

## No recession for the soup kitchens of the 6<sup>th</sup> arrondissement

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***Soup kitchen: a charitable institution that provides food for the needy. Defined in these terms, many associations might boast this badge of honor. And yet there is only a single one left in Paris: L'Oeuvre de la Soupe populaire du VI<sup>e</sup> arrondissement (the Soup Kitchen of the 6<sup>th</sup> arrondissement). 130 "clients" eat there every lunchtime, except Sundays, from 15<sup>th</sup> September to 14<sup>th</sup> July. A report filed in the heat of the action.***

*"Excuse me, do you need to book?" "Sure do, ladies"* replies Pierre Duru mischievously, as he hands out tickets for the first service. *"Can't you see this is a soup kitchen?"* The door closes. In all his fifty years here, Pierre had never heard that one before.

Located in the rue Clément, in the ultra-chic area of Saint-Germain-des-Près, the soup kitchen blends into the scenery. The red façade with its white curtains makes it look much like a bistro. But a clue gives it away. *Please donate if you can* reads the sign over a small slot: the collection box. Slightly above, fourteen letters can be seen: SOUPE POPULAIRE. A strange name for a restaurant, with a menu featuring a single dish. The clientele is international, the waiters volunteers and the meal free.

### Tickets

11.45. The tables are set, the first thirty-four "clients" are about to come through the doors. The four volunteers on hand that day get ready to tune up under their conductor Noria, the cook. Philippe, the secretary, Fanny, the vice-president and Pierre and his wife Geneviève – "the kitchen's old retainers", have the relaxed air of experienced instrumentalists.

Outside a small crowd is gathering. One of the "friends", as they are called here, hammers on the door. Others stay on the sidelines, beneath the arcades of the Saint-Germain covered market. Michel, a retired public health employee, is among them. He's been coming here for two years. Gray bonnet, blue eyes, in a tired-looking dark red suit beneath a large green canvas jacket, he confides: *"I've got mates who don't come here because they don't like waiting. I'm patient, I read the free newspapers in the market opposite."*

The friends have been waiting since 10 o'clock this morning. They clutch the numbered ticket Pierre issued earlier on. A ticket as valuable as an open sesame and which ensures people respect the order of entry for the four sittings.

As though running a tombola, Pierre calls out *"No. 1, no. 2..."*. One by one, the friends troop into the narrow room with its red and white walls. Some of them relieve themselves of their belongings before sitting down.

## **“A table d’hôte”**

“Welcome gentlemen, welcome ladies, hello everyone!” Philippe exclaims in his hoarse, affectionate voice. Sporting an apron, this 77 year-old former magistrate helps out at the soup kitchen at least once a week. “Our idea is to have a kind of table d’hôte so that everyone can sit where they want, without necessarily knowing their neighbor”, he murmurs, filling up the bread basket.

Each setting contains two interlocking metal bowls. The top one contains soup and the one below meat: a chicken leg with curried rice, lovingly prepared by Noria and Marie, who helps her out in the kitchen. Monday is beef and vegetable stew, Wednesday lamb casserole, Saturday spaghetti bolognaise... the menu never changes. Noria allows herself a free hand with the ingredients, pork excepted – that would be contrary to the soup kitchen’s ecumenical spirit.

Today it’s party time: foie gras and shrimp sandwiches, provided by a local baker, add the finishing touch to the meal. There are enough to feed an entire sitting. At one of the tables, a man asks for some bread to dip in the soup. Noria immediately cuts a few thin slices, making sure she doesn’t include the crust: “Our friends have sensitive teeth.”

## **Mrs. Fusspot**

Most of them eat slowly, not at all greedily. “I was strictly brought up”, confides Josette, 76. “You had to behave yourself at table.” White-haired, with large ears and an emaciated face, she is one of the few women to cross the soup kitchen’s threshold. “She’s Mrs. Fusspot”, laughs Geneviève, her hands in the washing-up.

Back in the dining-room, the volunteers don’t have time to chat. “Hey, Gramps,” calls out a young man who claims he’s just got out of prison, turning to Philippe. “Give us a razor.” Fanny, listening out attentively, gets one out. “We’re often asked for them, we try not to run out”, confides this energetic 61 year-old woman.

In a yellow K-way hidden below a gray jacket, Josette makes her way to the exit. “People say the soup kitchen is for beggars. That’s not true, some people have financial difficulties”, she spills out, glaring angrily.

12.05. Michel is the last to leave. He makes no secret of the fact that he owns an 80 m<sup>2</sup> apartment in the Porte Saint-Martin, in the 10<sup>th</sup> arrondissement. “I come and eat here nearly every day. It’s not bad, I mean for the price it’s fine, it’s free!”.

