



À La Mode

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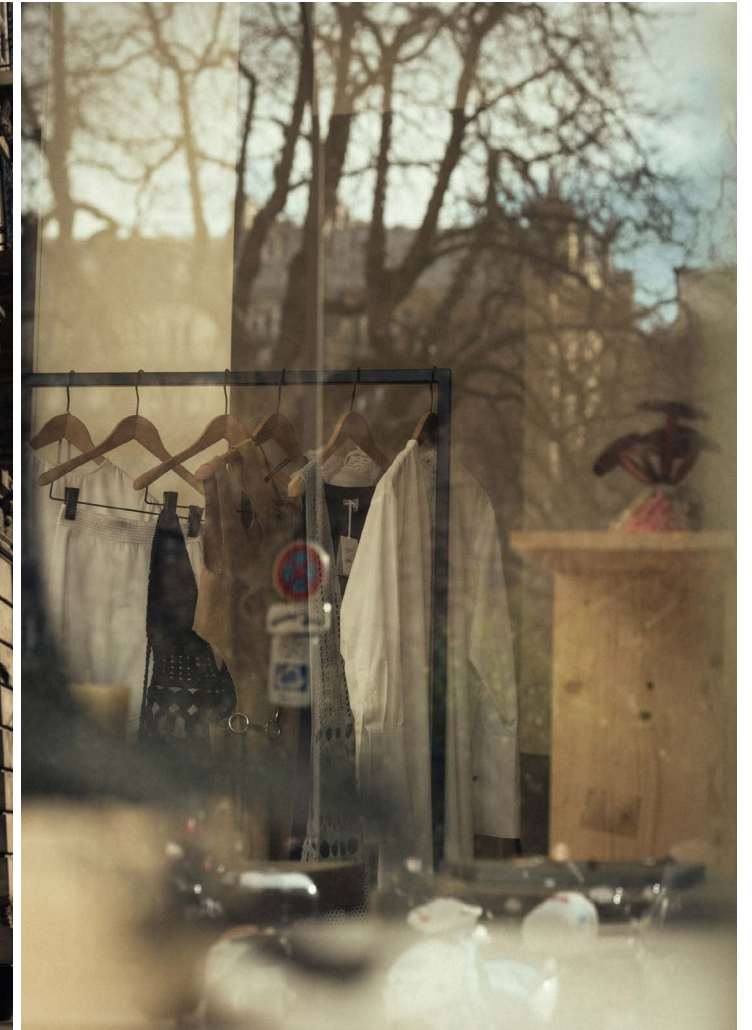
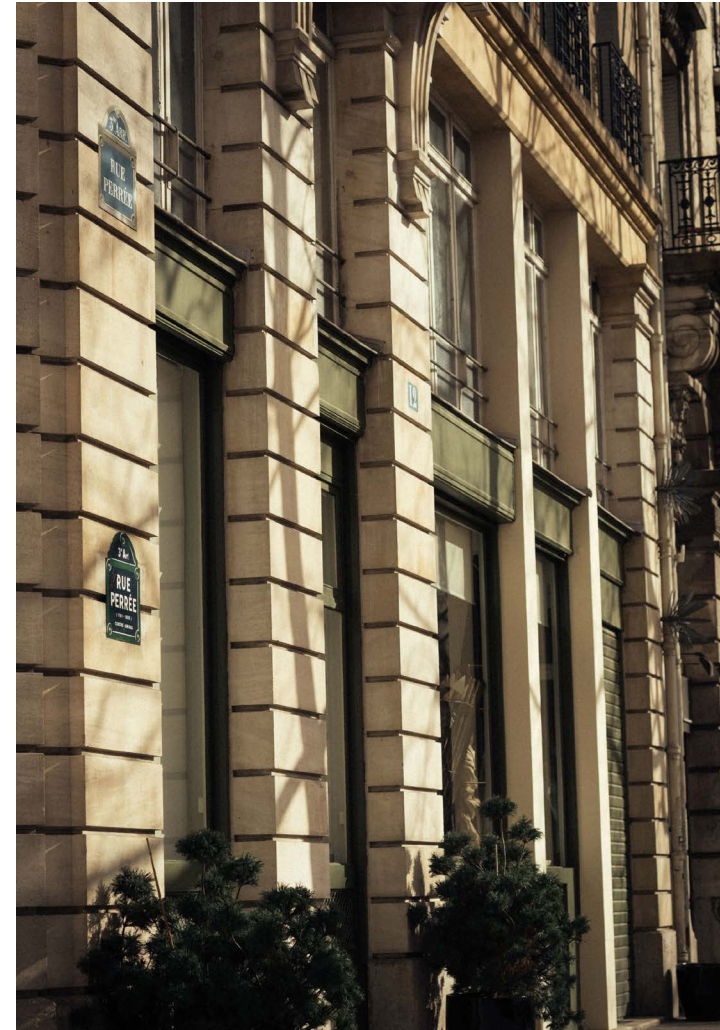
On my first trip to Paris as a study abroad student, Café de Flore was on the top of my list of must-visit places. The 19th century landmark in the well-heeled neighborhood of Saint-Germain-des-Prés is how many of us envision Paris: the corner café with its red leather banquettes and Art Deco-style brass fixtures and mirrored walls, feeling both intimate and like a spectacle. You're not coming for the coffee. You're coming for the history, to mimic the motions of the 20th century writers, painters and philosophers like Picasso and Hemingway, who immortalized the city's iconic café culture. And, of course, you're coming for the fashion. Everyone from Karl Lagerfeld to Yves Saint Laurent and his many muses held court here, and brands like Chanel, Chloé, and Paco Rabanne transformed the café into a runway show.

