

I came, I saw, I tasted:
A Literary Travel Journal of Culinary Tourism and Cultural Acclimation

by
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Dedication

This piece is all about food and eating, learning and hospitality. It is all about belonging. And it was the Creator of the universe who made food and our ability to enjoy it. He gave us the capacity to learn and the desire to be hospitable. And with Him we can belong in a precious way that is impossible outside of His presence. Therefore, it is to Him I dedicate this piece.

The hospitality I experienced during my year abroad provides a glimpse of the welcome I have received from the hand of the Father. After writing 90 pages about moments at European tables, I would be remiss not to invite you to the table of the One who created us to need the nourishment—physical and otherwise—found at the table.

This nourishment started for me at a preschool Sunday School table with cheerios and goldfish. It may not have started like that for you, but I hope it does start *somewhere* for you. I hope you let Him lead you to a table where your soul can be satisfied and where you will never hunger again.

If you have never been welcomed into the presence of the Savior, let me extend that invite to you, now. He loves you as you are and wants to offer you a place in His house and at His table. Bread that eternally fills, water that eternally satiates, and a sense of belonging that never ends . . . I cannot think of a table better than that. You are welcome there, too.

The Creator of the food is the Creator of the table. He is our Creator, too, and it is to Him that this entire thesis is dedicated. For He is “the bread of life; whoever comes to Him shall not hunger, and whoever believes in Him shall never thirst” (John 6:35).

Abstract

Food plays an important role in culture, and by extension, becomes an integral element of identity. Individual, local, regional, and national identities include food—*what* food is eaten, *how* it is prepared, *how* it is eaten, and *with whom* it is shared. Food also proves crucial to the practice of hospitality and to the connection of people across cultures; as a table or eating space is shared, lives intermingle and identities mesh and transform. Culinary tourism invites people to interact with the food of other cultures. This travel anthology presents the culinary adventures of an American woman living, studying, and eating in Europe during the COVID-19 pandemic. It elaborates on intersections of food and identity and how a long-term experience with culinary tourism allowed the native culture of one traveler to shift and become melded with elements of her adopted culture.

Keywords: Culinary tourism, identity, bi-culturalism, food culture, COVID-19, hospitality, France, American.

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Introduction

Culinary tourism is the “intentional, exploratory participation in the foodways of another—participation including the consumption, preparation, and presentation of a food item, cuisine, meal system, or eating style considered to belong to a culinary system not one’s own” (Long 20-21). I spent a year studying abroad in Europe, and I delighted in the opportunity to participate in this type of tourism—to taste the authentic cuisine from almost a dozen different countries and from more than a dozen cultures. Now, when I think of Greek culture, I taste the *bougatsa* pastry I snacked on at a park in Athens; when I remember England, I think of the peach tea I sipped outside a tea shop in London. Belgium makes me think of *mitraillette*, a sandwich with fries on it, I tried in Brussels. My year abroad recalls *fondue* in Basel, Switzerland, and *schnitzel* in Munich, Germany. I have memories of Spanish *tapas* and Italian *bruschetta*. And when I think of France, my home country for this year abroad, I think of dozens of delights—*pain aux raisins* and *raclette*, of *croques monsieurs* and *pépitos*, of *Calvados* and *Bordeaux*. Memories of Europe come with tastes; some memories are tastes themselves.

As I traveled around western Europe indulging in this culinary tourism, I realized every food experience was impacted by various elements of my identity. The fact that I am a woman, that I am American, that I am a Christian, and especially that I went abroad during the COVID-19 pandemic—all of these elements affected my culinary traveling experience during the academic year of 2021-2022. My gender meant I stayed on the main streets if I ventured out for dinner after dark. My nationality influenced my choice of comfort food—on nights when I felt lonely and homesick, I chose to eat Pizza Hut

pizza and peanut M&Ms. I learned how to navigate the wine culture of France without forsaking my buckle-of-the-Bible-belt Protestant upbringing. Being abroad during COVID changed how I experienced both the community and cultural aspects of dining.

My identity and circumstances influenced my experience with culinary traveling. As I analyzed these connections, I discovered that in the *recipe* that is my identity, food itself is one of the ingredients. Fischler claims that “Food is central to our sense of identity. The way any given human group eats, helps it assert its diversity, hierarchy and organization, but also, at the same time, both its oneness and the otherness of whoever eats differently” (Fischer 276). Americans eat tacos with beef and lettuce; the French eat tacos with beef and potatoes. Americans eat French fries with ketchup; the French eat them with mayonnaise. I frequented cafés alone; the French go with friends. I discovered cultural diversity *à travers* the foods I tasted. As an American, I was sometimes shocked by how and what the French ate. Eventually, I learned to appreciate even some of the surprises; I still eat tacos with beef and lettuce, but I now eat my French fries with mayonnaise. While seemingly banal differences, these variations in food choice and eating manner make up part of what it means to “be American” or to “be French.” As such, the voyage on which I embarked (both physically and psychologically) led not only to the discovery of a delightful assortment of different foods but also to the discovery and redefining of elements of my identity.

As I settled into a new culture, and then as I culture hopped, my understanding of food broadened. My view on eating changed. And, as I ate my way through almost a dozen countries, my perspective on life opened and transformed, too. As readers take in this culinary travel anthology, I hope their views on food, eating, and life change a little,

too. I hope mouths water at the descriptions of rich *crèmes* and light pastries that grace its pages. I hope they are almost able to taste the crust of the baguette and feel the tartness of the wine on their tongues. And I hope readers are able to slow down, take a deep breath, and learn to embrace the experience of being *à table* among the French—or at least at the table with a Francophile American. *Bon appétit!*

On a 'Big-coffee' Kind of Day, All I Could Find was a Tiny Teacup: the Virtue of
Moderation in France

The expression "Everything is bigger in Texas" is a common one, one with which many Americans would be familiar. However, abroad, foreigners often phrase it "Everything is bigger in the *United States*." As someone who had lived her entire life in the U.S., I had very little frame of reference as to why this is a stereotype for my country. A few weeks in France showed me the reason. Everything *is* bigger in the United States. Well, maybe not everything. But many things truly are bigger in my home country; if I thought the dorm room I shared my freshman year in the States was *small*, my private room in France was *tiny*. A meal at an American restaurant is at least a meal and a half in a French one. The few bakeries in my college town in the U.S. are spacious whereas bakeries in which only two customers at a time could fit are commonplace in France. Even the size of coffee cups is different. This difference in size is the one with which I struggled the most in those first weeks after I moved.

The French do not consume cup after cup of coffee in a sleep-deprived, need-caffeine-to-survive frenzy. Even before I moved to France, I was not usually frantic in my need for my morning coffee, but I definitely used to partake in trenta-sized (31 oz) coffees. I have journal entries from my first weeks in France where I bemoan the tiny coffees and wonder if there is anywhere I can trade my mouse-sized coffee for one a "normal" human being would be happy to drink; I eventually learned my "normal" was not their normal.

I also learned my perception of drink and food size was not something only I had noticed. I had conversations with some of my American and Canadian peers who also

missed their large coffees and massive burgers. I knew one individual who often bought two of whatever he was ordering because he knew he would be hungry after consuming the one the French considered a portion size. The difference in size is one researchers have studied and discussed as well. One researcher empirically compared the portion sizes of French and American foods. A Burger King meal in the U.S., for example, was 56% larger than an equivalent meal in France. The percentage was even higher for yogurt—an American portion size for a single container of yogurt was 82% larger than a single-portion container in France (Rozin 110). After recovering from this shock over size differences, I realized that from a French perspective, they are practicing moderation.

Moderation—one of the ancient Greek’s cardinal virtues—is something the contemporary French practice in their daily lives. The examples of coffee and hamburgers demonstrate the French practice moderation in terms of how much they consume. I found it is part of their mindset in terms of how much they work, too.

The OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) has an index that compares work-life balance in 41 countries around the world. The two factors considered in the creation of this index are 1) what percentage of the nation’s employees work “very long hours” (delineated as more than 50 hours per week)? and 2) how many hours do employees in that country spend on personal care or leisure (including sleeping and eating) per day? France and the United States rank similarly in terms of the percentage of employees who spend more than 50 hours a week doing paid work. France’s percentage was still 2.7% lower than America’s percentage (“Work-Life Balance”); this means an estimated 14 million more people were working 50 or more

hours in the U.S. (O'Neill "Employment in the United States from 2013 to 2023") compared to France in 2018 (O, Neill "France: Employment 2013-2023"). In terms of number of hours spent on leisure and personal care, however, France and the U.S. are on opposite ends of the spectrum. France ranks 2nd out of the 41 nations studied and America ranks 29th out of the same group of nations ("Work-Life Balance"). More Americans spend more time at work than the French do, and less of the time Americans do spend away from the office is spent on leisure activities. This is evidenced by another difference between the two countries—how technology is used outside business hours. Many Americans extend their work hours at home by staying "connected" to the office, expected by their boss to be on call through text or email.

The French, however, see time away from work differently. In 2017, the French enacted a law called the "Droit de Déconnexion," or the "Right to Disconnect," which legislates organizations employing more than 50 individuals must negotiate with their employees an acceptable utilization of technological tools by employers for communicating outside of working hours. The law itself states this legal code is meant to "assure the respect of time off and vacation time as well as personal and family life" (Loi no 2242-17). It is not like this in the United States. A study conducted in 2017 by Challenger, Gray, and Christmas Inc. showed that 82.9% of the 150 managers consulted said they communicate with their employees after hours and 87.5% of the managers have no policy regarding after-hours employee-employer communication ("Are You a Digital Dictator?"). In America, downtime is jeopardized by an employer's right to communicate with (and get responses from) employees at any time of day.

Some American high school teachers are guilty of this same over-connection; I had teachers in high school who would post an assignment at midnight on Saturday night with no forewarning and expect students to have it done by class Monday morning. For students who keep a Sabbath on Sundays like my brother and me, late-night, off-hours communication like this makes it difficult to finish assignments on time. We either have to sacrifice our grades, or we have to give up our religious practice *and* the precious few hours of free time we allot for ourselves every Sunday afternoon. School and homework easily took up 50 hours every week (and sometimes more) when I attended an American university; having only 30 hours of classes and *devoirs* in France was an enormous culture shock. But a pleasant one. I suddenly had the opportunity to try out the concept of work-life balance (i.e. moderation in the workplace) which the French seem to understand so well.

This mindset of moderation was not one with which I was very familiar before I moved to France. It did not quite compute in my American brain. In an essay I wrote while living in France, I reflected on this struggle to dial it back to a French level. I had been writing from a historical standpoint about what happens when different cultures interact; I demonstrated how sometimes cultures smoothly blend together and how sometimes there exist points of friction in places where one of the involved cultures does not want to experience a transformation. I discussed how this is true both on a large, national scale and on a small, individual scale. I was the “individual scale” example I used in my paper. I confessed that in the past six months “I have experienced several transformations in my native culture; I have also recognized situations in which I have simultaneously resisted the new culture and my own” (Beard 6). This quote reflects how,

during my first months abroad, I experienced several transformations in my personal culture. I also recognized situations in which I resisted the cultural differences with which I was suddenly confronted; sometimes the one I resisted was the “new” (French) culture, but curiously, sometimes it was my native culture I found myself resisting.



