



## London's French Foreign Legion Shuns Sarkozy Plea to Come Home

By Mark Deen and Alan Katz



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Jan. 18 (Bloomberg) -- Five years after opening the first French bakery in Hackney, north London, Eric Rousseau says going back to France is out of the question. Instead, he's opening a second outlet in neighboring Islington.

“Sure it's raining, but it would be the same in Paris and they're on strike over there,” he says in his Belle Epoque bakery, where everything from the ovens and oak floors to the butter and flour comes from France. “My savoir faire is very much appreciated here, and the competition is non-existent.”

Like many French citizens, Rousseau says he left home to start his own business without being weighed down by high taxes and restrictive labor laws. Now he sells about 2,200 croissants each weekend, and he has just ordered 100,000 pounds (\$197,650) of equipment to meet demand for his baguettes and quiches.

Rousseau, 35, is just one example of the Gallic invasion of London, now home to some 190,000 French expatriates. So many well-educated young people have moved to the U.K. that President Nicolas Sarkozy has urged “France's

children” to bring their talents home.

“Come back!” Sarkozy cried to a London hall full of expatriates last January, when he became the first French presidential candidate to campaign in Britain. “You've brought so much intelligence, imagination, passion for work and desire for success with you to London that you have helped give it vitality that Paris needs so much.”

### Tax Plan

Sarkozy's 2008 budget cuts taxes by 9 billion euros (\$13 billion) to spur economic growth in a country that lags behind the European average. He plans to lower the top tax rate to 50 percent of annual earnings from 60 percent, eliminate taxes on overtime for workers paid by the hour, and reduce inheritance levies.

That's not enough to lure people back at a time when London offers many comforts of French life.

“In France, you work for others,” Rousseau says. “You're dead before you get started.”

On Bute Street in South Kensington, you can pick up the Paris newspaper Le Monde at the French Book Shop and read it across the street while sipping an espresso at a sidewalk table of La Grande Bouchee, a Parisian-style deli. Nearby stands Monceau Fleurs, the Parisian florist's first U.K. outlet.

`` There has been an absolute explosion in the size of the French community," says Caroline Sivilia, founder of Macadam, a bi-monthly magazine for expats. The publication has 150,000 readers and lists French veterinarians, carpenters and caterers.

The number of French living in the U.K. has risen every year since 1991, according to French government statistics. It jumped by 8,716 people in 2006, the biggest gain in at least 20 years.

### Brutal and Fierce

`` We're attracted to London because it's the exact opposite of what we're used to: brutal, fierce, unforgiving and yet magnificent, quick-witted and spirited," says Agnes Catherine Poirier, 35, a city resident for 12 years and author of `` Touche: A French Woman's Take on the English." `` Paris is the epitome of perfection and elegance, London of imperfection and eccentricity."

The invasion means schools such as La Petite Ecole Francaise are bursting. The kindergarten has 180 applications for 60 slots in 2008, up 10 percent in one year. The Lycee Francais Charles de Gaulle, run by the French state, has space for only half the 4- year-olds who apply.

Parisian chefs including Alain Ducasse and Joel Robuchon have set up shop in London. Ducasse, who has 15 Michelin stars, opened his first London restaurant in November.

### Big Changes

Phillippe Houchois, 43, an auto analyst at JPMorgan Chase & Co., says he finds London's new international flavor refreshing.

`` Twenty-five years ago, when I was in high school, it was just a horrible place to go to in terms of food and stores," says Houchois, who often lunches at Coq d'Argent in London's business district. `` It's now quite a happening place."

One of the biggest attractions is an economy whose growth has outpaced that of France this decade, creating jobs that don't exist at home. Unemployment in France is 7.9 percent compared with 5.2 percent in the U.K., according to figures from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

Beyond prosperity, London's informality attracts many French people suffocated by the social mores of Paris. `` No one asks for your age or your diploma here," Sivilia says.

That new sense of freedom balances out living in the congested and expensive U.K. capital.

`` The public services are a catastrophe, Heathrow is a third-world airport, but no one worries about it," says Marc Levy, a French novelist living in London's Chelsea neighborhood. `` The Brits are phlegmatic and that helps your creativity."

Last October, a group of graduates from elite universities organized an awards ceremony for excellence in London's permanent French community. Levy was named best artist, while Pascal Aussignac, founder of Michelin-starred Club Gascon, came away with best chef.

Aussignac, who came to London in 1996 after failing to find financing to open a restaurant in Paris, now employs 60 French workers at three restaurants. He's staying put.

`` We are children of London," says Aussignac, who voted for Sarkozy. `` I'm not sure people like us can go back. What would be the point? I'm a Londoner now."

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