

Champagne Charlie's

Champagne Charlie rode into Paris in Hemingway's Jeep, two days ahead of the Allied forces, a bottle of Dom in one hand, a bag of nylons and chocolates in the other. At least that was Charlie's story and nobody ever said it wasn't true.

Charlie stayed in Paris and opened a nightspot on rue Lamennais, just off the Champs-Élysées. It swiftly became the place to see and be seen in post-war Paris, a home-away-from-home for American expatriates, Europe's exiled royalty and all of the other beautiful people on the Continent. Enjoying Champagne Charlie's hospitality on any given night might be the Duke of Windsor and the former Mrs. Simpson, Chaplin, Ike and Kay, Chevalier, Dietrich, Picasso, or the Prince of This or the Duchess of That. Legend has it that even de Gaulle would quietly slip into Champagne Charlie's late at night for a few hands of chemin de fer in the discrete private room behind the dining area.

It wasn't just the food and drink that brought everybody who was anybody to Champagne Charlie's. The menu was simple and basic. It was, after all, an American restaurant in Paris. Frogs, snails and exotic animal organs were never served at Champagne Charlie's. His motto was that he wouldn't eat anything he thought was ugly. But the chops and steaks were thick and tender and the fish and poultry was the freshest Charlie's chefs could buy. Breads and pastries were right from the oven and the desserts were sinfully rich.

Nor was the attraction Champagne Charlie's elegant décor of polished wood, etched glass and magnificent murals which evoked visions of Paris more than 50 years earlier. Nor was it the service, warm and hospitable, friendly yet unobtrusive. Nor was it the entertainment, often spontaneous, always eclectic, sometimes brassy and sometimes sweet. Even Charlie would shed a tear when Piaf sang her signature, "Non, je ne regrette rien."

No, it was the everything, the flair, the customer, the service, the entertainers, the food, the wine and the décor, that created the exhilarating experience of being at Champagne Charlie's, in the years after the war, in Paris, on rue Lamennais.

There are many stories about why Champagne Charlie's closed. Some say Charlie never felt at home in Paris. Notre Dame always would be a football team to Charlie. Others say he left because of a close personal relationship with one Madame Françoise de Panafleu le Troquet, a young woman of extraordinary passions whose elderly husband was a gentleman of wealth, power and influence. Charlie simply explained that it was time to go.