Figure 1. Me NOT giving up ice cream on one of my first days in France!

crème-filled, powder-sugar-sprinkled, pastry-covered desserts I saw in bakery windows, not without having to buy a whole new wardrobe to accommodate the extra sugary pounds I was sure I would gain. However, I quickly decided “you only live once” and started going downtown a couple of times a week to try whatever yummy pastry caught my attention; I would even pair it with a coffee (albeit a very *small* one) filled with thick cream or

As for the concept of moderation, my interaction with French culture followed an easily traceable path. In the beginning, I resisted French culture, clinging to the culture I was used to. I was nervous about eating French pastries because my mindset in the U.S. had been “I have to give up all sugary things (even *gasp* ice cream) in order to avoid over-indulging.” I did not believe I could eat the delectable,



Figure 2. One of the “crème-filled, powder-sugar-sprinkled, pastry-covered desserts” I ate on a day off spent in Rouen.

frothed with rich milk, a *café crème* or *café au lait*. I realized—with delight I might add—I could eat these amazing foods without hurting my waistline because I was walking everywhere and because I was not over-indulging. I was not eating three treats every day. I was eating one every couple of days (actually, almost every day if I am being totally honest).

My relationship with food changed while I was in France. I found I did not miss the larger portions I received in the United States. I would eat whatever was on my plate in France, feel a tad irritated because I felt I could eat more, but then realize I was actually full when the coffee and airy, whipped dessert came. I no longer felt guilty when I picked up the raspberry-and-blackberry-filled puff cobbler, cake, pastry “thing” I loved from the on-campus cafeteria. Instead, I knew that was my “bakery delight” for the day and enjoyed every bite of that scrumptious dessert. I did not have to eliminate all sugar. I just had to moderate my intake of it—and make sure I walked the two miles to buy it every day.

The path toward a healthier relationship with work changed, too, but took a similar trajectory. I started out clinging to my native culture but quickly adapted. Initially, I was at a loss about how to manage all my extra time. It is not that I *wanted* more schoolwork to occupy my outside-of-class time; I just did not know how to fill the extra hours I suddenly possessed. What was I supposed to do with an additional 15-20 hours every week? Well, it was in that extra time that I learned about myself and some of the

things I enjoy. I realized how much I like to sketch and watercolor paint. I was reminded how much I enjoy taking long walks and relaxing in parks. I spent time working puzzles and writing stories. I learned what it looks like to



Figure 3. My view one day when I took the bus down to the beach for my break for the day. French fables were my reading choice this time.

come away from school and take a break with a pastry and a good book.

The ways I resisted the French culture, then, are corollaries to how I resist American culture, now. American culture says we should eat the entire plate of restaurant food? Nope. I am going to save some for tomorrow. American culture says (as a contradiction to the previous expectation) we should cut out all (insert food type *fat/carbs/sugar* here) to stay fit and trim? No, thanks. I am going to drink a milkshake now, indulge in a latté later. American culture says to give your all to your work in order to “climb that corporate ladder” or achieve that “white-picket-fence American dream”? I think I will decline. I am going to work



Figure 4. One of the flower bouquets I painted sitting in my dorm room in Caen.

hard at school (and after school for a few hours) but then spend my afternoons reading books, painting flowers, and cooking for my friends.

I have even come to change my tune when it comes to the mug size that sits next to my coffee pot; my body cannot even handle the large quantities of coffee I used to consume before my year abroad. Nowadays, half of my large Dunkin' coffee ends up in the refrigerator for the next day. It is a cup (maybe a cup and a half), drunk out of my handmade-in-Germany mug, and then I am done . . . ready to drink some water, eat a pastry, paint a flower, read a book and *moderately* partake of—yet *abundantly* enjoy—the life I have been given.

Sharing a Table: My Experience with Communal Eating in France

A host family, a foster grandmother, a cultural sponsor . . . there is no exact translation for *famille d'accueil*. Most would probably translate it as “welcome family.” I am able to translate it in a name—Marie-Claire. I went abroad while COVID still ravaged the world, so I was unable to live with a host family; however, an elderly lady named Marie-Claire volunteered to take me out a couple of times a month for cultural activities and meals. It felt as though I were an adopted granddaughter and she the mom of my imaginary French mother. Marie-Claire is in her 60s, white-headed, spry for her age, and interested in sharing all she could about her culture while also learning about mine.

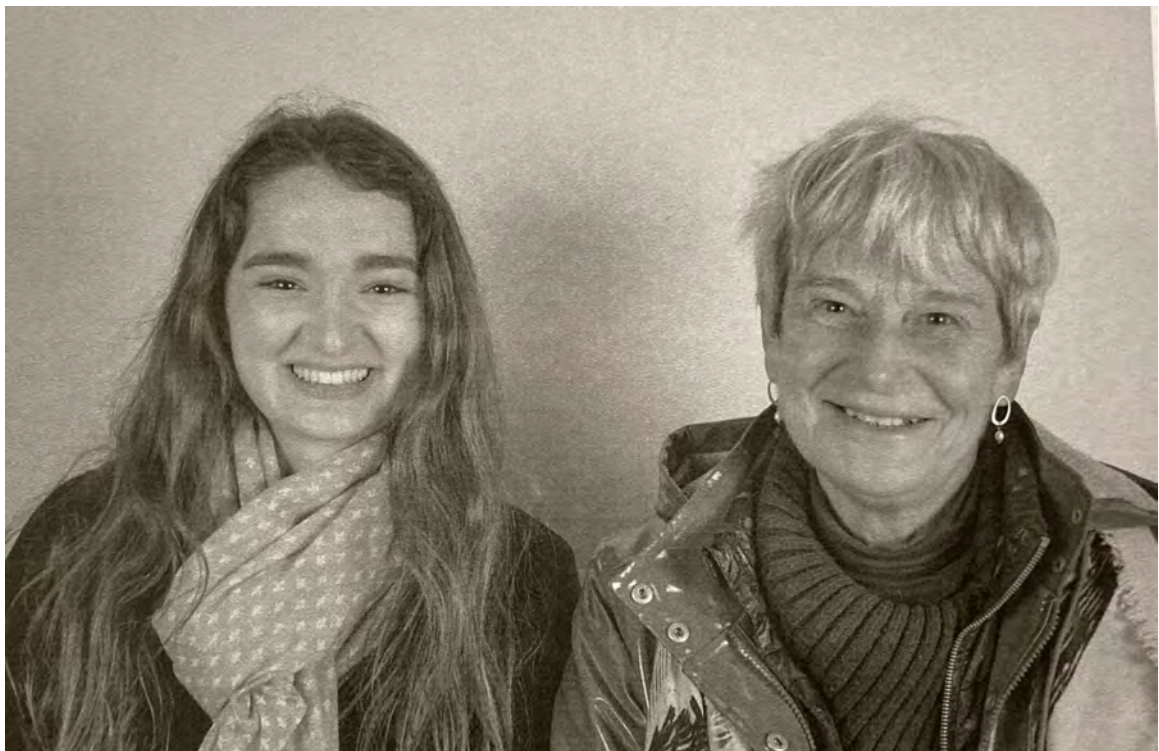


Figure 5. Me and my cultural sponsor, Marie-Claire.

Some days we went to the beach not far from Caen, other days to the market, and still others we attended tours of famous cultural sites within the city. Every outing

included food as she always wanted to make sure I was fed (just like my American grandma, actually). She often took me out to eat; a savory crêpe shop became a favorite for both of us, and we went several times throughout my year in her town. She also hosted me in her home on multiple occasions. The hospitality of this *femme d'un certain âge* struck me. Hospitality is not normally a quality attributed to the French by outsiders; if I had a nickel for every time someone asked me “are the French really rude?”, I would be a rich woman. The answer to that question is found in the actions of Marie-Claire. She took a lonely American student under her wing during a time when most people around the world were still staying pretty close to home. She made sure I had activities to keep me busy, social interactions to keep me sane, and food to keep me full. She showed kindness to a complete stranger. I would call that the exact opposite of rude, more like generous.

Thanks to the hospitality of Marie-Claire, I received the opportunity to learn about French dining culture from a communal perspective. Without her, I would have continued eating all my meals alone at bakeries, in the cafeteria, or in my dorm room. Instead, I learned firsthand how the French eat when they eat together. On my first afternoon in her home, she sat me down in the living room with a glass of white pear wine and placed a set of *hors d'œuvres* in front of me. Small bite-sized pieces of savory pastry posed on one plate while bowls of olives and other platters of finger foods filled the coffee table in front of me. We snacked for a while, indulging in a tradition called *apéro*—the colloquial term for *apéritif* which involves snacks and alcohol that are designed to prepare your mouth and your stomach for the meal to come. This tradition is one about which I learned in class when one of my teachers taught a unit on the concept

of the French *à table*. *Apéro* is a tradition whose “place in social relations is at the border of sacred where it has always been charged with a magical power reinforced by it being practiced as a ritual” (Clarisse 53). My French friends and teachers assure me this does not happen every time they sit down to eat; however, when friends or family are gathered, an occurrence that is often weekly at the very least, the *apéro* is offered.

After the *hors d'oeuvres*, Marie-Claire transitioned us to the dining room for the main meal. We started with a course that was generally a seasoned meat, accompanied by potatoes or other vegetables. Salad came *after* the main course and normally consisted of lettuce with a few slices of tomato and a light olive oil vinaigrette. Cheese and bread (*baguette, bien sûr*) came next. Dessert was last and was always served at the table *before* coffee. Coffee, in the form of strong black espresso, was drunk by the whole group after moving back into the living room space. I often wished for my dessert while polishing off my coffee, but drinking post-meal coffee and eating something sweet at the same time is an American custom, not a French one.

As Marie-Claire led me through the French dining experience, she also introduced me to new foods. I often ended up with something unfamiliar on my plate and would have to inquire as to what I was eating. Sometimes she would tell me, and I would still be in the dark about what had been set before me. I remember her asking me one day if I liked *poireaux*. The word for pear is *poire*, so I assumed the two belonged to the same family. I responded “yes” to her question. The long, green food with a mushy papyrus texture that appeared on my plate did not match the idea I had in my head. After trying it, I still had no clue as to what it was. I only knew it was *not* a pear! It took several weeks for me to discover the mystery vegetable’s identity; later, during a cooking class, I

recognized the word on a recipe, realized it was the same as what I had eaten with my host family, and looked up the word in English. Leeks! No wonder I had no idea what I had been eating! That is not something I had ever eaten in the States. After being served leeks more than four times in as many months, I realized this must be a food the French eat more often than the typical American family, or perhaps my “typical” American family simply skipped this vegetable because of parental preference. I might never know since there are not too many studies out there on leek consumption habits across various cultures.

Marie-Claire provided my most authentic encounters with “eating like the French.” As she welcomed me to her table, I learned the truth behind the following statement regarding how culture “has a major role in determining where and how foods are consumed” and regarding how “food is a way of expressing hospitality, as mealtimes bring groups together, both physically and symbolically” (Holdsworth 204). A 60-something-year-old French woman and a 20-something-year-old American woman were able to become friends while spending time together around a little square table in the middle of Normandy.

Marie-Claire’s meals taught me about French hospitality and opened a window into the world of communal dining, but they were not the only times I ate in community. I also spent many hours at the on-campus dining hall down the hill from my dorm. Like how COVID impacted my experience with a welcome family, the pandemic also affected my experience eating here.

One of my friends studied in Caen with the same program during the fall of 2022, four months after I finished my program in France. We chatted recently, and she

mentioned eating in the dining hall. She said it nonchalantly, like it was the most normal thing in the world. After all, a college student eating in a campus cafeteria *is* normal. I, however, was immediately transported back in time and felt again a sense of fear.

