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Paris's Place d'Asia

Sunday, October 10, 2004; Page P10

In a remote corner of Paris's 13th arrondissement, a modest competition is underway. Two Asian men in their twenties are flailing at a Ping-Pong ball, sending wayward smashes and ill-advised spin shots off the table and into the dust of the Parc de Choisy.

"@#\$\$%&*!" is the constant refrain, a French vulgarity unprintable here, even untranslated.

Behind them, rows of concrete and metal tables -- the Ping-Pong equivalent of the rusty outdoor basketball courts all over America -- host other spirited contests. Austere concrete high-rises cast long shadows on the distinctly unhistorical boulevards. Signs in exotic script announce food stores, hair salons and clothing shops. And the familiar Parisian charms -- ancient buildings, wrought-iron balconies, crooked streets, outdoor cafes -- are all but absent.

Venture into Paris's Chinatown -- a pie-wedge formed by Avenue d'Ivry, Avenue de Choisy and Boulevard Massena -- and you'll find an ethnic quarter where blissfully few backpackers hobble and fewer sightseeing buses seem to tread. But while hardly picturesque, the neighborhood is a hotbed of good, cheap restaurants and well-stocked shops.

About 12,000 Asians reside in the area -- four-fifths of them Chinese -- making this Chinatown several times smaller than its counterparts in San Francisco and New York. Still, it's the largest Asian neighborhood in mainland Europe, by most reckoning. Altogether, about 250,000 people of Far Eastern heritage live in Paris and its surroundings, and a second, smaller ethnic enclave has developed in the northeastern neighborhood of Belleville.

But the 13th arrondissement remains the heart of Asian Paris.

During a recent visit I noticed that many eateries advertised "Chinese-Vietnamese-Thai" cooking -- and I was skeptical they could do all three equally well. (Anyone who's stared at a New York diner menu and wondered how it could boast both Belgian waffles and baked haddock knows the feeling.) I wanted a place that specialized.

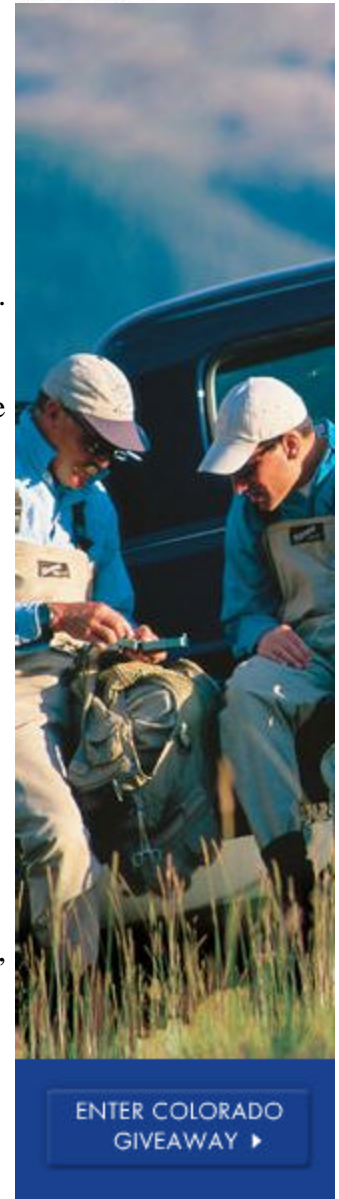
A newsdealer steered me to his favorite Chinese restaurant, **Le Prestige d'Asie** (121 Ave. d'Ivry), where I enjoyed shrimp dumplings ("raviolis" to the French, \$4) and beef with onions (\$7.50). A chef for a Buddhist temple recommended his preferred Vietnamese hangout, **Pho Mui** (97 Ave. d'Ivry), a tiny joint serving massive bowls of vermicelli soup (\$8.50) full of raw and cooked beef and meatballs.

Post-meal treats came from an Asian bakery called **Patisserie de Choisy** (62 Ave. de Choisy), in the form of sesame-coated nougat (\$1.25) and coconut croissants (75 cents).

The shops in the quarter range from specialty boutiques to everything-under-one-roof superstores. The sleek **L'Empire des Thes** (101 Ave. d'Ivry) specializes in fancy Chinese teas, which it sells by weight and categorizes by

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region, like a French wine list. After wading through some silly souvenirs at **Corail Rouge** (10-16 Rue des Freres d'Astier), I turned up some interesting carved-bone boxes (\$27) and lovely glass bottles (\$28).

At the other end of the spectrum, the huge **Kawa** store (89-97 Ave. de Choisy) was stocked to the rafters with nicely boxed tea sets (\$30), carved wooden rice bowls (\$4), bamboo sushi boxes (\$8.50) and other housewares.

For exotic and unusual foodstuffs, I found that nothing beat **Tang Freres** (48 Ave. d'Ivry) -- really a complex of indoor and outdoor markets -- where the pickings included everything from jackfruit to litchi wine to cuttlefish-flavored chips.

Simply walking the streets was often the most rewarding activity. Interesting details abounded: stone lions guarding a supermarket; a McDonald's with Forbidden City-style architecture; a community center offering courses in English, French, kung fu, Oriental cooking and Dragon Dancing.

In the area's largest housing complex, the **Olympiads** (best accessed by the stairs next to the main Tang Freres outlet), I uncovered two unusual **Buddhist temples**. At one, in the complex's outdoor shopping promenade, I witnessed elderly immigrants taking a country-music dance lesson. At the other, hidden in a parking garage (37 Rue du Disque), old men chatted in a corner while young women lit sweet incense and muttered quiet prayers.

A few weeks later I returned to the neighborhood, disappointed at first to find the Ping-Pong games washed out by a summer rain. There was nothing to do but walk the boulevards, poke around the superstores and chew sesame-coated nougat.

And that was fine with me.

-- **Seth Sherwood**

To get to Chinatown, take the Metro to the Tolbiac station. For general info on travel to France: French Government Tourist Office, 410-286-8310, us.franceguide.com.

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