

How 10,000 People Keep a Secret



Dîner en Blanc De Paris

POP-UP The Dîner en Blanc, or impromptu “dinner in white,” in the Cour Carrée at the Louvre in Paris. New York is having its own.

By **LIESL SCHILLINGER**

THERE are picnics, and then there are picnics.

Three weeks ago, in the golden light of an early-summer evening, thousands of Parisians dressed entirely in white converged on two of the city’s most picturesque locations — 4,400 of them in the plaza at the cathedral of Notre Dame; 6,200 in a courtyard of the Louvre — for a feast that was neither advertised nor publicly heralded. They had brought along not only their own epicurean repasts but also their own tables, chairs, glasses, silver and napery.

At midnight, after dining and dancing, they packed up their dishes, stowed their empty Champagne bottles in trash bags brought for that purpose, stooped to pick up their cigarette butts from the cobbles and departed. The landmarks were left immaculate, with no traces of the revelry of the previous three hours.

This annual event, called the Dîner en Blanc — the “dinner in white” — is like a gustatory Brigadoon, equal parts mystery, anachronism and caprice. Now attended by

thousands at some of the best-known Parisian spaces, it began humbly in 1988. That year, François Pasquier, now 67, returned to Paris after a few years abroad and held a dinner party to reconnect with friends. So many wanted to come that he asked them to convene at the Bois de Boulogne and to dress in white, so they could find each other.

But while in certain circles in Paris, everybody knows about the Dîner, many Parisians have never heard of it. And despite the precision that goes into its planning, it retains an air of surprise.

For the first time, New York will have its own Dîner en Blanc, on Aug. 25, rain or shine. A thousand people — half invited, the others drawn from an online waiting list (newyork.dinerenblanc.info) — will participate in this refined flash-mob feast, at an as-yet undisclosed location in Manhattan.

The New York event is being spearheaded by Mr. Pasquier's son, Aymeric, who lives in Montreal, where he inaugurated the Canadian version of the Dîner en Blanc in 2009. But can brawny Manhattan, with skyscrapers from top to bottom, innumerable regulations and a dearth of public spaces on a Parisian scale, possibly approximate the romance of the French pique-nique? The New York organizers, Daniel Laporte and Alexandra Simoes, are hopeful.

“The emphasis is on spontaneity, but we are making absolutely sure to be completely in accordance with all city rules,” said Ms. Simoes, an elementary school director at the Lyceum Kennedy, who volunteered for the Dîner organizing job. “But we don't want the guests to be impacted by our concerns. The guests should only be concerned about the dress code, and the tables they'll carry, and what kind of food they will prepare.”

Mr. Laporte, a Canadian-born architect whom Aymeric Pasquier asked to participate, said: “Everything is extremely carefully organized, because to seat a thousand people at the same moment you need a lot of planning. But the most important thing is for everyone to have the best memory of the night.”

In New York, as in Montreal, the Dîner en Blanc is being conducted openly, facilitated by Facebook and Twitter and other online aids, and coordinated with municipal authorities. But in Paris, despite the tacit approval of government officials, the Dîner is private — a massive demonstration of the power of word of mouth, and the strength of social connections. The guest list is made up entirely of friends, and friends of friends. And despite the dinner's vast and visible attendance, it has remained discreetly under the radar. Paris is still a class-stratified society — “It's horizontal, whereas Montreal is vertical,” Aymeric Pasquier explained — so unwritten rules of privilege have allowed secrecy to surround the event. Nobody is sure who decides, year in, year out, which people are invited to create tables for the evening.

François Pasquier calls the party-list formation a “pyramide amicale,” a friendly pyramid; trusted friends invite their own trusted friends. The event's exclusivity was evident just

before the Dîner en Blanc in Paris on June 16. As I hurried with my dinner companions along a bridge to Notre Dame last month, passersby stopped us.

“What’s going on?” a man asked. “Haven’t you heard?” joked my friend Aristide Luneau (who had invited me). “It’s the end of the world.”

One tourist asked, “Do they do this every night?” If only.

At 8 o’clock, clusters of diners emerged from the Metro or chartered buses to gather at rallying points, where they had been instructed to meet their “heads of table,” the organizers who had invited them. The site is revealed at the last moment, both to avoid gate-crashing and to preserve instantaneousness. The guests, decked out in white suits, dresses, skirts, feather boas and even wings, carried heavy picnic gear and delicacies like pâté de foie gras, poached salmon and fine cheeses — each table brings its own meal.

At about 9, with the sky still light, the site was announced. Guests hurried across bridges and side streets to reach their destination. By 9:30, all the tables had been deployed in orderly rows, according to diagrams in the possession of the heads of table, with men all along one side, women along the other. The guests quickly covered their tables with white cloths; laid out the crystal for Champagne, wine and water; the plates for hors d’oeuvres, main course and dessert; and began tucking in.

As night fell on Notre Dame, a clergyman appeared and blessed the throng, and church bells rang out overhead; at the Louvre, opera singers serenaded the diners. At 11 in both places, diners stood on chairs and waved sparklers — signaling the end of dinner and the beginning of the dancing (to D.J.’ed music at Notre Dame, and to a brass band at the Louvre). An hour later, the frolickers switched off the merriment and packed up their tables to depart, like Cinderella, on the stroke of midnight.

Needless to say, New York presents its own challenges. As in France, the organizers have created a fleet of “heads of table” who will collect picnickers at various meeting points around the city and shepherd them to the location. But some differences will apply. For one thing, it’s likely that Champagne will not be permitted, if the Dîner is held in a public location. For another, the proceedings are expected to end at 11.

“Even if we can’t have Champagne, it will be nice still,” Ms. Simoes said.

Mr. Laporte said, “After this year, the city will know the beauty of the Dîner,” adding, “We can show them that a big group can be very respectful.”

As in Paris, guests in New York will have a strong incentive to uphold the code of conduct. If they misbehave — for example, by bringing uninvited guests, getting too rowdy or not showing up or helping to clean — they will receive a punishment worse than any police fine: being barred from future dinners.

“Any guest who doesn’t respect the rules of behavior will be put on a blacklist and never invited back again,” Aymeric Pasquier said.

Initially, Mr. Laporte and Ms. Simoes worried that New Yorkers would find these rules too demanding.

“But the more we talked to our New York friends,” Ms. Simoes said, “the more we realized that they were fascinated by the idea that it was difficult and special, and that you have to build your own dinner and bring your own table.”

Mr. Laporte added: “Our first impulse was to rent tables for the event, so people wouldn’t have to carry them. But we realized that would change the spirit of the dinner too much. Part of the event is the journey there. To think ahead, to get ready, to get the table, to prepare your picnic, to choose your outfit. Not making it easy is part of the allure.”