

# Bohemian for a night

The Paris salon tradition of bringing together intellectuals for evenings of spirited discussion has waned over the years, but one American expatriate is keeping the movement alive

BY JUDITH RITTER, PARIS

On a warm afternoon in Paris, I work my way through the crowds of tourists hotly competing for the privilege of paying \$18 for a cup of coffee and a seat at a café overlooking the Seine. I understand the value of the transaction. It seems a small price to pay for a view that will fulfill the fantasy of how they see themselves — relaxed, worldly, sophisticated — in the city of their dreams.

I am looking for the same illusion, but in a different form. I am off to find a Paris salon.

I have dreamed of this since I was 16 years old and pulled my first copy of Jean-Paul Sartre's *No Exit* off a bookstore shelf. After a couple of turgid pages, the Sartre went unread, though it grew well-worn from being carried conspicuously around during my Grade 11 year.

Back then, life and laundry interfered with my plan to become a regular at a Paris salon, but I would finally get a second chance.

Now, visitors like me can indulge their artsy fantasies at a Paris salon for the 21st century.

Patricia Laplante-Collins, originally from Atlanta, uses her Left Bank fourth-floor walk-up to host weekly cultural soirées for other expatriates, travellers and local Parisians. In the tradition of Madame de Sevigne in the 19th century and Gertrude Stein in the 20th, Laplante-Collins invites artists, writers and musicians to speak at the soirées. Unlike the salon hosts before her, however, she also includes tarot-card readers, acupuncturists and an occasional Hollywood somebody.

On the night I make my way up the creaky stairs to Laplante-Collins's crowded apartment in the Ile St. Louis district of Paris, the salon's guest of honour, a female painter with the unusual name of Isaac Shari, is holding court in the centre of the room. With her long, straight, black hair and Kohl eye makeup, she looks as though she has been sent over from central casting.

The mere sight of her did more to fuel my vision of myself in offbeat Paris than smoking a Gauloise in Café Flore, once the haunt of literary lights such as Richard Wright and Simone de Beauvoir.

When I get close to the artist of the evening, it turns out she isn't talking about art at all. Rather, in a honeyed Southern accent, she is warning guests of the impending apocalypse, which she happened to know about because she had had a vision. This was the stuff of a late-night, AM-radio call-in show, not a Paris salon. Refusing to allow my enthusiasm for a genuine bohemian evening to be dampened, I head to another room in search of a more promising cluster of guests.

I don't have far to go. The apart-

ment is tiny, at least by North American standards. Beside a closet-sized kitchen — where our host is now jammed in with stacks of pots and plates of food — is a small bedroom filled with visitors who seemed to be in their 20s and 30s, and who are singularly plain in both dress and conversation. A few know each other from other Sunday evenings, but the talk all seem to be about how long they had lived in Paris or where else they had lived, and not about the novels I had hoped they were all working on.

Other guests are working their way through the apartment, bouncing off each other like pool balls and hoping to bump into the "real" thing — an artist or an intellectual.

Still, for Maxanna Nichols, an expat English teacher from Alabama and a regular at the salon, the prospect of one night of intellectual repartee with Parisians in an apartment on the Left Bank is enough.

"Something like this can't happen anywhere but Paris," she says. "Just coming up to the fourth floor on those little wooden steps worn by hundreds of feet is special. When you're in love with Paris, you come here to share that."

Sharing — indeed creating — that special Parisian artistic experience is Laplante-Collins's specialty. There were no James Baldwins or budding Picassos among her guests the night we were there, just civil servants, a lawyer and a smattering of English-language teachers. Nevertheless, Laplante-Collins works the room like a Las Vegas lounge singer, introducing everyone to everyone else and making each person feel special and eccentric and mysteriously interesting.

"This is Johann, who's French but has Swedish origins," she announces to the crowd, referring to a quiet, non-descript fellow. Then, with a show-biz flourish of her arm, she sweeps into the conversation someone named Randy, "who is American but once lived in Austria."

