



BY MICHAEL BALTER  
 PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARGARET SKINNER AND GEORGES VÉRON



ONE MORNING IN THE 1870s, THE IRISH writer George Moore went for a walk in the Luxembourg Gardens of Paris. "I threw myself on a bench," he wrote in his memoirs, "and began to wonder if there was anything better in the world worth doing than to sit in an alley of clipped limes smoking, thinking of Paris and of myself."

More than a hundred years later, visitors to this peaceful oasis cloistered adjacent to the kinetic streets of the Latin Quarter must ask themselves the same question. Even those who could do without the cigarette would agree that the gardens' one-hundred-plus species of trees exhale enough oxygen for everyone. And weekdays around midday, it seems that almost everyone is here: students from the Sorbonne taking a break from classes, reading mystery novels next to the Médicis Fountain; secretaries and shopworkers sitting in green metal chairs around the duck pond, munching sandwiches in the sun; friends from across the city lunching at the outdoor tables of the brasserie Les Gaufres, near the Luxembourg Palace; and senior citizens on benches under the trees, gossiping and feeding the pigeons.

Many Parisians regard the Luxembourg Gardens as the most delightful green space on the city's Left Bank, and it's easy to see why. Just inside the main gate, off the busy boulevard St.-Michel, a statue of a piping satyr kicking up one leg beckons visitors down a sandy avenue bordered by two rows of chestnut trees. As they reach the edge of a balustraded terrace overlooking the octagonal pond, the Florentine-style palace, built for Marie de Médicis, looms on the right, while the orderly lanes, plush green lawns and {CONTINUED ON PAGE 80}

# A PARK BENCH *in Paris*

The Luxembourg Gardens are an oasis of quiet on the Left Bank. On Sunday, they're filled with people seeing the sights, relaxing with friends and enjoying some delicious bistro food.



Sunday in the park, Paris style (clockwise from top, far left): in front of the Luxembourg Palace, all the necessary picnic accoutrements, including assorted quiches and a smoked salmon sandwich from Dalloyau pastry shop; ready to pitch during a game of boules; taking a break for late-afternoon espresso and the day's news at the brasserie Les Gaufres; and guests enjoying the atmosphere and Thierry Lemoine's cooking at Chez Marie.





Touring the gardens (clockwise from top): a park regular (with friends) in her favorite spot; great food and a little romance at Le Chat Grippé; Dalloyau's treasure trove of sweets; and an open-air rendezvous at Les Gaufres.

exquisitely manicured flower beds of the formal French garden spread out ahead. Farther on, past the pony rides and the tennis courts and the clacking sound of stocky men playing *boules*, the linear French formality dissolves into the curved, playful paths of an English garden, shaded by elms and poplars.

Yet, as appealing as they are today, these 60 tranquil acres are the legacy of one of the most dysfunctional families in French history. In 1612, two years after the assassination of King Henri IV, his widow, Marie de Médicis, bought the grounds from the duke of Luxembourg and had a palace built in the style of her native Tuscany. Legend has it that she paid for the palace by riding over to the Bastille one night and stealing the money Henri had stored there in case of a future war. Henri was killed the day after Marie's coronation as queen, making her regent of France until their eight-year-old son, King Louis XIII, came of age. But, as the French say, *cela ne nous regarde pas*—that's really not our affair.



Even if, as some suspect, Louis had his mother to thank for becoming king of France at such a tender age, he proved to be quite an ungrateful lad. Louis was fifteen when he ended the regency and sent Marie packing to the provinces, where she persisted in plotting against her son for several years. Finally, after revoking a promise to her to dismiss the powerful Cardinal de Richelieu—who had become Marie's implacable foe—Louis banished his mother for good, and she died penniless in Cologne.

After Marie's death, the palace reverted to the crown and remained royal property until the French Revolution, when it served as a prison during the Terror. Soon after the heads stopped rolling, it became the house of the French Senate, and still is today. As for the gardens, they were turned over to the public after the Revolution of 1848, when King Louis-Philippe, the last king of France, abdicated the throne and took refuge in England.

It was during the reign of Louis-Philippe that the Luxembourg Gardens began to acquire the collection of statues that are among the park's most characteristic features. Yet even the French find most of them mediocre, particularly the second-rate representations of the queens of France that line the terraces in front of the palace. Somewhat more inspiring are an impressive marble monument dedicated to the French painter Eugène Delacroix, and a bacchanalian depiction of a naked, laughing old man trying to stay atop a bucking horse with the help of several equally naked friends.

But the most popular work of sculpture in the gardens, the massive Médicis Fountain with its long terraced pool shaded by plane trees, was commissioned by Marie herself in 1620. It took on its present form in 1863, when the sculptor Ottin added the figures of the goddess Galatea and her lover Acis, who is about to be crushed by Polyphemus, the fierce and jealous Cyclops crouched above the pair on a rocky ledge.

