

*The Collected Travel Articles*  
*For*  
*The Wine Society of Texas*  
*By*  
*Meril Markley*



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

		Page
1	Homage to a Big Cheese in Brie	1
2	Out for the Count in Languedoc	3
3	Getting an Ear-Full in Van Gogh's Town	6
4	Quaffing the King's Tipple in a Paris Comfort Zone	9
5	A Hungarian Rhapsody of Duck and Tokay in Budapest	11
6	A Winter's Tale from the Black Mouth of Florence	13
7	Venice Conjures its Wintertime Magic with Vivaldi and a Mandolin	16
8	Musseling in on Trips to Belgium	19
9	Czeching Out Oranges and Austrian Wines in Prague	22
10	New Wine in Old Venues and Tales from the Vienna Woods	26
11	A Fowl Visit to London with a French Take on <i>a Chicken in Every Pot</i>	29
12	Uncorking Vintage France, One (Extended) Family at a Time	33
13	Enchanted by Umbria – Perugia and Beyond	38
14	Pining for Porcini after a Roman Holiday	42
15	Glühwein and Other Germanic Treats in the Land of Noël	45
16	Sipping the Bounties of a League's Final Hold-Outs	49
17	Austrian Wine Worth its Salt	52
18	Recalling Icons of a Bygone Era on a Trip to Bologna	57
19	A Christmas Carnival of the Animals in the City of Light	59
20	Up in Smoke in Gaudí's Barcelona	62
21	Crossing Malta off the List	65
22	Avoiding the Staples of Naples	70
23	Paris at a Snail's Pace	74
24	A Honey of a Duck after the Hunt at Fontainebleau	78
25	Cracking the Morse Code on a Visit to Oxford	81
26	Lisbon for the Spice of Life	85
27	Scotland in the Footsteps of her Queen	89
28	Missing the <i>Crus</i> on the Loire	93



In the fall of 2008, my husband, Michael, and I attended a wine event hosted by the Greater Houston Chapter of the Wine Society of Texas. We were chatting with its president, Ed Dent, when he mentioned that the Chapter would be starting a website and quarterly newsletter as a way to communicate with members, promote the Society's scholarship programs, and highlight interesting foods and wines. "How about travel articles?" I asked. No sooner had the words escaped my lips than Ed reacted. "That would be great. When can you start?"

While we drink wine and love many different wines from different places, including Texas, we aren't experts. During the two years we lived in Paris, we had the chance to sample many fine French wines with folks who took us under their wing and shared precious tips on vineyards and vintages, especially for Bordeaux and Burgundy. Their tutelage encouraged us to try wines from other regions as well, especially when traveling to them and meeting the local residents who prized them. We also learned a winning strategy for finding good values. Visit a grocery store on a couple of occasions and observe which bins empty out the quickest; then try those wines. Savvy French consumers never steered us wrong!

Since moving back to the U.S., I had always wanted to write about the journeys to France which my husband and I were taking for our antiques business and more recently, to cities farther afield in Europe due to my role as a tax lawyer in a global practice. The newsletter provided me structure, deadlines, and a gifted editor, Tenley Fukui, to encourage me.

My admiration for journalists and others who tell stories for a living increased exponentially in the process of crafting each travel feature. For example, I struggled to find just the right verb, to keep gushing to a minimum, to cut-cut-cut every superfluous adverb, and to concentrate on what might spur others to follow in our tourists' footsteps. Invariably, and just when I thought I had finished, Michael would chime in with a tidbit, graciously bringing it all together.

After several years' hiatus, the newsletter has returned; this time on behalf of all of the Society's chapters. I am privileged to be its editor while continuing to write about travel.

*Bon voyage!*

*Meril Markley*

## HOMAGE TO A BIG CHEESE IN BRIE

BY MERIL MARKLEY

We have fond recollections of a series on the Travel Channel from many years ago called "The Flavors of France." In it the host traveled to a region, visited the sights, and filmed renowned local chefs as they prepared signature dishes in their restaurant kitchens.

Episode 37 focused on Paris and the region to the east, featuring a dish called *poularde au cidre et moutarde* (chicken with cider and mustard). We loved the series, especially this episode as we could almost smell the chicken browning and the essence of leeks, carrots and onions in a sauce of cider, mustard and cream wafting from the skillet. My husband, Michael (chef at our house), was able to fashion a version that has become a beloved dish for friends and family. So, in anticipation of a recent business trip to France, we decided to try and track down the restaurant and say thanks, in person, to our hero the chef.

Owing to the wonders of the internet and some cyberspace detective work, I found a hotel and



restaurant listed on a French website and sent an inquiry. Chef Christian Berton wrote back and confirmed that he had made the *poularde*, and he was delighted that anyone in America had seen the show, much less remembered his signature dish. He still owned La Chaum' Yerres and would welcome us for lunch the following Friday.

On a damp and chilly December morning, we set out with our French friends, Brigitte and Michel, for the town of Chaumes-en-Brie (the region of cheese re-

nowned), about an hour's drive from Paris.

Despite being on the edge of town and surrounded by farmland, La Chaum' Yerres was anything but a rustic hideaway and instead offered an elegant dining room decorated in shades of pink and rose. At lunchtime it was full – a family celebrating a birthday, businessmen on their way to a meeting, and numerous "regulars" choosing from a menu featuring locally grown items and an extensive wine list.

There was no *poularde*

on the menu that day so we opted for a starter of *ris de veau* or veal sweetbreads in a light puff pastry and a main course of wild duck breast (*colvert sauvageon*) stuffed with *foie gras* and prepared at the table in a flaming finale. To accompany our meal, Michel chose a 2006 Pernand Vergeless from the Burgundy Region near Beaune, a deep purplish-red wine with enough heft to stand up to the robust flavors of a duck who has lived in the wild.

To finish it all off, Michel opted for *crème brûlée*, a masterpiece reflecting how local dairy products have distinctive flavors depending on what the

## HOMAGE TO A BIG CHEESE IN BRIE (CONTINUED)

cows eat, while Michael had *profiterolles* in a chocolate sauce so intense and fragrant we all had to have a taste.



Michel, Michael, and Meril with Chef Christian Berton

After the meal, Chef Berton stopped by our table to chat and to tell us about his daughter who lives in Los Angeles. We hope he can stop in Houston on his way to visit her so we can introduce him to “The Flavors of Texas” and the wonders of Texas wines.

La Chaume' Yerres  
1, avenue de la Libération  
77390 Chaumes en Brie  
<http://www.chaumyerres.fr>

Next time – a road trip through Southern France in search of a Count's elusive elixir.

### **Poularde au Cidre et Moutarde**

Taken from *The Flavors of France*  
on The Travel Channel

8 chicken thighs\*  
1 onion, chopped  
3 leeks, sliced in ¼ inch rings  
1 bunch organic carrots, sliced in ¼ inch rings  
1 bottle hard cider  
Dijon mustard  
Whipping cream  
Duck fat  
Pepper

Fry chicken in duck fat until lightly browned (about 15-20 minutes), turning as necessary. Remove from pan. Sauté carrots, leeks and onions in the duck fat and chicken juices (5-10 minutes). Put chicken back in pan with the vegetables.

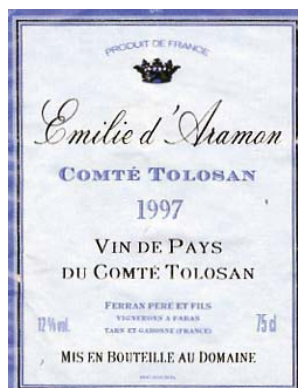
Add cider and pepper and bring to a simmer; cover and continue cooking for 45-60 minutes, turning the chicken at least once. Remove chicken and vegetables, separate-

\*Original recipe calls for a chicken cut into parts, but we think thighs work best, and we leave the skin on throughout the cooking process

## OUT FOR THE COUNT IN LANGUEDOC

BY MERIL MARKLEY

Could a Paris antique fair be a great place to discover wines of small producers from all around France? Surprisingly, the answer is “yes” as my husband, Michael, and I have discovered during our regular business trips to the French capital. As lovers of French food and wine will know, the country is dotted with delights of regional origin, whether wine, cheese, meats, fruits, and for us, antique furniture. It was at a Paris antique fair a few years back that we discovered a producers’ cooperative based in Cahors (southwestern France) that had brought its wine and food selections to the fair.



The day we happened by, on offer was a lunchtime “value meal” consisting of a *sandwich* and a glass of white wine. The sandwich consisted of slices of duck *foie gras* arranged on a baguette and accompanied by a ¼ liter glass of a *Vin de Pays du Comté Tolosan*. Instead of the unctuous Sauternes served reverently on New Year’s Eve with *foie gras* of goose liver, the pale and fruity wine on offer was light and refreshing, fragrant of pear and apricot. It was the perfect complement to the sweetish duck liver. We bought several bottles to drink while we were in Paris and hoped to track it down in Houston when we returned home.

As we learned later while searching for it on the Internet, *Comté de Tolosan* is, in addition to the designation for the wine grown in the area, the ancient term in the Occitane language for the “county” ruled by the Counts of Toulouse. They are particular favorites of ours since in the 14<sup>th</sup> century they helped found the first limited liability companies, that lasted 600 years, and gave corporate law such seminal concepts as the board of directors, independent auditors and shareholders’ rights. If only modern shareholders had adopted their model, Enron and the financial crisis would have been avoided.\* Who knew that they played a leading role in viticulture as well.



The medieval walled city of Carcassonne

Regrettably, the wine was nowhere to be found in the U.S. That left us no alternative but to head for the cooperative in Cahors. So on a trip to visit some of architectural monuments of southwestern France, such as the walled city of Carcassonne and the redoubts of the Cathars from our base at the Hotel Château de Floure, we planned a day-trip to Moissac with a detour to Cahors.

## OUT FOR THE COUNT IN LANGUEDOC (CONTINUED)

The cool October morning started out dry and partly sunny as we headed north through farm land and vineyards as far as the eye could see. Suddenly, the hills gave way to the deep valley carved by the Lot River, along whose banks the city of Cahors grew from medieval times when it was renowned for its “black wine,” as English traders named the dark red liquid made from the Malbec grape and now enjoying a resurgence with its own designation.

With great anticipation we reached the cooperative, on a steep hill outside the city, hopeful that our quest would soon be at an end and we could ship a case of the treasured white wine back to Houston. Yes, the saleslady knew the wine well, but “*il n’y a plus.*” Such were the words we had heard too often in France and had come to loathe. The final case on hand had been sold a few days ago. Limited production. We should come back next year. She offered some other white

wines for us to taste, but nothing compared to our memory of the one we’d enjoyed in Paris. As a consolation, why not try the restaurant next door, she suggested, since we had come so far and it was lunchtime anyway. Skeptical, we headed across the tarmac past parked cattle carriers and oil tankers to what looked like a glorified truck stop. What we found was rural France’s answer to fast food – a sandwich of sliced duck breast, raised locally, and smothered in a sauce of wild mushrooms harvested nearby that morning. For



Cahors (home of the original Malbec wine)



Romanesque Abbey of Moissac

dessert, a freshly baked tart of forest berries. Accompanied by a *pichet* of local red wine, a fabulous lunch cost about \$8 a head. Utterly delicious, it was like so many of our serendipitous finds in *la France Profonde*, beyond our expectations – but normal for the food-loving French folks living there and enjoying it all the time.

Amplified refueled, we headed for Moissac. The sky turned darker and the countryside seemed ever more deserted while we drove past tall outcroppings with medieval villages perched on top and ancient stone farmhouses with satellite dishes pointed heavenward. By the time we got to Moissac, it was cold and pouring down rain. Not the best way to view the Romanesque carvings over the door at St.

## OUT FOR THE COUNT IN LANGUEDOC (CONTINUED)

Pierre, but they are a reminder of how important the 12<sup>th</sup> century artwork of the church and cloister were in the development of western culture and as a vital stopover for pilgrims making their way to Santiago de Compostela. How arduous travel was then, compared to zipping back to Floure in our rental car through the ancient city of Toulouse, now also France's ultramodern capital of the aerospace industry.



The Hotel Château de Floure

The cold and rain had their effect on our mood and our appetites. We were anxious to return to the hotel for dinner by the roaring fire and Chef Poirier's version of the legendary *Cassoulet* (casserole of sausage, duck and white beans) originating in nearby Castelnaudary (where the autoroute exit signs show a steaming pot). It was at Floure that we made two other discoveries that have proved less elusive than the wine of the Counts of Toulouse – Maury, a fortified red wine that is a terrific aperitif from the Roussillon area, and Domaine de l'Hortus, a complex red wine from a wild area of Languedoc still bearing the name given by the ancient Romans who strove to tame it.

History, art, food and wine – are at the heart of France. And while Provence gets a lot of attention as a destination for vacationing and

eating and drinking, we were delighted to discover that the Languedoc-Roussillon region next door is no slouch. Less traveled but rich in agricultural bounty and natural beauty, it is every bit worth the visit. For wine lovers, the Languedoc has been gaining in reputation beyond its traditional association with the *vin ordinaire* that populates grocery store shelves, as small wineries focus on the traditional grapes of the region with new dedication and superb quality. The good news is that there is a huge selection of wonderful wines to try, but the bad news is that you will not be able to find them back in the U.S. or even as relatively nearby as Paris. And while we never did find the white wine we remembered so fondly, we had a great time in the countryside creating new memories and reasons to return again.

Hotel Château de Floure, 1 Allée Gaston Bonheur, 11800 Floure, <https://www.chateau-de-floure.com/>

Next time, a rare bad meal leads us to find a cure where Vincent van Gogh also sought one.

\*<https://www.mmarkley.com/notimetoulouse-article.html>

## GETTING AN EAR-FULL IN VAN GOGH'S TOWN

BY MERIL MARKLEY

As a region of France, Provence gets lots of attention. Its sunshine and warmth, stoked by the relentless mistral wind, are a welcome contrast to cold, gray, damp and drizzly Paris and the North. With its culture dating back to the Greeks, it has been a center of agriculture, and especially wine making, since ancient times. Provence remains an agricultural powerhouse, including sunflowers, citrus, apricots, olives, truffles, and lavender, echoed everywhere in decor and on menus.



Saint Paul de Mausole (Saint-Rémy-de-Provence)

For a buying trip centered on the antique furniture markets at Isle-sur-la Sorgue, we decided to stay a few miles away in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, a town known for many things: for the Glanum archeological site from Roman times; as the birthplace of Nostradamus; but most of all for the psychiatric clinic where Vincent Van Gogh committed himself in 1889 after cutting off part of his ear in nearby Arles. During the time he was being treated at Saint Paul de Mausole, Van Gogh experienced a period of exceptional productivity, including some of his most famous works among the 142 painted there: *Starry Night*, *Wheat Field with Cypresses*, *Irises*, along with numerous portraits and scenes of the buildings and gardens at the former monastery comprising the clinic as well as

the nearby town and the surrounding countryside.\*

So it was that we arrived late one October day after an over-night flight from Houston to Paris, a high-speed train ride to Avignon and the short drive in our rental car to Saint-Rémy. Exhausted and jet-lagged, we opted to book dinner at the award-winning restaurant of our hotel on the outskirts of town. Expecting something not merely great but exceptional, I chose a main course that struck me as unusual – a veal chop in a sauce with bean sprouts and peanuts. And it proved exceptional – one of the few truly awful concoctions I have ever had in France. The combination of flavors just did not work. So convinced was I about this that I mentioned my concerns to the waiter, suggesting that the chef might want to reconsider this dish. I wasn't demanding my money back or expecting an apology. We just wanted the chef to know that diners had found the dish unsatisfactory. "*Non, Madame, je vous prie,*" responded the waiter. In conspiratorial tones he pleaded with me not to make him tell the chef. "He will take it out on me. He does not appreciate any criticism, regardless of how sincere or well-meaning. He is very proud of this dish, his tribute to "fusion" cuisine. It is more than my job's worth to say anything." Enough said. We would look elsewhere for dinner during the balance of our sojourn.

The next night we decided to walk into the heart of Saint-Rémy, about a mile away, in search of more traditional Provençal fare. We strolled by the Restaurant La Source on the main drag, just before the center of town. It was early and all twelve tables were still empty. But the menu of classic *gastronomique* items looked intriguing. No trace of bean sprouts or peanuts. Thanks to French law, all restaurants must post their menus and prices outside, so you have an idea of what you're getting into and how much it will cost.

We circled the town, considered other menus and returned to La Source about 30 minutes later, by the time only one table remained unoccupied – a promising sign of good, traditional food on offer. Over the next three nights, we had memorable meals consisting of items such as: *flan de foie gras*, zucchini stuffed with ricotta,

## GETTING AN EAR-FULL IN VAN GOGH'S TOWN (CONTINUED)



lamb with apricots, duck with a fig sauce, lobster salad, lavender ice cream, and a delight called a “chocolate pocket,” all accompanied by wines from small producers around Provence and Languedoc, including a remarkable Côtes du Ventoux.

Our meanderings back from La Source each evening, after the mistral had died down, were memorable for the gentler breezes and the nighttime sky alight with the same dazzling stars that had inspired Van Gogh. Just breathing in great gobs of Provençal air revealed why centuries of inhabitants have been captivated by this place. We could appreciate why some pleasure-seeking Romans had abandoned the empire’s capital and built their villas here to inhale the natural perfume of citrus, lavender and olives while feasting on local produce and wines.

In between meals at our refuge, La Source, we managed day-trips to Avignon and the surrounding areas. More than its bridge from the famous nursery rhyme, Avignon was a boomtown of sorts in the 14<sup>th</sup> century when the Papacy decamped from Rome and Avignon’s reputation for food and wine was at its zenith. The Popes, it seems, had nothing on Texans when it came to slow-roasted meats and a big party, leading some scholars to credit the French with creating the method



of cooking known as barbecue (from the French term *de la barbe à la queue* or “from the beard to the tail,” meaning the whole animal was cooked on a spit). Records from the coronation of Pope Clement VI in 1342 describe the mother-of-all-cook-outs in which guests feasted on 1118 oxen, 1023 sheep, 101 calves, 914 kids, 60 pigs, 1500 capons, 7428 chickens and 1195 geese, all washed down with red wine from nearby vineyards. No mention of what they used for barbecue sauce!