COVID was a serious consideration while I was abroad; at most restaurants around town, a *passe sanitaire* was required to enter, and masks were required until seated. The *passe sanitaires* came in the form of a phone application into which one must upload proof of vaccination, proof of recent recovery from COVID, or proof of a PCR test no older than 48 hours. I did not mind the protocols because I wanted to continue enjoying my year abroad, and I could not do that if I were sick and quarantined. For this reason, the campus dining hall made me nervous. In this space, no *passe sanitaire* was required. While masks were still mandatory until seated, the tables were long and skinny which meant you were sitting at the same table as 40 other people, who were surrounded by 280 more at the tables nearby. I felt anxious sitting and eating and wished for a to-go option. At the same time, though, I did not want to use a to-go option. I wanted to be able to sit with my peers, eat slowly, savor my food (which was amazing for a campus dining hall), and build friendships around the table. Instead, I felt nervous. Instead, I tried to be there as soon as the dining hall opened because that was not the peak hour which meant I might could get a table to myself and feel a little more comfortable unmasking long enough to eat.

Instead, each day I ate with people, I sent up a prayer that I would not contract COVID while I ate lunch and got some desperately-needed social time. Not all my peers felt this fear, and it is a worry that is mostly nonexistent now that we have emerged from the throes of the pandemic. In the moment, though, the dining halls really were an exercise in

letting go of what I could not control and choosing to preserve my mental health by eating with others.

On the days when I pushed through my fear enough to dine with my classmates, I noticed we took a long time to eat. I learned this was typical French. A study published in 2002 claims that in France “an average (of) 93 minutes are spent eating every day. This is around one third longer than that spent in the US for example, where an estimated 67.2 minutes are spent eating by men and 63.6 minutes by women” (Holdsworth 204). While this article is a bit dated, I found the essence to still be true, at least anecdotally. The meals I shared with my welcome family always took at least 45 minutes; the times we ate in her home, the meals took more than an hour. The same was true when I ate lunch at the cafeteria on campus. If I ate with a classmate or two instead of alone, we used all but 20 minutes of our 90-minute lunch break.

During this long lunch period, I learned about cultural differences from my peers, all of whom were from countries around the world. Most often I ate with a young man from Spain and another classmate from South Korea. We chatted in French and swapped stories from our home nations and cultures. While we talked, we discovered the delights of French cuisine that landed on our plates as we went through the lunch lines. One article states the French talk about what they eat as they eat (Holdsworth 206); this is one way in which my international friends and I ate “like the French.” Many times, we sat down, pointed to something on our plate, and asked each other “do *you* know what this is?”

Most days, I knew what main dish I was eating because dry-erase labels graced the glass barriers above the hot pans and vats. A vegetable and goat cheese quiche one day and salmon with a *crème* sauce the next. However, our \$3.50 meal included more



Figure 6. Salmon with a crème-based sauce, plus mashed potatoes, green beans and, for apéro, a shrimp dish with butter and orange. This university Christmas meal came with a glass of wine.

than a main dish and side. This meal might have included a whet-your-appetite type food such as a small salad or a lentil-based dish, a soup or dessert, water, and a mini baguette. As for the ingredients, your guess would have been as good as mine regarding the foods on display. I felt fortunate to not have any food allergies. Since I can safely eat anything, I considered the unknown element of an on-campus lunch to be an adventure, an adventure my tastebuds often loved but sometimes hated.



Figure 7. A tomato with all sorts of delicious things on the inside plus a cauliflower casserole for the side. In the background—the divine berry crumble mystery dessert.

Early on in my year, I picked up a dessert plate that looked like a casserole with a crumbly crust and a bit of glazed sugar on top. It looked delicious. It tasted that way, too. I think it had raspberries and blackberries, along with a decent amount of sugar. Kind of a cross between a cobbler and a pastry, I still have no idea what this dessert is called which is a shame because knowing its name would mean I could google a recipe and make it on my own. My tastebuds wish for that. If only the desserts had been labeled

Another day, the adventure was not quite as pleasant. On this fateful day, I selected for my dessert a porous, white, jello-looking dessert in a fancy glass pudding cup that had shaved chips and a brown sauce drizzled on top. It looked light and airy and delightful. It *was* light and airy, but it was also banana-flavored which means it was *not* delightful. I took one bite, gagged a little as I chewed and swallowed, and handed the dessert over to my Spanish friend



Figure 8. The fluffy white square of a dessert that had a banana sauce.

who had no such qualms about foods that taste like that yellow, hairy, mushy fruit. Once again, labels would have been nice

In my experience, labels are more common in the United States; when they are not, I possess the bravery and language skills to ask what the unknown food is (something I only did a few times in France and never in the dining hall). In this way and others, I find myself frequently contrasting on-campus dining facilities at the *Université de Caen* and at my university in the United States. The stereotype in the U.S. surrounding dining halls is that they are notoriously bad, with powdered eggs and mushy vegetables as the norm. I do not want to complain because my American university has some wonderful options. I love the pulled pork and baked macaroni and cheese one venue sometimes offers and the omelet bar at another. However, \$12.00 versus \$3.50 for a similar quantity of food . . . a comparison should be made.

I also appreciate how the majority of the food in the French dining hall *felt* healthier; sure, there were the typical “college-kid” options like a burger bar and a pizza station. The other options, though, were more along the lines of baked fish and beef stews which were kinder to my waistline than the fried chicken and cornbread that are staples in my American university dining halls. I also was struck by how my university in France had no fast-food venues on campus. KFC and McDonald’s were options downtown but not on campus. This contrasts to the United States where Steak and Shake, Panda Express, Chick-fil-A, and Twisted Taco are only a few of the grab-and-go options on which I can use my university meal plan. The non-dining hall options at my university in France were cafés that offered coffee and pastries in the morning and sandwiches at lunch.

Every communal dining experience in France was impacted by COVID; however, I did not let that stop me from learning at each meal. I learned to take time to savor that delicious blackberry dessert. I decided what I liked about my home university and what I preferred in France. I learned a different order of eating dishes. And, even if I learned nothing else, at least I now know I like leeks.

Dining Alone: My Experience with Café Culture as a Solitary Venture

My year abroad took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, and most of my hours outside the classroom were spent alone. I felt fear whenever I unmasked long enough to eat with other people, so for many meals, I did not eat with anyone at all. For the most part this did not bother me. My mom taught me from an early age how to spend time with myself; every once in a while, she would send me to my room for a half hour at a time just to practice being alone. It is a skill not everyone possesses. However, this training came in handy when I lived in France. I ate most meals alone, not a common trend in France, especially not when considering café culture.

Cafés in France are known for being places with convivial atmospheres, where people engage in social interactions for hours on end. The focus on enjoying time with someone else while at a café is a trademark of French café culture, even if it was not of my experience. In the early 2000s, American coffee shops had readily embraced the technology revolution and had shifted to encourage individuals to open their laptops or talk on their mobile phones while drinking their coffee. This was not universally the case in France during the same time period. Few cafés had Wi-Fi, only one person was found to be talking on the phone, and laptops were hardly seen at all (Kleinman 198-201). Instead, people were chatting, reading a newspaper, people-watching, or simply drinking their coffee. The emphasis seemed to be on doing “one thing at a time” (Kleinman 203).

Even twenty years later, many cafés in France do not have Wi-Fi (something that really frustrated American me who did not want to be in her dorm room or the library for every homework session). I felt weird the few times I pulled out my laptop and began, in

desperation, to use my phone's hotspot to get a few assignments done while sitting on a café terrace. My discomfort in these moments stemmed from the fact that no one else had a laptop. Why should I? Phone calls also were out of the question. In the United States, it is common to hear one side of a person's conversation while they chat on the phone and sit in a coffee shop; sometimes these individuals have a laptop in front of them, too. I did not experience this even once during my entire year abroad. Despite the frustration I felt for not being able to get anything done off campus, I did not give in to the desire to pull out my laptop very often. Instead, I pulled out a book or, more often, a paintbrush.

My café experience revolved around four things: coffee, bakery treats, amazing views, and painting. Coffee seems an obvious element as the word *café* means both the location and the drink in the French language. Many Frenchmen choose espresso as their go-to. We Americans are often teased when we order an *allongé* or *americano* which is an espresso that has had several ounces of water added to it in order to weaken the strong and bitter espresso Europeans love. I opted for a *café au lait* (a coffee with warm milk poured over it) or a *latté* (an espresso frothed with hot milk) most days which seemed a perfect pairing for whatever bakery treat I pulled out of my tote bag.

Since I snacked on a *pâtisserie* with almost every coffee, my experience with café culture is inexplicably tied to bakery culture. My favorite bakery exchanges happened at a little shop on a side street in my town. Its name now escapes me, but my feet know how to get there; once or twice a week I found my feet pounding out the path that would take me from campus, through the castle, past the art museum, down main street, and onto the narrow alley called *Rue Froide* where this bakery sat. It nestled into the street with other businesses on either side. It was tiny, with a dark interior and a dusting of flour in the air.

The main source of light was the large window that looked out onto the street and allowed the passerby a glimpse of the *merveilleuses* pastries on display—*chaussons aux épinards*, *croissants*, *pains au chocolat*, and stack after stack of *baguettes*.

Everyone else also knew this bakery sold gourmet food for a few euros, so I learned to arrive early in the day to snag my preferred pastry. Each time, I waited my ten or fifteen minutes for the little blue door to swing open and for the proprietor's *bonjour* to signal it was my turn. I loved how most owners/employees of bakeries began an interaction with a happy greeting which set the tone for the time spent in their shop. These moments put a smile on my face before I even tasted the pastry for the day.

I forced myself to wait just a little longer before I indulged in whatever treat I had just purchased. The switch from bakery culture to café culture happened as I wandered over to my favorite café, ordered my soy milk latté (which often came with amazing coffee art), and gently unwrapped the paper surrounding my bakery treat. Then, I sat—with a view of William the Conqueror's castle in front of me and the sound of clinking glasses and French conversation behind me—and just existed, taking in the sights and sounds of the French city around me.



Figure 9. The coffee art that the barista at Arbuste made in my latté one day.



Figure 10. My iced coffee with William the Conqueror's 11th-century castle in the background.

Not every café in France had a view of an 11th-century castle. Others had views of a 13th-century church or 19th-century apartment buildings. The view is a special part of French café culture and certainly an element of my experience with it. This is different from the restaurant culture some cities in the U.S. have, where the oldest views would be 400 years old instead of 1,000. The striking physical geography is a visual aspect of French cafés that has caused them to be labeled “compelling

spaces.” Kleinman discussed how seats on the sidewalk are oriented so people sit beside each other instead of across from one another (Kleinman 198-199). While known for being convivial in nature, French cafés also emphasize physical beauty. Talk to your friends, sure, but why not look at ancient ruins while you do so? This research corroborated my experience; when I did have a friend with me, we often sat with the café to our backs and our shoulders side by side as we chatted about whatever book we were reading, drank our strong French coffee, and took in the bustling street or beautiful architecture across the way.

That beautiful architecture across the way never ceased to inspire. It seemed as though those buildings were posing like models for an artist; when I sat and gazed at them, it was like they were posing especially for me. Even on my first solo outing into town, I remembered my paintbrush and mini paint palette. I never left them behind.

My first attempt looked like this.



Figure 11. The view I captured from a streetside café.



Figure 12. My first sketch in Caen.

A later attempt without paints looked like this.



Figure 13. A slightly different view from a different café; the green pharmacy sign on the far right-hand side of this figure is the same one as depicted in the left third of Figure 11.



Figure 14. A different angle of the same street as in Figure 12, just a few months later.

My paints became my companions. They kept loneliness at bay and made me feel like I fit in, like I belonged there. The white-haired gentleman two tables over had no need for a companion other than his newspaper. My paints provided a similar feeling of independence and self-sufficiency. They gave me a reason to be in that café and to sit for an hour or two. With this purpose in mind, I continued to paint and sketch my way through cafés all over France. Here are some photographs taken in the moment and the sketch or painting that I created in that café space.



