

MONTPARNASSE YESTERDAY AND TODAY

By Keith Spicer

PARIS. The frisky young woman with the page-boy black hair was – oh, about 28. Last week, on a nippy Montparnasse evening, she steered her companion into the cosy Bistro du Dôme on rue Delambre, a small street of discreet hotels, bars and restaurants known to up-and-coming actors and fashion models. She sat down facing me, beside her stunning blonde friend – a giant Afghan hound, who started slurping enthusiastically from a silver ice bucket.

Fido-Shah was the quintessence of elegance, lacking only Hamid Karzai's famous green cape. Throughout the meal, he sat up straight, as well-raised Afghans do, alternating bites of his raw meat with long-nosed pokes into the ice bucket. Not a soul stared, except occasionally to smile that the show was free.

So what if a few puffs of cigarette smoke in our “non-smoking” area shortened our lives by six and a half minutes. The fish was sublime, the sauces were subtle, the wine – every bottle the same reasonable

price – hugged each dish like a lamprey clinging to a wild salmon.

The 8 p.m. stampede, lasting barely half an hour, brought some 50 hungry guests of all shapes and ages. They rushed in to unite in that most grave of French pastimes, eating while chattering. Or is it chattering while eating?

Diners squinted at the dozen daily specials on the blackboard, a proclamation of the day's fishermen's luck. Two Japanese women, one in rare full kimono, whispered and nodded perplexity. A dowager peered over granny glasses, querying with fond eyes her white-haired cavalier in Harris Tweed jacket.

Couples of wage-earning age completed the clientele, with the odd solo eater. But no starving artists here, not even many currency-challenged Americans. Prices suited only people earning euros, now riding high.

Real waiters in black pants with white aprons – not kids working their way through school -- scurried about with complicitous advice. Within minutes, the din enveloped us. Were we all celebrating a

Montparnasse of the ages? Or just a reliably splendid meal?

Mythic Montparnasse of 1900-1950 – that of Lenin and Trotsky, of Proust, Sartre and Hemingway, of Picasso, Modigliani, Rivera and Cocteau, of Honegger, Poulenc and Stravinski – lives encrusted in legend and tourist brochures. It shimmers in a few frail minds.

But its spirit thrives in plaques and streets and elegant Haussmann-style buildings, and in art and literature. And especially in bistros and restaurants. You can dream up a kaleidoscope of heroes just by sitting with a drink in the never-changing eating and drinking places: Le Sélect, la Rotonde, La Coupole and, of course, la Brasserie du Dôme, big brother of the Bistro du Dôme.

Where are the grandees of politics and culture today? Many defected to the nearby Luxembourg district, many to Saint-Germain-des-Prés or even the Right Bank Marais. But no concentration of talent yet manages to match the diversity of Montparnasse in its heyday half-century. Mass media, especially “people” magazines and a star system favouring

movies and TV, churn up few top-league intellectuals.

If talent has deserted Montparnasse, so has much good taste. Architectural vandals have committed two egregious crimes. First, destruction of the classic old train-station, the Gare Montparnasse, where, on August 25, 1944, German General Dietrich von Choltitz surrendered Paris to French General Philippe Leclerc. One would have thought that, after four years of German occupation, such a place might have meant something, especially since von Choltitz had refused for 16 days to obey Hitler's direct order to burn Paris.

Second crime: the monstrosity of the Tour Montparnasse. President Georges Pompidou, normally a man with an eye for beauty, backed replacing the old train station with this banal 58-storey glass tower and a cold, confusing new train-station and a department store.

The happiest place left in legendary Montparnasse may be its vast cemetery. There you can stroll in the silence, just steps from the hurly-burly, sit on a bench and ponder a pantheon from before and during the

glory years – Baudelaire, de Maupassant, Sainte-Beuve, Saint-Saëns, César Franck.

But more important to me than these schoolbook names is the grave of Germaine Leuridan. For three years, in the mid-1950s, she was my landlady and “French mother.” She rented me a fourth-floor corner room in the family apartment at 89 boulevard du Montparnasse, and took me into her heart.

It was from there that, at night, I saw the lights of the Dôme and all those other famous cafés and restaurants I couldn’t afford, yet marvelled at because of the ghosts of Lenin, Trotsky and Co.

Fifty years on, when I leave one of those fabled restaurants -- lights, beautiful women, Afghan hounds and all -- I sometimes look up at my window. My old Montparnasse is still there, somewhere. In spite of everything.