To learn more about the most famous wines associated with the Papacy’s 70-year residence in Avignon, we headed to nearby Château-Neuf-du-Pape where

## GETTING AN EAR-FULL IN VAN GOGH'S TOWN (CONTINUED)

we climbed up to the ruins of the Popes' summer retreat or "new castle of the Pope" – a windy hilltop overlooking the vineyards and the small town of the same name. We took the opportunity to phone Bill and Nancy Pape, long-time members of the Wine Society of Texas, to let them know we were at the epicenter of the wine with which their family name is connected and to describe the beautiful landscape of vineyards, farm houses, and the silvery ribbon of the Rhone River in the distance.

From our perch we spied a nearby hilltop surrounded by vineyards where a large stone structure with crenellations stood. Intrigued, we decided to take a drive there and find out what it was. It turned out to be the Hostellerie du Château des Fines Roches, a luxury hotel with less than a dozen guest rooms and a gourmet restaurant. The manager showed us around, including a lovely library and reception area reflecting the passion for Gothic decoration that motivated a 19<sup>th</sup> century Count to create this Gothic Revival castle as his personal retreat. "No," the manager assured us, "no bean sprouts or peanuts in anything here!" And so we resolved to return again to this wonderful corner of France and enjoy its prized wines while staying in the castle nestled amongst the Popes' famous vineyards.



Restaurant La Source, 13, Avenue Libération, 13210 Saint-Rémy-de-Provence (no website)

Château des Fines Roches, 1901 Route de Sorgues 84230 Château-Neuf-du-Pape,

<https://www.chateaufinesroches.com/en/luxury-hotel-avignon>

\*For a complete list see [http://www.vggallery.com/painting/by\\_period/st\\_remy.htm](http://www.vggallery.com/painting/by_period/st_remy.htm)

Next time...tasting a king's special wine at one of our favorite Parisian haunts.

## QUAFFING THE KING'S TIPPLE IN A PARIS COMFORT ZONE BY MERIL MARKLEY

After a long, damp, chilly winter's day of trudging around Saint-Ouen, France's wholesale antiques market on the outskirts of Paris, my husband, Michael, and I were tired and hungry. Too pooped to dress up and stay up late for the obligatory couple of hours at a restaurant on a Saturday night, we hoped to find somewhere more casual and quick within a tight radius of our hotel off the Place de la Madeleine. This neighborhood, filled with corporate headquarters, law offices, embassies, designer boutiques, and grand department stores, offers a restaurant every few meters. Most seem geared to the expense account lunches of captains of industry and their investment banker cohorts. Some were even open on a Saturday, deserted but perhaps hopeful a tourist or two might wander in.



In the hierarchy of French eateries, the restaurant is top dog, including some of France's most famous temples of gastronomy in and near the Place de la Madeleine (Hédiard, Fauchon, Le Grand Vefour, Les Ambassadeurs, to name a few). Lower in the pecking order are: the bistro -- serving hearty offerings in an atmosphere more casual and cozy; the brasserie -- originally developed around Alsatian food and beer; the café -- with its simple fare such as the *croque monsieur* and the *omelette*.

At each level, certain expectations are harbored on the part of proprietor and customer. For example, it is not considered appropriate to order only one course at a restaurant or to forego a bottle of wine. While portions are typically not so large that left-overs are an issue, asking for a doggie bag is definitely a *faux pas*.

After a half hour of reconnoitering, when we were about to give up and head for the Galeries Lafayette grocery store to procure the fixings for a "picnic" in our hotel room, we happened upon an eatery whose steamy windows were filled with newspaper reviews and testimonials from France's entertainment elite. The sounds of French people talking and laughing spilled into the street from the only place in the neighborhood

that seemed to have any patrons. "Le Roi du Pot-au-Feu," the awning proclaimed ("the King of Pot-au-Feu"). A life-size statue of a chef stood outside the door holding a blackboard menu with the words "pot-au-feu" and a price. This looked like just the thing -- casual, nourishing, not requiring any tough decisions or compromises.

*Pot-au-feu*, literally, "pot on the fire," is one of France's favorite wintertime dishes and beloved comfort foods--right up there with such regional specialties as *cassoulet* and *coq-au-vin*. Its origins are obscure but it made its way into the annals of the French Revolution when Count Mirabeau declared *pot-au-feu* to be "the foundation of empires." The Count died before Napoleon crowned himself emperor (or his namesake, Mirabeau Buonaparte Lamar became the second President of Texas). This stick-to-your ribs amalgam of less than tender cuts of beef, roasted marrow bone, potatoes, turnips, leeks, carrots, cabbage, and onions could have fueled Napoleon's army on its conquest of Europe, provided troops stayed in one place long enough for the requisite hours of simmering (never boiling) to achieve the optimal blending of flavors.

We ventured inside but no maitre d' or podium with a book of reservations awaited us. A lone waiter gestured toward a tiny booth, the perfect size for two famished souls. Rustic, no-nonsense décor signaled this was a des-

## QUAFFING THE KING'S TIPPLE IN A PARIS COMFORT ZONE (CONTINUED)

tinuation for serious devotees of *pot-au-feu*. As we settled in and unbundled our winter gear the waiter appeared at our table empty-handed – no menu, no notepad. He looked at Michael. "*Pot-au-feu*?" he asked, eyebrows raised and nodding his head encouragingly. "Oui." Next, he turned to me. "*Pot-au-feu*?" "*Absolument*," I responded. What else? Looking around, it seemed everyone had made the same choice. A few minutes later, he returned with two plates piled high, along with a condiment tray of horseradish, pickles, and various types of mustards. "*Du vin*?" he asked. We nodded and he produced a bottle of wine with no label, only a few letters scrawled in white to say it was Le Roi du Pot-au-Feu's own red wine.

We dug in, savoring the aroma and warmth of this traditional stew and washing it down with the wine – fruity and just hearty enough to stand up to the horseradish or mustard daubed onto forkfuls of beef. The meat was tender and flavorful, the leeks and onions slightly piquant, the potatoes acting like little sponges soaking up and magnifying the flavor of the beef juices. Sensing from our American-accented French that we might not know all the ins and outs of *pot-au-feu* consumption, our waiter checked up on us and demonstrated the *pièce de la résistance* – bone marrow slathered on a garlicky baguette and sprinkled with sea salt.

So much for all those nearby restaurants offering complex architectural creations, incorporating exotic ingredients and innovative pairings designed to delight the eyes and the palate. Instead, we had just filled ourselves to bursting with France's ultimate comfort food, served unpretentiously and unceremoniously to an adoring throng of mostly French urbanites longing for a taste of what their mothers had fed them and from a kitchen their rural forebears would have cherished.

While we love the haute cuisine that the French create without peer, it is also possible to eat simply and exceedingly well at a popular price without having to leave the heart of the City of Light. By taking a step out of our restaurant comfort zone we had plunged headlong into a bistro celebrating the ultimate French comfort food...and loved it!

Le Roi du Pot-au-Feu is at 34 rue Vignon, 75009 Paris, 01 47 42 37 10 (no website). Closest Métro stations are Madeleine, Saint-Lazare, and Havre-Caumartin.



Next time, a Hungarian Rhapsody of Duck and Tokay in Budapest.

## A HUNGARIAN RHAPSODY OF DUCK AND TOKAY IN BUDAPEST

BY MERIL MARKLEY

We can never forget GE's "Hungarian Rhapsody" TV commercial from the early Nineties coinciding with the company's investment in Hungary and figurative lights coming back on across Eastern Europe as the Iron Curtain parted. Accompanied by Liszt's music of the same name, this thirty-second spot showcased the bridges of Budapest illuminated with Tungstrom's light bulbs, cutting to elegantly attired couples whirling around a ballroom and a lady of a certain age pausing to say, "I feel young again." We were reminded of this touching paean to capitalism and freedom as we crossed the bridge over the Danube from Pest to Buda on our way to an unforgettable evening of duck, Tokay, and Liszt.

The opportunity to speak at a conference in Budapest had lured us first to Prague and then, after a leisurely seven-hour train ride, a few days in Budapest before heading back to my former home, Vienna. As children of the Cold War, we never imagined we would visit Prague or Budapest in our lifetimes, or that they would become thriving outposts of capitalism in a post-Communist world.



It didn't take long for us to succumb to romantic Budapest, 19<sup>th</sup> century co-capital and more wild and passionate counterweight to Vienna within the Habsburg Empire. Throbbing with folk melodies, exotic tonalities, and wild violin-playing gypsies, Hungary captivated composers such as the staid German, Johannes Brahms, as well as its own offspring from Franz Liszt to Zoltan Kodaly. When it comes to 19<sup>th</sup> century Gothic Revival architecture and monumental buildings, as well as equestrian statues of Prince Eugene of Savoy who saved both capitals from Turkish invasions in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, not even Vienna can top Budapest for sheer beauty and audacity.

Michael, always anxious to try local versions of duck dishes wherever we travel, had interrogated our taxi driver on the way from the train station for recommendations on the best duck in town. "Kacsa" was the emphatic reply, Hungarian for "duck." Attila, the masterful concierge at the Kempinski Hotel Corvinus, seconded this recommendation and booked our evening at the restaurant. Within an hour of arriving in Budapest we were crossing the Danube from Pest at twilight, bathed in the lights from the Chain Bridge, on our way to Kacsa in the heart of Buda.

We were welcomed by Roznai, the owner, into a smallish restaurant decked out in 19<sup>th</sup> century Habsburg style complete with a piano-violin duo of outstanding talent treating us to Liszt's and Brahms' Hungarian-themed music as well as to a Strauss waltz or two for good measure. The menu was a duck lover's delight and we took full advantage of it, reviewing the possibilities while enjoying the first of the evening's Tokays (*Tokaji* in Hungarian) – this one a drier, aperitif version of the Hungarians' more famous dessert Tokay (Aszú) so beloved that it is mentioned in the country's national anthem.

May being the height of asparagus season, Michael started with a cream of asparagus soup while I tried a traditional Hungarian fish soup. Michael opted for Roznai's own creation as his main course -- duck with goose liver,

## A HUNGARIAN RHAPSODY OF DUCK AND TOKAY IN BUDAPEST (CONTINUED)

apples, walnuts, onions, red cabbage and potatoes – a rhapsodic blending of diverse flavors in a memorable dish. I had the offering identified as the favorite of Roznai's wife – duck breast in paprika sauce. The duck was tender and cooked to perfection, the sauce a subtle and lightly perfumed introduction into the complex world of Hungarian paprikas. To accompany our meal, we chose a Hungarian red wine, a Merlot that was a good match for the duck but otherwise unremarkable. For dessert, Michael chose the chocolate cake with chocolate sauce while I opted for the traditional Hungarian *Palatschinken* – delicate pancakes folded around crushed walnuts and covered in chocolate sauce. While a favorite in Vienna, nothing could compare with sampling this trademark dish in its hometown. To accompany dessert, we had a Tokay with 5 *Puttonyes* in the Hungarian ranking system denoting sugar in Tokays. Sweet without being cloying, it was the perfect foil for the pleasingly bitter chocolate sauce.

The musicians kept playing until we had sipped the last of our Tokay and were heading reluctantly for the door. Their tunes lingered in our heads as we rode back across the Danube to our hotel, filled to brimming with the memorable combination of duck, Tokay and Liszt.



Kacsá, Fő utca 75, Budapest 1027, Buda, District 1, <http://www.kacsavendeglo.hu/index.php/hu/>

Next time, a legendary *Doge* of Genoa serves up dinner in Florence.

## A WINTER'S TALE FROM THE BLACK MOUTH OF FLORENCE

BY MERIL MARKLEY

During my days as a graduate student in Vienna, Florence was my refuge – a sunny Italian escape from interminably gray Austrian winters, a living museum with a great work of Renaissance art around every corner, plus fabulous food and wine well within a student's meager travel budget. And so it was, after decades away, that I returned to Italy to introduce my husband, Michael, to the joys of the Tuscan capital. Then, as now, I prefer to "eat on the economy" where the local inhabitants go to enjoy what they know is best. Following in their footsteps, we were not disappointed.

Notable meals included a luncheon of gnocchi in a truffle cream sauce and chicken roasted in fresh herbs at Giannino, near the Church of San Lorenzo and the outdoor market of the same name. But what we remember most about the restaurant was its commitment to Italian carnivores, from the chops on display in the window, to customers chowing down on the biggest T-bones we had ever seen (Texas cowboy steaks seeming puny by comparison). Boisterous, hectic, fun – what else would you expect in a country where people love to eat, drink, and socialize, preferably all at the same time?



The culinary highlight of the trip was, like so many of our favorite experiences, unplanned. We had been invited to visit I Tatti, the villa in Fiesole outside Florence where Bernard Berenson spent a half century in connoisseurship of Italian Renaissance paintings. His dedication to finding and preserving the artistic output of centuries past remains the inspiration for our own antiques business.



Following instructions, we took the bus to Fiesole, but during the ride the heavens opened. When we disembarked, a cold, windy, and wet hike up the hill to I Tatti awaited us. But it was worth it. Sitting in the great man's living room, surrounded by the furniture, rugs, and paintings he had amassed and treasured, we enjoyed imagining what life had been like in the villa while he wrote his books and helped establish some of the great collections of Italian Renaissance art in the U.S. By the time we left, the rain had stopped but the wintry wind propelled us down the hill. The long wait for the bus meant we were chilled to the bone and famished by the time we returned to Florence.

As we made our way back along the Via Ghibellina to our hotel, the Relais Santa Croce, we noticed that the lights were on at the Ristorante Simon Boccanegra just up the street, across from the Teatro Giuseppe Verdi. The theater was named for the composer of Grand Operas, including "Simon Boccanegra," the story of the first Doge of Genoa elected

## A WINTER'S TALE FROM THE BLACK MOUTH OF FLORENCE (CONTINUED)

with the backing of the Ghibelline faction (for whom the Via Ghibellina was named). The family's surname dated back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century when "bocca negra," literally "black mouth," was accorded an ancestor who spoke evil in a time when black was not only a color but a term for wickedness; an epithet difficult to shed while dogging his descendants for generations.

We had walked past the Ristorante Simon Boccanegra numerous times. Never open, we had concluded it was no longer in business. After all, considering that Simon Boccanegra's reign was cut short when he was poisoned in 1363, potential customers might have been put off by the notion of eating at a restaurant named for him. Any such reluctance on our part was banished by a look at the menu in the window. A snap decision ensued, to make a quick change into some dry clothes and head back there for dinner.

When we arrived around 7:30 (early, by Italian standards), the hostess greeted us and asked if we had a reservation. "No," we responded as we surveyed a sea of empty tables. Nevertheless, she was insistent that others could be coming and our spot would be needed. So, we volunteered to leave by 9:00 if she would just let us stay and eat in the meantime. A compromise achieved, we settled in for what would prove our most memorable meal in Florence.

The menu at Simon Boccanegra hit all our hot buttons – game dishes, wild mushrooms, and other wintertime delights such as butternut squash and truffles. The wine steward suggested a Vino Nobile from nearby Montepulciano to complement the locally produced ingredients comprising our meal. The wine was exceptional – full-bodied and able to stand up to the game dishes we selected. Delivering a warmth and coziness after our day of chilly travels, the rich, garnet-colored liquid reflected the glow of the candlelight and enhanced our enjoyment of a romantic dinner for two.

Michael started with a porcini mushroom pie with veal sweetbreads and I opted for the butternut squash cream soup with truffles. One taste and we knew that the chef was a genius and that we were in for an outstanding dinner.

As the main dish I had wild boar fillet with a balsamic vinegar and shallot sauce accompanied by baked endive. Michael had duck breast with a pomegranate sauce and butternut squash pudding.

While enjoying every morsel, we checked our watches occasionally to see if our deadline was approaching. It came and went without another customer setting foot in the restaurant. Instead, the staff ventured out of the kitchen to chat with us about the food and wine, their commitment to local, fresh ingredients, and their passion for using them in innovative ways. They also prodded us to tell them a bit about Texas and the food and wines we loved from our home state, along with what "Italian" food was like in Houston. When we finally left around 10:30 we had been the only customers that evening – a pity for such a wonderful eatery. But, the hostess assured us, it was always packed on opera nights, especially when Verdi's Simon Boccanegra was playing!



## A WINTER'S TALE FROM THE BLACK MOUTH OF FLORENCE (CONTINUED)

The next day, before catching the afternoon train back to Milan and our flight to Houston the following morning, we went in search of a restaurant I recalled from my travels to the city as a student. Called "Dante," it was located on a tiny square with the equally tiny house where the poet of the same name had lived. I remembered Dante fondly for my introduction to the world of Italian antipasti – a large table covered with at least twenty different dishes from which you could help yourself to all sorts of marinated seafood, vegetables, and other tidbits to whet your appetite. The pasta dishes were generous enough to fuel an afternoon at the Uffizi Gallery or a stroll across the Arno to the Pitti Palace. The desserts had proved simple yet memorable – home-made gelato known as *fiocco* (or what we would think of as vanilla ice cream but without the vanilla flavor) topped with fresh fruit and cognac. Probably long gone, Dante had been replaced by a plumbing supply store.

