

# Eurofile | A Fine Metz|

By *ALEXANDER LOBRANO*

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*Roland Halbe* The newly opened Metz branch of the Centre Pompidou in Paris.

*In Alexander Lobrano's new column, Eurofile, the author of "Hungry for Paris" writes about the best tables (and beds) on the continent.*

With the opening last month of the Metz branch of Paris's Centre Pompidou, a lot of people are suddenly curious about the city in Eastern France (which is pronounced "Mess" in French). The fact is that Metz is a destination that draws blank stares from most foreigners — the American exceptions to this rule are most likely from Kansas City, Mo., Metz's American sister city — and often far worse from the French.

"Metz! *Mais pourquoi?!*" chimed the five Parisians at a dinner party when I mentioned I'd be spending the weekend there. They thought I was joking. It's true, I told them, I really am going to Metz, and not just to visit the wonderful new museum, which opened May 10 with a terrific show of 800 works from the reserves of the museum in Paris, but also to enjoy the city itself. Metz, you see, is a terrific, still-under-the-radar destination for anyone who loves great art and architecture, good food and *hotels de charme* (hotels with character). Still, even though it's a handsome and very ancient place that's mostly built of pretty curry-powder-colored limestone and where it feels like the Holy Roman Empire ended yesterday afternoon, it continues to strike a nerve in the French psyche.

Arriving from Paris in an hour and a half via the TGV Est, the new high-speed rail link to eastern France, you'll get an immediate lesson in just what it is about this city that inspires both scorn and dread among the Gauls. An imposing stone pile with a sort of melancholy Teutonic beauty, the city's train station was built under the personal supervision of Kaiser Wilhelm II from 1905 to 1908, and it was intended to be not only one of the most grandiose train stations in Europe but also an awe-inspiring monument to the permanence of German rule. Following France's defeat in the Franco-

Prussian war in 1871, Metz and all of La Lorraine, along with Alsace and Moselle, were annexed by Germany, a debacle that was repeated a second time, of course, in 1940.

This probably explains why the sturdy middle-aged waitress who served me coffee on my first visit to the city in 1989, as I sat reading a newspaper article about the fall of the Berlin wall with the headline “BERLIN EST LIBRE!” groused, “Nothing good ever comes from the East.” If several French generations grew up to regard their country’s easternmost frontier with permanent anxiety, the reality of this unexpectedly pleasant city — most of the French still think of it as a drab and often rainy garrison town — is more complicated.

With a population today of 127,000 commuters in a metropolitan area of 340,000, Metz is compact, amiable, and nonchalantly cosmopolitan. A third of the population has Italian ancestry (they came to work in the mines and factories); half of the clientele in the city’s best restaurants is likely to be from neighboring Germany and Luxembourg; and most locals speak several languages. “We’ve seen ourselves first and foremost as Europeans for centuries, and now the rest of the continent is catching up to us,” a newspaper kiosk owner told me when I commented on the fact that he sold newspapers in a dozen languages, including Turkish. He’s right. After being captured by Attila the Hun in A.D. 451, the city served as a cultural hinge between Latin and Germanic Europe for centuries, becoming part of France only in 1552. Even into the 20th century, Metz was a pawn between France and Germany, with some *Messiens* changing nationality four times during a single lifetime.

“I did my military service there, and it was dire,” insisted one of the still dubious Parisians at the dinner party I went to before my most recent weekend in Metz. Almost as if to second his skepticism, the new Centre Pompidou promotes itself in part by stating that it’s within an easy walk from the train station. In other words, come see us and then get out of Dodge.



The Hotel de la Cathedrale, room 408.