Figure 15. Colombage architecture as seen through the 2nd floor window of Columbus and Co. in Caen, France.



Figure 16. Colombage architecture painted (4 December 2021).

I painted the classic
Norman wooden
colombage
(patterned wood)
architecture I could
see across the street
from my spot in a
café in Caen.

I painted a palm tree in
front of a red church door
from my spot in a café
across the square; the palm
tree is a unique feature
because Normandy is not a
tropical paradise.



Figure 17. Église du Vieux Saint Sauveur as seen from Pain de Marcel.



Figure 18. Rendering of the church, focusing on the palm tree.

I sketched the folded umbrellas that partially obscured my view of the curved domes and sharp lines of *bâtiments* in Paris.



Figure 19. *Café La Terrasse in Paris on a snowy day in April 2022.*



Figure 20. *Sketch of the Parisian buildings across the street and a closed café umbrella.*

I painted urban landscapes and barren winter trees from a photo I took while on a winter trip in Strasbourg. It was too cold to sketch it outside in the moment. My hands were warm as I painted it in a café called *Paul* in Caen.



Figure 21. *Urban landscape in Strasbourg, France.*



Figure 22. *Painting of the Strasbourg urban landscape photo.*

I passed this church every day I came downtown (which was everyday I lived there, so everyday for a year). One cold day, I decided to draw it from a picture while I defrosted my hands in a café.



Figure 23. Photo of L'Église Saint-Pierre in Caen, France.



Figure 24. Sketch of L'Église Saint-Pierre, 28 November 2021.

It was not always magnificent architecture that inspired me, sometimes it was a scene inside the café or a couple of items on the wall or on my table. For example, I sketched wrought iron lamp posts at corner intersections and cartoons decorating shop windows.



Figure 25. Photo of a streetlamp at a café in Honfleur.



Figure 26. The Honfleur streetlamp drawn.



Figure 27. Sketch of a scene painted on a window of a café in Bayeux.



Figure 28. The café window I captured in pencil in my cahier.

I sketched the baked goods I could see from my seat outside the café and a room within a room at another one.



Figure 29. My view from outside Pain de Marcel.



Figure 30. A sketch of some of the bakery items from my spot outside Pain de Marcel.



Figure 31. A drawing of another room as seen through a doorway of a café.



Figure 32. The mise en abîme of the room within a room caught my eye in this café.

I rendered the bookshelves in both watercolor and pencil.



Figure 33. A painting inside a bookstore café in Caen.



Figure 34. The bookstore café in Caen.



Figure 35. Bookshelf in a café.



Figure 36. Drawing of a bookshelf in a café in Bordeaux.

I sketched the storefronts across the tram tracks and the setup of my table; this one is interesting because my “setup” includes a mask sitting just beside my coffee, a reminder of the state of the world the year I studied abroad.



Figure 37. My setup at a café involves painting supplies, a coffee, a mask, and an ash tray (not for me, but for les vrais français).



Figure 38. Drawing of my mise en place and the stores across the tram tracks.

These café sketches, made during my time in France, capture my routine; in each place, I ordered my coffee, pulled out a treat, let my eyes rove over the sights before me, and allowed my paintbrush to move across the page. Eventually, these actions became linked in my mind; these moments, and their associated pastries, began to be associated with cultural immersion for me. This is especially true for *pains aux raisins*, a particular passion



Figure 39. Pain aux raisins.

of mine. I tasted dozens of pastries while I lived abroad, but my favorite is—without a doubt—a *pain aux raisins*, a puff pastry in the shape of a flat, wide cinnamon roll with raisins baked into the dough. I have never met a French person who prefers a *pain aux raisins* to a *croissant* or a *pain au chocolat*. In fact, some of the French tease me when they hear of my obsession with this *viennoiserie*, especially when they hear I prefer it over any pastry. While I love *pains aux raisins* for their taste, I also love them because they became a symbol for me . . . a symbol of rest. Every time I bought a *pain aux raisins*, it meant I had an hour or two free (because I was never going to eat one of these pastries if I had to hurry and did not have time to savor it). I would sit down with a latté at a café and pull off pieces of the warm, flaky dough to pop into my mouth while I dabbed a few splotches of paint onto a notebook.

While my experience with café culture is not the traditional one—full of quiet conversations or raucous laughter—it was special, nonetheless. I experienced my year abroad most acutely from those little café seats that do not quite sit evenly on the cobblestone pavement. I pleased in the rich hot coffee and the soft pastries. I took joy in the beautiful views and filled both my memory and my notebooks with moments captured in cafés. It was here I became most French.

Le Marché Hebdomadaire: Local Products in my Basket, Local Interactions in my Heart

“I’m sitting at a little mom-and-pop café, nestled on the corner of a narrow side street and the main thoroughfare of downtown. A delectably light and flaky pastry taunts me from its place on a table whose legs wobble a little on the uneven cobblestone. I have a coffee with frothed milk in one hand and a paintbrush in the other. A small watercolor notebook rests on my lap. I make quick glances between my painting and the scene in front of me, trying to capture the bustling pace of the market. I was here just hours before, and the street was quiet, serene, even. There were groups of two or three traversing the street—chatting and going about their business—but that was all. Now, people and noise have taken over the space. Vendor tables stand as far as my eye can see. The colors of the fruits and vegetables are striking; the bright red of the apples and the deep mauve of the figs call to me, asking me to spend a euro on a snack. Instead, I stay seated and attempt to match my paint to the hues in front of me. A splash of green, a drop of blue. The scene takes shape in my lap. I continue to paint but also try to absorb the experience of the moment. The colors are already ingrained in my mind as well as on the thick paper of my journal. I start paying attention to my other senses. I crinkle my nose at the strong odor of aged cheese but breathe more deeply when I turn my head and smell sweet, warm, fried dough from a nearby waffle stand. I tune in to the sounds, too. I hear the knives thwacking a slat of wood after slicing through the flesh of a recently caught fish. I hear the clink of change passing from hand to hand. Most of all, I hear the people. I hear vendors hawking their wares, one euro for this, two euros for that. I hear little old

ladies asking for a half kilogram of cheese and a liter of wine. I see those same sweet women tucking their treasures into soft wicker baskets draped over their arms.”

I wrote this journal entry on a Friday morning in the Place de Saint Sauveur as the market spread out before me. I noticed how the markets popped up at the same spot every week in otherwise quiet locales, a fact recognized by researcher Aurore Navarro who described markets as “commercial structures that are supple and ephemeral and that unfold regularly in a fixed public space” (Navarro 241). Markets in France are “ephemeral” in that they last only a few hours every week, but they are enduring in that they



Figure 40. Sitting with a crêpe from the market and a coffee as the Friday market spreads out behind me.

have lasted as a tradition for centuries. The importance of markets as a cultural marker was pronounced when a group of government officials joined together in 1994 to sign an agreement declaring the markets as something “belonging to the economic and national cultural heritage that must be conserved within the French distribution sector” (Navarro



Figure 41. A market sketch, done from the café where I am sitting in Figure 40.



Figure 42. A photographed view of the market sketched in Figure 41.

241). This cultural heritage is experienced by tourists and locals alike in many markets in France.



Figure 43. Locals at a market stand.

The Friday and Sunday markets in Caen were places where I felt most like a native, perhaps because most of the people who frequent these markets are natives. Markets are known for being a place where people can “discretely penetrate in the daily lives of its inhabitants” (Navarro 245). I was surprised because I did not have to force this “penetration”; some Frenchmen invited it. The French are not known for being eager to strike up conversations with strangers.

The marketplace provides an exception. At the markets people became a little more uninhibited, and on multiple occasions vendors began conversations with me as I passed by or paused to look at their wares.

This happened to me my first morning at the market. It was 10:30 on my first Sunday morning in town; the bells of the Saint Pierre Cathedral had just rung the start of mass, and I had successfully purchased a dozen small pink roses to add a splash of color to my dorm room. My next act of bravery was to order a waffle from the stand at the corner of the market. The concept of a non-syrupy waffle to hold in one’s hand was foreign but



Figure 44. The roses I bought on my first trip to the market.



Figure 45. *Un gaufre bought at the market my last Sunday in town, very similar to the one I bought the first Sunday except this time with Nutella.*

appealing. I waited my turn in line. Knowing the idiosyncratic necessity of having exact change, the idea of fumbling in my wallet for another euro while making the cashier wait made me nervous. I asked for a *gaufre avec confiture*—a waffle with jam. Oh no! Panic! A follow-up question! Thankfully, the question of “which jam” was accompanied by a motion to my options. I scanned the row of small glass jars with their red and white checkered lids and chose the first one I knew I could pronounce—*fraise*—strawberry. I offered my “exact”

change to the vendor who told me to wait while my waffle heated. I exhaled a little puff of air, relieved to have that conversation finished (it took a couple of months before these banal interactions ceased making me nervous); my relief did not last very long, though, because an older man—a friend of the truck owners—was perched on a stool nearby and decided to strike up a conversation with me while I waited for my waffle. My stomach tingled with nerves at being drawn into a conversation with a native. He had heard my foreign accent and started by asking where I was from and why I was in Caen. We chatted a bit longer and somehow ended up talking about astrological signs. I giggle when I think back on that conversation with its odd topics and stilted language, but I also smile because it was my first experience having a real conversation—odd though it was—with a local.

I connected with locals on other days as I wandered the markets. My accent caught people's attention and provided a starting point for a conversation. Other interactions with natives occurred when my French *famille d'accueil*, my local cultural sponsor, took me to the market for one of our first outings together. I had already been to the market several times, but I still learned from her knowledge as a local. She taught me you could buy a half log of cheese at the cheese stands instead of a full log, a good thing for a single college student to know especially since there was always a chance my taste buds would revolt. Marie-Claire also taught me how to differentiate between locally-grown fruits and vegetables and those imported from other countries—the stalls at the center of the market are locally-grown while those toward the outskirts of the market are imported. I appreciated knowing “locally-grown” was not a marketing ploy to attract those of us who like organic, local products; it was instead a true adjective describing many of the vendors. The Friday market in Place de Saint Sauveur, for

example, is primarily supported by farmers within a 30-kilometer radius from Caen (Graby 9). “Short circuit” markets like these are beloved and well-supported in France.

At the market, one can find produce and also enjoy an encounter with a friend. The social nature of the markets is described as “a weekly chance for locals to resume friendships and get the current gossip” (Steves). My French family helped me experience



Figure 46. Some of my locally-grown fruits and vegetables from a trip to the market.

markets as a social as well as a commercial event. Marie-Claire ran into a friend while we wandered, and we chatted for a few minutes, going through the “where are you from, your accent is not French” motions. I later observed the social nature of markets in a different way; I began to notice social interactions when I started buying my Sunday morning coffees at one of the cafés located near the market. The tables at these cafés were always full on Sunday mornings; waiting ten or fifteen minutes for a seat was a normal occurrence. I watched as people would pop over to tables to say hello or sit for a moment with a friend. The kisses on the cheek as people parted ways told me the drinks at that table had been a planned outing among friends, an outing framed by the busy and social nature of the market.

Beyond interacting with vendors and learning from my welcome family, the markets allowed me to become a little more like the locals because it was here I was able to observe and imitate. I learned quickly that touching the food items was not necessarily permitted. I wanted to be culturally appropriate; therefore, when I wanted to buy something from a vendor, I stood off to the side for a few minutes and watched what the natives did. Did they exchange pleasantries first or just start ordering? Did they touch the produce, or did they tell the seller what they wanted and wait while it was gathered? Did they pay with cash or with card? What made it harder was each stall operated a little differently, but I eventually found clues that helped me know what to do without watching for too long each time. If the plastic bags are hanging above the customer’s head, I could touch the produce myself. If bags are not anywhere in sight, the vendor

probably wants to handle the produce for me; that was definitely the case when a chalk sign propped amongst the vegetables said “Ne touchez pas!”—“Don’t touch!”