Instead, we opted for Birreria Centrale, just across the street. Not being beer drinkers we probably would not have given a restaurant connected with a brewery a second thought. But we were hungry and ready to sit down and relax. The menu was tempting and, when we peeked inside, the mish-mash of antique tables, chairs, and benches proved irresistible. The place was tiny, no wider than the bar behind which we glimpsed a kitchen the size of our bedroom closet. The chairs and benches quickly filled with local diners, all of whom seemed to order the same dish of pasta, ham, sausage, and cabbage in a creamy sauce. Expecting that the portions would be the "normal" size we were used to in Italy, nothing prepared us for the giant plate of noodles in wild mushroom sauce or arugula and green apple salad with what seemed like a kilo of gorgonzola cheese piled on top. We ate as much as we could, accompanied by generous helpings of refreshingly brisk house white wine resembling an Orvieto (better than we expected from a beer place). It turned out to be a good thing that we had "tanked up" on both food and wine. Our train was delayed for hours, in the middle of nowhere, while the police investigated an accident. But after such a great meal, what's a little delay, Italian style!

Our visit to Florence reminded us that however much you feel you know a place and imagine things to be comfortably predictable, wine, food, and art can combine to make the unexpected remarkable – whether steaks a cowboy would love, a brew pub in the midst of wine country, or a restaurant named for an operatic hero who met his maker when a meal became a murder weapon.

Giannino, Borgo San Lorenzo 13, Firenze, FI 50123, <https://www.gianninoinflorence.com>

Simon Boccanegra, Via Ghibellina, 124, R50122 Firenze, <https://boccanegra.com/en/restaurant/>

Next time, Venice, Vivaldi, and a trip to the Emergency Room.

## VENICE CONJURES ITS WINTERTIME MAGIC WITH VIVALDI AND A MANDOLIN

BY MERIL MARKLEY

Despite years of traveling to Italy, somehow I had always missed — or avoided — Venice. One time I got as close as Treviso, just a half-hour train ride away, but a punishing schedule of rehearsals and concerts at San Nicolò prohibited a quick detour to the city on the lagoon. Decades passed and my first trip to Italy with my husband, Michael, seemed the ideal time for us to discover La Serenissima together. We arrived late one December day after a flight from Houston to Milan, via Newark, and a train ride through Verona, Vicenza and Padua.



Our hotel, the Palazzo Sant'Angelo, was half-way between the Rialto Bridge and the Piazza San Marco, on the site where the Teatro Sant'Angelo, of Baroque operatic fame, had once stood. Exhausted from our long trip, we dropped our bags and headed off to explore the city and to stave off jet lag until a reasonable Italian bedtime approached. As we discovered quickly, maps were no help in the warren of streets and canals, tiny piazzas and squares. The secret to getting around was looking for direction signs on buildings, with arrows pointing either to the Rialto or San Marco. Few people were out and about after dark, most stores and restaurants were closed, and so we stopped in a bar for a glass of wine and

some tiny sandwiches of Parma ham, *mortadella* (what we would call baloney but infinitely better) and miniature pastries. Sufficiently restored, we found our way back to the hotel with ease and settled in for a good night's rest.

When we awoke the next morning, we were not prepared for the splendor awaiting us as we pulled back the steel shutters of our guest room windows. Checking in late, we had not realized that our room overlooked the Grand Canal with sweeping vistas across the water and upstream to the Rialto Bridge. Cold, damp, and snowy Milan had given way to Venice bathed in winter sunshine, the buildings glimmering in reflection on the water. With a breakfast of more *mortadella*, exquisite pastries, and strong coffee, we were fortified for a day of sightseeing and of sampling Venetian culinary offerings.



## VENICE CONJURES ITS WINTERTIME MAGIC WITH VIVALDI AND A MANDOLIN (CONTINUED)

When it comes to favorite dishes, Michael is obsessed with duck in all its forms. A close second in the running is anything involving liver – whether from duck, chicken, goose, or calf. And so our array of Venetian meals began with a quest to sample *fegato alla veneziana* or calves' liver and onions Venetian style, but nothing resembling the shoe leather and charred onion bits that had sent me scurrying from my college dining hall to the local HoJo whenever liver was on the menu. Sampling this signature dish on its home turf was a delight – the slices of liver pink on the inside but light and crusty, tender, succulent, and the onions fragrant, never greasy. Served with grilled polenta, all memories of vile predecessors were erased.

Our next meal involved stumbling upon an impromptu family reunion at Al Gazzetino, where we were treated to truffled risotto in all its seasonal splendor while the matriarch in the kitchen embraced us in *la famiglia* for a memorable repast. There was plenty of seafood, especially squid, steamed to perfection – never fried – at Ristorante Anonimo Veneziano. Washed down with wine from vineyards in the Veneto region, everything came together exquisitely like a Crivelli painting or a Vivaldi concerto.

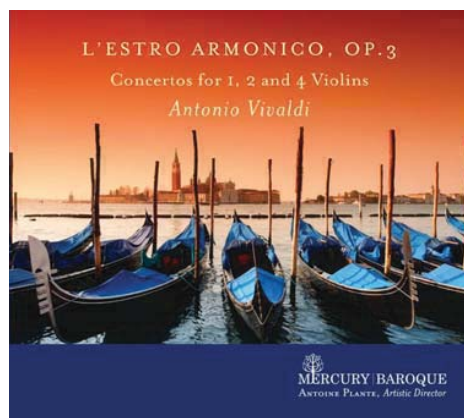
Justifiably, there is much more to Venice than food. For Michael and me it was a city of architectural bounty, anchored in the Gothic and skipping over the Renaissance to a final gasp of the Republic reflected in the triumphant Baroque style.



Over the centuries, Venice has nurtured, celebrated, and even banished some of the world's greatest painters and composers. One such 15<sup>th</sup> century genius by whom I am captivated, Carlo Crivelli, beckoned us. An up-and-comer, his career flamed out when imprisonment for adultery led to his expulsion from the city and exile to the Marche region where his enigmatic style flourished. To Venice's Accademia we had come to see his *Saints Jerome and Cyprian*, a panel from an altarpiece depicting the two saints with the lion sitting at the feet of St. Jerome, gazing up at him adoringly with a mane perfectly coiffed while offering his left paw, pierced by a thorn. Legend has it that the Saint removed the thorn and, in gratitude, the lion spent its life protecting Saint Jerome and guarding his donkey. As with so many of Crivelli's paintings, a universal story is acted out by figures richly garbed and expressive, inviting the viewer to enter scenes of great drama and tenderness. And there I was, after years of yearning to come face to face with Crivelli's masterpiece, but the sole light bulb aimed at the painting was burned out and the entire panel was obscured in winter twilight. "How many Doges does it take to change a light bulb at the Accademia?" we pondered, as a troop of conservators happened by. Nabbing one who spoke English, we inquired whether the light might be fixed if we came back tomorrow. Unlikely during our stay, she offered. It had been burned out for months and required special equipment and engineers to replace it.

Venice was also a center for composers, from the Gabrielis and their antiphonal works composed for the Basilica of San Marco in Renaissance times, to the German opera composer, Richard Wagner, who died there in 1883. Deserving of admiration for far more than the Four Seasons, it was Vivaldi who best captured Venice in sound – the rhythmic lapping of the water against the buildings and the bumping of the gondolas against their moorings, phrases arching like the graceful bridges across the canals, the shift between major and minor keys like the sunlight and shadow in the hidden piazzas throughout the city – all are evoked in his restless music. It came rushing back to us like a Venetian high tide earlier this year in a masterful performance of Vivaldi's violin concerti, known as *L'Estro Armonico*, by Houston's own Mercury Baroque and now available on a CD whose cover captures the hues and harmony of this singular city in winter.

## VENICE CONJURES ITS WINTERTIME MAGIC WITH VIVALDI AND A MANDOLIN (CONTINUED)



We found Venice thoroughly intoxicating and realized that we had allotted too little of our itinerary to these urban islands so willing to offer their enchantments to scant winter visitors. Early on our final morning in the city, the sirens sounded and horns announced the *acqua alta* or high water resulting from an unfortunate interplay of tides and rains common in wintertime. Having kicked ourselves for lugging our rubber boots in anticipation of floods that never materialized, we now found ourselves vindicated and fashionably attired to step out of our hotel into water over a foot high where earlier a sidewalk had been visible. Here was another aspect of a magical visit to a mystical place, with lots of reasons to come back again in winter.

Back in Houston a few weeks later, Michael planned a New Year's Eve celebration with longtime Wine Society members, Nancy and Bill Pape, to give them a taste of some of the foods and wines we had savored in Venice, accompanied by our favorite Vivaldi recordings. While slicing the onions for *fegato alla veneziana* with his trusty mandoline (not the sort Vivaldi would have played), he whacked off part of his fingertip, requiring a trip to the Emergency Room and a number of stitches. It was not until the next day that Nancy and Bill learned why we had not been home when they arrived. Not to miss an opportunity for liver and onions, however, Michael was sufficiently recovered to host what became a New Year's Day celebration of restoration and renewal, Venetian style.

Hotel Palazzo Sant'Angelo, San Marco, 3878/b, 30124 Venice,

<https://www.sinahotels.com/en/h/sina-palazzo-santangelo-venice/>

Trattoria al Gazzettino, Sotoportego de le Acque 4997, VE 30124, <https://www.algazzettino.it/>

Anonimo Veneziano, Calle del Frutarol, 1847, Venezia I-30124 (no website)

Next time, musseling in on trips to Belgium

## MUSSELING IN ON TRIPS TO BELGIUM

BY MERIL MARKLEY

Why would anyone write for this Newsletter about Belgium, a land where beer is king and wine-making died out in the Little Ice Age? Because Belgian mussels, harvested in the morning and served that evening after steaming in white wine, are as close to heaven as any wine lover can get.

For one of our regular furniture-buying trips to Belgium, where due to creative tax planning some of the best French antiques wind up with local dealers, my husband, Michael, and I decided to spend a few days in Bruges and experience the Venice of the North.



On a hair-raising trip from Paris' Charles de Gaulle Airport, ranging from dusk into nighttime on motorways and back roads, through countless construction zones and detours, we had begun to believe we were on a never-ending loop destined instead for Brussels. Encouraged at numerous stops for directions, by sympathetic gas station attendants and bartenders, we arrived hours late and exhausted at the Pand Hotel in the heart of Bruges. Happy to banish our rental car to an 18<sup>th</sup> century prison, now a parking garage, we longed to enjoy a few days of exploring Bruges as pedestrians.

Owing to what historians could term a fortuitous silting up of the harbor at the head of the water route between Bruges and the North Sea, the city became, literally, a backwater from the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century until its "rediscovery" in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. A happy accident, the buildings from the economic boom times of the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries were never torn down and replaced with more modern structures. Today's tourists experience Bruges in a time warp, as in its heyday when it was one of Europe's most significant commercial and artistic centers.

Much of Renaissance Bruges, inside and out, is still on display in the paintings by Flemish artists such as Jan van Eyck and Hans Memling at the Saint John Hospital Museum and the Groeningemuseum. Van Eyck, as one of the developers and early adopters of oil-based pigments, transformed the ability of artists to achieve verisimilitude. Thanks to Bruges being the northern outpost of Italian banks, works by Flemish masters were snapped up by Florentine financiers and shipped home, fueling a similar revolution in painting south of the Alps. Van Eyck memorialized the wedding of an Italian banker, Giovanni Arnolfini, in Bruges (the work hangs at the National Gallery in London).



While telling a grander story, the Flemings reveled in depicting the minutest of details — strands of squirrel fur on the cuff of a garment, intricately carved animal figures on furniture, golden threads comprising thistle patterns of a cardinal's vestments, the filaments of colorful Caucasian carpets, light reflecting on richly tooled

## MUSSELING IN ON TRIPS TO BELGIUM (CONTINUED)

armor. Awestruck, we lingered in front of work after work of incomparable virtuosity, marveling as intended at the status symbols that merchants had amassed. Such wealth enabled the commissioning of renowned painters to memorialize the patron's families as onlookers in scenes such as the Baptism of Jesus or the martyrdom of a saint.



Conspicuous consumption was not on our itinerary when it came to eating and drinking in Bruges. Rather, we were bent on enjoying shellfish as the Belgians do. Our quest involved the cherished *moules frites*. While the term could be translated as “fried mussels,” it is instead the French-language moniker for steamed mussels with the obligatory side dish of fried potatoes (what we would call “French fries” but never while in Belgium).

Belgians eat more mussels per capita than any other nationality and have developed countless creative ways to prepare them. Not deemed sufficiently sophisticated, or perhaps a bit too messy, *moules frites* do not grace menus at Michelin 3-star restaurants. Enjoyed by the masses, from autumn through spring, mussels are on offer throughout the country at local eateries dedicated to the high-volume consumption of these succulent bivalves and their fried potato cohorts. Extracting the meat from the shell and sloshing it around in the broth along with chunks of toasted garlic bread may not be the most elegant way to dine, but is hard to beat for sheer pleasure.

Based on our hotel's recommendation, we headed for the restaurant Breydel de Coninc at the edge of the square named for Jan Breydel and Pieter de Coninc, medieval heroes honored with statues there. Tiny, the restaurant blended bar and seating area filled with diners already well into their mussel experience accompanied by tall glasses of Belgian beer.



We ordered the traditional version, mussels steamed in a mixture of white wine and cream with chopped celery, carrots, onion, and a little garlic. A short while later, cast iron pots arrived at the table, brimming with mussels in their shells. I leaned over and inhaled deeply the intoxicating steam, essence of the sea enhanced by wine and onion. These mussels were the large, meaty, and tender “jumbos,” as the Belgians call the biggest variety, harvested from river estuaries along the North Sea near the Dutch border. Accompanying them was a bowl of fries, the crowning glory of the Belgian method of preparation involving frying potatoes twice to produce the crispy exterior while keeping the interior from going soggy. Served with a little cup of mayonnaise

## MUSSELING IN ON TRIPS TO BELGIUM (CONTINUED)



(not of the jar variety) for dipping, we understood instantly why this version of “French fries” is so beloved that there are take-out shops on squares and in train stations throughout the country. Needing to prize each nugget of meat from the shells forces a slow pace of consumption and utter enjoyment of the *moules frites* ritual. Not being beer drinkers, we ordered a bottle of Viognier that proved the perfect accompaniment to the mussels and the garlicky toast.

Hungering for the mussel experience but can’t get to Bruges anytime soon? Head for the frozen dinner section at your local HEB for a bag of Central Market brand “Mussels Marinière,” imported from France. The mussels have already been shelled and only need be popped into a skillet along with the frozen pellets that melt into sauce. We recommend adding a quarter cup of heavy cream and cooking for an extra 30 seconds before serving. While the jumbos are simmering, bake the 3 mini-baguettes that came in the same package. All the flavors come together, the kitchen smelling like Breydel de Coninc. Accompanied by a bottle of Becker Viognier, recreating a great European treat is achieved without leaving your Texas kitchen! Now, if only Central Market could figure out how to recreate authentic (Belgian) fries as well.

The Pand Hotel, Pandreitje 16, 8000 Bruges <http://www.pandhotel.com/>

Restaurant Breydel de Coninc, Breidelstraat 24, 8000 Bruges <https://restaurant-breydel.be/en/>

Next time, a fruitful trip to Prague with oranges as a theme.

## CZECHING OUT ORANGES AND AUSTRIAN WINES IN PRAGUE

BY MERIL MARKLEY

The 2006 film, *The Illusionist*, revolves around a magic trick using an orange tree and around a locket, an orange tree-shaped inlay in whose cover becomes a clue in a murder mystery – all in turn of the century Vienna. But the real illusion is that Prague stood in for Vienna, as it did in Milos Forman's 1984 film *Amadeus*, based loosely on the life of composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. During my recent business trip to Prague, oranges and Mozart were foremost in my mind but an introduction to several remarkable Austrian wines proved a highlight as well.

For classical musicians and especially a Mozart-lover like me, Prague is ground zero for some of the Austrian composer's greatest triumphs. The inhabitants of the city fettered him as nowhere else. It was filled with talented performers for his demanding works but also proved to be his refuge away from the vicious intrigues of the Hapsburg Court in Vienna, such as those dramatized in *Amadeus* but filmed on location in Prague. Of the theaters where Mozart's 22 operas were first staged, only the Estates Theater, a few steps from Prague's Old Town Square, is still in existence and performing operas. Sadly, none was on offer while I was there.

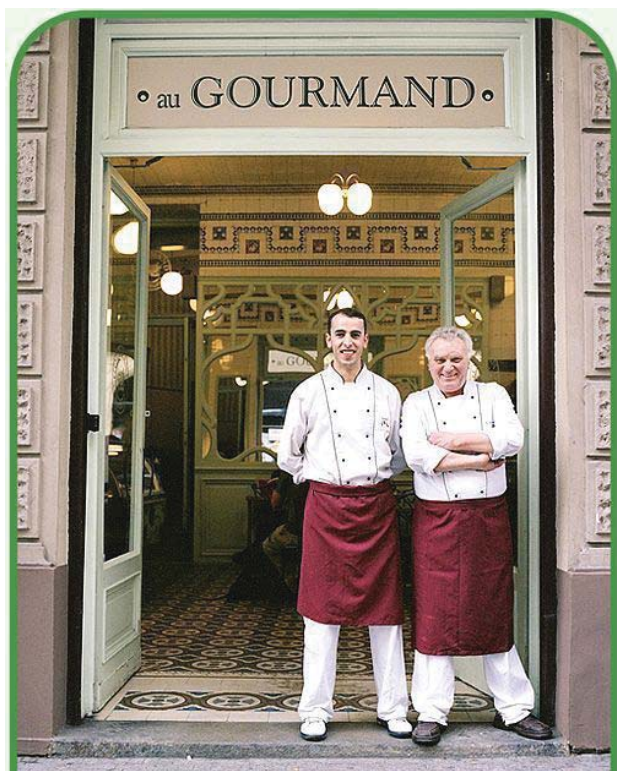
In 1787, Mozart's *Don Giovanni* was premiered in the Estates Theater. Based on Tirso de Molina's Spanish play about Don Juan, the librettist was Lorenzo da Ponte, pal of the non-fictional lothario, Casanova. *Don Giovanni* offers some of Mozart's most enigmatic music and precise psychological characterizations in an age before Sigmund Freud made Vienna the center of psychoanalysis.



