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Call It Beyrouth: Beirut With a French Accent



Bryan Denton for The New York Times

At Villa Clara, the menu is in French.

By JAY CHESHES

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I was finishing an aperitif on the porch at Villa Clara while other guests tossed pétanque balls in the nearby yard. The hotel's 4-year-old namesake cozied up to her papa, showing off her latest crayon creation. "Oh, c'est magnifique," said Olivier Gougeon, a French chef and an owner of the property with his wife, Marie-Hélène, an editor of a French-language home décor magazine.

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The tiny [boutique hotel](#), its restaurant and guest rooms stocked with Parisian antiques, opened last year around the corner from an Asterix chicken shack and across the street from its neighborhood boucherie. But this was not Marseille or Lyon, it was the eastern edge of Beirut.

"A Frenchman can easily live in Beirut without feeling displaced," said Mr. Gougeon, who moved to the Lebanese

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Bryan Denton for The New York Times
A room at Villa Clara. The charming guesthouse is filled with French antiques.

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The retail shop of Domaine des Tourelles.

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Duck confit at Villa Clara.

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Pastries at Fauchon.

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capital from [Paris](#) in 1999, as he sipped local wine in Villa Clara’s leafy backyard after cooking a dinner of crispy-skinned duck confit and old-fashioned île flottante.

For more than a century, through all manner of turmoil, including a 15-year civil war and, more recently, ongoing conflict in neighboring Syria, a distinctly French character has pervaded the city. Much of it is the legacy of the French colonial period — the mandate that lasted from 1920 to 1943 — but a cultural kinship goes back much further than that.

I had come to Beirut to see just how much French influence remains, and discovered an East-West blend more complex and layered than ever. Having left the country for France during particularly troubled times, many affluent Beirutis have returned, bringing with them cravings for Parisian life. A younger generation, meanwhile, has embraced a new hybrid culture — a French, Anglo and Arabic stew — evident in shops and restaurants and trilingual discussions across the city.

On an immediate level, Frenchness is everywhere — and, even for a first-time visitor, awfully easy to spot. Beirutis, though, sometimes take it for granted. “I don’t think there’s much French influence anymore,” a resident might insist, as you wander past the neighborhood bistro Goutons Voir serving “salade Nice-Beyrouth”; the jewel-box boutique of La Ferme St. Jacques, a local foie gras producer; and the retail shop of Domaine des Tourelles, a winery in the Bekaa Valley founded by a French engineer in 1868. But big international chains are increasingly replacing mom-and-pop Francophile spots, and the mandate-era buildings that house them are giving way to sky-high steel and glass condos.

Some locals are trying to protect that architectural legacy, a mix of stone mansions and low-rise Haussmannian towers. “This house is in danger,” said Giorgio Tarraf, a young preservation activist, during a tour of the city’s vanishing landmarks, as he pointed at the carcasses of once-magnificent homes, abandoned during the civil war that started in 1975.

For the last three years Mr. Tarraf’s group, Save Beirut Heritage, has been fighting a losing battle to restore these old buildings instead of tearing them down. “At the end of the war we had a golden opportunity to have a beautiful, well-preserved city,” he said. “We chose to ignore that.” The group’s new iPhone app features an interactive map noting the status of each site: “urgent,” “saved” or “too late.”



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The Grand Theater.

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Le Relais de L'Entrecôte steakhouse.

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The atelier of Rabih Kayrouz, a Paris-based Beirut designer.

We cut past the Grand Theater, said to be modeled after the old opera house in Paris; Charles Boyer and Maurice Chevalier performed there in the 1930s. During the civil war the theater, by then a partial ruin set along the Green Line dividing East and West Beirut, began to show pornographic films to fighters on both sides. Now developers want to turn it into a boutique hotel designed by the architect Richard Rogers. Preservationists would prefer to see the site's original character retained. "We're lobbying to have a theater in there or a cinema," Mr. Tarraf said, "accessible not just to people paying \$500 a night."

Driving down the Avenue de Paris, along the Corniche, the palm-tree-lined esplanade that hugs the city's Mediterranean coast, I gazed up at a defunct lighthouse, striped like a barber pole, that was built by the French in the 1920s. Our destination was the 19th-century home next door, the last of its kind in the neighborhood, known simply as the Pink House.

We were welcomed by Fayza el Khazen, 69, whose elegance matches her gorgeous art-and-antiques-filled home. The el Khazens are Maronite, a Christian sect that constitutes a big chunk of the city's non-Muslim population; the family has ties to France going back to the

Crusades. On a wall hung a framed letter from Louis XIV, the French king who first anointed her ancestors official representatives of the Bourbons in Lebanon. "Our family remained French consuls for 100 years," she said.

During the war Ms. el Khazen, like many affluent Lebanese, moved with her family to Paris. Her mother stayed behind, though, on the second floor of the house, even while Syrian fighters occupied the ground floor beneath her. In the 1990s, when Beirutis began rebuilding their city, Ms. el Khazen returned, along with so many expatriates who brought with them nostalgia for Parisian life.

She'll be leaving the house soon, though, headed back to France to live with one of her sons, she said, before developers turn her home into yet another boutique hotel. "My kids were born here," she said wistfully, standing on the balcony. "I was engaged here. But now it's time to go."

The sort of connection that Ms. el Khazen and her brethren feel toward France inspired a franchising gold rush in the city. The Lebanese businessman Michel Abchee is responsible for much of it, including a new outpost of [Fauchon](#), a high-end food shop. "I was looking for opportunities after the war," Mr. Abchee said. "The brands people knew, the brands they wanted, they were all French."

