In New York, you are taught to approach everything with suspicion. Hot dog and pretzel stands, famously featured in romantic comedies, are never frequented by weathered New Yorkers. Strawberries and bananas purchased from a rickety fruit stand must be washed twice before the first bite. But in Paris, you approach markets with an unrestrained willingness. The same man who offers you a slice from an open melon at the end of the market at Les Halles Saint-Eustache would be a pariah in New York City. A French market is an entirely different universe from the stands of New York City from the protruding cobblestones, quaint aesthetic, down to the way people approach food.

The market at Les Halles, located on Rue Montmartre, has been a controversial location for Parisians since the early 1800’s, when it was the first open air market opened in the city. The staples of French cuisine could be found here: a variety of meats, vegetables, breads, and fruits. The assortment available earned the market the title of “The Belly of Paris.” Much like a stomach, the market could sustain a hearty concoction of food and managed to digest everything harmoniously. Unfortunately, the congestion of people caused irreparable damage, and the popularity of Les Halles led to her demise. Needing massive restoration and unable to thrive in the “market economy,” Les Halles’ infamous arcades were torn down in 1971, causing the scandalous disappearance of a once mythical hub and safe haven for merchants. Then Les Halles was revived, but relocated to the French suburbs. What remained from the dislodgement was a massive pit, which was considered “le trout des Halles” or the hole of Halles. Parisians considered
this trench an eyesore, so much so that it has earned a fifty-four minute documentary about its demolition and reconstruction. Clearly, market culture and its social standing are as frequently spoken about as the economy or the weather, proving The Market’s importance to French society.

I was first struck by the smell of Les Halles. Unlike a fruit stand in NYC, there weren’t any looming odors of rotting fruit or the heavy pollution that spoils the air. What you will smell is clean air with the occasional whiff of saffron from the Moroccan food stand. One inhale indicated that what I was entering was destined to be good and wholesome. Market-goers have come prepared; most of them sport what appears to be a sack on wheels that follows them, like a heavy-eyed toddler they must haul through their errands. Upon noticing your gaze, a friendly stand owner will probably offer you a substantial piece of a juicy melon or a handful of dates, rightfully beaming and proud of their product. I was handed a chunk of orange melon despite my hesitance to accept fruit from a stranger, sopping with cold and sticky melon juice. One bite convinced me to take more, as the melon’s owner looked on approvingly.

Next, you might notice pillowy pink peonies, juxtaposed against the blue and white awning that supports the flowers. They are poised and standing upright, waiting to be plucked from the crowd. They are all over eight euros and like to be photographed, unlike the plastic wrapped roses you are guaranteed to find squished together on a stand in New York. Although you could spend hours in awe at the colorful palette of flowers, more awaits.

Deeper into the market you will find grinning chefs sautéing what looks like dark mussels and tomatoes on sauce pans the size of a tire. To your left, a vendor is selling flat
grey fish with bright orange freckles, miniscule anchovies that fit in a box, and massive octopus tentacles lying on ice. To your right, the finest couscous is neighbor to sweet baklava and other pistachio-sprinkled desserts. To your left is a stand with food from Africa, the sizzling of shrimp and rice mixing with the curry, cayenne, and turmeric that indulge the air.

Toward the back of the market, you will find a stand brimming with olives of all colors rubbed with oil, herbs and seasonings along with wrinkled dates, prunes, and dried figs. A vendor might offer you a complimentary date, plucked straight from a branch. If you were offered a fruit with a branch still attached to it in New York, you would demand a refund. Instead, I proudly clutched my bag of dates, branches and all brushing my leg.