Perhaps the best time to visit the Luxembourg is on a Sunday, when people from all walks of Parisian life come

and go like the movements of a symphony. When the gardens open, just after dawn, the first to appear are the joggers and the silent figures performing the intricate maneuvers of tai chi. They are soon followed by the chess players, who gather near the nursery and fasten their boards onto the chairs with elastic cords. By noon the families have begun to arrive. The pool in front of the palace ripples from the wakes of toy sailboats and the flapping wings of indignant ducks.

As the afternoon lingers on, children invade the playground to cavort on the slides and swings, or line up at the puppet theater for the next performance of *The Three Little Pigs*. Meanwhile, their parents take refuge at La Buvette des Marionnettes, the little café next to the theater, for tea and a piece of apricot tart.

Minutes turn into hours, the light fades, and suddenly the air is pierced by the whistles of the stern uniformed guardians, whose thankless job it is to chase the reluctant populace from the grounds. As the sun touches the horizon, the only figures left are the shadowy statues—including the lonely silhouette of Marie de Médicis, situated without reverence between two obscure queens whom

all but the historians have forgotten.

Perhaps Marie, wasting away in Cologne, came to regret the trouble she made for her son, Louis XIII. Surely, if she had just let him have his kingdom to play with, he would have let her keep her lovely gardens.

## CRAB SALAD WITH ENDIVE AND TOMATO-CILANTRO SAUCE

The crab salad is mounded over the ends of endive spears so that they work as edible scoops for the salad (above right). This is served as a starter at Le Chat Grippé.

6 APPETIZER SERVINGS

### CRAB SALAD

- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 2 shallots, thinly sliced
- 1 teaspoon minced peeled fresh ginger
- ½ cup chopped tart green apple (such as Granny Smith)
- ½ cup chopped zucchini
- ½ cup chopped seeded red bell pepper
- ½ cup chopped seeded green bell pepper
- ¼ cup chopped carrot

## GARDEN SPOTS FOR DINING

There are two restaurants inside the Luxembourg Gardens: the brasserie Les Gaufres near the palace, and La Buvette des Marionnettes next to the puppet theater. Both serve modest but perfectly adequate lunches, including main dishes, salads, crepes and homemade tarts. But for a more satisfying culinary experience, you might try one of the following establishments near the gardens.

**Chez Marie.** Right across from the Senate, Chez Marie is a discreet place for neighborhood friends and legislators who don't want to bring their mistresses into the Senate dining room. The prices on the menu have gone up lately, but the terrine of duck with pistachios and the sauté of lamb with *petits légumes* are still worth it.

**Dalloyau.** This chain of pastry shops and caterers has outlets all over Paris, but the shop just across from the main entrance to the Luxembourg Gardens has the nicest view of all. Croissants, pastries, chocolates and luxury hors d'oeuvres are available on the ground floor, while upstairs the quaint restaurant serves full-course meals for lunch, and tea and cakes all afternoon.

**Le Chat Grippé.** The strange name of this restaurant, which translates as "The Cat with the Flu," is a play on the names of the establishment's original owners. Located just south of the gardens, the place was recently taken over by Robert Bernacchia, and the cuisine of the new chef, Michel Galichon, is anything but strange. The delicious crab salad with endive, the breast of guinea fowl wrapped in strips of zucchini, and "turban" of caramelized pears make Le Chat Grippé the best restaurant in the immediate area.



- ½ pound crabmeat, drained well, picked over
- ¼ cup mayonnaise
- 2 tablespoons chopped fresh chives

### SAUCE

- 2 tomatoes, peeled, seeded, chopped
- ⅓ cup chopped fresh cilantro
- 2 tablespoons Sherry wine vinegar
- 1 garlic clove, chopped
- Pinch of cayenne pepper
- ½ cup olive oil

- 2 heads Belgian endive, trimmed, separated into spears
- Chopped fresh chives

FOR CRAB SALAD: Heat oil in heavy large skillet over medium-high heat. Add shallots and ginger and sauté until tender, about 4 minutes. Add apple, zucchini, both bell peppers and carrot and sauté until tender but not brown, about 5 minutes. Remove from heat. Cool to room temperature.

Mix crabmeat, mayonnaise, 2 tablespoons chopped chives and sautéed vegetables in large bowl to blend. Season to taste with salt and pepper. (Can be prepared 1 day ahead. Cover and refrigerate.)

FOR SAUCE: Combine tomatoes, cilantro, vinegar, garlic and cayenne in blender and puree until almost smooth. Gradually add oil and blend until sauce is thick. Transfer to medium bowl. Season to taste with salt and pepper.

Arrange endive spears on large platter, tips toward platter edge. Spoon crab salad into center of platter. Drizzle sauce over endive. Garnish salad with chopped fresh chives and serve.

Michael Balter is a Paris-based travel writer and frequent contributor to Bon Appétit.