On the last day of our visit to Prague several years ago, my husband, Michael, and I made a pilgrimage to the Estates Theater as I recalled the times I had performed the opera elsewhere in Europe, during the Cold War, when Czechoslovakia was off limits to Americans. Neither of us had dreamed we would ever visit Prague or this magnificent jewel of a theater linked to one of our favorite operas. Snippets of Donna Anna's arias resounding in our heads, Michael and I decided to reflect on it all by enjoying afternoon tea. Caddy-corner from the front of the theater was one of four locations of Café au Gourmand, the perfect spot for a tea break. Making my pastry selection from the glass case, I noticed that there was just one slice left of what the sign described as *tarte à l'orange* or *koláč z pomerančů* in Czech. So, I figured it must be good if it was scarce. It was definitely not a *ko-lache* in the Texas sense!

We don't recall what Michael ordered because the *tarte à l'orange* was so remarkable that we ended up sharing it and savoring every morsel. The base was a *pâte sucrée* or pastry dough with a hint of sweetness. On top of it were circular slices of orange that tasted fresh and succulent. Interspersed with this were the crunchiness of a *croquant* and a hint of Grand Marnier. Topping it off was a layer of icing laced with orange zest. A magnifi-

## CZECHING OUT ORANGES AND AUSTRIAN WINES IN PRAGUE (CONTINUED)



cently orchestrated ensemble of sweet crust and icing, pleasingly sour fruit, and the bitterness of the orange zest, resulted in the pastry equivalent of the magnificent finale of Act I of *Don Giovanni*. We were captivated and longed for another piece of *tarte à l'orange*, but the café was sold out and we would be leaving town before it opened the next morning.

So when I was invited to return to Prague and speak at a conference, I became obsessed with *tarte à l'orange* and sent an email through Café au Gourmand's website to make sure they still offered it. I ended up placing an order for an entire *tarte*, figuring I would either find a way to bring it back to Houston or devour it in the process!

When I arrived in Prague, the weather was hot and sunny. After checking in at the Hotel Intercontinental, a hideous, Communist-era monolith along the Vltava (Moldau) River, I made a beeline for Café au Gourmand. Sitting at one of the outdoor tables while staving off jet lag with a large coffee, I ordered a salad and a piece of *tarte à l'orange*. The *tarte* was even better than I remembered and provided the energy for a long walk

along the river with the strains of the *Moldau* section of Bedřich Smetana's epic tone poem, *Ma Vlast*, swirling through my head.

The conference featured several memorable meals and, to my surprise, nothing but Austrian wines. While the Czech Republic has a wine industry dating back to Roman times, most of the vineyards are in Moravia, south of Brno toward the Austrian border. Wine seems to command scant attention in a country that leads the world in per capita consumption of beer at 160 liters for the average person each year.

For sheer beauty of place, nothing could match our buffet dinner at Hergetova Cihelna, a restaurant boasting a beautiful stone terrace next to the river. With an exquisite view of the Charles Bridge as twilight descended on the city, we feasted on duck *confit*, spinach *spätzle* with cheese sauce, tiny cakes of leek and potato, and a dessert concoction called a



## CZECHING OUT ORANGES AND AUSTRIAN WINES IN PRAGUE (CONTINUED)

*Mocca* or caramel cake topped with chocolate-infused whipped cream. Dinner was accompanied by a selection of Austrian red and white wines.

The next and final evening of the conference involved a gala dinner at Francouzská Restaurace, a 100 year-old French restaurant on the ground floor of Municipal House, a magnificent art nouveau building abutting one of the medieval gate towers of the Old Town. Themes included oranges, in the form of a dressing for a smoked duck salad, and asparagus in the form of a green asparagus soup as well as green and white asparagus complementing a main course of roasted veal tenderloin with potato purée and truffle sauce. Accompanying the meal were two Austrian wines from the Jordan winery in Pulkau: a Grüner Veltliner, Ried Talbach 2010 and a Zweigelt Rubin, Barique 2008. The Zweigelt was especially wonderful – full-bodied and a deep reddish-purple color – the perfect complement to the veal tenderloin and asparagus.

After the conference ended on Saturday afternoon, I headed for Prague Castle, the hilltop fortress of churches and palaces, including an orangery – an early form of greenhouse found on noble estates throughout northern Europe to shelter citrus in the wintertime and make oranges available year-round. In the case of Prague Castle, the Orangery dated back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century and was reconstructed in a high-tech version just a few years ago – perhaps an inspiration for Café au Gourmand's *tarte à l'orange*?

The Lobkowicz Palace is our favorite place within the Castle complex. The Palace is now a privately-owned museum after being returned to the descendants of the Lobkowicz family who fled to the U.S. after their properties were confiscated in 1939 (and returned in 1945 only to be confiscated again in 1948). For centuries it was an important location for music-making in Prague, now commemorated each afternoon by a concert whose music echoes throughout the building while providing the perfect accompaniment for museum-goers. The Lobkowicz family were important patrons of composers in Prague and in Vienna, where they also had a palace.



Ludwig van Beethoven's contemporary and benefactor was Prince Joseph František Maximilian, 7<sup>th</sup> Prince Lobkowicz, whom Beethoven nicknamed "Fitzliputzli."

The Palace houses an important collection of musical instruments and manuscripts in addition to paintings such as a Bruegel masterpiece, *The Haymaking*. Open to the public since 2007, the Palace has a wonderful café whose menu offers a nod to the American connections of the Lobkowicz family in the form of one of the best cheeseburgers and fries I have ever tasted. The breathtaking view of the city from the café terrace is well worth the price of a snack or a meal.

The next day, I returned to Houston with the precious *tarte à l'orange* in my checked baggage. No illusion, Michael and I shared the bounty and remembered our first magical visit to Prague and Café au Gourmand.

## CZECHING OUT ORANGES AND AUSTRIAN WINES IN PRAGUE (CONTINUED)

Can't get to Prague anytime soon? The next best thing may be Houston's own Czech Center Museum, a "baroque palace" in the Museum District, built entirely with private donations.

Café au Gourmand (various locations) <http://www.augourmand.cz/>

Hergetova Cihelna, Cihelná 2b, Prague 1 <http://cihelna.com>

Francouzská Restaurace, náměstí Republiky 1090/5, Prague 1, <http://www.francouzskarestaurace.cz/>

Lobkowitz Palace, Jiřská 3, 119 00 Prague 1 <https://www.lobkowitz.cz/lp-cafe>

Czech Center Museum Houston, 4920 San Jacinto Street, Houston, TX, 77004, <http://www.czechcenter.org>

Next time, new wine in old venues and tales from the Vienna Woods

## NEW WINE IN OLD VENUES AND TALES FROM THE VIENNA WOODS

BY MERIL MARKLEY

Living in the Woodlands, it's easy to take our forest for granted, spoiled as we are with tall trees, 100+ miles of hike-and-bike trails, and ample opportunities for long walks where the woods begin a few feet from our door-steps.

Similarly fortunate, but with a sylvan environment embracing wine, are the residents of Vienna. Former headquarters of the vast Austro-Hungarian Empire, Vienna is today the capital of the Republic of Austria. Political missteps that led to the shrinkage of Austrian territory in the aftermath of World War I may have ensured that Vienna avoided the urban sprawl experienced by other European capitals and the attendant elimination of green venues such as the vineyards still located within Vienna's city limits.

As in centuries past, a dweller in the city's center can reach the legendary Vienna Woods in less time than it takes to get from downtown Houston to the Woodlands. A 30 minute tram or bus ride transports a traveler from the city's cosmopolitan First District to a rustic hinterland of forested Alpine foothills interspersed with vineyards, some dating back as far as the 3rd century BC when the Roman Empire lifted its ban on growing grapes north of the Alps and Austria's 2000 year-old wine industry was born.



Vineyards on the outskirts of Nußdorf, overlooking Vienna

## NEW WINE IN OLD VENUES AND TALES FROM THE VIENNA WOODS (CONTINUED)

The bi-annual meeting of my law school's alumni group in Vienna was an ideal opportunity to spend a late spring evening in one of the many hillside wine gardens where the former imperial capital intersects the Vienna Woods and vineyards. And what better place for a bunch of tax lawyers to relive their university exploits than in a *Heuriger*, that uniquely Viennese version of a wine garden, conceived in response to a tax break? To fill government coffers back in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when beverages were heavily taxed and cheap beer was encroaching on Vienna's wine industry, the reform-minded Emperor Joseph II permitted the vintners on Vienna's outskirts to serve home-grown food with their "new" or "green" wine, to be drunk on-site without charging tax. A fir sprig hung each spring over the doorway signaled that the new wine had arrived. This uniquely Viennese institution was born with "*Heuriger*" denoting both the new wine and the tax havens where it was served.



Enshrined in a bureaucratic loophole, the *Heuriger* has grown into a destination with its own set of traditions and customs. For example, it is by nature a locale for communal conviviality due to seating on long wooden benches on either side of a narrow table. Arrive as a couple, you will leave with a new group of friends! Expected to be open from late spring through early fall, a *Heuriger* starts indoors but stretches up the hillside with tables and benches placed under towering oak trees just a few yards from where the new wine's grapes were grown. The new wine, less alcoholic than its aged and bottled cousins, is exclusively white, served in pitchers, and accompanied by bottles of mineral water so revelers may prolong the eating and drinking experience without provoking a hang-over. No need to choose from a wine list or fret over vintages. The wine is the wine – cool, light, refreshing, and irresistible in the *Heuriger* setting.

*Heuriger* food has evolved from a few rustic snacks to a wealth of tried and true offerings. Typically purchased inside at a buffet and carried up the hillside to be enjoyed family-style, the selections involve unique and memorable foods. While there is an emphasis on cold meats, slow-roasted pork, homemade sausages, horseradish, and vinegary versions of potato salads, my personal favorite is *Litptauerkäse*, a soft cheese for spreading generously on hunks of brown bread. The cheese, blended with chopped pickle, onion, and capers, turns a rich orange hue thanks to the addition of paprika. My husband, Michael, fell in love with a surprising staple of *Heuriger* cuisine – fried chicken. Served piping hot and fresh out of the grease, it has been dusted in flour seasoned with paprika and fried to perfection. Light, golden, crispy on the outside, moist and tender on the inside – watch out, KFC!



The author, while a graduate student, visiting a Beethoven apartment

As with everything about Vienna, its Woods, and the vineyards carved from them, have a strong connection with music. Ludwig van Beethoven, though a native of Germany, spent his entire working life in Vienna, living much of it on the outskirts of the city bordering the Vienna Woods. For Beethoven and countless other creative types who called Vienna home, the nearby Vienna Woods symbolized and offered brief bursts of freedom, contributing directly to artistic output. Liberated from the cramped confines of the city, Beethoven's imagination was unleashed on his strolls through the woods and hikes up to nearby peaks such as

## NEW WINE IN OLD VENUES AND TALES FROM THE VIENNA WOODS (CONTINUED)

Klosterneuberg, whose monastery houses one of Europe's oldest and largest wineries.

Living in Vienna during its occupation by Napoleon's forces must have given Beethoven a taste of oppression and freedoms lost. He roused audiences with his passion for individual liberty while ushering in a new era of music and a commanding role for composers. The *Prisoners' Chorus* from the second act of his opera, *Fidelio*, is a plea for liberty whose universal message of freedom from tyranny resonates with audiences to this day.

Later composers, including Franz Schubert, Hugo Wolf, Anton Bruckner, Gustav Mahler, and even Arnold Schönberg, wandered the Vienna Woods and found in them a freedom from urban life and fresh inspiration for glorious music. One can imagine that they visited a Heuriger or two, which are themselves music venues. The complete Heuriger experience involves performances by local musicians playing the traditional 19<sup>th</sup> century folk-like fare known as *Schrammelmusik*, after the famous quartet launched in a Heuriger by violinists Johann and Josef Schrammel, with the addition of friends who played guitar and clarinet. And the famous waltz, *Tales from the Vienna Woods*, by Johann Strauss the Younger? Apparently, it's just an evocative title slapped on an earlier composition having no connection with Austria's famous green belt.

The mixture of food, wine, music, and fellowship add up to what the Viennese are known for – *Gemütlichkeit* – a sort of friendly coziness and relaxation that connote freedom, for a few hours, from whatever else is going on in one's life.

Next time, an English take on a French 'chicken in every pot.'



Sketch for the Beethoven Memorial in Vienna

## A FOWL VISIT TO LONDON WITH A FRENCH TAKE ON A CHICKEN IN EVERY POT

BY MERIL MARKLEY

The British Isles have endured their share of invasions in centuries past, including culinary conquests by the likes of the Romans, Vikings, and Normans. Recent decades have seen an influx of Indian, Thai, French, Italian, Japanese, and other nationalities of restauranteurs who, coupled with the efforts of outstanding homegrown chefs, have made London one of the world's culinary capitals.

On our visits to London in May of 2010 and in October of 2011, my husband, Michael, and I enjoyed memorable meals and outstanding wines. With only one exception, we managed to avoid the dreaded Carvery where hunks of roasted beef, lamb, and pork may languish for hours under heat lamps until a dried-out slice is hived off and piled onto a plate with desiccated potatoes or Yorkshire pudding. Instead, we found ourselves feasting on exquisitely prepared succulent fowl, tame or wild, and loving it.

In 2010 we first discovered La Poule au Pot, on Mozart Square in London's Belgravia neighborhood, thanks to a recommendation for French restaurants serving duck from the concierge at our hotel, a short stroll away. A London institution since the 1960s, La Poule au Pot offers traditional French fare in a tiny building on a corner, its kitchen in the basement. From the ceiling hang baskets, pots, and dried flowers above small tables channeling the cozy atmosphere of a French restaurant in the countryside, devoted to seriously good eating.



France's King Henri IV (1553-1610), the first monarch in the Bourbon dynasty, is revered for saying that French families should be sufficiently prosperous to have *poule-au-pot* every Sunday. While controversy remains over whether he uttered this maxim, the traditional dish of stuffed hen, cooked in a pot, remains a staple of French cuisine, including on the menu of this London eatery of the same name.

On our first visit, I ordered what was described as duck breast with lime. Michael feared it would be too citrusy and so opted for veal liver instead, but the lime flavor proved subtle within the sauce made from pan drippings. The duck was perfectly cooked and delicious, especially with the accompaniment of the red Burgundy wine we had chosen. What transformed Michael into a devoted fan of the restaurant was his dessert of bananas in a caramelized sauce. So enthusiastic were we that, as we left, we booked dinner for the following week after our short business trip to Croatia.

Our 2011 visit to London, for UHY International's annual meeting, was sandwiched between stays in Paris for Michael's antiques business but happened to coincide with grouse season in the U.K. The perfect place to try this most British of birds, never successfully domesticated and still hunted on the moors of Scotland, was Racine, a French restaurant in Knightsbridge with a gifted British chef and owner, Henry Harris.

On bustling Brompton Road and caddy-corner from the Victoria and Albert Museum, Racine is a popular destination for lunch and dinner. I first ate there in 2004 with Christopher Wilk, my classmate from college and the

## A FOWL VISIT TO LONDON WITH A FRENCH TAKE ON A CHICKEN IN EVERY POT (CONTINUED)

Keeper of Furniture, Textiles and Fashion at the Museum. Coinciding with my two-year absence from visiting France, Racine's offering of the Deux Charentes region's incomparable and hard-to-find Echiré Butter provoked raptures of delight and my consumption of way too much bread and butter while we reminisced about Professor Eugene Carroll and how his Art History lectures shaped both of our careers. Our most recent visit to Racine was for lunch with Laura Holt, another former student of Eugene's, and a long-time resident of London.

Sticking with our fowl theme, we shared a starter of *foie gras* of goose accompanied by glasses of Sauternes. Michael opted for a main course of grouse, bread sauce, and Armagnac gravy. I know little about grouse except that its American cousin, the ruffed grouse, is the official bird of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania where my father used to hunt it and my mother attempted to make it edible. Nothing prepared us for the plate placed in front of Michael. The entire bird, in size somewhere between a Cornish hen and a chicken, was exquisitely roasted. Michael dug in and carved it up while Laura and I enjoyed tastes. The meat was dark red in color, a bit disconcerting, but not from being undercooked. It was gamey but delicious, an acquired taste and one well worth cultivating.



Laura and I both opted for the day's special, breast of pheasant stuffed with leg meat and mushrooms. A far more subtle taste than the grouse, it was especially flavorful when complemented by the deeply purplish Malbec from Cahors which we had selected to accompany our birds.

As if legendary butter and fowl were not enough, Laura and I indulged in desserts. Called *Mont Blanc* after France's Alpine peak, this traditional and beloved concoction involves a base of meringue below a mound of chestnut cream (forced through a sieve or small gauge pastry bag and looking like whole wheat spaghetti) and

topped with whipped cream. Racine's version was innovative and huge, benefiting from the addition of a rich chocolate sauce.



No discussion of fowl in London would be complete without considering George Frideric Handel (1685-1759), the Baroque era musician who, despite being born in Germany as Georg Friedrich Händel, spent almost his entire life in England and became one of the country's most adored composers. His last name, in German, evokes the beloved roast, stuffed chicken known as *Brathändel*, a sort of Teutonic version of *poule-au-pot*, on which Georg Freidrich must have grown up in Saxony.

Handel lived in London for a half century, most of that time in the house on Brook Street in Mayfair that, for the last decade, has been home to the Handel House Museum. Well worth a visit, it is awe-inspiring to stand in the tiny room where the great man composed and presided over rehearsals with the vocal superstars of his day. His output of over 40 operas (including *Rodelinda*, which had its Houston premiere last month in a per-

## A FOWL VISIT TO LONDON WITH A FRENCH TAKE ON A CHICKEN IN EVERY POT (CONTINUED)

formance by Mercury Baroque), close to 30 oratorios (including *Messiah*, also being performed this season by Mercury Baroque), and some of the most famous pieces ever composed to accompany royal pageantry (*Music for the Royal Fireworks* and the *Water Music*), guaranteed his perch in the pantheon of great composers and his final resting place in Westminster Abbey.