But they’re all wrong, I thought as I walked from the train station past the pink sandstone *belle époque* buildings and town houses of the Imperial Quarter toward the Hotel de la Cathedrale (25 place de Chambre; 011-33-3-87-75-00-00, [hotelcathedrale-metz.fr](http://hotelcathedrale-metz.fr)). It is one of my favorite hotels in France, a

preference I share with such illustrious past guests as Madame de Stael and Chateaubriand. Situated in two 17th-century houses, many of the rooms (the ones in the “annex” — for once, that’s the right place to stay) have herringbone parquet floors, beamed ceilings, antiques, toile de Jouy bed coverings and upholstery, great lighting and modern baths.

If you have to have room service and air-conditioning (Metz gets hot in the summer), you might prefer the Hotel La Citadelle (5 avenue Ney; 011-33-3-87-17-17-17, [citadelle-metz.com](http://citadelle-metz.com)), which occupies a thick-walled 16th-century arsenal building that has been converted into a very comfortable if rather corporate hotel with contemporary décor dominated by bright jewel tone colors. Whether or not you stay at La Citadelle, its restaurant, Le Magasin aux Vivres, is the best table in town.

Though he’s not a native of La Lorraine, the talented Michelin one-star chef Christophe Dufosse does a brilliant contemporary riff on such local culinary specialties as quiche Lorraine — his is deconstructed into a delicious cube of bacon-flavored flan, lacy cheese biscuits, wands of short crust and garnished with a plump langoustine — and tarte aux mirabelles, the tiny sweet yellow plums that are native to La Lorraine. Other first-rate dishes include a declension of Lorraine suckling pig with summer truffles and peppered duck breast in honey sauce with mirabelles.

L’Ecluse (45 place de Chambre; 011-33-3-87-75-42-38), which has a great outdoor terrace during the summer, is the other estimable local restaurant, and the one-star chef Eric Maire does the sort of sincere, occasionally gimmicky and self-consciously “important” cooking you often find in provincial France — the difference being that his food is often very good. He makes a sensationally good Parmesan risotto with langoustines, and if his “hamburger” of veal sweetbreads with bacon, Comte cheese, onions and homemade ketchup is clearly designed to give local bigwigs a giggle, it’s also delicious.

Le 4Vin3 (83 rue Mazelle; 011-33-3-87-75-20-20) is an Italian kitchen that serves a superb vitello tonnato that makes for a perfect lunch. But at noon, I often head for the U-shaped covered market on the place de la Cathedrale and pick up a sandwich at Chez Mauricette — maybe of fuseau lorrain, a soft garlic sausage that’s a regional specialty — or I check out the soups of the day at Soupes a Soups, which makes a dozen fresh pots daily, including a cold blueberry concoction.

For a drink before or after dinner, LeCafé Mathis (72 En Fourniture; 011-33-3-87-18-94-67) is a hip cafe where the wild things are, including the antiques dealers who show at the Marche aux Puces de Metz, the second largest regular flea market in France, after the one in Paris, at the Porte Saint Ouen. Go to [metz-expo.com](http://metz-expo.com) for dates.

Aside from the new Centre Pompidou Metz, this town’s other cultural highlights can fill up a weekend, too. With luck, it’ll be a sunny day so that its 70,000 square feet of stained glass windows in the magnificent gothic Cathedrale Saint-Etienne will explain its local nickname: the lantern of God. The windows here range from medieval masterpieces by Hermann de Munster and Thiebault de Lixheim to striking modern panes by Jacques Villon and Marc Chagall. Housed in an old Carmelite convent nearby, Les Musees de la Cour d’Or (2 rue du Haut Poirier, 011-33-3-87-68-25-00) offers up three museums. Le Musee Archaeologique has a brilliant collection of Gallo-Romain art and objects unearthed locally; Le Musee d’Architecture showcases great Romanesque and Gothic pieces; and Le Musee des Beaux Arts includes works by a wide range of artists, from German medieval masters to Corot and Delacroix.

The Monday morning following my last trip to the city, I picked up one of the Paris dailies and came across a big article entitled “Metz: Quel Bel Surprise!” (Metz: What a Nice Surprise!). But then I knew that already.