Le Piano Vache
8 rue Laplace, 5th (01.46.33.75.03/ www.lepianovache.com), M° Mabert Mutualité or Cardinal Lemoine. Open noon-2am Mon-Fri; 9pm-2am Sat, Sun. Bar. Map p145 A4 🌊

A Left Bank drinking haunt for many a decade, this has all the hallmarks of what any beer-stained, smoky hovel should be: dark, cramped, filled with a hardcore drinker/student clientele, walls covered four times over with posters and indeterminate pub grime, and the hits of alternative 1980s synth-pop on repeat on the stereo.

Le Pantalon
7 rue Royer-Collard, 5th (no phone). RER Luxembourg. Open 5.30pm-2am Mon-Sat. No credit cards. Café. Map p145 A4 🌊

Le Pantalon is a local café that seems familiar yet utterly surreal. It has the standard fixtures and fittings, plus a strange vacuum-cleaner sculpture, disco-light toilets, and the world’s most prosaic proposal of marriage. Happy hours are generous, but drinks are cheap enough to make you tipsy without the worry of a cash hangover.

Le Pré Verre
8 rue Thénard, 5th (01.43.54.59.47). M° Mabert Mutualité or Cluny La Sorbonne. Open noon-2am, 7.30-10.30pm Tue-Sat. Closed 2wks Aug. €€. Bistro. Map p145 A3 🌊

Chef Philippe Delacourcelle uses spices like few other of his French counterparts. Take his salt cod with cassia bark and smoked potato puree: what the fish lacks in size it makes up for in crunchy texture and rich, cinnamon-like flavour, and the smooth potato cooked in a smoker makes a great accompaniment. Finish it all off with roast figs with olives.

Old books, new blood
Paris’s most famous bookshop takes a fresh direction.

Founded in 1951, Shakespeare & Co (p153) is one of the world’s most famous bookshops. Its story includes some of the leading literary names of the 20th century, three premises and two owners.

Sylvia Beach, founder of the original store at nearby Odéon, died in Paris in 1962; the current owner, George Whitman, is now in his 94th year, grey-haired and lucid; and the present manager, responsible for introducing a telephone, a credit card machine and, most notably, a biennial summer literary festival, is Sylvia Whitman, George’s daughter.

‘When I took over in 2003, everyone was always talking about the shop’s history,’ she says. ‘It was always Sylvia Beach and the Lost Generation, George Whitman and the Beat Generation. It was infuriating! And yet, rather than tamper with the homely feel of the shop’s interior, or her father’s philosophy of giving penniless writers a dark recess of the shop in which to sleep, Sylvia has set about giving Shakespeare & Co a modern direction. As well as the festival, housed in a marquee beside the store – ’Real Lives, Memoirs and Biographies’ is the theme for 2008 – Sylvia has plans for a café and cultural centre.

Whitman bought the current shop with a modest inheritance; at first it was called Le Mistral, but she renamed it in Beach’s honour when she died in 1962. The Beats, Burroughs and Ginsberg were regulars, giving readings and drinking their way through literary evenings. Walk in today and you hear the clacking of old typewriters upstairs, your eyes falling upon a few bronze coins in a symbolic dry wishing well. Outside, amid the stalls and small ads, the ‘Paris Wall Newspaper’ is a chalked history written by Whitman on New Year’s Day 2004. No bar codes, no security gates, no shrink wrap. In other words, the sort of bookshop that every city really ought to have.

La Mosquée de Paris p147