Described by contemporaries as “corpulent,” particularly in his later years, it is a fair bet that Handel enjoyed some of the same rich fowl dishes as today’s visitors to his house can enjoy throughout his adopted hometown. Handel’s imagination ran to fowl as well, including one of his most famous compositions, *the Cuckoo and the Nightingale*, a concerto for organ and orchestra in which bird calls are imitated in the organ’s highest register.

Fabled birds also played a role in our lodgings in London. Having visited Saint Pancras Station in 2010, we were captivated by the magnificent renovation of what has become the terminus of the Eurostar high-speed train from Paris. Dating back to the 1870s, when British railway companies outdid themselves in competing for passengers and in erecting Gothic Revival stations with hotels attached, Saint Pancras dodged the wrecker’s ball and the Luftwaffe’s bombs but lay dormant for decades before a multi-million Pound face-lift assured the future of the Renaissance Hotel Saint Pancras that opened in 2011. As soon as we learned we would be heading for London, we reserved a room and garnered the chance to wander this magnificent edifice used in films as diverse as *Batman Begins*, *King Ralph*, and *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. The renovation of the station included cleaning and preserving many fearsome looking mythical yet inedible feathered creatures, such as those shown on the column capital in the photo.



Before heading back to Paris, we had one last meal at La Poule au Pot with international marketing guru and friend from our sojourn in Southern California, Allyson Stewart-Allen. I opted for a starter of arugula, mushrooms and cheese – a captivating and rich combination of peppery greens and mild cheese in a salad large enough for a meal. As the main course, Michael had the duck with lime. I had guinea fowl (*pintade*), another first for us, in a sauce incorporating Calvados and cream. The bird was tender and delicious, the sauce so scrumptious I would have happily licked every drop from the plate. Allyson had the day’s special, partridge, which involved a struggle to prize every morsel from the bones. She pronounced it well worth the effort. Accompanying it all was a red wine from Pic Saint Loup, another winner in our quest to enjoy excellent wines from the less heralded Languedoc region of France.

Having flown the coop for two food and wine-filled weeks, we were happy to return home to a steady diet of chicken -- but with cherished memories of our staple’s more exotic cousins.

To read more about the types of wild fowl we sampled and how to obtain them in the U.S., go to D’Artagnan’s website <http://www.dartagnan.com>.

## A FOWL VISIT TO LONDON WITH A FRENCH TAKE ON A CHICKEN IN EVERY POT (CONTINUED)

La Poule au Pot, Mozart Square, 231 Ebury Street, London, SW1W 8UT <http://www.pouleaupot.co.uk>

Racine, 239 Brompton Road, Knightsbridge, London, SW3 2EP, <http://www.racine-restaurant.com>

St. Pancras Renaissance Hotel, Euston Road, London NW1 2AR,  
<https://www.marriott.com/hotels/travel/lonpr-st-pancras-renaissance-hotel-london/>

Handel House Museum, 25 Brook Street, Mayfair, London W1K 4HB, <http://www.handelhouse.org>

For an incomparable taste of Handel's music, consider Drew Minter's recording, Handel Operas Vol. 1 on Harmonia Mundi, available from Arkivmusic (<http://www.arkivmusic.com>).

Next time, feasting *en famille* on the outskirts of Paris.

## UNCORKING VINTAGE FRANCE ONE (EXTENDED) FAMILY AT A TIME

BY MERIL MARKLEY

As my husband, Michael, and I look back on the years we lived in France, one of the greatest blessings was to have been “adopted” into a French family and to be transformed by affection, camaraderie, and wit spanning four generations.

It all began when Caroline, a young French attorney at the firm where we worked in Paris, shared that her family had lived in Canada for several years, and they all spoke English. Having been expatriates themselves, they could appreciate how we felt as newcomers to France and they wanted to meet us.

We were invited to the home of Michel and Brigitte, Caroline’s parents, in Soisy-sur-Seine south of Paris, for a traditional Sunday lunch including Caroline and her younger sister, Delphine. When we arrived, Brigitte was in the kitchen whipping up a complex meal while Michel was selecting the wines to accompany each course. Such a Sunday lunch is a French institution and the reason that for centuries French retailers resisted opening on Sundays. Their workers would not want to forego lunch “en famille.” No potluck, the Sunday midday meal is the culmination of a week’s planning and a chance for the younger generation to return home from cramped *pieds-à-terre* in Paris to a traditional repast and lively conversation in the countryside where they grew up.

On that first visit, my husband and *chef-de-cuisine* at our flat, Michael, was eager to see what Brigitte was up to in the kitchen. But the door to her inner sanctum was firmly closed and admitted no one while the complex choreography of the multiple courses was being executed. Michel had opened each of the wines, some earlier for decanting, and matched them perfectly with Brigitte’s culinary offerings. While some twenty years on I cannot recall exactly what was served that day, the overall memory is one of utmost enjoyment of the three key elements – food, wine, and conversation.



Michael attempted to reciprocate with a typical Texas feast of fried chicken, mashed potatoes, cream gravy, and pecan pie (what seemed an exorbitant dessert considering that pecans were available in tiny bags of ten shelled halves for the equivalent of about \$5.00). This was accompanied by the only American wines on offer in Paris at that time, from California — sadly, not Texas. Our French friends seemed to enjoy it all and Brigitte was particularly intrigued by cream gravy — something unknown to Escoffier and the Guide Michelin’s temples of gastronomy.

To our delight, we were invited to a number of gatherings, including with the extended family on both Brigitte’s and Michel’s sides. One such get-together involved an Eastertime trek to Niort in western France where Michel’s father, known to all as Papi, lived in a huge old house near the center of the city.

Papi was delighted that Brigitte was along, the best cook of the entire extended family, and would be preparing several meals for the group of around twenty or so. Meal planning involved a trip to Niort’s huge market with

## UNCORKING VINTAGE FRANCE ONE (EXTENDED) FAMILY AT A TIME

### (CONTINUED)

hundreds of vendors offering the freshest local produce, meats, and fish for holiday feasts. As Easter was late that year, it coincided with white asparagus season. Brigitte served it warm, accompanied by *sauce hollandaise*. It was Michael's first introduction to this pale cousin of our green asparagus, much subtler in taste and with stalks so plump they have to be carefully peeled. As in the tradition of the Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans, it evoked a feast fit for the gods.

This trip also marked our conversion to the French way of thinking about food, utterly obsessed with freshness. It meant not deciding on the menu until seeing what was available at the market — choices that also drove the decision on what wines should accompany the food. Things truly did taste different, more intense yet with subtle gradations. The flavors of such seemingly mundane items as chicken, potatoes, tomatoes, strawberries, each proved a little explosion of flavor and delight. The wines were gentler, very different from the bold flavors we were used to from our years in California, and required a complete recalibration of our taste buds. They complemented each of the foods and enhanced the overall enjoyment of the meal and the company. No wonder French people linger for hours over a meal. After our visit to Niort, eating, drinking, and life in general would never be the same for us.



Papi was in charge of wine and showed us his *cave* or underground wine cellar where hundreds of bottles were stored. In the main part of the cellar was a tiny table with a lone bottle standing on it — a cabernet sauvignon from California which Caroline had bought Papi on one of her visits there. That was years earlier, but there it still stood, an enigma at the center of the cellar. Was Papi fearful that it might contaminate the French inventory if placed among the neatly ordered bottles, or was he waiting for just the right occasion to give it a try?

The other men also did their part, rising early each morning to head off to the *boulangerie* for the freshest breads and the butter-croissants. By the time they had returned, the strong coffee had just finished brewing and the butter was out on the table along with locally made jams. The trip to Niort was our first introduction to butter from the Poitou-Charentes region of west central France. We had been skeptical when Brigitte proclaimed that *Beurre d'Echiré* was the world's greatest, but one bite of it on a croissant and we were devoted adherents. In those days, it was not available in Paris, so we consumed as much as we could in Niort.

Back in Paris and for the balance of our residence in France, Michael focused on absorbing the basics of French cooking from Brigitte and adopting her insistence on the freshest of ingredients. Since returning permanently to the U.S., we have tried to build on this foundation. For a while we were aided by Delphine, who came to spend several months with us and to perfect her English. She was disappointed by the lack of many basic fresh

## UNCORKING VINTAGE FRANCE ONE (EXTENDED) FAMILY AT A TIME (CONTINUED)

ingredients, especially vegetables and herbs, but found cause for celebration when Eatzi's began stocking her favorite stinky cheese, Morbier, along with freshly baked *baguettes* that tasted almost like home.

Embracing the French approach to food and wine left us open to other aspects of French culture. For me, that meant a heightened understanding of French music, especially Jean Philippe Rameau, the composer/genius of the French Baroque. His complex harmonies and chromatic juxtapositions in the guise of graceful dance music

and poignant operas made sense to me after years of skepticism grounded in the Austrian imperial hegemony of my musical upbringing.

An especially magical aspect of our sojourn in Paris involved living in a flat overlooking the courtyard of the Interior Ministry on Place Beauvau. It was there that the official government band rehearsed in preparation for serenading visiting heads of state at the nearby Elysées Palace. Their renditions of *La Marseillaise* never failed to cause lumps in our throats as we heard this most revolutionary of national anthems, born of a yearning for freedom and a willingness to risk life and limb to attain it. The melody and the rousing text still remind us of the close relationship our two countries have enjoyed since before the Thirteen Colonies became the United States



and of the former General, the Marquis de Lafayette, whose dedication to our country extended to wanting to be interred in France with soil from the U.S. in his casket. No French blood courses through our veins, but we could not feel a greater kinship and affection for France.

The weddings of Caroline to Pierre and of Delphine to Jean took us back to Europe for two fabulous celebrations in which food was central, especially the highly architectural *croque-en-bouche* or "crunch in the mouth" wedding cake. These tall cones built of cream-filled pastry balls bound together with caramel are an apt metaphor for the enduring commitment of husband and wife.

After Caroline's wedding, everyone stayed at a hotel close to the chateau where the wedding reception was held and where dancing continued until dawn. Breakfast the following morning held in store one of those typically French experiences we will always treasure.



## UNCORKING VINTAGE FRANCE ONE (EXTENDED) FAMILY AT A TIME (CONTINUED)

Michael had been thinking about trying to make *foie gras* now that Central Market offered fresh duck liver. He figured that a breakfast table full of French foodies might be an ideal place to seek advice. It led to thirty minutes of impassioned, heated, and philosophical discussion. Nearly everyone had taken a course on *foie gras* preparation and was a tenacious adherent of either the slow-cooking or the quick-cooking school of thought. Armed with perhaps more knowledge than he'd sought, Michael put his plan into action a few months later, but disaster loomed. Despite several urgent transatlantic phone calls to Brigitte and her feverish emails in French with strict instructions, Michael failed to follow them precisely and we ended up with a withered piece of pricey but awful offal.

Delphine and Jean's wedding in France was followed by a reception in Switzerland after a cruise across Lake Geneva. The trip afforded time for vacation in Provence, our first adventure to Languedoc, and the genesis of our affection for the output of small wineries whose achievements have changed the latter region's reputation from one for plonk to a host of vintage wines worth savoring. The wine we had enjoyed most was Domaine de l'Hortus – a beautifully balanced red wine redolent of forest berries. It went perfectly with the game dishes offered at the restaurant of the Hotel Château de Floure near Carcassonne where we were staying. We drank as much as we could, sensing we would never find it back in Texas.



At the wedding reception a week later, I was seated next to Jean's best man; a banker from Paris named Michel. I sensed that Michel was kicking himself for getting stuck next to *Les Américains*, especially as the rock and roll band was playing nothing but U.S. golden oldies (and giving the lie to the notion that the French hate American culture). Making polite conversation in French, Michel asked me about our recent travels and I mentioned how much we had enjoyed Languedoc, and especially the wines we had tried. When I named the Domaine de l'Hortus as our favorite, Michel pushed his chair back from the table and stared at me as though he had seen a ghost. "But that's my favorite wine!" he exclaimed, as I sensed that *les Américains* were becoming *les Amis*. Of all the thousands of wines in France, that two people from opposite sides of the world could meet up in Switzerland and have the same favorite wine seemed utterly improbable, yet true. Thankfully, Michel knew the only wine merchant in Paris stocking Domaine de L'Hortus, so we were able to enjoy a few more bottles during our stopover there on the way back to Houston.

Owing to Michael's French antiques business, we return to France at least once a year for reunions with the extended family. Brigitte still prepares memorable Sunday meals, including for our visit last fall. Dinner was preceded by Champagne (Camille Savès) setting the festive tone for the reunion with Caroline and Pierre who, along with their three young children, had just moved back to France after four years in Canada. The first course was *foie gras* of duck served with buttered and toasted slices of *baguette*. Michel paired with it a Macvin du Jura, a late harvest, small production, fortified wine from an area near the Swiss border. Lighter

## UNCORKING VINTAGE FRANCE ONE (EXTENDED) FAMILY AT A TIME (CONTINUED)

than the Sauternes traditionally served with *foie gras*, it was refreshing and delicious. The main course was a traditional French Sunday favorite, *blanquette de veau*, a veal stew in a creamy sauce (although such a mundane description fails to do it justice). For the wine, Michel chose Château La Rose Figeac 1995 from the Bordeaux Region (Pomerol). It tasted like just what it was – a superlative French red wine created reverently under ideal conditions and conserved until this perfect moment for consumption. In this comfortable dining room, surrounded by our friends and enjoying another sumptuous meal by Brigitte with Michel's superb wines, we were reminded of how blessed we have been to embrace a country and a culture over the course of decades through one remarkable family, always looking forward to the next reunion.



Next time, a trip to Italy celebrating the re-discovery of Sagrantino.

## ENCHANTED BY UMBRIA — PERUGIA AND BEYOND BY MERIL MARKLEY

A chance to speak at a law conference in Rome afforded my husband, Michael, and me, five days to explore another part of Italy. Why not Umbria, we thought? The green heart of Italy, between Rome and Florence, the region is home to the forests, lakes, and farmlands whose yields, especially truffles (both the noble mushroom and the chocolate-coated ice cream bombe also called *tartufo*) wild boar, olive oil, and wine, are treasured throughout the country and beyond. Artistically, it is renowned for the great ceramics-works of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries along with some of the most magnificent Renaissance frescoes still on the walls of the buildings where they were painted. Five days turned out to be scant time to discover the natural beauty and cultural riches on offer, in between memorable meals accompanied by some of the most interesting wines we have ever tasted.

In for a treat, we had come to Perugia not for Perugina, the world famous chocolatier based there, but for Perugino, as the great Renaissance painter Pietro Vanucci was known. Hearing this, our taxi driver from the Perugia train station was filled with enthusiasm for Perugino and other Renaissance masters whose names he rattled off as if they were all old friends. By the time we alighted at the Hotel Brufani Palace, our base of operations, he had generously bestowed on us a pile of guidebooks and was pointing out maps of the nearby towns where we could see works by his favorites. It seemed that everyone we met in Umbria was as enthusiastic as he was about the local must-sees.



Everyone included Antonio, maître d'at the Brufani's Collins Restaurant, whom we encountered a few minutes later. His lectern, positioned strategically between lobby and elevator to the guestrooms, allowed for maximum interaction with folks who might be in need of a dinner reservation. Tired and a bit cranky, in no time we were invited by Antonio to inaugurate our stay in Perugia with dinner and a sampling of local wines. One look at the menu and our plan for a quick snack was ditched in favor of guinea fowl stuffed with *foie gras*, truffles, and pecorino

cheese for me, and sea bass in orange sauce with cauliflower flan for Michael, all cooked to perfection.

Antonio made sure we had a proper introduction to his beloved Umbrian wines, both red and white, but especially the Sagrantino di Montefalco based on a grape grown in the region for at least four hundred years but "rediscovered" by Arnaldo Caprai in the 1970s. Full-bodied, rich, balanced, with hints of berry and vanilla, the "dry" version of the wine could be our ideal red to accompany meals or just to sip. The "passito" version is an intense, sweet and fruity dessert wine, the perfect accompaniment to the Collins' warm and creamy chocolate *tortino* and the chestnut concoction capping our meal that first evening.

Thanks to Antonio's tutelage, we enjoyed repeatedly both versions of Sagrantino, along with Caprai's blend of Sagrantino with other grapes (Sangiovese and Merlot) and known as Rosso di Montefalco. As we soon learned, it is essential to enjoy these remarkable wines in Umbria because it is such a memorable place, but also because they are difficult to find, even as nearby as Rome.

The Hotel Brufani Palace proved to be a marvel and the ideal headquarters for our visit. Eschewing the trend to sterile soullessness of other places we have stayed in Italy, this Sina Group property evokes classic elegance and luxury at an affordable price, with attentive and gracious service. Our room featured a sweeping vista to the northwest while just down the corridor was a large covered patio offering a panoramic view of the region and

## ENCHANTED BY UMBRIA — PERUGIA AND BEYOND (CONTINUED)

nearby towns. It proved the perfect spot to relax in the evening with a glass of Sagrantino and reflect on the day's adventures.

Everywhere we gazed in Umbria there were free-standing bell towers rising above the churches for which they were built. Centuries before Italy became a nation, the towns or communes were self-governing cities in a seemingly constant state of war with one another from the 11<sup>th</sup> century until taken over by the Papacy in the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century. A bell tower was always built before its church because the locals needed a vantage point from which to determine if the neighboring town was about to attack and, if so, to use the bell and sound the alarm. Anne Robichaud, expert on Umbria and friend of a client of mine in Houston, explained all this as she guided us on a tour through Assisi.