Not only did I engage with and learn from local people at the markets, but I also interacted with local products at these weekly events. Markets such as these “reflect local production and consumption and how they could be considered a conservatory of local heritage” (Navarro 242). I found this to be true and was able to compare the products I found in various cities in Normandy while focusing on the local products in Caen. I found even in the region of Normandy, the markets in different cities offered wares divergent from those found in



Figure 48. Rabbits at the market in Bayeux.

other markets—salts and *tourtières* in Honfleur,

rabbits (alive!) in Bayeux, and in my town of Caen, apples galore. Eventually the reason for this last regional occurrence became apparent; this region of Normandy is famous for its apples and for its products made from apples, especially its *Calvados*. *Calvados*

is the name of the region, but it is also the name of an apple brandy that is a staple both of the area and at the markets.



Figure 47. Tourtière in Honfleur, plus my coffee and sketch setup.

It was at one of these apple-glorifying market stands that I learned some apples are meant only to be cooked into a dish, not eaten raw. I learned this by “eavesdropping” on the conversation the vendor had with the couple in front of me. He was advising them on which apple to buy; his advice came after several questions about their intentions for these apples—were they going to make a *chausson* pastry or maybe a *grillé aux pommes*? A purchase in France is often accompanied by cooking tips or a recipe, and sometimes customers walk away with something they did not intend, simply because the vendor knew what they wanted better than they did.



Figure 49. A chausson aux pommes, perhaps this is what the customer was going to make?



Figure 50. A grillé aux pommes, another of the “apple-glorifying snacks” common in Normandy.

Markets offer the opportunity to “taste the land” (Scheffer). Between gritty Calvados apples, soft Pont-l’Évêque cheese, and moist tripe soup, I certainly tasted the

Norman land as I wandered the markets. My French family helped me with most of these tastings, but there was another one I discovered by accident.

It was another Sunday morning sometime in the fall, and I had already made my usual loop around the market, not a quick affair for a market with over 400 stalls and no direct path between them all. I had already purchased some flowers (a weekly trend for me), some green grapes, a cucumber, a zucchini, a tomato, and some sort of maritime dish that had potatoes, mussels, shrimp, and an orange crab-like critter whose black eyes stared at me from where their bodies swam in the cream. As I completed my market jaunt, my gaze was drawn to a stall with a large ceramic bowl of something that looked homemade. As an exchange student living in a campus dorm,



Figure 51. Maritime dish bought from the market one Sunday.

most of my meals came from the cafeteria or bakeries; the idea of something homemade made my mouth water. I approached the stand and hovered nearby, trying to inconspicuously watch the customers in front of me. I had no idea what the dish in the bowl was, nor did I know how to order it. Does it come by the kilogram? Do I ask for a scoop of it? I hoped not because I did not know the word for scoop and did not want a full kilo! “Rats” I thought, “the person in front of me did not order any of the mystery dish.” “Rats” I thought again when the vendor suddenly turned to me. Apparently, my watching was not as inconspicuous as I thought. I mustered up courage, asked what the food was, and while I did not know what the word he used meant, I still said “yes, okay”

to his offer. With more confusion about sizes (ah okay, it comes in little plastic containers, that looked like pints and quarts . . . not that I knew those words either, nor would they have meant anything to the kind vendor guy), I walked away with my homemade prize—*teurgoule*. Two spoonfuls in, and I realized I had ordered a rice pudding. A quick google search confirmed it—*teurgoule* is rice cooked in milk and seasoned with sugar, cinnamon, and nutmeg—a Norman specialty.

Markets, such as the ones I frequented, “create an illusion of village life . . . they mix values of tradition, authenticity, of the countryside, and of nature” (Navarro 244). As I tasted Norman snacks, perused the rows of regional products, and interacted with locals at the markets, I became part of this tradition. I experienced this authenticity. I supported the rural producers. I united myself more closely with the nature that allowed for the growth of the products. I continued to relate to what I saw as an American, but I became a bit more like the French. A little more focused on the thirty kilometers around me. A little more focused on the food in my basket and on the people across the stall.

Pleasing to the Palate: An Analysis of the Foods Found in the Christmas Markets of Four Towns in France

According to a National Geographic article, the Christmas markets of France are “considered by UNESCO to be immaterial cultural heritage.” Dirk Spennemann, a professor of cultural heritage, says, “What makes the markets so important, it is not simply the buying of a decorative object, it is all that one can hear, all that one can smell, all that one can see, but also the intangible presence of the people surrounding you” (McKeever). I certainly bought a few “decorative objects” during my jaunts around the markets, but the professor is right. When I think back on my trips to the Christmas markets, it is not the purchased baubles that come to mind. It is the sound of the instrumental Christmas music piping from the speakers . . . it is the smell of the “chestnuts roasting on an open fire” . . . it is the bright colors of the stalls and their wares . . . and it is the joy of the thousands of people all around. These are the elements that

make the Christmas markets of France a special part of the region’s culture and of my year abroad.

Stands at the Christmas markets are called *chalets* in French, and the wares on offer are as diverse as the people who visit them. Row after row of ornaments—wooden, ceramic, glass—pottery stands, puzzle and toy spots, jewelry shacks, and leather stands. And the food. At each market, there are dozens of vendors selling everything from smoked



Figure 52. Me in front of chalets in Strasbourg.

meats to soft pretzels, from creamy pasta to baked potatoes, from brioche breads to every variety of “cookies” imaginable.

My experience with the Christmas markets began in the town of Caen. Imagine the excitement of wandering downtown for my daily bakery run only to find a dozen more food options suddenly appearing in little shacks around town. These bright pink and blue little cabins offered me a foray into the culinary tourism of the special yearly

markets. One of the first pastries I bought was a *mannele*. It looks like a gingerbread man, but the taste of this little brioche dough man was more akin to a sweet Pillsbury dough biscuit. The tradition is to eat it with citrus fruits and hot chocolate; I, not knowing any better, ate it alone,



Figure 53. The mannele I ate from a market stand in Caen. Next time I indulge, it will be with hot chocolate!

so it was dry. The hot chocolate addition is clearly crucial for a full appreciation of this delicacy. The tradition goes back centuries. The *mannele* are shaped to resemble a bishop. Since the 15th century, children—on the night of December 5—leave their shoes outside for one particular bishop, Saint Nicholas, to fill with tangerines, chocolates, and (of course) *mannele*. The *mannele* are a reminder of the story of Saint Nicholas saving three children from the salting tub of an evil butcher, a classic legend told around Christmas time (Jones). I remembered the shoe tradition and Saint Nicholas legend from my high school French teacher who used to send us out in the hallway on December 6 to

place one of our shoes there; the rest of class we wore only one shoe. At the end of the period, we went outside to find our shoes filled with candy. It was fun and nostalgic to relive this tradition in France and to be transported back to high school French class, the place where my love for the French language, people, and culture began. The only part missing from my high school experience was a *mannele*, and the part missing from my college experience was a piece of chocolate.

Another night in Caen, I tried an apple *beignet*; as the steam warmed my face—and as the taste of the warm fruit filled my belly—I wandered around and took note of the other food offered at the *chalets* of this town. I smelled churros covered in cinnamon and sugar, hand-held waffles covered in chocolate or Nutella. I marveled at the multicolored sweets that resembled nougats. I felt my stomach rumble on seeing the roasted nuts like pralines and chestnuts and other savory options such as sandwiches. I also remember crinkling my brow in confusion at a meat stand that served its meat logs with mashed potatoes. The food offerings were diverse even if only comparing it to the stand beside it. I discovered the same diversity between markets. After spending several days sampling the foods of the Christmas market of Caen, I began traveling to other market towns. I visited the Christmas markets of Nancy, Metz, and Strasbourg and compared the food options at each one as I wandered through the stalls—salivating at each new discovery and tasting all my stomach and wallet could allow.



Figure 54. Piles of bredeles at one market chalet.

One of the most amazing items I discovered was what we in the U.S. call cookies. Some *chalets* were dedicated to these baked goods, piles and piles of them. Most of the bakery stands had bins that sat flush against one another, each one overflowing with cookies and sweets of all kinds. In Alsace, these sweets are called *bredeles* which roughly translates to “Christmas cakes.” According to the informational signs at the market in

Strasbourg, these sweets are “essential to an Alsatian Christmas” (“Bredeles ou Petits Gâteaux de Noël” sign). Alsace is the home to Strasbourg from which the tradition of the Christmas markets diffused into the rest of France. The tradition of baking *bredeles* with family is one element of an Alsatian Christmas that spread to the rest of the country. These cookies come in a large variety of shapes and are made during Advent. They can have cinnamon, anise, cocoa, or hazelnuts in them; the number of options was a bit overwhelming yet all of them enticing.

Next time I visit the markets, I am planning to pick out four *bredeles* varieties from every bakery stand and nibble on them as I wander the streets. Okay, maybe not four from *every* stand, but from many stands. Any I do not eat, I can use for Christmas tree decorations. *Bredeles* are one element in a long line of Christmas tree decorations labeled “traditional” in the Alsace region of France. *Bredeles* replaced religious wafers as decorations and were later joined by nuts and apples which became glass balls when a drought limited the fruit supply. French Christmas trees used to be hung from the ceiling, and

according to legend, the reason was to keep the children from eating the sweet *bredeles* cookies and later the fruits (“Noël En Alsace : Culture Et Traditions”)!



Figure 55. No fruits or *bredeles* on this Christmas tree, instead, a marker declaring Strasbourg the “Capital of Christmas.”

Another snack common to Strasbourg is the *kougelhopf* or *kouglof*. I found this German pastry only in Strasbourg and Metz, the two Christmas markets closest to the German border. The word *kouglof* comes from a word that means “turban” in Alsatian; it does look like a top hat, *ne c’est pas?* Legend has it this pastry was given by the three kings to thank a baker for welcoming them into his home. Another legend says



Figure 56. *Kouglof* pastry in Strasbourg.

the pastry was created in Bethlehem when a baker used the forgotten hat of one of the



Figure 57. My sketch of a *kouglof* pastry from Strasbourg.

three kings as a baking tin (Band). Regardless of its true origins, the cake is a delightful tradition, an experience I captured after my first taste of this pastry. I described it in my journal, first in words, then with a set of German paints. I wrote, “denser than a normal pastry, rougher texture and chewier, with raisins within and powdered sugar on top.”

The Christmas markets do not only offer sweet snacks. There are plenty of savory ones, too. In Strasbourg, *pasta* is the name of the game.

Spaetzl, the pasta *du jour*, is a miniature version of a macaroni noodle. A first taste filled my mouth with warmth and cream, plus a hint of bacon from the lardon that was chopped and sprinkled on top. Strasbourg also boasted sauerkraut which filled my mouth with a different, stronger taste. The burnt yellow mustard accompanying the vegetable and the meat started a tingling that spread all the way up to my nose, making me cough and giggle at the interesting sensation.

While spaetzl and sauerkraut were common in the markets of Strasbourg, seafood (like calamari and fried cod hush puppies) and potatoes characterized the markets of Nancy and Metz, a few miles—and a wide culture—away. This is where some of the differences between the Alsace and Lorraine cultures became apparent.

I tasted Lorraine's culture in Nancy when I tried *fondiflette*. This is a play on words, mixing the well-known winter dish *tartiflette*



Figure 59. Fondiflette in Nancy.