## **Spoon**

Fanny gives a table a final wipe. Philippe is calling out the second sitting. The band is off again, and no one has struck a wrong note.

The monastic atmosphere is scarcely ruffled by the tinkling spoons, the only utensil the friends are given to eat with. No forks or knives, for security reasons. No water at table either, in case a fight break out.

“*What’s going on?*” Noria asks Pierre. A man of Indian origin has exchanged his bowl of soup for his neighbor’s chicken leg, and the neighbor isn’t happy. Tensions rise. A rare event, Noria emerges from her kitchen and despite her 33 years, manages to restore peace and quiet. Pierre quotes Hugo admiringly: “*Then Jeanne.../raising her beautiful eyes/ Full of that mastery sweet creatures have...*”.

Although the friends may differ in origin, they resemble one another in their lavish use of salt and pepper. Aromas waft over from some of the tables, but they can’t disguise some of the other smells, alcohol in particular.

### **One principle: anonymity**

Tramps are less common than a few years ago. “*They’re a bit like snobs*”, comments Philippe, tongue-in-cheek. “*They don’t want to eat with anyone who comes from a different station in life!*”

Whatever their religion and nationality or the resources of their friends, the association is ready to welcome them. The key word is anonymity. This isn’t indifference, it shows their respect for private life.

“*The drawback to the soup kitchen is that there is no human follow-up due to lack of time and space*” regrets Philippe.

One of the friends gets up and brings his bowl back to the kitchen counter, which divides the room in two. Without a word, he raises his thumb to Noria and turns on his heels. Many of them give thanks before leaving.

13.15. The game’s over. The two last sittings have passed without incident. The four companions get together with Noria and Marie to snack on a piece of cheese. Each of them goes over the anecdotes of the day: “*Earlier on*”, Geneviève contributes with a smile, “*one of them asked for fruit instead of yoghurt. Do you know why? ‘It’s Lent’, he said to me!*”

## An old lady of 117

The last remaining Paris soup kitchen doesn't date from the last century, but the one before. Its creation goes back to 1894. Local shopkeepers wanted to help out the rural population, driven out by growing industrialization and hoping to find a job "up" in the capital. Soup was provided to help them through the winter.

The charity received its official charter ten years later, when the Journal Officiel published the following description: *Provision of food for the needy*. It took the form of a "loi 1901" non-profit association, like the other soup kitchens springing up in every arrondissement. They then joined ranks, becoming a federation under the aegis of the Municipal Council, which provided a subsidy. A soup kitchen commission sat at the City Hall.

It was in 1909 that the charity founded by Mr. Christiaen set up shop at 4 rue Clément.

## The soup kitchen shows its gratitude

Inside, a plaque pays tribute to Charles Domergue, a French Resistant shot by the Germans. An economist at the soup kitchen, in October 1940, along with René Lhopital, André Donnay and Marcel Lamboley, among others, he set up a network called L'Armée des Volontaires (the Voluntary Army). "*Most of them were pro-Pétain but the Occupation revolted them*", writes the historian Guillaume Piketty, "*and its first militants organized escape networks for war prisoners.*" The soup kitchen provided a cover-up for their activities.

Jean Guimont, the president of the charity from 1955 to 1997, is also remembered. It is thanks to him that the soup kitchen didn't flounder. Following the Liberation, "*probably due to a lack of available volunteers or managers who weren't replaced*", Paris' soup kitchens disappeared one after the other, except for the one in the 6<sup>th</sup>.

But it wasn't until 1965 that it was able to ensure its long-term future. Guimont, a head of department at the Senate, decided to "*methodically approach the local residents*" by sending out a leaflet "*to all the telephone subscribers registered in the street directory of the 6<sup>th</sup> arrondissement*". The rest of the receipts came from the 2 Franc contribution levied per person for each meal. The idea was to "*avoid the presence of 'out-and-out tramps' [...] who aren't short of money for a liter of red wine but can never find enough for food.*" Above all, the president brought an end to the system of subsidies "*in order to maintain independence*" emphasizes Pierre Récamier, a long-time honorary president of the soup kitchen, by virtue of his position as former Mayor of the 6<sup>th</sup>, from 1971 to 1977.

In the late 1980s, the contribution was the subject of debate within the association, some members believing it to be moral to ask the down-and-outs for a contribution. But the Coluche amendment in 1988 put paid to the discussions: in order for donators to receive a tax deduction, the meals provided had to be free.