Among the works by Perugino that we had come to see were the frescoes in the Collegio del Cambio in Perugia, commissioned by the money changer's guild in 1496. The guild's members were responsible for exchanging local coinage for that of tradesmen visiting from other towns, each of which issued its own currency. Unlike today's currency exchanges, the money changer's responsibilities included assaying and weighing the coins to ensure they were not counterfeit and that they contained the requisite amounts of gold or silver.



Perugino's frescoes, still present in the small rooms adorned with magnificently carved cabinetry, gave us a sense of what it meant to be an Umbrian artist. While depicting stories from the Bible, these painters included, in the background, the countryside they saw around them. Even when painting in the Sistine Chapel and Papal Apartments in the Vatican, they brought the natural beauty of their region with them for all the world to see. Valleys, lakes, hillsides sprinkled with castles and towns, all recede into a deep distance dotted with trees and bathed in pastel shades of blue and gray under the canopy of a pale yellow sky. No matter the narrative, the tranquil landscape beckons and draws the viewer into the drama being acted out in the foreground.

Needing a restorative pastry and coffee after visiting the Collegio del Cambio and the National Gallery of Umbria next door, we crossed the street and headed for Sandri, the pastry and chocolate emporium dating back to 1860 and still owned by the founding family. Echoing the theme of the Collegio del Cambio, the ceiling is beautifully painted and the walls lined with ornate walnut cabinets. And if you offer a 20-euro note in payment, it will be run through an electronic device to verify that it is genuine. The spirit of the Collegio del Cambio lives on in Perugia!

A rival and occasional collaborator with Perugino was responsible for the most interesting discovery of the trip, as part of our tour of Assisi and Spello with Anne. Standing at the opening of the U-shaped *Capella Baglioni* in the Church of Santa Maria Maggiore in Spello, we had the sense of shifting back in time some 500 years to when Bernardino di Betto, known as *Pinturicchio* (the short painter) glimpsed three blank walls and a vaulted ceiling for the first time. Within a few months, he had transformed the space into one of the most breathtaking and magnificent sets of frescoes produced in the Italian Renaissance, which is saying a lot considering the masterpieces of his contemporaries and successors such as Perugino, Raphael, Leonardo, etc.

## ENCHANTED BY UMBRIA — PERUGIA AND BEYOND (CONTINUED)



Depicting the scenes from the life of Jesus including the Annunciation, the Nativity, and the Disputation at the Temple, these works incorporate magnificent architecture full of trompe l'oeil elements as well as charming touches such as the rustic, half-finished manger from which the ox and ass peer over their pens at the simple shepherds and elaborately garbed magi come to visit the Baby Jesus. We found ourselves bowled over by Pinturicchio's talents and accomplishments, but not before we ran out of the one-euro coins needed to feed the meter so the lights would stay on in the chapel.

Worn out from sensory overload, we were whisked next door by Anne to Enoteca Properzio, the leading wine merchant in Umbria and one of the top purveyors of Italian wines worldwide. We were welcomed by Roberto Angelini and his daughter, Irene, who were our hosts for an evening of wine and foods from the region. Roberto was enthusiastic about having Texans visit since he had done several private tastings in Houston last year, including one in the Woodlands. We hope he comes back soon and brings his wonderful wines for a Wine Society tasting!

My favorite wine of the evening was the limited production Rosso Assisi 1997 Reserve Sangiovese. The nose full of earth was at first startling but then engaging when sipping this remarkable, full-bodied red wine. Michael's favorite was the Sagrantino 25 Anni from Arnoldo Capri, the culmination of the vintner's art using this native Umbrian grape. The wines were accompanied by slices of bread drizzled with superb local olive oils, bruschetta, bean soup, and assorted artisanal meats and cheeses.



Other memorable repasts included the following (pasta always home-made):

- Taverna del Gusto in Deruta -- spelt salad (based on an ancient Roman grain still grown in the area), noodles wrapped with ham and cheese in a béchamel sauce with black truffles, pork fillets in black truffle sauce with oven-roasted potatoes
- Ristorante del Sole in Perugia (with a magnificent view of the city) -- gnocchi in a duck sauce with duck bacon, noodles in a porcini mushroom sauce, wild boar ragout, tortino of chocolate and pear (Michael's all-time favorite dessert from this trip)
- Trattoria degli Umbri in Assisi -- wild boar steak with potatoes seasoned with "antique" fennel and the inevitable but scrumptious chocolate *tartufo* dessert

**ENCHANTED BY UMBRIA — PERUGIA AND BEYOND (CONTINUED)**

Thanks to the natural beauty of the countryside, the ancient towns, the friendly and enthusiastic inhabitants, and all the fabulous foods and wines, our visit to Umbria can be summed up in two words – joyous and harmonious. It all works wonderfully well together and, despite the stresses of travel, left us feeling relaxed and contented, eager to return.

Sandri, Corso Vannucci, 32, 06121 Perugia, <http://www.sandridal1860.it/en>

Hotel Brufani Palace (Collins Restaurant), Piazza Italia 12, Perugia, PG 06121, <http://www.brufanipalace.com>

Ristorante del Sole, Via Della Rupe, 1, 06121 Perugia, <http://www.ristorantesole.com>

Enoteca Properzio, Piazza Giacomo Matteotti 8, Spello, PG 060, <http://www.enoteche.it>

Trattoria degli Umbri, Piazza del Comune 2, Assisi, PG 06081 (no website)

Taverna del Gusto, Via Mastro Giorgio 5, Deruta, PG 06053 (no website)

Next time, capitalizing on *porcini* season in Rome.

## PINING FOR PORCINI AFTER A ROMAN HOLIDAY

BY MERIL MARKLEY

Each time we visit Rome, the more captivated we are by this city of contrasts. There is the obvious juxtaposition of ancient and modern – the sleek buses parked by the Coliseum, the contemporary office buildings grafted onto antique foundations, the impersonators of Roman centurions posing for pictures with tourists. What strikes us most, however, are the contrasts of urban versus rural and of public versus private. These themes percolate just below the figurative surface of the Eternal City and bubbled up at the eateries we visited.

The small town feeling first became evident on an earlier visit to the city when we lodged at the Hotel Villa San Pio on the Aventine Hill. Having picked this residential neighborhood with several boutique hotels (and absolutely no restaurants) meant we were spared the roar of motorbikes as we awakened each morning to birds singing in the pine trees outside our windows. A short walk farther up the hill from the hotel was the fifth century Church of Santa Sabina with the austere design of a village sanctuary and a faith emergent. We wandered through the garden of orange trees next door to it, from whose edge we glimpsed the distant dome of Saint Peter's Basilica, projecting to the world an urban church triumphant.

We got plenty of exercise striding down the Aventine Hill each morning to the Marmorata tram stop and then back up the Hill each evening after a day of sightseeing. In case we needed fortification for our climb, there was always *Gastronomia Volpetti*, the renowned purveyor of cheeses, olives, cured meats, wines, and gourmet prepared meals channeling the empire's agricultural heritage. Next door was *Pasticceria Barberini*, a magnet for pastry lovers like my husband, Michael.

The schedule of early morning meetings on our trip to Rome this past May meant that staying in our urban oasis was out of the question, but we still longed to recapture the bucolic sensations of the earlier sojourn. A Sunday morning the day before our departure, with Michael battling the sniffles, compelled a restful hour or so on a bench in the expansive Gardens of the Villa Borghese. Like urban parks in America, it was filled with families strolling, playing games, picnicking, sunbathing, and enjoying a patch of green away from nearby apartments.

For us, the treat was sitting amidst the tall umbrella pines that make this park so memorable and inspired the first movement of Ottorino Respighi's 1924 orchestral tone poem, *The Pines of Rome*. Their soaring height and powder-puff-shaped canopies are exotic and intriguing; so different from the pine trees of our neighborhood in The Woodlands. The sunshine shimmering through their branches, the dappled light and shadow playing on the ground, all are evoked in Respighi's music as it shifts from a boisterous mood of youngsters at play to a hushed flute solo eliciting a timeless, pastoral setting. Although his repertoire did not include Respighi, the accordion player some 50 yards down the way pulled at our heart strings as he cycled through a classical hit parade from Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* to Mozart's *A Little Night Music*.



Hunger pangs eventually led us to depart and to stroll down the Via Veneto into the heart of urban Rome. We passed many tony restaurants with their extensions of glass-enclosed seating areas on the sidewalk. Nothing tempted us.

## PINING FOR PORCINI AFTER A ROMAN HOLIDAY (CONTINUED)



A turn from Piazza Barberini onto Via Sistina led us to Antonio and the Ristorante Leon D'Oro. Antonio was poised out front next to a table supporting a basket brimming with porcini mushrooms. He had either figured us for a couple of famished tourists or foodies in search of a taste of porcini. Either way, a chat with Antonio (whose English was superb), the promise of the mushrooms and of pasta made fresh that morning by his wife, all proved irresistible. As we learned from him, the Italian porcini season was still a few months off. The mushrooms on which we would feast had come from an erstwhile and remote part of the Roman Empire – Turkey.

Mushrooms are nothing new to the Romans, occasionally portraying the murder weapon of choice in a drama of regime change. At least that's the story about how Nero became Emperor after plotting with his mother, Agrippina, to murder her husband (Nero's stepfather), Claudius, with a dish of lethal fungus. Patricide and intrigue aside, we opted for a plate of sautéed porcini on a bed of arugula. A creation of young and passionate Chef Matteo Alba, the dish was so simple yet utterly delicious. The mushroom slices were meaty with just the slightest hint of crustiness, the arugula crisp and peppery (unlike the "baby" version on offer at our

local supermarkets), with just a scant trace of olive oil. The kitchen, being located just a few feet from our table, meant that the lingering aroma of the sautéing mushrooms was still wafting around us as we bit into the first succulent morsels. We were in porcini heaven, enlivened by a Sangiovese from Tuscany – Podere del Giugiolto Corte alla Flora (2009).

After a main course of *tortellini* in cream sauce with mushrooms, for me, and a tender and flavorful Danish steak in green peppercorn sauce, for Michael, we passed on dessert and bade Antonio a fond farewell. Earlier, Michael had spied a *gelateria* just up the street. Our meal was topped off by another example of this incorporeal Italian version of ice cream – diminutive balls of extra-dark chocolate or hazelnut, packed with intense flavor, and a rich cream flavor notable for the absence of vanilla.

The more formal, public meal we enjoyed was at Vecchia Roma (*Old Rome*), discovered while wandering the former Ghetto after hiking up to the Campidoglio from the Forum. Its tables, spread out in the tiny piazza and covered by broad umbrellas, made the location ideal for a leisurely lunch starting off with *fritto misto*, a plate of delicately battered and fried scallops, cod, zucchini, red pepper, and cauliflower. Always on the look-out for organ meats, I had as my main course veal kidneys in a sauce of pan drippings with a dash of cream while Michael had veal liver, pan-sautéed to perfection with a similar, but lighter,



## PINING FOR PORCINI AFTER A ROMAN HOLIDAY (CONTINUED)

sauce. Accompanying this was Arnaldo Caprai's Rosso di Montefalco (2009) which we had learned to love the week before in Perugia. We lingered for several hours, enjoying the cool breezes on this sweltering afternoon along with the wonderful wine, while talking to the folks at the next table, Americans who happened to be from our former neighborhood in Los Angeles and for whom this restaurant was a priority destination. Stumbling upon it, for us, was serendipitous but equally memorable.

The culinary delights of a more private Rome were consumed with gusto at Trattoria dal Cavalier Gino on a tiny street near the Parliament. Our friends, Andrea and Fabiana, Romans through and through, were determined to introduce us to the hearty Roman delicacies they love but that do not generally grace restaurant menus because mothers (or more likely, grandmothers) make them at home. We loved the lively atmosphere at the trattoria. There were just a few tables, close together, full of friends sharing a meal and a carafe of the house white wine.

A revelation was the traditional Roman pasta dish known as *Cacio e Pepe*. Thick spaghetti is cooked first, *al dente*. Olive oil and cracked black pepper are heated in a skillet. Some pasta water is ladled in and brought to a boil. Then the pasta is added and generous amounts of Pecorino Romano and Cacio de Roma cheeses are



sprinkled in until a creamy concoction results. While I subsequently tried to duplicate this simple dish at home, my efforts cannot compete with the perfect consistency and delicious marriage of the tangy sheep's milk cheese and the fresh, spicy pepper at Gino's. There's something about fresh pasta, consumed in Italy with locally made cheeses, that tastes like nowhere else. Michael and I split a plate of *Cacio e Pepe*, but I would have gladly eaten the whole thing myself, but for the need to save room for the next course.

We followed Andrea's suggestions for what to eat next from the array of tempting, elemental dishes. I opted for oxtail stew, a dish dating back to the time when oxen were still used on nearby farms to plow the fields. It proved a lushly flavored, slightly spicy dish, the meat

slow-cooked and tender in a sauce of red wine and tomato. Michael had rabbit, Andrea had tripe, and Fabiana had a veal dish. The only two with room left for dessert, Michael and Fabiana opted for Tiramisu in a superb, creamy, and perfumed version unknown to us in the U.S.

Dire warnings about the collapse of the Euro, concerns about the viability of the Italian economy, scandals at the Vatican, and other alarming headlines assailed us throughout our stay. But nothing could dampen the enthusiasm we feel for the sweet life of contrasts that make Rome eternally special.

Ristorante Leon D'Oro, Via Sistina, 9 (no website)

Trattoria del Cavalier Gino, Vicolo Rosini, 4 (no website, no credit cards)

Ristorante Vecchia Roma, Piazza Campitelli, 18 , <http://www.ristorantevecchiaroma.com>

Next time, Germanic treats in France's Alsace region.

## GLÜHWEIN AND OTHER GERMANIC TREATS IN THE LAND OF NOËL

BY MERIL MARKLEY

Being from colder climes than Houston, and having lived in Germany and Austria with their enchanting Christmas seasons, I have never quite adjusted to the holidays in Texas where the mercury always seems stuck in the 70s. So a December business trip to France with my husband, Michael, offered prospects of reinvigorating our Old World Christmas spirit with a few days in Alsace.

The Alsace region of France boasts rolling hillsides covered wall-to-wall by the vines that are the source of its reputation as one of the country's centers of viticulture. Fought over for centuries between the French and the Germans, Alsace promotes the best of both nations when it comes to mulled wine ("Glühwein"), food, and good holiday cheer.



We chose as our initial destination the region's capital, Strasbourg, and as our base of operations the Petite France district, separated from the rest of the city by canal and river. Tanneries and slaughterhouses were centered there in medieval times and many of the half-timbered buildings from that era still exist. Our hotel, the De L'Europe, was an amalgam of just such older structures located a few minutes by foot from the Place Kléber, the city's huge main square with a giant Christmas tree at its center.

Having arrived on our wedding anniversary, we asked the concierge to propose a special dinner of something typically Alsatian. She arranged an evening at the Maison des Tanneurs, a restaurant along the nearby canal.

Housed in a half-timbered building constructed in 1572 for the tanners from which its name derives, the restaurant has offered the best of the region's cuisine and wines for over 60 years. We were seated at a corner table with a commanding view of the main dining room but by a window where we could watch the snow falling on the cobblestones outside.

Michael and I had the day's specials as our starters -- onion tarte and a salad of scallops. For the main course, Michael had the venison special with various sauces based on chestnuts and on red berries. I had veal kidneys in a rich cream sauce with mushrooms. Both were accompanied by *spaetzle*, rich little nuggets of dough which are ideal for absorbing the sauces of any dish they accompany. Lighter and more flavorful than any we had ever tasted, these became the standard against which all others were measured as we ate our way across the region.

Being red wine drinkers, especially when consuming game or organ meats, we opted for the Pinot Noir



## GLÜHWEIN AND OTHER GERMANIC TREATS IN THE LAND OF NOËL (CONTINUED)

from Hügel et Fils, a family whose involvement in the wine industry of Alsace dates back to the aftermath of the Thirty Years War, in the village of Riquewihr. As we quickly learned, it's better to stick with the whites in Alsace if you are accustomed as we are to full-bodied reds. While the Pinot Noir went well with our meal, it reminded us of the need to recalibrate our taste buds when we set foot in France, since wine made from its cherished grape varieties bears little resemblance to what we are used to back home.

As we also learned that night, portion sizes in Alsace lean toward the hefty and the Germanic side of the region's heritage. Both of us were challenged in finishing each plate laid in front of us. Not to be put off, however, Michael ordered *Poire Belle Hélène* for dessert, unable to pass up pears poached in wine (presumably white) paired with a rich dark chocolate sauce over a dollop of vanilla ice cream. After that, the manager presented us with a cake topped with sparklers in celebration of our anniversary. He extinguished the lights and our fellow diners applauded us, once they figured out that no electrical failure was involved! As we left, utterly stuffed but contented, the manager pointed out a plaque signed by Buzz Aldrin and mentioned how Houstonians are al-



ways honored guests, even if they have not traveled in outer space! We strolled back to the hotel amidst gently falling snowflakes and marveled at the gothic spires and the rooftops from which icicles dangled, all bathed in the hazy glow of Buzz Aldrin's moon.

As in so many cities we visit, the search for Michael's favorite pastry shop involved a relentless but unscientific sampling of numerous locales in Strasbourg. Early on, I learned that the traditional plum tart or *Zwetschgenkuchen* was in season and so I embarked on a similarly rigorous hunt for the best in town. As it turned out, our two quests converged on the same winner – Pâtisserie Winter near Place Kléber. The addition of orange zest to the plum tart gave it a zing unlike any other, complementing the sweet crust and slightly tart flavor of the firm and juicy fruit. Our enthusiasm for the *tarte* led to meeting the establishment's owner, Georges Winter, the third-generation *patissier* in his family to run the business (and all named Georges!). He took us on a tour including the subterranean kitchens where the pastries and light meals are made, along with the chocolate factory housed on the

premises. Amidst the tiny rooms, low ceilings, and ancient beams, we admired his dedication to running a modern business while preserving a historic building.

