, hydrotherapy.

**Aux Bains Montorgueil**, 55 rue Montorgueil (Second), (33-1) 44.88.01.78. Boutique spa where, for 88 euros, guests receive a steam bath, a rubdown in black soap, an exfoliation and a massage (followed by mint tea and Oriental pastries). Mostly caters to women. Reservations essential.

## SIGHTSEEING

**Institut du Monde Arabe**, 1, rue des Fossés-St.-Bernard (Fifth), (33-1) 40.51.38.38, [www.imarabe.org](http://www.imarabe.org). Designed by the celebrated French architect Jean Nouvel, with Pierre Soria, Gilbert Lezenes and Architecture Studio, and completed almost 20 years ago, the stunning postmodern pastiche of Middle Eastern architectural details houses a museum, film center, cafe, library, bookstore and the Ziryab restaurant, whose views are among the best in Paris. Admission: 5 euros.

**Paris Mosque**, 2 bis, Place du Puits-de-l'Ermite (Fifth), (33-1) 45.35.97.33, [www.mosquee-de-paris.org](http://www.mosquee-de-paris.org). Built in the 1920's by Moroccan craftsmen, this Latin Quarter institution houses a traditional hammam and a tearoom.

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