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Marché d'Aligre: A Seat For Everyone

Walking down Rue d'Aligre immediately reminds me of Thanksgiving. The street is a cornucopia of summer produce, a plentiful bounty of the season's harvest. The line of vendors' booths form a long banquet table like the one at my aunt's where my family eats our annual meal. Though I may be an American tourist, I want a seat at this feast.

Like the historic American holiday, Marché d'Aligre is one of the oldest markets in Paris. Constructed in 1779, the market has always been a crossroads of cultures. Located in an area home to many Northern African immigrants, a majority of the vendors are third or fourth generation maghrébins continuing their family trade. I can identify their stalls; the ones showcasing beautiful fall colors, from pumpkin-orange apricots to wrinkled bark-brown dates and autumnal dried apples. At each booth, whiffs of exotic spices stir through the air like a cinnamon stick in a mug of cider.

I begin my journey through the market spread, in awe of the plethora of piled high produce. One stall offers such abundance that I can only see the vendor's tiny head partially hidden behind massive melons and lettuce leaves. I greet the vendors as I pass, mustering my best "bonjour." My confidence builds until I hear the dreaded words; "Hello miss," a vendor beckons. In a matter of minutes, I've become an outsider; grouped alongside the passing tourists.

I stop at a stall where I spot my friend ordering a peach. She, too, cannot possibly walk amidst the sensuous harvest without getting a taste. "Un pêche s'il vous plaît," she mutters in broken French. I shudder in embarrassment, so much for blending in. To my surprise, the vendor responds with a toothy grin.

"*Une* pêche," he replies frankly as he hands her the peach, stressing the emphasis on the "ooo." We get a French lesson as he points to the strawberries then back at the peaches: "*une*

pêche, *un fraise*.” She hands him the money. “Six million dollars,” he says with a chuckle. His sarcastic humor resembles my grandpa’s jokes on Thanksgiving. I can picture him uttering Pa’s pre-meal declaration “I’m so hungry I could eat a horse!” followed by that same raspy laugh.

As I walk further along the street, I notice some diverse faces gathered at Aligre. Alongside stalls of fruits and vegetables are a collection of small shops: an Italian *traiteur* featuring three “*lasagnes du jour*,” a Greek grocer on the corner, and an Algerian bakery selling stacks of honey-infused desserts. Strolling through the covered market, I glance at the garland strung across the ceiling— a colorful array of international flags. It seems that there is room for everyone at the table, there must be a spot for me.

The celebration continues as I approach a stall, eyeing the crates of fresh herbs. The vendor watches as I rub the rosemary and smell the soothing oils left on my fingers. I wonder if his stare means I’ve done wrong, but he returns my glance with a smile. “*Le basilic!*” he says, drawing bucket of basil toward my nose. We share a special moment sniffing the basil leaves with their aroma of summer. Despite my American identity, I finally feel part of this summer feast.

The market’s embrace of acceptance strengthens as I look more closely at the plentiful produce. I notice the dainty disfigured potatoes and the irregularly long pears. Sitting on my left are the stocky white asparagus, who appear to have over-indulged on my aunt’s pecan pie. To my right are the wonderfully wrinkly heirloom tomatoes flaunting their natural, unaltered skin.

Suddenly the rumbling of wheels approaches from behind. A line of elderly women push their grocery carts across the pavement, marching through the street in Aligre’s own Macy’s Thanksgiving parade. I get caught in the middle, happily joining the procession. Amidst the bantering, laughing and cart-pushing, I’ve finally found my seat.

As I finish the meal with one final bite of baklava, my stuffed belly is satisfied. I give thanks for the beauty of summer and the friendly faces that invited me in. In contrast to the once-a-year American holiday, Aligre's horn of plenty can be enjoyed six days a week, taking a necessary Monday post-holiday recovery. Though Thanksgiving may not be for another five months, I'll always have a spot at the table on a visit to Marché Aligre.