Our next stop was Colmar, where it was even chillier and snowier than Strasbourg. This regional gem is renowned for canals and architecture from medieval times, including gabled and half-timbered buildings with towers and crenellations ideal for Christmas highlighting. Meeting up with our French friends Delphine and Jean, their son Alexandre, and their dog Flip, we spent hours strolling around but stopped repeatedly for *Glühwein* to stave off the bitter cold. Sweetened red wine, heated with a cinnamon stick, star anise, cloves, nutmeg, plus lemon and orange zest, *Glühwein* is a staple of the Germanic lands in winter and indispensable for anyone wandering frosty Colmar!



## GLÜHWEIN AND OTHER GERMANIC TREATS IN THE LAND OF NOËL (CONTINUED)

Catering to tourists from other parts of France, as well as nearby countries, meant that Colmar was packed with visitors during our stay. We enjoyed observing their creative and unique approaches to keeping warm and safe, especially the brightly colored fur hats and the sandal-like contraptions, with crampons, strapped onto boots by ladies of a certain age. Alexandre was especially fond of an intriguing outdoor ride for children involving hobby horses “galloping” through a mini-forest of spruce and ending with a splash of snow in the face. Oh to be eight again and captivated by this winter wonderland! With dogs welcome too, we all piled happily into the Winstube next to our hotel for a late dinner of Alsatian specialties including pumpkin cream soup, deer stew with chestnuts, locally made *foie gras*, and more *spaetzle*, all accompanied by a Pinot Gris from Hugel et Fils.



Some serious tourism awaited us the next morning as we joined Jean on a trek to Haut-Koenigsbourg Castle in the Vosges Mountains. Driving there through tiny villages, we marveled that each had at least one tall structure topped by a nest of storks, the iconic bird of the Alsace region. We ploughed through traffic jams with cars from all across Europe exploring stops on the famed Alsace Wine Route, despite the frigid temperatures and snowfall the night before.

With its commanding view of the Alsatian Plain, the strategic outcropping where the castle is perched has housed some sort of fortress since the first *Königsburg* or king's castle was established in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. The current version was a pet project of Kaiser Wilhelm II who oversaw its restoration and additions in the medieval style during the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century while Alsace was part of Germany. Since World War I, when Alsace became part of France again, this castle with the curious Frenchified spelling has been a major tourist attraction.

Throughout, the interior decoration reminded us of stage sets for Wagnerian operas. Frescoes and tapestries conjured a medieval world of knights and maidens where we half expected to encounter Tannhäuser or Elisabeth of Thuringia amidst the pageantry. Drafty, as any legendary castle should be, the penetrating cold soon took its toll and drove us to the fortress' snack bar/gift shop for restorative *Glühwein*.

Some serious eating awaited us that afternoon in the town of Eguisheim where a leg of the Alsace Wine Route passes the Restaurant au Vieux Porche. Being our last meal in Alsace, we all opted for the inevitable *choucroute au poisson*, a fish version of the traditional cabbage, potato and sausage dish whose name dates back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century as a corruption of the German word *sauerkraut*. To accompany this, we had a Pinot Gris from the renowned Zinck winery located next door to the restaurant.

Behind schedule and rushing us to the Colmar station for our train back to Strasbourg and on to Paris, Jean took a wrong turn. We found ourselves climbing higher and higher into the vineyards dusted with snow, where GPS and cell phone signals had long since abandoned us. The sun was setting behind the hills, and as twilight enveloped us we had visions of losing our bearings completely, forced to spend a frigid night among the vines but without the benefit of *Glühwein*! Finally, we spotted the spires of Colmar



## GLÜHWEIN AND OTHER GERMANIC TREATS IN THE LAND OF NOËL (CONTINUED)

in the distance and arrived there in the nick of time for our journey to Paris and the comfortable predictability of our old neighborhood and favorite eateries in the City of Light.

Hotel de L'Europe, 38040, rue du Fossé des Tanneurs, 67000 Strasbourg, [www.hotel-europe.com](http://www.hotel-europe.com)

Maison des Tanneurs, 42, rue du Bain aux Plantes, 67000 Strasbourg, [www.maison-des-tanneurs.com](http://www.maison-des-tanneurs.com)

Pâtisserie Winter, 25 Rue du 22 Novembre 67000 Strasbourg, [www.patisserie-winter.fr](http://www.patisserie-winter.fr)

Restaurant au Vieux Porche, 16, rue des Trois Châteaux, 68420 Eguisheim, [www.auvieuxporche.com](http://www.auvieuxporche.com)

Vins d'Alsace Zinck, 18, rue des Trois Châteaux, 68420 Eguisheim, [www.zinck.fr](http://www.zinck.fr)

The Alsace Wine Route, <http://www.vinsalsace.com>

Next time, springtime in Germany at the center of its red wine business.

**SIPPING THE BOUNTIES OF A LEAGUE'S FINAL HOLD-OUTS****BY MERIL MARKLEY**

When the opportunity to attend a conference took us to the city of Bremen, it afforded my husband, Michael, and me a chance to explore North Germany's heritage of dominance in international trade and the Hanseatic League. Formed by merchants in the port cities of Hamburg and Lübeck in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, it arose because Lübeck found itself with bounteous catches of herring but no way to preserve the fish beyond what could be sold in a day. Hamburg had no herring but did have salt for transforming fish into a long-lived product sellable throughout the region. A marriage made in commercial heaven, the League was born with these two cities and, eventually, sixty more joined.



A city gate (Holstentor) in Lübeck

In an era pre-dating insurance, the merchants of the Hansa developed a mechanism for pooling capital and spreading risk in order to finance specific vessels, cargoes, and voyages. Losses were likely as rocks, storms, and primitive navigation techniques took their toll. If the ship came in, the investors all shared in the profits. This led to a foundation of wealth upon which the cities grew, including huge churches with tall spires thrusting upward from the flat landscape. Their congregations hired the gifted musicians of the day such as Johann Sebastian Bach and Georg Philipp Telemann and built the organs whose majestic sounds reverberate there to this day. This affluence also fed the demand for luxuries such as wines from Germany and farther afield. But competition from consortia outside the monopoly grew stronger as the centuries passed and the league waned. By

## SIPPING THE BOUNTIES OF A LEAGUE'S FINAL HOLD-OUTS (CONTINUED)

the time of its formal dissolution in 1862, only the two original cities plus Bremen remained.

With its main harbor of Bremerhaven farther down the Weser River, Bremen served for centuries as a gathering point and port of departure for German wines heading to thirsty enthusiasts around the globe. This city owns one of the world's largest wine warehouses located under the magnificent City Hall (Rathaus) that is also the meeting place for the Senate of this smallest of Germany's states. Although the construction of the "old" part of the Hall dates back to the early 15<sup>th</sup> century, a major addition in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century resulted in the "new" part whose bright and airy interiors reflect the Renaissance in all its splendor.

The building's Upper Hall, previously used for legislative sessions but now for ceremonial purposes, was the site of the gala banquet capping our conference. Evidence of the city's nautical heritage hung above us in the form of intricate ship models, some as much as six feet long. Crafted between the 16<sup>th</sup> and the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the detail of these models is impressive, especially the tiny cannons. They are a reminder that the League's vessels were not only merchant ships but needed to defend themselves in a bellicose era.

Prior to our gala dinner, we were treated to a tour of the massive underground complex comprising the city's wine cellar and a chance to view the giant "rose" barrel holding wine dating to 1653. Top city officials are permitted to taste from it, but reserve that privilege for visiting dignitaries such as Queen Elizabeth. No word on whether she thought it plonk! We were offered more modern vintages on our visit as we wandered the narrow subterranean hallways. Part of the cellar is dedicated to a restaurant, a tradition throughout Central Europe for city halls. But in this land of fabulous beer, the Bremen Ratskeller Restaurant serves only wine, with some 600 on offer.

Still one of the most beautiful and well-preserved of the Hanseatic cities, Lübeck was not exporting wine through Bremen. Rather, it was importing red wine directly from Bordeaux, France and then aging it in local cellars before bottling and selling it (much of it to Russia). The city remains famous for its *Rotspan*, the resulting French wine in German bottles, whose name stems from a term in local dialect for the reddish wood of the barrels in which the French imports first arrived. Even French soldiers passing through town during the Napoleonic Wars remarked that there was something special about this north German barrel-aging that improved on their homeland's finest nectar. I can attest that sipping *Rotspan* over lunch at an elegant restaurant, the Schabbelhaus in a Baroque-era gabled structure whose tall windows let in the pale northern sunshine, left me agreeing with the soldiers.



## SIPPING THE BOUNTIES OF A LEAGUE'S FINAL HOLD-OUTS (CONTINUED)

Our last stop on the Hanseatic trail was the commercial colossus of Hamburg, even larger and busier as an international seaport in the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall and German re-unification than it was when I lived there during the Cold War. We stayed at the Vier Jahreszeiten (meaning “four seasons” but not part of the hotel chain of the same name), the magnificent century-old grand hotel along the Alster inlet. I used to stroll by the hotel when I was a young intern working at a law firm in the nearby BAT-Haus. Someday I hoped

to afford a room there and have tea in front of the fireplace in the magnificent reception salon, and so a dream came true when Michael and I made our first visit together to Hamburg.



We dined with friends from my student days in the city and marveled at the newly renovated warehouse district with its array of modern eateries offering new takes on the traditional seafood dishes of the region. Bypassing the smaller ports, wine cargoes now make their way through Hamburg, whether the Argentine Malbec we had with dinner or the Blue Nun heading for Houston.

Strolling along the Alster on a rare sunny afternoon, watching the crowds window-shopping or sitting in the sidewalk cafes, we admired this prosperous and sophisticated city built on international commerce. Euro currency crises may come and go, but the Hansa Cities' charms still beckon.

Vier Jahreszeiten, Neuer Jungfernstieg 9-14, D-20354 Hamburg, <https://www.fairmont.com/vier-jahreszeiten-hamburg/>

Next time, a quick and salty trip to Austria.

## AUSTRIAN WINE WORTH ITS SALT

BY MERIL MARKLEY

I'm of an age when I fear that each trip I make to my former home, Vienna, may be my last opportunity to stroll the streets where Mozart walked, to hear his operas in the theater where the world's most acclaimed singers perform, and to visit the museum where some of civilization's greatest paintings hang. And so it was this past March. An unexpected business trip to Austria and Italy required meetings in Vienna supplemented by two days in the southern state of Carinthia before heading back to Vienna and then on to Italy. Boarding the Vienna-bound Austrian Airlines flight at Charles de Gaulle Airport outside Paris, I felt almost home as the flight attendant offered me a glass of Grüner Veltliner, Austria's renowned white wine, and I was enveloped by animated conversations in "Austrian" German.

I was fortunate to land on a frigid but sunny afternoon affording a chance to stave off jet lag with a walk around the First District, the historical and archeological center of the city dating back to Roman times. Staying at the Schlosshotel Römischer Kaiser on the Annagasse was ideal. A tiny boutique hotel in a Baroque former palace, it stands around the corner from a concert hall at the Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts where I first sang in this music capital of the world – the audition upon which my entire future depended (or so it seemed at the time).

While Vienna is a modern capital, full of business enterprise, it remains a major tourist destination. Even on a chilly Wednesday afternoon in late winter, Kärtnerstrasse was full of tourist groups headed down the pedestrian zone to the magnificent Gothic Cathedral of Saint Stephen and then along the Graben toward another cathedral of sorts, Demel's, world-renowned for its *Sachertorte* and for serving hundreds of worshipful pastry lovers each day.



For me, however, the ultimate destination was Heiner's, the tiny café, pastry, and chocolate emporium that has been a treasured haunt for over 30 years. How comforting, I reflected, that nothing other than prices ever changes – not the décor, not the china service, not the silverware – except that I am now as old as the elegantly dressed patrons I had once thought so aged. I ordered my "usual," a *Kremschnitt* made of layers of puff pastry filled with whipped cream and topped with strawberry icing, accompanied by a *Mélange*, a dose of Vienna's strong coffee with just a bit of steamed milk. Suitably fortified, I headed off for meetings with my colleagues, Georg Stöger and Ulrich Paugger, at UHY Vienna.

Afterward, I enjoyed a relaxing evening at Bio Restaurant Weinbotschaft (literally, Wine Embassy), the all-natural eatery a few steps from my hotel and which I had spied on my earlier walk. While I don't go out of my way to find organic foods or wines, I was delighted with the results. I enjoyed a fish (whose complicated name I have forgotten) that was caught in local waters and accompanied by steamed vegetables whose foamy treatment reminded me of WD-50 in New York. Rounding off the meal were two glasses of a richly hued and complex Blaufränkisch wine, redolent of cherries and forest berries, made from a variety of late ripening grapes grown in Austria since medieval times. This vintage could be a peerless ambassador for Austrian wines, or any organic red wines for that matter.

## AUSTRIAN WINE WORTH ITS SALT (CONTINUED)

The next day found me on a train to Klagenfurt, snaking through mountains past picturesque villages to the southern end of the country near the border with Slovenia and a few kilometers from Italy. I had sung Haydn's oratorio, *The Creation*, decades ago in Klagenfurt but when I arrived this time, absolutely nothing looked familiar. My taxi driver, a native of the city, spent the trip from train station to hotel pointing out pizzerias and trattorias while complaining that no one wanted to eat traditional Carinthian food anymore. Fortunately, that



was in store for me a few hours later at Bierhaus zum Augustin, a classic beer joint serving delicious but huge helpings of local fare to the locals who still crave it. I found Gösser Bier on tap, and enjoyed a *Seidl* (one-third liter) of their dark brew that is deeply flavorful and satisfying, like drinking a loaf of bread. The pork medallions I ordered were moist and delicious, accompanied by potato croquettes, Carinthia's answer to the French fry but superior at soaking up gravy.

My hotel in Klagenfurt turned out to be an architectural gem. Das Salzamt Palais Hotel Landhaushof (Salt Office Palace Hotel at the State House Courtyard) occupies a Renaissance era edifice that once housed the government salt exchange. The building has three stories of arcaded walkways ringed by former offices converted into hotel rooms. The atrium, now covered by a roof with glass skylight, is beautiful and evokes a time when the Salt Office was a beehive of activity facilitating the purchase and sale of salt for the entire region. Unfortunately, the décor in the atrium (also the breakfast room) was jarringly contemporary, and the recep-

tion area so run down I was convinced the taxi driver had dropped me at the wrong spot. As I struggled to help the receptionist locate my reservation and then the correct price of the room I had booked, I was reminded of the quaint expression the Austrians use in the face of Kafkaesque bureaucratic dysfunction, *man kann sich beim Salzamt beschweren*, or "go complain to the Salt Office." Here I was, living that futility at its source. When I finally made it to my room, it proved large and recently re-decorated with a sweeping view of the main square below. Too bad I would only be staying one night.

The next day, I set out toward Villach through mountain valleys and along the Wörther Lake to an industrial park for a meeting with my client. Ringed by tall mountains, this region of Austria is an industrial powerhouse where smokestacks dot the landscape, disproving tourists' preconceptions about the country being one giant ski resort.

The sunshine was brilliant but winter had not yet loosened its snowy grip as I found when I wandered through the pedestrian zone in Villach, rolling suitcase in tow, looking for a spot



## AUSTRIAN WINE WORTH ITS SALT (CONTINUED)

to eat lunch before catching the train back to Vienna. The day's menu posted outside the Goldenes Lamm offered an irresistible dish – pan seared duck breast. It was perfectly cooked, the meat slightly pink and served with a burgundy wine sauce on a bed of fragrantly spiced red cabbage, all accompanied by a glass of Blauer Zweigelt (a modern hybrid of Blaufränkisch and Saint Laurent grapes). My starter was a salad of grated potato and celery root, an ingredient I adore but rarely encounter. A post prandial walk up the hill and around the ancient parish church did me a world of good. As I headed back to the train station and the ride to Vienna, I stopped on the bridge across the Drava River to marvel at the beauty of the city and surrounding mountains bathed in winter sunshine.



The next day, Vienna afforded the experience I had dreamed of – a visit to the Kunsthistorisches (Art History) Museum. Posters and billboards around the city heralded the recent grand re-opening of the *Kunstkammer*, the gallery housing the treasures of the Habsburgs and showcasing Benevenuto Cellini's magnificent salt cellar (known as the *Saliera*). Swiped from its display case in 2003 (valued at US\$58 million) and recovered a few years later thanks to a text message and video surveillance from a cell phone store, this triumph of the goldsmith's art has been restored to its rightful place.

It was King Francis I of France who, in the mid-1600s, commissioned the elaborate vessel to hold what was then a very expensive and precious commodity reserved for the communal use of royal diners – salt. Considering the Habsburgs' ownership of salt mines and their monopoly on the sale of salt, it seems fitting that Francis' descendant, King Charles IX, bestowed the salt cellar on Archduke Ferdinand II, making it possible for the Habsburg nobility to pluck some of its revenue-generator from the world's most magnificent and expensive salt shaker. Another gift from that king is also in the museum. "The Unity of the State" is a grand tapestry created for Fontainebleau Palace and showing Francis I decked out in Roman-looking ceremonial garb while wearing a pair of curious booties with lions' faces on the front.

Since my last visit, the gallery has been completely re-done and, most importantly, the ambience is breathtaking with spotlights on each object affording the opportunity for detailed study of treasures including diminutive ivory carvings based on mythological themes, jewel-encrusted drinking cups, silver-gilt automatons, and oodles of cameos.

Cellini's Salt Cellar was even more exquisite than I remembered. Made of gold and other precious elements, it depicts the sea god Neptune next to a tiny bowl where the salt would be placed – metaphorically the bounty from the sea (rather than Austria's salt mines) as harvested along Italy's Mediterranean coastline. Paired with him is the goddess Tellus next to a receptacle for peppercorns – the bounty from the



## AUSTRIAN WINE WORTH ITS SALT (CONTINUED)

earth. The two figures recline away from one another, as if in a backyard spa. Approximately 11 inches by 11 inches, but presumably too heavy for diners to lift considering all the gold involved, the salt cellar rests on invisible ivory balls permitting it to be rolled back and forth on a table. Oh to be at a grand banquet where the Emperor sends the salt cellar careening in one's direction.