Figure 58. Calamari in Metz.

with the famous *fondue*. This warm dish had a base of potatoes, a variety called *grenailles*, a name which refers to small, bite-sized potatoes of any type. The potatoes were roasted, covered in *fondue*, and topped with lardons and fried onions. A taste of wine spiked the dish, making for a nice warm snack on a cold night.

I also enjoyed the larger potatoes I ate in Metz. These were bigger than two of my fists put together. The topping options spanned the gamut, some with meat, some without, some with vegetables, some without. Some had cheese on top; others had cream; some had cheese *and* cream. I selected one with both dairy options; mine was filled with chives, purple onions, *crème fraîche* (a genius culinary ingredient with the consistency of sour



Figure 60. Large baked potatoes with lots of dairy.



Figure 61. Rapés, kind of like a potato cake. Kind of.

cream but

without the bitterness), and emmental cheese.

Oh my goodness, a delicious treat. The one potato option I did not love were the *rapés*.

These potato cakes are made of crispy shredded potatoes. I think these did not tickle my tastebuds because, in America, potato cakes have a soft and warm inside with a lightly fried outside. The difference was marked and caught my tastebuds by surprise.

Instead of my tastebuds, my mind was shocked when I saw pretzels everywhere—in almost all the markets, and in many of the *chalets* within the markets. Pretzels, in my American mind, are reserved for trips to Sam's Club and occasionally for trips to the mall. Pretzels during the winter season, and in this region of France, are staples. The

chalets selling pretzels displayed them on wooden stands that had a big pole sticking out of the base with small rods poking out from the main pole. It was from these small rods the pretzels dangled. Some stands were so stuffed with pretzels, I could hardly see the rod on which they hung. They seemed to float in the air. Other shacks had rods on the ceilings that supported even more pretzels. Emmental cheese was a common topping, melted just enough to make the cheese stick but not melted enough to make the shreds become gooey.



Figure 62. A stand of pretzels or “bretzels.”

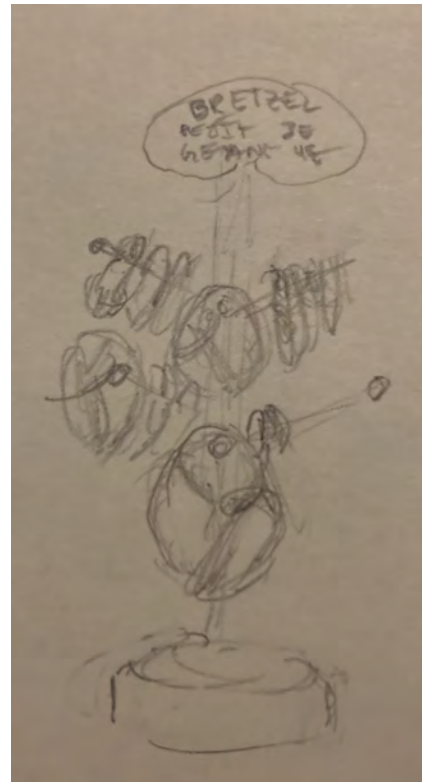


Figure 63. A sketch of a pretzel stand.

Regardless of the food available, each market had spaces dedicated to letting people relax and enjoy their selected culinary treat(s). This came in the form of clusters of tables for people to stand or sit (but often stand). This is one of the only times I remember seeing French people eat standing up.

One of these dining spaces had no food to enjoy, only wine. I wandered into a market in eastern France to find lights in all the trees, live music in the air, and people sitting at every table, sipping their chosen variety of hot wine. This was the primary way people at the markets can escape the frigid cold—by ordering a cup of *vin chaud* from any of the dozen vendors who sell it. The mulled spices of the wine serve to accentuate the sweet flavor. This taste is made stronger by the fact that farmers harvest the grapes weeks after the beginning of the harvest,

letting the grapes become overripe and thereby allowing them to gain a higher sugar concentration; the grapes eventually develop a “noble rot” (a fungus) which gives the



Figure 64. A space for people to sit and drink their hot wine.



Figure 65. One of the “brass” cauldrons from which cups of hot wine were dipped.

fruit a different acidity that works well in hot wine (Puckett). In the markets, big silver vats or enormous brass cauldrons held this sweet, hot drink. Some shacks offered only three or four options, others had a dozen choices; my favorite was one called “Grandma’s Recipe.” This, maybe, was my favorite because it reminded

me of my grandmother whose annual peanut butter fudge and Chex mix I was missing during this Christmas season. I do not know if I would say “Grandma’s Recipe” burned going down as the German name “burning wine” suggests, but it warmed my insides and left a sweet grape taste on my tongue.

A *bittersweet* taste was left on my tongue by the COVID restrictions that affected my visits to the market. While I understand the necessity of the restrictions (especially considering the high concentration of tourists who visit the markets), I cannot help but wonder at the ways in which my experience wandering the markets was different from the experience of people who visited in years leading up to 2020. Many of the markets were gated at the entrances. In order to access the



Figure 66. Me holding up a souvenir cup of hot wine near my masked face.

chalets, I had to show my *passe sanitaire* – a digital document declaring I had been vaccinated in the last three months, had recently recovered from COVID, or had received a negative PCR test in the last 72 hours. I am sure this restriction inhibited some non-vaccinated, non-tested tourists from entering the markets. Once inside the gates, my experience was affected again by the masking requirements. Wearing a mask made it difficult even to order pastries or purchase items from the *chalets*. As a result, I did not even attempt to have more personal interactions with the vendors. My experiences at the markets were authentic, but a different sort of authenticity than it would have been had I gone before the pandemic. Even though my experience was touched by the lingering

contagion of the pandemic, the Christmas markets have nevertheless left an indelible imprint on my mind, and maybe one on my heart, too; I cannot think of the little *chalets* without a smile spreading up my face and warm fuzzies filling my body. Or maybe I am only remembering the effects of the hot wine

Les Cours de Cuisine: Lessons I Learned in the Kitchen with Italians and Frenchmen

While living in Europe, I took three cooking courses, two in France and one in Italy. During these hours, I learned various cooking lessons such as “never share a cutting board with someone else” because, according to my Italian teacher, “Cutting boards are very personal things. Sharing them is like sharing underwear.” I appreciated that mental image and was happy to have my own board a few seconds later. I also learned less comical tips like you



Figure 67. Our aprons on the night we cooked together in Rome.

should not crack an egg on a bowl but on a flat surface in order to prevent excess shell from falling into the bowl. These classes also taught me about the beauty and the grace I could find in a space as mundane as a kitchen, plus a good deal about new cuisine and about the admiration of a home-cooked meal.

Between the courses in Italy and in France I noticed a difference in attitude. In Italy, presentation was important. Our chef exclaimed, “you must feast with your eyes before the food even touches your lips,” which meant we had to make the *bruschetta* and everything else beautiful on our plates before eating. I was part of the team that made the *bruschetta* beautiful. The knife in my hand sawed gently through the wide baguette-like Italian bread, crumbs landing all around the clean metal island surface. After coming out

of the oven, the toasted bread received a drizzle of olive oil and a sprinkle of sea salt. Then, my hands delicately placed scoops of toppings into piles on each oval of bread. Some of the slices of bread featured soft Stracchino cheese over freshly-washed arugula. Diced tomatoes and organic basil offered a splash of color for others. Ground sausage and broccoli garnished some slices, and a mystery blend of pork (and perhaps leeks) fell over the sides of others. Silver platters filled with these colors soon landed on the tables, and our bodies filled in around them. If variety truly is the spice of life, as the adage claims, then this night was *vraiment épice*.



Figure 68. A platter of bruschetta I helped prepare. I spy with my little eye . . . all the colors of the Italian flag!

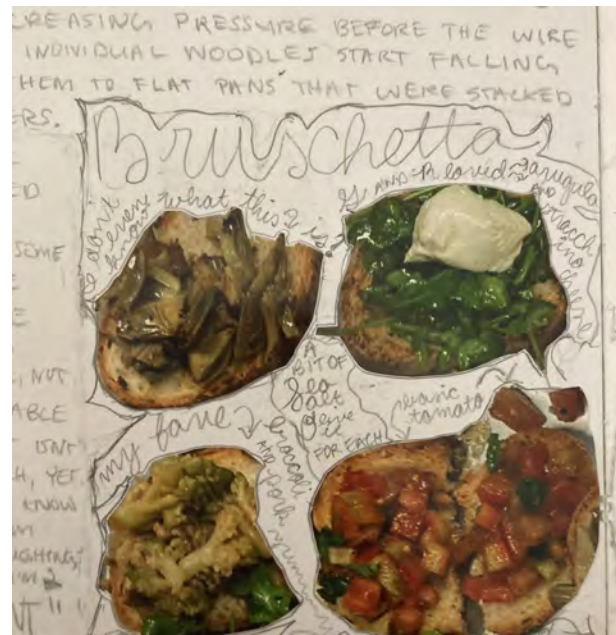


Figure 69. The colorful spread of bruschetta in my journal.



Figure 70. Spaghetti made from scratch.

At this cooking class in Italy, beauty was emphasized most, but taste followed closely behind. With such fresh ingredients, how could it not? At the courses I attended in France, taste reigned even if aesthetics were sacrificed.

I learned quickly that *galettes*, while simple in their ingredients, are not simple to cook. *Galettes* are savory *crêpes*, originating from Bretagne, the department adjacent to my home in Normandy. Made from buckwheat flour, they can be filled with everything from ham and an egg sunny-side up to goat cheese and pears. The ones we made during our class were filled with lardons (like large rectangular bacon bits that are not dehydrated), *crème fraîche* (a cream with the consistency of sour cream but without a sour taste), and Reblochon (a type of soft white cheese from the Haute-Savoie region in southeastern France). The only ingredient an American would recognize was the

The large mounds of spaghetti placed on the tables before us also were lovely—bright reds, flecks of green, smooth curves. Our lava-cake dessert was aesthetically pleasing, too, with its perfect swirls of whipped cream on the side and with syrupy strawberry preserves hugging the flat muffin's edges.



Figure 71. Chocolate lava cake.

potatoes, *petite* diced. The potatoes were simple enough to cook, and the lardons only needed to be heated. The trouble came when it was time to spread the *crêpe* batter across the pan. One must know the exact right amount of batter to scoop onto the hot pan. Additionally, one must know the proper rotation the wrist must perform to spread the batter evenly using the *râteau* tool. It is common for the first *crêpe* not to turn out quite right. However, at our cooking class, the entire first batch of our savory *crêpes* did not look right. When we finally successfully produced some *galettes* that were round and cooked through, we learned they were not large enough to fit our toppings; they broke when we tried to fold the corners. Our cooking instructor simply laughed and said, “Oh well, it will still taste good!” She was right. It was delicious. It just did not look like a proper *galette* which normally has a square shape and four edges folded to form a semicircular napkin enclosing the ingredients.



Figure 72. A *galette* is not supposed to look like this . . .

Perhaps this difference in expectation derived from the fact the cooking class in Italy was a professional venture (one we paid a good deal of money to partake of) while the one in France was led by a university staff member and was free for students. I did not mind the difference. I learned something from both experiences. From my Italian teacher, I learned food is an art form, and pleasure can be derived from the sight of it as well as from the taste. From my instructor in France, I was reminded I could give myself grace if

a dish I make does not look exactly like the picture found at the top of the recipe. Beauty and grace, a nice combination of attributes to learn about in these two European kitchens.

