

Title:

What is the oldest bar in Paris?

Word Count:

1061

Summary:

French people love drinking and eating out. Paris overflows with bars, wine bars, cafés, bistros and restaurants. Tons of fun. But which and where is the oldest one?

Keywords:

Paris hotels,Eiffel Tower,Paris France,Paris metro map

Article Body:

Let's begin by wandering down rue Mazarine from the Odéon square. Bingo? We almost immediately come on Le Procope, where a plaque affirms it is "the oldest café in the world".

It opened in 1686, mainly to offer coffee. This beverage's fashion had been recently imported from Austria - the Viennese got their caffeine zonks from the Turks during a lull in the Ottoman siege of their city ca. 1623.

Voltaire and... God

The Café Procope was an early favorite rendez-vous of actors from the Comédie Française - the national theatrical company, then situated nearby- and later, during the turbulent pre-Revolutionary mid-18th century, of Encyclopaedists (such as Diderot and D'Alembert) and other non-conformist thinkers, who had - this was still during the reign of Louis XV - to be careful with what they spouted in public.

Voltaire recounts that one day, he and a host of like-minded philosophers wanted to discuss a very thorny issue around a cup of coffee at Le Procope: does God exist? They coded "God" into Monsieur Néant ("Mister Nothing") and the wrangling went on for several hours.

At a nearby table sat a gentleman who had time to read his newspaper several times over. Then, out of patience, he stood up and came over to the philosophers. "Excuse me, Messieurs, you have been discussing Monsieur Néant. Could you please relieve my curiosity and tell me who he is?" According to Voltaire, the answer was shot back with no delay: "Yes, of course! He is a

police spy - DO YOU KNOW HIM?"

There is a problem with the Le Procope's claim, however. The owner, Mr. Procope, born in Palermo under the name Procoppio dei Cotelli, had already worked as a waiter at another Parisian café before launching his own! The "first in the world"? Sorry... Unless we're talking about the earliest still extant.

But then there are other candidates.

Treasures of Paris islands

Another site to visit is Ile St-Louis, an island on the river Seine, which was built basically between 1613 and 1700.

Our first find is Les Anysetiers du Roy (The King's aniseed liqueur makers), a restaurant located at No. 61 rue St-Louis-en-l'Isle. Our second find is Le Franc-Pinot, a well-known jazz club located at No. 1 Quai de Bourbon.

Both are indeed Procope contemporaries, and have been serving eats and drinks since they were founded in the 17th century.

A thought nags the tavern researcher, however: none before the 17th century??? Impossible!!

Fifteenth century poet François Villon did indeed dedicate "tout aux tavernes et aux filles" ("everything to taverns and girls."). And a listing of taverners dating from 1457 A.D. counts some 200 full-time professionals and another hundred occasionals.

A famous tavern of the time was the Pomme de Pin (Pinecone), on Ile de la Cité (the second island in the center of Paris). It survived until the mid-1800s when Paris Prefect Haussmann razed it to make more room for the Hôtel Dieu hospital adjacent to Notre Dame Cathedral (see: <http://www.paris-eiffel-tower-news.com/paris-stories/paris-story-hotel-dieu-hospital.htm>).

Remnants of the 19th Century

Hmm... Ancient Ile de la Cité looks a good place for more fieldwork.

Systematic research reveals that today's taverns around Notre Dame all date from the 19th century period of Haussmann's urban cleanup.

Ah, but wait. Let's take a look down an authentically quaint sidestreet on Ile de la Cité, rue de la Colombe (The Dove street).

We come at No. 4 upon the Réserve de Quasimodo, a wineshop-cum-eatery located in the old building already described in my piece titled What And Where Is The Oldest House in Paris?(see:<http://www.paris-eiffel-tower-news.com/paris-stories/paris-story-oldest-house.htm>)

The Réserve de Quasimodo pretty much ignores (although not scorning) the tourist hordes around nearby Notre Dame Cathedral. Noon and night it serves scrumptious and affordable traditional French fares, accompanied by vintner-supplied wines. And it offers regular evening supper shows enlivened by oral culture ("Old Paris Stories", "Tales from Brittany"), magicians, a "pocket theater" group, etc. Prior to that, in 1950, it was bought by Austro-American illustrator Ludwig Bemelmens, best known for his cartoons in The New Yorker and his Madeline children's album series.

A photo from 1869 proves the place was then a wine-bar and wineshop.

A Foiled Suicide

Skipping back a century-and-a-half from then, right around 1719, we come to a legend about Cartouche, whose hangout here was the St Nicolas Tavern, a predecessor of today's Réserve de Quasimodo. Cartouche was the ring-leader of a pickpocket gang - that's documented, since he was executed in 1721.

The legend: Cartouche and gang were "working" the popular and crowded Pont-Neuf bridge one day in 1719, when all of a sudden a well-dressed gentleman leapt up onto the Bridge's parapet.

"Hang on, there, Sir," Cartouche is said to have shouted, pulling the fellow back down from a clear suicide attempt. "What's this all about?" The gentleman's response: "I'm an honest man, indeed an honorable man, and /sniff/ I owe several people much money that I'll never be able to reimburse...The only honorable way out is to jump into the Seine." Cartouche: "Now, now, you just give me a list of your creditors and the sums due."

The "gentleman bandit" invited said creditors to the St Nicholas Tavern at No. 4 rue de la Colombe, wine and dined them abundantly, paid off the suicide candidate's debts (obtaining receipts, of course) and ordered more and more wine. Then he pulled out his pocket watch, said "Sorry, gentlemen, I've got an appointment", and disappeared.

More libations ensued among the creditors, only too pleased to celebrate their

unexpected windfall. When they staggered out onto rue de la Colombe, guess who was awaiting them. Yes, indeed: Cartouche's gang, who quickly divested them of the debt reimbursements.

And The Winner Is....

The St. Nicholas Tavern itself pre-dates Le Procope by a wide margin.

The tavern got its name from the patron saint to whom local clergymen had erected a statue in replacement of an earlier pagan statue nicknamed "The Man with Doves".

The statue of St. Nicholas was torn down in 1792 during the French revolution. It used to be affixed above the door of No. 4 rue de la Colombe.

The tavern itself is attested here in... 1240.

We got our winner.

(article written in collaboration with Arthur Gillette)