

## L'Epi Soleil St. Anne, Martinique

By Louise Wollman

If you like tuna sandwiches, do not miss standing on line at L'Epi Soleil, a boulangerie that bakes unimaginably terrific baguettes, stuffs them with an array of ingredients and then dispatches you to a picturesque terrace overlooking a talcum beach—a near perfect spot to devour them.

The tuna is the standout here. I'd rate the chicken baguette bland and somewhat dry. Possibly, I'll develop the nerve to try morue—codfish shredded into a sort of salad, possibly with egg—apparently popular with residents. With considerably more dexterity en français I might discover what “surimi” is.

No, go for the tuna. All the other core sandwich ingredients look decidedly, as my grandmother used to say, “sch-va” (rhymes with blah), her all-purpose word meaning pale and unexciting. Or paltry—for example, the single layer of ham and cheese that “fills” a French sandwich.



If the French get stingy with sandwich components, doubtless the reason is their supernal bread: a factor in its own right, even the prime ingredient, to be savored above all else. Americans, on the other hand, pile meats and cheeses and tomatoes into mouth-stretching concoctions because our bread is often pale, pappy, ho-hum.

There's no timing an Epi Soleil feeding opportunity. Sometimes the line goes out the door and up the street. But it's worth the wait. Remember, efficiency or speed are not endemic to the Caribbean mentality, even among the more martinet French. Equally un-timeable are the sandwich fixings. There appears to be only one bin per ingredient. Thus, when they're out of tomatoes, you're out of luck.

At least I think so. Reinforcements, if they arrive, do so on some

dilatory, ultimately unknowable schedule. Any secret refill timetable may be reserved for locals, but definitely is not available to bush-league French speakers like myself.

Despite my dilettante status, I have mastered the basics of French—I know the critical difference, as a sailing buddy once put it, between “Good Day” and “Hold the Anchovies.” So I soldier on, trying out my French whenever I dare. L'Epi Soleil offered such an opportunity.

On our inaugural visit, while waiting, I vacillated between the thon (tuna) and the poulet (chicken), considering the saucisson (sausage) but not identifying anything I'd label sausage, and wondering how a French speaker asks for a sample. Finally, I reached the Sandwich-Maker Lady—Madame La Fabricateur, I guess. Or maybe La Femme du Fabrication.

“Deux baguettes du thon,” I requested.

## *Sailing On Your Stomach: In the wake of an insatiable food sleuth*



“Avec?”

“Buerre.” (Suicide via hardened arteries seems to be my chosen demise.)

Madame’s face registered doubt but, acquiescing, she mashed several wee scoops of tuna into a thin film down the baguette’s length.

“Encore de thon, s’il vous plait,” I wheedled.

“Et?” she asked.

“Laitue.” (Fortunately they hadn’t yet run out of lettuce.) “Et concombres.” (I got the last of the shredded cucumbers.) “Et tomates.” (I lucked out.)

“C’est tout?”

“Et mayonnaise,” I concluded.

“Mayonnaise?” she snapped. “Don’t you think this tuna already has enough mayonnaise?” (Now the tuna, I’ll grant her, is about one-third mayo, but that’s what makes it so excellent.)

Madame’s abrupt explosion into English caught us completely unawares, causing Gary, my husband and cholesterol cohort, to back down on the mayo. But me, I refuse to cry “Oncle” in any and all food matters.

“Vinaigrette,” I then requested and La Femme du Fabrication grudgingly allowed a thin yet full-baguette-length stream of that most-excellent French, comes-in-a-bottle-at-the-supermarché mustard-vinaigrette.

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Which I must say took this sandwich from merely excellent to ethereal.

On a subsequent visit I learned how to get extra tuna. Ask for a “supplément,” pronounced “soup-play-mont.” (Astonishingly, this cost the same \$4.50 U.S. but I’m

sure this was a fluke, given I had not exactly endeared myself to La Femme.)

Though having tried a supplément one time, trust me, the tuna will squeeze unmercifully out the bread and run down your fingers, wrists and even arms. Maybe “un peu de supplément” would have scored me just one more scoop than considered suitable. But those are linguistic nuances I would have worked on had I, after three months in the French West Indies, been willing to swallow another morsel of Creole fare.

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diets for palate-lacerating, lower-torso-amplifying French baguette delights has had the unexpected result not only of stretching our waistlines but also expanding our repertoire of dining procedures, in this case—quite literally—our bread-breaking etiquette.

I got a hint of things to come when my final request of La Femme—to cut the sandwich in half—also met with shock. Again she obliged, though not without a shrug of dismissal, tinged possibly even with disdain.

Why, I wondered, is cutting such a strange idea? Wouldn’t halving make the handling and eating of 12-inches-worth of stuffed bread a

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# BLUE WATER DISPATCHES

far more manageable proposition?

Mais, non, it turns out. Observing neighboring diners taught us the unique French approach to sandwich consumption. The finished torpedo-shaped masterpiece, which La Femme slides directly into a standard-issue baguette wrapper, stays in the bag. Once seated, you grasp the bag somewhere near the top third, push up from the bottom, exposing some three or four inches of bread, and begin to eat. Avoid biting into the paper as it approaches. (Beginners sometimes have trouble with wrapper inclusions but eventually gain mastery.)



You continue corkscrewing the sandwich up thus until, voilà, it's done!

The advantages are numerous and, if you think about it, obvious. The portion of empty wrapper dangling below like a deflated runway sock is available to catch all fallout—a sloppy certainty in every submarine sandwich, even the “schva-est” of French ones. Beyond its tidy and well-mannered aspect this matchless system leaves one of your appendages free for smoking, drinking, conversational gesturing—up to and including pontificating—even arm-and-arming with your sweetie.

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