It was in these cooking classes where I also learned to broaden my palate. I have never been a picky eater. I will taste almost anything. This is a good thing because, on the nights of these cooking classes, it was often a new food that was set before me. One



Figure 73. *Aumonière from one of my French cooking classes.*

evening in France we made *aumonières*, which look somewhat like a large crab rangoon found at an Asian restaurant. It is actually nothing like that. *Aumonières* are baked instead of fried and enclose vegetables and salmon inside instead of cream cheese. It was during this course on *aumonières* I learned the name of a vegetable that had bewildered me for weeks up to this point. I had tasted leeks earlier in the semester with

my cultural host family and was unsure of how I felt about the mystery vegetable.

However, I could not remember the name of the vegetable to even look up the English translation, much less attempt to cook it and give it another try. Then, on the cold December night of the cooking class, the word *poireaux* on the recipe pinged a memory in my brain. The mystery vegetable was a mystery no more. The problem was, I still did not know how to cook it. My instructor quickly remedied that. First, one must break each sheet off the stalk. Then, one must wash each piece thoroughly. The leek must be cut into

quarter-inch slices (my teacher used centimeters for this instruction, I am sure). Finally, the pieces get sautéed in butter and cream with a dash of salt and pepper. Sautéed leeks are now a permanent item in my cooking repertoire.

Italy introduced me to varieties of vegetables I (almost) recognized. In Rome, I stood in the kitchen and let my gaze wander over the spread of ingredients before me. I could identify most items but was skeptical about the purple mystery vegetable sitting in the pile of bruschetta items. After watching it simmer along with sausage in white wine and chili flakes, I was feeling more optimistic. I like all those other ingredients, maybe I would like it, too. My doubt vanished after one bite which won me over to this vibrant variant of broccoli.

I was skeptical about both of these vegetables and the dishes themselves. However, once I had been shown how to cook the ingredients, I was intrigued and eager to taste them. This is a trend researchers have found to be true. Hersch, for example, compiled information from multiple studies on cooking classes and their impacts on children's "food-related preferences, attitudes, and behaviors." He concluded children were "more willing to try new foods if they had cooked or had grown it." I am not a child aged 5-12 like the studies investigated, but I find the logic to be sound. I was more inclined to taste and enjoy the vegetables once they were on my plate because I cut the leeks myself and watched both the leeks and the broccoli florets simmer with foods I already knew I liked. Researchers also find cooking classes effective in "increasing



Figure 74. My second attempt at galettes turned out better.

This applies to more than only meals; it applies to individual foods, like vegetables, too. One article states, “when the main home

cook is confident in preparing vegetables, households buy a greater variety of vegetables” (Reicks 260). While I have not yet bought purple broccoli, I have bought leeks on multiple occasions and have cooked them in the manner I was taught by my French instructor in the cooking class. My vegetable drawer is more diverse thanks to the course, and my consumption of vegetables has increased, too.

consumption of particular foods” because the courses teach individuals how to prepare the foods (Reicks 273). Since coming home, I have tried my hand at *galettes* again (this time with more success in form and function!) and have even made some sweet *crêpes* for my American friends to try.



Figure 75. The crêpe bar I put together for my friends after returning to the States.

My cooking know-how expanded in terms of vegetables and also in terms of pasta. During the Italian cooking course, one of my favorite tasks was making the noodles from scratch. I described the process in my journal later that week, so I would not forget the steps I learned. “I started with a thick piece of dough . . . in the shape of a triangle (rounded corners, not pointy though). I patted it down with flour and then fed it through this contraption with a couple of cylinders placed close enough to each other as to flatten the dough as my partner cranked the handles. Then I smoothed more flour over it before folding it in half and feeding it through again. I repeated this process 3-4 times before feeding it through once without folding it at all. Then I placed the flattened rectangular-esque piece onto the *guitare* which is another wooden contraption except this one has a flat piece on the bottom to catch the noodles as they fall through. This is separated from the top part by four stilts, one placed at each corner. The top part of the ‘instrument’ was several thin wires that were held in place at the two short ends and were stretched across the two long ends in parallel fashion. Once the dough was placed on the top, I took a rolling pin and started working it across the dough. Over and over with increasing pressure before the wire cut through it and made the individual noodles start falling through. Then, I transferred them to flat pans that were stacked with space between them on towers.” One of my



Figure 76. The flat pans with the prepared noodles before cooking.

peers bought one of these *guitares* when we returned to the United States and has made pasta from scratch. While I have not chosen to invest my time in making homemade pasta, I still remember how good it felt to be doing something with my hands, knowing I would eat the product of my labor in a few hours.



Figure 77. Me hard at work because on this evening, no shortcuts were allowed.

I appreciated this moment even more because I knew there were shortcuts. I knew I could go to any supermarket in town and buy a bag or a long rectangular box and have enough noodles to feed all 20 of us in half an hour. Making the noodles from scratch helped me feel closer to the native culture, especially as I learned the terminology for each item and was schooled by an Italian. I also enjoyed my pasta more, knowing I had not taken any shortcuts and had worked to help make the food on our plates.

Cooking from scratch is not as common as it used to be. In American culture, busyness is king, and it keeps us from cooking and eating homemade meals at home as much as we used to do. While eating away from home certainly occurs in France, it is not as common as in English-speaking cultures. According to one study, “an astonishing two thirds of the French cook a meal from raw ingredients on a daily basis compared with less than a quarter of the English in the same study” (Holdsworth 205). Moreover, this investment was possible because, “the French were prepared to make time for cooking” (Holdsworth 205). As I spent time in the kitchen amongst the French or the Italians, I was

reminded of the benefits of blocking off three or four hours to prepare a meal that blesses the people around you, the benefits of “making the time for cooking.”

Sharing the kitchen and the table with Europeans, I practiced the art of taking time both for preparing food and for eating it. I learned about foods that were not common around my American table growing up; I learned about making food pleasing to the eye while also smiling when it does not quite work out that way. Now, every time I prepare my charcuterie board for a gathering at my apartment—

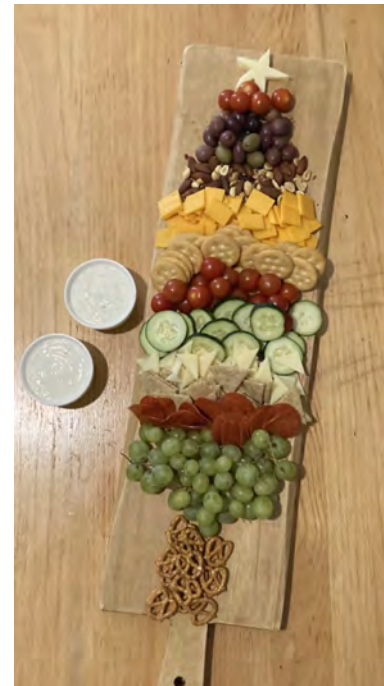


Figure 78. Charcuterie boards take time to prepare, and this Christmas one was no different.



Figure 79. A meal I prepared for myself.

and sometimes even

when I cook something

only I will eat—I twist bowls and plates to make it look

beautiful. Then, I take the time to eat; I appreciate the

visual appeal, savor the homemade taste, and remember

the time it took to prepare. At these moments I am grateful

for the lessons I learned while living in Europe.

At Italian Tables: How Italian Food and American Culture Intersected the
Summer of 2022

The date was May 6th, and I was sitting outside of a small deli café, anticipating my first taste of Italian food. I would be meeting a group of MTSU students for a two-week-long study abroad trip the next day. For now, though, I was still on my own. I had just finished wandering around the Coliseum, and I only stopped to sit because my stomach was grumbling (the first time this had happened since my bout with food poisoning two days prior—thanks, Dutch food truck).

After standing awkwardly at the entrance for a moment—whether you should wait to be seated or seat yourself is just as unclear in Italy as it is in France—a waiter motioned for me to sit. He soon brought a small menu over to my roadside table (my chair rested inches from a parked car).



Figure 80. My view of the Coliseum as I sat at the edge of the road for my first Italian food.

When he returned, I ordered “brooshehta,” which was my best attempt at the word spelled *bruschetta* and actually pronounced “brooskehta.” The waiter gently corrected me as he transcribed my Americanized Italian into understandable Italian on his notepad. In that moment, I chuckled to myself because it had only taken a few hours in this new country for me to be corrected by the locals, something with which I was familiar after living in France for almost a year. I remember thinking, “And so the cultural learning begins.”



Figure 81. The bruschetta from my roadside dining experience.

The cultural learning was different in Italy than it was in France; in both places, though, I experienced trepidation when interacting with waiters and bakery owners (or really whenever I was expected to speak to someone in French or Italian). These nerves are a form of “language anxiety”: “the apprehension experienced when using the second language either inside or outside the classroom” (MacIntyre 376). The difference now was I had already learned to navigate this form of anxiety in France. I had figured out the questions they might ask at a bakery or restaurant . . . *Du sucre?* With sugar? *Avec ceci?* Anything else? I knew what to listen for and had a list of responses ready. That was France, a country whose language I speak. Suddenly, I was in Italy where the words I knew consisted of *buongiorno* and *grazie*. My two weeks of Duolingo Italian left my brain as I left the airport. The nerves I felt talking to people in France were reignited in Italy where any communication on my end came out as a mix of French, Spanish, and

English. Despite my discomfort, I was pleasantly surprised by how many times I *was* able to communicate with more than gestures and nods. These moments often occurred around a table.

The encounter with the waiter hours after venturing into town was my first experience successfully communicating in my broken Italian with its French pronunciation. A few days later, the roadside café deli in Rome morphed into a fancy dining room in an upscale hotel in Florence. This breakfast dining room was fancy in a way I had never before experienced in a hotel. Employees asked for your room number when you walked into the dining room before seating you as though it were a real restaurant. White tablecloths and cloth napkins graced the tables. I do not remember if there was soft classical music playing in the background, but that would have matched the ambiance of this place. It was in this setting where my next language learning moment occurred. A gray-headed Italian woman came up to ask what variation of hot beverage my friend and I preferred. She brought my *cappuccino* on a platter, further confirming the refined nature of this place. When she later returned to clear away our plates, she said “opp-a!” I thought this was cute, so I repeated it. She directed a grin at me. She also, knowing full well I did not speak Italian, started telling me about the expression. Thanks to my experience with other Romance languages, I was able to understand the majority of what she said. She mentioned how the expression is originally Tuscan, and it apparently has a folkloric quality to it. My Italian vocabulary suddenly expanded and now even included information on the origins of the newly-discovered word.

My giggle helped in that moment, and my grin and a few other Italian words helped in another moment. I was standing with a group of American peers outside a *gelateria* at Spiaggia Beach near Rome. We had just finished dining at a beachside restaurant where I had tasted octopus for the first time.



Figure 82. My first experience eating octopus.

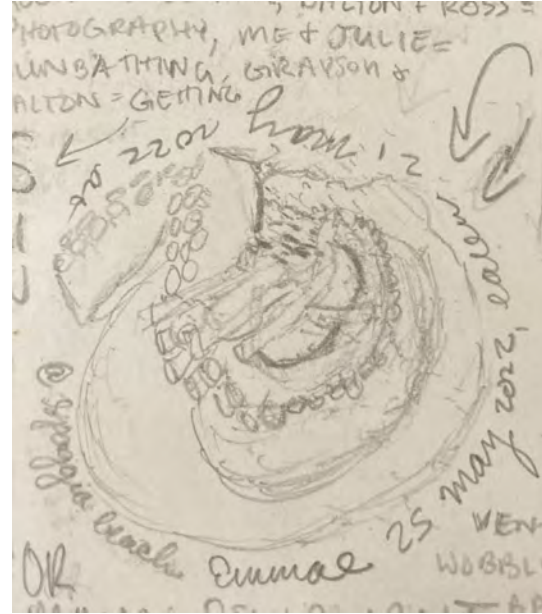


Figure 83. A sketch of the octopus I ate at a beachside restaurant outside Rome.