Café de Flore is still every bit as fashionable—and was somewhere I frequented on Sunday mornings when I briefly lived in the *quartier*—but with the emergence of lifestyle-themed concept shops like Merci and The Broken Arm, with their adjacent coffee shops, and Maison Kitsuné's new roastery in the Marais, fashion brands are proving that the coffee itself is just as important as the atmosphere surrounding it. "You have these places that are focusing on third wave coffee, but they also want to break down the institutionalized fourth wall of what it means to be a shop or boutique," says Paris-based Sudeep Rangji, whose work in bioethics covers the social and cultural history of food, and who is a brand creative and strategist for the legendary Parisian bakery Poilâne. "You're seeing this influence of streetwear in high fashion; they're deconstructing these identities, so it only makes sense that they're also deconstructing the physical spaces as well."

This was the design philosophy for Parisian beauty brand L'Officine Universelle Buly in its Marais boutique, which opened in 2017. It shares a space with the revived Grand Café Tortoni. Once a 19th century meeting place for artists, writers, and socialites, the café was revived here on the rue de Saintonge with an interior designed to recall the Belle Époque era (the original café was in Paris's Golden Triangle in the 8th *arrondissement*). On the left is an apothecary-inspired jade-green marble cosmetics counter. Lining the wall behind it are floor-to-ceiling, glass-paneled oak cabinets beautifully displaying Berber natural lipstick, customizable tortoiseshell-patterned combs, and L'Officine Universelle Buly's signature white bottles of perfume and oils. On the right side, antique-style wooden stools line the café's bar. A menu of homemade ice cream and *café minute* (coffee made-to-order) etched into marble slabs is displayed on the wall behind the bar and is served by women in pleated skirts resembling something a headmistress may have worn in eras past.

Founders Ramdane Touhami and Victoire de Taillac scoured eBay and antique markets across France to source the café's vintage silver trays and Limoges porcelain cups, while coffee hails from their neighborhood roaster Brûlerie de Varenne in the 7th *arrondissement*. "The coffee culture has changed so much in the past 10 years, and everyone is starting to pay more attention to the quality of what we're drinking," says de Taillac. "Traditional [neighborhood] cafés are still so much a part of French culture, since they're next to your home and where you'll go to meet friends for coffee in the morning or a drink at night. This is still quite strong, but different from what newer spots are offering. Now, when you go into a shop [that has a café], it's like another service you can get."













