

Cheap and cheerful restaurants back in fashion

Traditional Parisian *bouillons* are having a renaissance in and out of the capital. **Martin Greenacre** finds out more

EGGS with mayonnaise, onion soup, sausage and mash... these simple dishes have been behind long queues on Paris pavements in recent months.

It is all down to the rebirth of a Paris institution: the *bouillon*.

The promise is a hearty, traditional meal at low prices. The concept dates back to 1855, when butcher Pierre-Louis Duval had the idea of offering cheap meat cooked in a broth (hence the name *bouillon*) to market workers at Les Halles in Paris.

Duval went on to open 30 *bouillons*, based on soup and other simple dishes using cheap meat and vegetables.

The term became most synonymous with brothers Frédéric and Camille Chartier, who opened the first Bouillon Chartier in 1896 in the Grands Boulevards neighbourhood. In the early 1900s, there were almost 250 *bouillons* in Paris, of which approximately 10 belonged to the Chartier brothers.

"They were the McDonald's of the time," said Luc Morand, owner of Bouillon Racine, referring to the cheap prices and modest clientele.

"In the 1860s and 70s, with Haussmann, the city expanded, and the number of *bouillons* exploded. Around 1900, there is the Art Nouveau movement, and you have Racine and a



Bouillon Chartier at Grands Boulevards opened in 1896

whole series of *bouillons* with Art Nouveau decor. After World War One, Art Nouveau became has-been."

It was also around this time that brasseries were growing in popularity. "They were slightly more refined. *Bouillons* were really canteen-style, with large tables. You were put right next to your neighbours, and the goal was to get you to eat and free up the table as quickly as possible."

He gives the example of Bouillon Julien, which dates back to 1906, to explain how trends have evolved.

"It was a *bouillon*, but it became a brasserie, then an upscale brasserie, and now it's a *bouillon* again."

Bouillon Racine was created by the Chartier brothers in 1906. It was taken over by the Sorbonne in the 1960s

as a staff canteen, but by the 1990s it had fallen into disrepair and closed. In 1995 it was bought by Belgian brewers who renovated the site, obtained historic monument listing, and reopened to the public. Today, it is a classic restaurant rather than a *bouillon*.

Fifteen years ago, Bouillon Chartier at Grands Boulevards was the last true *bouillon* standing. Christophe Joulie, who runs Paris's three Chartier locations, said: "If my father and I hadn't taken it over in 2007, nobody would be talking about *bouillons* today."

These include a historic *bouillon* in Montparnasse, which reopened in 2019, and a completely new one at Gare de l'Est, created in 2021.

"Our idea was for somewhere you could eat for less than €20 and in

under 30 minutes, to be able to compete with fast food restaurants."

Twenty euros is the average price of a meal. Starters begin at €1 for the soup of the day, and mains at €7 for frankfurter and chips, with pot-au-feu costing €11.50. For dessert, a crème caramel will set you back €3.20.

While Mr Joulie says the prices are partly down to knowing which ingredients to buy, the business model also requires high volumes. At Grands Boulevards, it is impossible to reserve a table, and they do 1,800 covers a day. Clients range from Parisian business-people to students and tourists.

The concept has now also spread outside the capital: *bouillons* have opened in Lille, Lyon, Dijon and Bayonne over the past few years.

'Menu changes every century'

OTHER parts of France have their own traditional settings, such as the *winstub* in Alsace or, perhaps most famously, the *bouchons* found in Lyon.

According to the Michelin Guide, a *bouchon* is where you come to enjoy "regional wines and local cuisine, fish quenelles, *tablier de sapeur*, *tête de veau ravigote* [...] The menu changes every century".

A *bouchon* is usually on the smaller side, with tables pushed close together, red and white tablecloths, and a bar. Everything is carefully designed to create a welcoming and convivial atmosphere.

Any restaurant can call itself a *bouchon lyonnais*, but to help people find authentic eating places, an association of restaurateurs partnered with the local chamber of commerce in 2012 to create the Bouchons Lyonnais label. Certified restaurants can be found at lesbouchonslyonnais.org.

Mr Joulie remains sceptical of those he sees as seizing on the success of Chartier. Among the new *bouillons*, some are priced like a restaurant and lack a large, open space.

"If you have 50 seats, for me it's a bistro. It creates confusion. A *bouillon* is about the ambiance, movement, lots of people and noise, shared tables.

"At the beginning, nobody believed in the product. Today, certain people are doing it out of opportunism."

Mr Morand said he could understand the growing popularity of *bouillons*. "In France, we don't really have a culture of high-quality cheap food. That is why McDonald's was able to develop, and why there are lots of pizzerias. There were brasseries, but they often served food that was not very good and more expensive than a McDonald's."

He has particularly noticed interest among young adults. "I've been here for 20 years. For a long time, nobody knew what a *bouillon* was. Then some smart people opened Bouillon Pigalle. They got great press, and brought the term *bouillon* back in fashion."

Bouillon Pigalle opened in 2017, and proved such a hit with a new generation that the owners soon opened a second restaurant at République.

Mr Morand has no intention of riding the wave and transforming his restaurant back into a *bouillon*.

"That would mean increasing the number of tables by 50 or 100%, and doing everything much more quickly. It is not the same profession, the same cuisine, or the same waiters."

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