And although I'm from Montreal, I have suddenly become "Judith from Washington," bestowing upon me instant cachet in a crowd hungry for an antidote to ordinary life.

After about an hour of repeating where I am from and how long I have been in Paris, I am rescued by Patricia's announcement that it is time for the artist of honour's slide show. Guests cram into seats in the now darkened living room to hear more from the born-again painter from the deep South. Luckily it is dark, since the paintings, while quite good, are rather sexually explicit.

I amuse myself by trying to reconcile the artist's "holy" visions (which came straight from "Him," as she puts it) with her erotic imag-



TOM REAVES

Artist and painter Isaac Shari shows slides of her work at a Paris salon, part of a weekly cultural soirée hosted by an expatriate from Atlanta.

es, but am saved from the task when the projector overheats (no wonder) and the audience gets back to chatting.

As they converse, in broken French and broken English, I note an odd duality. While the North American visitors came to the soirée to satisfy their romantic notions of life as an expat in France, most of the French guests are there to fill a particular void in their lives.

Parisian Sara Litha works in the insurance business by day, but she says she came to the salon to experience a little bit of America. "I want to meet Americans and practise my English," she says, pronouncing each word carefully.

North Americans may not be very cultured, but they sure are friendly and easy to talk to, according to a second Parisian, Patrick Demuyneck. "Here in Patricia's house, it is like America."

Laplante-Collins's desire to create an international mutual-admiration society sprang out of what she believes was an early calling to entertain.

Part of her salon's magic involves serving an enormous meal of fried chicken and potato salad worthy of a south Georgia Sunday school picnic, which is exactly where she got her start, she tells me, as she heaps another serving of fried chicken on a plate in her crowded little kitchen.

"I was the kid who always organized the programs at Sunday

school, and even when I was little, I drove my mother crazy because I was an only child and always invited people over to our house."

Laplante-Collins conceived her Paris evenings in the early nineties as a black American literary salon, with events such as a reading by black American author Ernest Gaines or the staging of scenes from *June Bug Graduates Tonight* by jazz musician Archie Shepp.

While the guest list still includes many well-known black Americans and Paris expats, visitors now come from every heritage and corner of the globe.

For the Paris traveller looking for a piece of bohemia, the evening at the salon does not disappoint. The most non-conformist guest during my visit is a French man named Yves, who is part of a music group called Synaesthesia. Sitting on a futon and strumming a guitar, Yves gives the salon the air of a college dorm cum literary salon. That he sings not Edith Piaf or Charles Aznavour, but rather an old Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young tune doesn't seem to matter.

The guests gladly join in, happy for the occasion to feel that they are, for one night, part of avant-garde history in the cultural capital of the planet.

Judith Ritter is a writer and a broadcaster for CBC Radio in Montreal.

## If you go

### GETTING THERE

Air Canada offers daily flights from Toronto and Montreal. Air France also offers service several times a week from both cities.

For more information, visit [www.aircanada.ca](http://www.aircanada.ca).

### WHERE TO STAY

Though there are, of course, many hotels in Paris, one that tends to be overlooked is the Hyatt Regency Paris — Madeleine. It is small and centrally located, with a great fireplace in the lobby restaurant. For more information, phone 33 (1) 5527 1234; fax: 33 (1) 5527 1235, or visit [www.paris.madeleine.hyatt.com](http://www.paris.madeleine.hyatt.com).

For more information about accommodations, restaurants and attractions in general, go to [www.visit-paris.com](http://www.visit-paris.com).

### INFORMATION

**Patricia Laplante-Collins:** Visitors can contact Laplante-Collins in advance, or they can simply drop in. Her salon is at 35 quai d'Anjou, 75004, Paris; phone: 33 (1) 43 26 12 88; fax: 33 (1) 45 86 40 59; e-mail: [parissoirees@noos.fr](mailto:parissoirees@noos.fr).

For information about a self-guided literary tour of Paris, including the haunts of greats Gertrude Stein, Natalie Barney and Simone de Beauvoir, e-mail [info@discoverparis.net](mailto:info@discoverparis.net).