His other French holdings in Beirut include a mini-chain of bakeries from the pastry chef Eric Kayser, Petit Bateau children's clothing boutiques and an enormous Géant supermarket. (He hoped to open an outpost of the upscale Parisian department store Galeries Lafayette, he said, but that was put on hold after the economic slowdown brought on by the war in Syria.) And thanks to his competitors you'll also find a Ladurée macaron shop, several Le Relais de L'Entrecôte steakhouses, and even a clone of the venerable Café de Flore — located in a suburban shopping mall instead of on the Boulevard St.-Germain.

When it comes to dining out, though, Beirutis tend to eschew Michelin-starred names in favor of a generous Mediterranean spirit — part Southern France, part Beirut — with big portions and a convivial atmosphere. **Indeed, the best French meal I had in the city was prepared by a Lebanese chef, Youssef Akiki, at the Burgundy restaurant. Mr. Akiki's food features modern techniques and a mix of regional and top-shelf imported ingredients — from Lebanese songbirds to Wagyu beef — all paired with exceptional French wines.**

Farther downtown, [Momo at the Souks](#), from the French-Algerian impresario Mourad Mazouz, has a raging bar scene and gutsy French and North African fare. And across from the Corniche, the dining room is just as animated at [La Petite Maison](#), a new sun-drenched offshoot of a festive Provençal restaurant by the same name in Nice, where a table-hopping crowd passes around shared plates of sweet-onion pissaladière and chilled bottles of rosé.

That sort of upbeat scene can also be found at glamorous beach clubs along the Corniche and raging new rooftop night spots like [White](#), which draws international A-list D.J.'s. And the [Phoenicia Hotel](#), where Brigitte Bardot and Jean-Paul Belmondo used to preen by the pool in the swinging '60s, is back on the scene after spending the war years as a bullet-scarred sniper hide-out. The hotel reopened in the spring of 2000, rebuilt from the rubble, a crystal-and-marble-filled beacon for a resurgent Beirut.

But the legacy of the French mandate endures most of all hidden behind sandblasted facades and fresh coats of paint. Solidere, the private corporation behind the revival of downtown Beirut (founded by the slain prime minister Rafik Hariri), has been criticized for turning the area and its once bustling souk into a Dubai-style luxury [shopping mall](#). But the development company has gone to great lengths to point out how much history, in fact, remains: [a Heritage Trail](#), highlighting landmarks (mostly from the French period), will officially make its debut this fall.

I found a more organic sense of history, though, east of the city center, in the bourgeois neighborhood around the French embassy compound, home to the Université Saint-Joseph, Hôtel-Dieu de France Hospital and Grand Lycée Franco-Libanais — all French institutions active since the late 19th century.

Not far is the Residence des Pins, which served as France's seat of power when the mandate began; the modern borders of Lebanon were officially announced on its steps in 1920. Today the stunning neo-Moorish building, fully restored after being ransacked during the civil war, is the full-time residence of the French ambassador, Patrice Paoli.

While cultural ties remain strong, clearly, between the two countries, these days the influence seems to flow back and forth — a state of things that was not lost on the ambassador. "We'll always be here," Mr. Paoli said during an impromptu tour of his home. "But we'll never again tell the Lebanese people what they must do."

If You Go

WHERE TO STAY

Villa Clara (Khenchara Street, Mar Mikhael; 961-7-099-5739; [villaclara.fr](#)): Charming, affordable guesthouse filled with French antiques. Rooms from \$165 with breakfast (most hotels quote prices in U.S. dollars).

The **Phoenicia Hotel** (Minet El Hosn, downtown; 961-1-369-100; [phoeniciabeirut.com](#)): A throwback rebuilt after the civil war, with six restaurants, a pool, a spa and a rooftop bar. Rooms from \$286.

Le Gray (Martyr's Square, downtown; 961-1-971-111; [campbellgrayhotels.com/le-gray/home](#)): On the edge of Martyr's Square, with great views from the rooftop pool

over Beirut's newly rebuilt downtown. Rooms from \$310.

WHERE TO EAT

Burgundy (752 Gouraud Street, Saifi Village; 961-1-999-820; burgundybeirut.com): Beirut's most ambitious French restaurant, pairing modern cuisine with an impressive collection of Burgundy wines. (Entrees from 57,000 Lebanese pounds, about \$40 at 1,445 pounds to the dollar).

Balthus (Ghandour Building, Minet el Hosn; 961-1-371-077): A French-Lebanese brasserie with a real power scene and food with a light Mediterranean touch. Grab a seat on the sidewalk at lunch. (Lunch plat du jour from 40,000 pounds.)

La Petite Maison (Le Vendôme Hotel, Ain el Mreisseh, downtown; 961-1-368-300; lpmbeirut.com): Popular import from the French Riviera, serving classic Provençal fare. (Entrees from 40,600 pounds.)

Momo at the Souks (Beirut Souks Jewelry No. 7, downtown; 961-76-700-407; momobeirut.com): This imported hot spot in the new souks offers a mix of French and Moroccan fare in its gilded dining room, and strong drinks in an adjoining bar. (Entrees from 41,000 pounds.)

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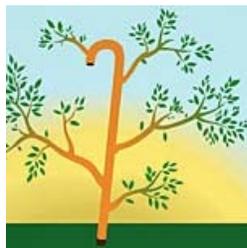
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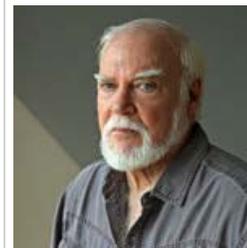
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