On a recent chilly winter morning, I went to visit Belleville Brûlerie, one of the city's leading roasteries. The cafe and roaster is run by the team behind my old neighborhood coffee shop, Le 50 in Belleville, which sadly shuttered during Paris's first pandemic lockdown. Head coffee roaster, Bucharest-born Mihaela Iordache, has spent the past eight years working her way up in the Paris specialty coffee scene—and earned the coveted title of Roast Masters Champion in 2019 in the process. She talked about how Belleville Brûlerie was one of the first in the country to rethink coffee blends within a specialty coffee environment to “distance ourselves from what used to be the old coffee houses with no traceability or transparency. We saw this as a great opportunity to tell stories with coffee [through blends], and there's something very special and French about *l'art de l'assemblage*,” she says.

In French culture, there's *assemblage*, or blending, in everything from flour for bread to wines for Champagne and Cognac. “It's interesting that a coffee that's not French in origin can be Parisian because of its blend, its DNA,” she says, adding that what also feels French is the traditional corner cafes with their Old World atmosphere. “This is a culture that's nostalgic about the beauty of its past. When I go somewhere like L'Officine Universelle Buly, I'm in awe of the space itself; it immediately feels Parisian to me.”

There has been an explosion of roasters over the past few years in Paris. And now, places that were importing concepts and architecture from coffee capitals like London or Copenhagen want to create a Parisian identity, bringing specialty coffee to traditional Parisian spaces. “It's no longer just this New Age, industrial open vibe that is a signifier of ‘good coffee’ in the city,” Rangì says. “There's the pressure or interest in locavorism, and the idea that if roasting is being done here, it feels more local.”

When Maison Kitsuné launched 20 years ago, it started as a music label (founded by the Franco-Japanese duo Gildas Loaëc, who was one of Daft Punk's managers, and Masaya Kuroki) before morphing into a fashion brand and coffee shop that's one of the best definitions of *l'art de vivre*. When the original cafe in Paris opened in the Palais Royal gardens in 2011, Maison Kitsuné was one of the first fashion brands in the city to debut a specialty coffee shop. To create a link between Café Kitsuné and the Parisian fashion house, Maison Kitsuné even created ready-to-wear clothing and accessories with the fox emblem (*kitsuné* means fox in Japanese) and a color palette of matcha-green and latte-beige to match the brand's signature drinks.

In 2021, Maison Kitsuné also opened its first European roastery, Café Kitsuné Vertbois, in a sleek, Scandinavian-style space in the Marais where it roasts the brand's signature house blend: a full-bodied coffee, with notes of chocolate and honey, using beans sourced in Brazil and Guatemala. And, to marry the fashion and coffee concepts, the cafe sells a line of branded tableware, including cups and saucers. “We're seeing this trend in a lot of coffee shops [in the city] roasting for themselves,” Iordache explains. “I think what's happening in fashion [demonstrates] how coffee has been democratized in Paris over the past few years.”

Not everyone may be roasting in-house or sporting a menu of slow coffee methods like V60 or Chemex, but boutiques that once offered nondescript espresso while you browsed four-figure bags and sky-high footwear are switching gears and placing more emphasis on the coffee they're pouring. Even Saint Laurent,

which opened its first cafe next to the Rive Droite boutique near the Tuileries gardens, is serving espresso from a statement-making Faema E61, which is poured into black, branded to-go cups that are the coffee equivalent of a designer shopping bag. And as a girl who feels that “shopper's high” after making a big purchase, there's something gratifying about strolling the city with a little black cup in hand, and knowing that what I'm sipping is just as luxurious as what's sitting on the shelves in the shop.