Figure 84. My chocolate and strawberry gelato with the homemade strawberry wafer and a swirl of whipped cream.

Now it was time for dessert. I asked for two scoops of *gelato*, one chocolate and one strawberry. I think the employee appreciated me trying to speak her language because she kept my cone in her hand for a moment longer, plopped a round pink *truc* into the top scoop, and added a squirt of whipped cream nearby before handing it to me. She told me it was a homemade strawberry wafer. I knew what she said thanks to cognates and my growing Italian, and I felt I had connected

with her in a small way because I was able to offer her the dignity and pleasure of speaking to her in her own language. She promptly offered my friend a different treat to add to their cone; maybe I was not actually special, but I felt I was.

While I hated not being able to communicate well in the nation's language because I felt rude, I used the opportunity to reacquaint myself with my own language and culture. My year abroad was incredible, but it was also lonely. I lived in France during the middle of a global pandemic. Making friends across cultures and across language barriers is hard in normal circumstances. Try adding masks into the mix. Then, I came to Italy. After a few final solo days, my peers arrived—fifteen familiar faces and three of my favorite friends from my freshman year of college. I reveled in the fact I was suddenly surrounded by people I knew and loved, people who understood me as a person and who shared my home culture. I rarely sketch faces because they are challenging to properly render; that first evening, though, the feeling of being surrounded by the familiar even in the midst of an

unfamiliar country struck me enough that I pulled out my sketchbook to attempt to capture a few of the faces of people sitting nearby. The entire trip, I often glanced across the table and found the eyes of my friends lighting up as

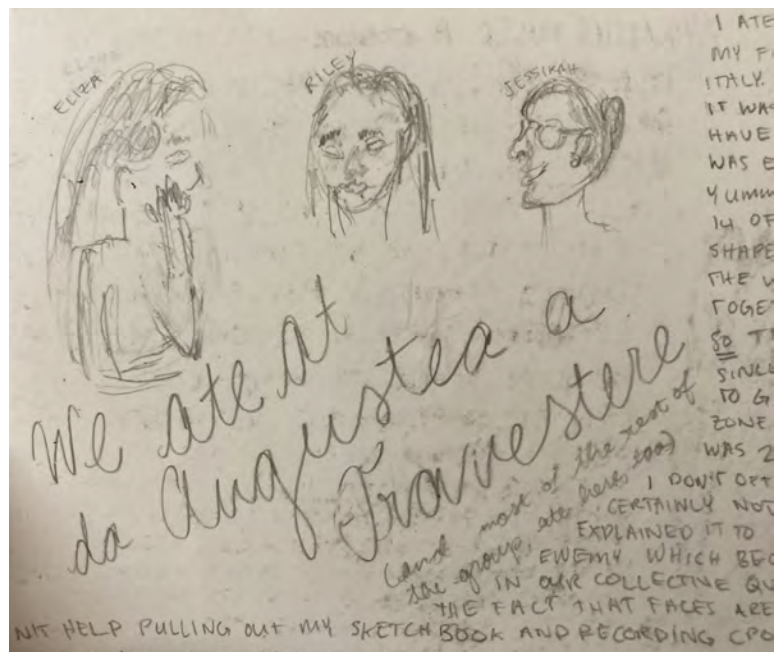


Figure 85. The faces I sketched while sitting at a table with fifteen other Americans for the first time in a year.

we chatted and grins spreading across their faces as we became reacquainted. I could not stop marveling at the nearness of people who know me.

I had to be reacquainted not only with my peers but also with my native culture. My friends were experiencing culture shock as they stepped into Europe, many of them for the first time. I did not experience much of that since I had been immersed in western European culture for a year. I did, however, experience reverse culture shock which is the “process of readjusting, reacculturating, and reassimilating into one's own home culture after living in a different culture for a significant period of time” (Gaw 83). For a year, I had not been around many Americans, and I had spoken only small amounts of English. As I chatted with my American friends, I realized how much I had missed understanding cultural references. When I took courses in France, I always knew when the professor made a cultural reference because there would be a break in my comprehension and then a collective chuckle would wash over the classroom. I would often inwardly sigh and wait for the French that was intelligible to American me to recommence. Within minutes of being with the Americans, though, one of them referenced *Mary Poppins*. My eyes grew wide as I realized I had understood a cultural reference in context for the first time in a year. This was an interesting moment because most often we do not notice when we understand a cultural reference. Our culture is ingrained into who we are, so we understand without having to think about it. It took me stepping out of my culture and back into it to recognize how my native culture comprises much of who I am, even down to the references I understand.

It often felt surreal I was being reimmersed in my native culture while still in a foreign culture. Thankfully, suddenly being surrounded once again by American culture overwhelmed me in a positive way. It helped that my reimmersion happened in Italy. The fact I was chatting with my peers while snacking on *focaccia* in Cinque Terre, *piadina* in Ravenna, and *gelato* in every city made my culture shock more acute but also less painful. I was getting to reexperience my native culture while also seeing for the first time a beautiful European culture.



Figure 87. *Piadina* in Ravenna.



Figure 86. *Focaccia* in Cinque Terre.



Figure 88. *Gelato* in Rome.

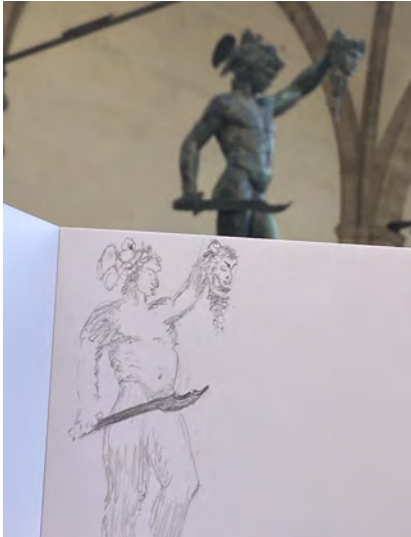


Figure 89. Sketched while talking to my roommate in a Florentine square.

Moments like catching up with my roommate from freshman year while sampling peanut butter *gelato* and sitting in a Florentine square where 19 of the 23 sculptures were originals, chatting about our most recent Netflix interests while munching



Figure 90. Paprika Pringles in Pompeii.



Figure 91. Cappuccino in front of the Vatican.

Pompeii, discussing our religious beliefs while sipping *cappuccino* and waiting for the Papal Audience at the Vatican to start, and talking about life with two of my best gal friends while drinking Prosecco and watching the



Figure 92. Prosecco in front of the Coliseum.

sunset over the Coliseum: these moments will always represent my sweet reintroduction into American culture after a lonely year abroad.

Not surprisingly, some of my most authentic experiences interacting with the Italians and their language happened while sitting at a table and eating their food. It was in these same moments that I also experienced authentic community with people who know me, something I had sorely missed during my time in France. As I sat at the table with my peers, I felt myself re-becoming my *vrai* self. When I lived in France, I became more of an introvert, caused probably by a language barrier and required masking. I became comfortable observing and chose to be a wallflower more often than not. That is not truly who I am, though. I am a social butterfly at heart. I love to talk. I think bantering back and forth is stimulating. As I found myself in Italy amongst Americans, I found myself coming back out of my shell. Bantering became possible again because I was fluent in our common language. Laughter became more genuine because I felt known again. Introvert morphed to extrovert as I sat across the table from people who love me. At that moment, I recognized myself as I am now: a European-influenced American.

Conclusion

In my capstone essay for a *cours d'observation* I took while in France, I wrote about a 1933 story I read in literature class called *Un barbare en Asie* in which the author, Henri Michaux, recounted his experience as a Frenchman encountering India (Michaux 99-101). Michaux uses an allegory to describe the experience. He tells a story of horses and monkeys who interact with one another. Each species watches the other for a while, each considering the other odd. The monkey notes the horse cannot do anything the monkey considers important but that there are, nonetheless, certain benefits of coexisting. The monkey, whose playfulness the horse noted earlier, allows the horse to be more relaxed, and the monkey can sleep without fear if the horse is around because the horse keeps the other monkeys from stealing its bananas.

The allegory of comparing the citizens of one nation to monkeys and the individuals of another country to horses does not perhaps sit well with a modern reader. However, as I read the story in French, sitting in a classroom in France, learning alongside Spaniards and Brazilians and Georgians and Afghans and Chinese and Nigerians, the comparison resonated deep within me. After a year of residing among the French and interacting with people from all over the world, I learned “how culture can transform when monkeys and horses (or other animals) encounter one another. Additionally, I have better grasped which elements of my culture I should use as a resource, and I recognize some elements of other cultures I can assume in order to ameliorate my life and the lives of other ‘horses’ that surround me in the U.S.” (Beard 9-10).

My American culture is a resource because it teaches me to be a hard worker who is not afraid of getting her hands dirty, but the French helped me learn to take intentional time away from work and to rest well. My American mindset teaches me to avoid all sugar or flour because physical appearance is important; the French taught me moderation can allow me to stay healthy while still enjoying cheese and wine. I learned how both sweet and salty can be a part of my daily balance and how food can provide rest as it is being prepared and shared. I decided to embrace these elements—and others—of French culture, and it changed my relationship with food.

As I ate their butter-soaked and baguette-accompanied meals, I was thrilled to accept lessons on how to eat more slowly, how to walk off what I eat, how to eat more intentionally, and how to indulge in the company of those sharing the meal (which may mean almost as much as the food itself). Specifically, the French taught me to accept hospitality and showed me how that practice can overcome cultural and linguistic barriers even during a global pandemic. Yet, in my moments away from the hospitality and company of others, I learned to delight in bakery culture—accompanied by a paintbrush and a sketchbook. Lessons of *nourriture* and *territoire* were taught to me as I wandered the scattered aisles of the open-air markets and as the locals helped me discover the regional specialties on offer. The Christmas markets taught me how foods can be soaked in tradition, with *manneles*, *bredeles*, and *kouglofs* all carrying stories from centuries past. These lessons I learned while my public identity—as presented through my face—was covered by a mask; thanks to the current history I was living, masks became part of my story. Masked, I learned from the French and the Italians via cooking classes about new methods of cooking and about the importance of beauty and grace when preparing

food. Masked, I learned to extend this grace to myself outside the kitchen as I practiced languages in which mistakes stumbled from my tongue. Even as I made these language mistakes, I learned how food creates opportunities for forgiveness and respect even when language obstacles stand in the way. And when language was not a barrier, when I reunited with my American peers in Italy, the table provided an opportunity for me to reacquaint with my native culture. As I refamiliarized myself with my own culture, I managed to retain and express the new habits I had accepted from my adopted culture.

This biculturalism—that I felt acutely sitting with Americans in Italy and have felt often since returning to the United States—is part of my identity now. I am no longer an American living in America. I am a European-influenced American living in America. “Global-ness” is ingrained in me now. Often every seat around my table is filled with international students from places all over the world, and my cuisine matches that diversity. Specifically, elements of *Europe* are ingrained in me, now (as evidenced by my balanced routine and weekly menu). As I live out this part-French, part-American life—taking breaks from my studies, extending and receiving hospitality, painting at cafés, wandering around markets, trying new vegetables—I choose to *relish* what I eat. I appreciate, I savor, I delight in, good food. My life abroad and my experiences in culinary tourism have turned me into a bi-cultural *gourmand* (Holdsworth 204). Post-pandemic, post-year-abroad, this is now a piece of my identity, a piece I will carry with me in my future of eating, traveling, and living.

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