After wandering the Kunstkammer, I headed to the museum's wonderful café situated among the columns at the top of the grand staircase. I sat down across from another masterpiece, the case of magnificent pastries from which I chose a slice of scrumptious *Maximiliantorte* (layers of almond cake alternating with chocolate/nougat pastry cream named for the Habsburg Emperor) preceded by a light and delicious sandwich of smoked salmon and arugula on brioche. Restored and ready for more great art, I spent the balance of the afternoon in



the collection of Old Master paintings, reunited with the "friends" I had known intimately when free admission with my student i.d., coupled with luxurious central heating, made the museum a refuge on many a frigid winter afternoon during my student days living on nearby Burggasse.

The late afternoon sunshine beckoned me outdoors, as it did so many inhabitants of the city on one of those rare days when the gray gloom of wintertime lifts and everyone heads outside to enjoy the respite. I strolled through the Hofburg Palace complex on my way back to the hotel, recalling the ball I attended there and where I waltzed until dawn to the soaring melodies of Johann Strauss the Younger. A feast for the eyes, the huge double-headed eagle gleamed in the sunlight atop the Neue Burg, with the Austrian flag waving in the breeze.

That evening, my last in Vienna on this trip, was spent with friends Eva and Wolfgang Holzmaier. Eva is a translator and writer of fiction. Wolfgang and I were classmates at the Music Academy, students of the legendary Hilde Rössel-Majdan. In addition to being an opera singer and teaching at Salzburg's Mozarteum, Wolfgang is the consummate Lieder interpreter of our generation with dozens of CDs to his credit. His groundbreaking recording of Ernst Krenek's *Reisebuch aus den österreichischen Alpen* or *Travelogue of the Austrian Alps* evokes darker and more forbidding mountains than those I had admired the previous day in Villach. Had we taken our cue from a song on that CD, *Unser Wein* or *Our Wine*, we could have sympathized with Krenek's lament about Austrian wines being valued only by those who seek them out. For us to enjoy, Wolfgang had sought out a rare bottle of sparkling wine, a Riesling Brut, from the Szigeti winery in the Burgenland region near Hungary. We toasted Michael, my husband and usual travel partner, who was absent from this trip.

For dinner, we headed to Strandhaus, a fish restaurant in the Naschmarkt, Vienna's traditional open-air food market and now a mecca for fine eateries as well. There we feasted on mussels and on grilled fish accompanied by a Grüner Veltliner from the nearby Kremstal region where vineyards cover the hillsides encircling medieval villages nestled along the Danube River. It was a delightful evening of conversation with old friends, the intervening years melting away as we chatted about music and recalled our student days. Our final stop that

## AUSTRIAN WINE WORTH ITS SALT (CONTINUED)

evening was Wein & Co for the Holzmairs to send home with me a favorite red wine (Gager's Quattro) and chocolate (artisanal, from Zotter in Riegersburg) for Michael and me to enjoy.

The next morning I awoke to snow. As I sat by the window in the hotel's breakfast room, enjoying the strong coffee and freshly baked croissants (both originally appropriated from Turks as they retreated from outside the city's gates after a failed invasion back in the 17<sup>th</sup> century), memories came rushing back. Viennese winters had always seemed endless to me and the prospect of spring desired so desperately. I watched the snowflakes as they meandered earthward and then melted on the street amidst a dampness that chills to the bone. Unable to bolster the momentum for a real snowstorm they furnished an extra layer of misery for anyone trudging about.

With my bags already packed for heading to the airport that afternoon, I had just enough time to attend a Sunday morning service at the Vienna Community Church where I used to sing in the choir. The Baroque-era Reformierte Stadtkirche is one of the few Protestant churches, dating back to the Reformation, in this Catholic city. As I sat in the stiff wooden pew and admired anew the elaborate interior, I wondered if Mozart, who had performed in that same upstairs choir loft in close proximity to the "coffered" ceiling, had discovered its secret. What appeared to be intricate carving of recessed squares filled with rosettes, was in fact a triumph of trompe l'oeil painting on a curved surface and much less expensive than the real thing. I was startled from my reverie by



Louise and Anne, two fellow choristers from decades ago who remembered me and still attend this warm and welcoming sanctuary for English-speakers far from home.

As I bade them farewell and stepped out onto the Dorotheergasse I felt a crunch under my boot. Looking down, I saw that the icy sidewalk had been generously spread with rock salt. I chuckled at how this almost priceless substance, on which an empire had been built, was now just a throw-away item.

Schlosshotel Römischer Kaiser, Annagasse 16, A-1010 Wien, [www.hotel-roemischer-kaiser.at](http://www.hotel-roemischer-kaiser.at)  
 L. Heiner Hofzuckerbäcker, Kärntnerstrasse 21-23, A-1010 Wien, [www.heiner.co.at](http://www.heiner.co.at)  
 Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien, Maria-Theresien-Platz, A-1010 Wien, [www.khm.at](http://www.khm.at)

Wolfgang Holzmaier, Baritone, [www.wolfgangholzmaier.com](http://www.wolfgangholzmaier.com)

Eva Holzmaier's novel, *Mir träumte, du lägest im Grab.: Mord in der Grand Opéra*, is available from [Amazon.de](http://Amazon.de)

Next time, a brief visit to Bologna where a little dove re-invents classic dishes.

## RECALLING ICONS OF A BYGONE ERA ON A TRIP TO BOLOGNA

BY MERIL MARKLEY

Things did not start off well on a business trip to Bologna this past March. As I slid into the back seat of the taxi for the short ride from Aeroporto Guglielmo Marconi into the city and uttered the hotel's name and address in my halting Italian, the driver nailed my accent as American and informed me emphatically, in English, that "there's no such thing as *Spaghetti alla Bolognese* – it's an American invention!"

Okay, I thought, and strove to steer the conversation in another direction. I explained that while I had visited Italy a number of times, it was my first visit to the Emilia-Romagna region, birthplace of luxury sports cars, grand opera, world-class hams and cheeses, and so I was obsessed with trying local specialties during my two-day visit. What did he recommend? His tone changed instantly. It turned out that Daniele was a part-time sommelier, passionate about the region's foods and wines.

Daniele's culinary passions and recommendations revolved around *ragù alla bolognese*, the hearty sauce whose home is Bologna and which is thick and reddish brown from its base of meat (veal, pancetta) browned in butter with chopped carrot and onions, then cooked in beef broth. Variations can involve the addition of tomato purée and a bit of cream. Served over broad flat noodles such as *tagliatelle* or *pappardelle* (but never *spaghetti*), it is also the sauce layered into baked *lasagna*, another typical dish. By the time I alighted, we parted friends and I had a far better idea of what to eat and drink.



I met up with Paolo from UHY Rome and Mark from UHY Houston (albeit a transplant from Italy) in the lobby of UNA, a stylish yet reasonably priced business hotel across from the train station. We were joined by our client, Andrea, as host for the evening. From a small town not far from the city, Andrea had come to Bologna to study Finance at the city's famed University, the world's oldest (founded in 1088), and never left. He was raised speaking the local dialect dating from the time before the ancient Romans conquered the Etruscans and Celts already living in the region and exploiting its agricultural bounties. These remain at the heart of cooking and commerce in modern-day Bologna, Emilia-Romagna's capital.

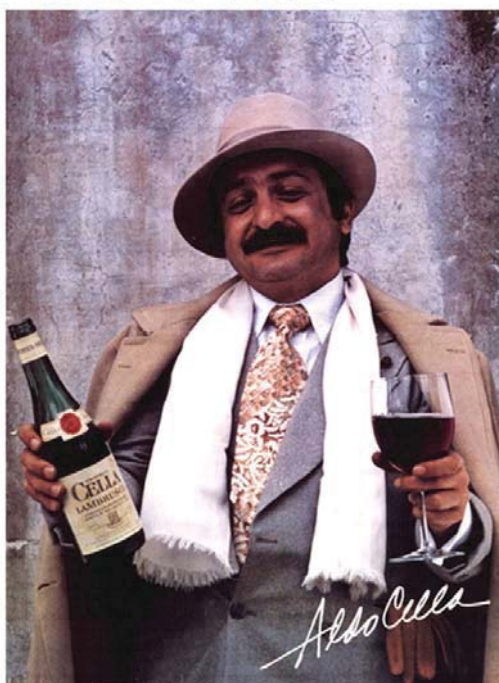
Anxious to show us some of his adopted home town, Andrea led us through the medieval city gate and into the 22 miles of Bologna's signature arcaded walkways that are set into the ground floor of buildings and separated from the street by broad archways. Even on a cold and rainy Sunday evening, Bologna's architecture was dazzling, especially the pair of tall stone towers, one leaning, the ancient churches and

## RECALLING ICONS OF A BYGONE ERA ON A TRIP TO BOLOGNA (CONTINUED)

broad plazas. Andrea provided a running commentary on all we were viewing. It was a tantalizing taste of a fascinating city and I regretted that my stay would be such a brief one.

We arrived at Vicolo Colombina hungry and ready for an evening of traditional Bolognese dishes with a modern spin. Since we had lots of work to do the next day, our wine intake was limited to one bottle. Andrea chose Lambrusco Canova from Fattoria Moretto. Dry, yet not too much so, this regional red wine, served a bit chilled, was slightly effervescent, pleasingly fruity, and utterly enjoyable.

### "CHILL-A-CELLA"



Our meal started with a traditional shared appetizer, a platter of cured meats including various hams and salamis from local artisans. On top were crumbled bits of *parmigiano reggiano* cheese so sweet and distinctive I longed for an entire plate of it.

As my first course, I had *lasagna*. Not the stuff of the pot-luck diners after high school choir practice, this *lasagna* was barely three-quarters of an inch high with nary a dollop of tomato paste or *ricotta* cheese in sight. Instead, it was comprised of delicate layers of broad noodles with cheese and a *ragù* made from white meats blended with chicken broth and cream, instead of *béchamel*. The flavors blended seamlessly and the slight toastiness of the cheese, from a final pass through the salamander, offered a bit of contrasting texture. It was superb.

As our main course, three out of four of us had the evening's special – slow-roasted guinea fowl on a bed of Swiss chard. The meat was tender and succulent, harmonizing nicely with the leafy vegetable and proving a deliciously different dish for this American visitor. The little dove (*colombina*) had lived up to her reputation as one of the most interesting places to eat in a city known for great eateries.

As we strolled back to the hotel, I reflected on how far Americans like me have evolved when it comes to appreciating Italian food and wine. Raised in an era when few knew *pasta* from *pesto*, we feasted

on spaghetti and meatballs slathered with sauce from a jar named Ragu and topped with parmesan cheese from a can, while watching on TV a dapper Aldo Cella in a Borsalino hat reminding us to "chill-a-Cella." I was in a far better place after an evening of authentic *ragù* and *lambrusco* in the region they call home.

Vicolo Colombina, Vicolo Colombina 5/B - 40123 Bologna, <http://www.vicolocolombina.it>

Next time, Camille Saint-Saëns accompanies a Paris shopping showcase.

## A CHRISTMAS CARNIVAL OF THE ANIMALS IN THE CITY OF LIGHT

BY MERIL MARKLEY

Over the course of the last 20+ years when my husband, Michael, and I have found ourselves in Paris at Christmastime, we have noticed a trend toward ever more elaborate decorations and light shows. December of 2013 offered the most lavish yet, combining feasts for the eyes and ears while capping memorable meals at beloved French institutions.

Paris' two major department stores or *grands magasins* on the Boulevard Hausmann, Galeries Lafayette and Au Printemps, battle each year for the most captivating Christmas display windows. The stores are architectural beauties in their own right with atriums below enormous stained glass domes. Built in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century amidst Baron Hausmann's clearing and redesign of Paris' Right Bank, the stores were the first to lease "departments" to fashion houses in what gave birth to the concept of the modern department store.

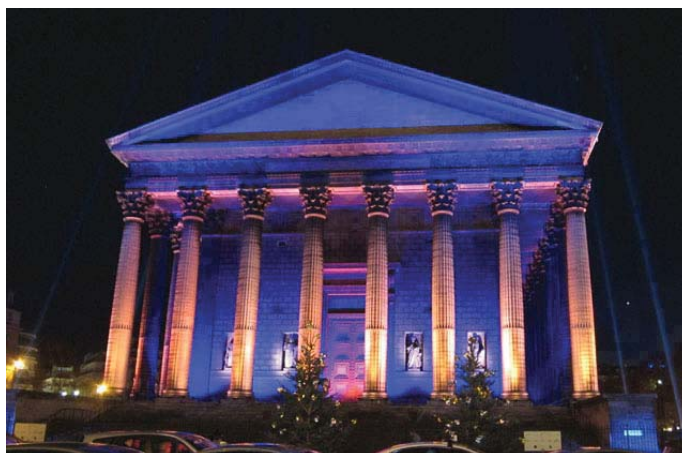


In this year's rivalry for window supremacy, Printemps prevailed with animated scenes designed and executed by just such a department – Prada. One window featured an ingenious workshop manned by industrious bears crafting miniature Prada purses. Another involved bears dressed in fashionable Prada dresses, sporting Prada sunglasses, and wielding candy canes as they danced the cancan. Our favorite involved polar bears in Prada winter outfits skiing, sledding, climbing a mountain, and soaring in cable cars, all to the accompaniment of classics by French composers.

Just when we thought it couldn't get any better, the loudspeakers switched to the

Aquarium section of Camille Saint-Saëns' *Carnival of the Animals*, which never fails to stir our hearts with its shimmering arpeggios. How delighted we were to hear France's great romantic period composer (who lived from 1835 to 1921) featured on this spot so close to the Church of Saint Mary Magdalene, known as the *Madeleine*, where he was organist for twenty years. Saint-Saëns had insisted that *Carnival*, perhaps his best-loved and most enduring work, not be published or performed until after his death for fear it would not be viewed as the output of a "serious" composer.

This Christmas season the enormous Madeleine church, designed in the style of a Roman temple, had its own elaborate light show highlighting architectural details and sculpture not generally visible since Saint-Saëns' time. Beams from giant spotlights intersected in the sky above, in the shape of the Star of Bethlehem. We could imagine Saint-Saëns strolling down Rue Tronchet to Boulevard Hausmann after a rehearsal at the church and nipping into Printemps for a bit of



## A CHRISTMAS CARNIVAL OF THE ANIMALS IN THE CITY OF LIGHT (CONTINUED)

shopping. We hope he would have delighted in seeing his church bathed in colored lights while hearing his music outside Printemps as part of a memorable Noël spectacle.

While Saint-Saëns preferred the swan among the animals featured in his *Carnival*, we were focused more on ugly ducklings for our culinary samplings around Paris, taking us to rendez-vous at two of the city's oldest eateries.

We had lunch with our friend Caroline at Le Bistrot des Halles, a short walk from her office at France's space agency by the huge construction site that stretches over the Chatelet-les-Halles Metro station and underground shopping center to the steps of Saint Eustache church. From the 12<sup>th</sup> century to 1971 this area was home to Paris' wholesale food market known as *Les Halles*. As a result, numerous eateries serving the freshest of meats and charcuterie dotted the landscape and a few, such as Le Bistrot des Halles, remain in what is now a neighborhood of offices and shops.

By the time we arrived, this diminutive temple of traditional dishes was already packed with hungry Parisians, but we were shoe-horned into a tiny spot at a table barely large enough to hold the *Salades Périgourdines* all three of us ordered. This duck-lover's delight was our default choice since the Bistrot had already sold out of the day's special, roasted duck breast. Our selection proved scrumptious – field greens, haricots verts, tomato, slices of smoked duck breast, all crowned with the most tantalizing slice of duck foie gras we had ever tasted. To accompany it we had a bottle of the day's featured wine, a Chinon (Jean-Mauice Raffault 2012 Les Galuches), the classic red wine of the Loire Valley. All around us, diners were digging into plates of other bistrot staples such as steak tartare and piles of fried potatoes. At the zinc counter doubling as a wine bar, regulars enjoyed a liquid lunch before heading back to the office.

Another memorable meal was provided by Le Vaudeville, a *brasserie* or brewery. This type of restaurant dates back to the Franco-Prussian War (1870) when beer-loving refugees from Alsace fled to Paris and opened eateries. Still somewhat casual, the *brasserie* is a notch above the *bistrot* or *bistro* in the French hierarchy of formality for establishments serving food.



Our friend and former long-time resident of Houston, Dominique, suggested Le Vaudeville for its great food and authentic décor dating back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Its name pays tribute to the theater called Le Vaudeville that once had a temporary location in the Salle de la Bourse across from the restaurant. It was in this famous theater that Giuseppe Verdi saw Alexandre Dumas' play, *La Dame aux Camélias*, which inspired one of the composer's greatest hits and perennial Paris favorites, *La Traviata*.

As an aperitif, we enjoyed a refreshing glass of Gewürtztraminer from the 200 year-old winery of Bestheim in Alsace. A *vendange tardive* or late harvest offering, it was crisp and mellow, with a sweetness that was intense but not cloying. Hands down, it was one of the best Alsatian wines we have ever tasted.

One of the joys of French restaurants is reading the detailed descriptions, verging on an entire recipe, of items on the menu. Le Vaudeville excels at this. For example, the guys started with soup – *velouté de lentillons de*

## A CHRISTMAS CARNIVAL OF THE ANIMALS IN THE CITY OF LIGHT (CONTINUED)

*Champagne, crème fouettée au foie gras de canard, croûtons dorés.* The main ingredients of lentils, duck liver, and cream all blended perfectly in a texture so smooth that no single flavor was dominant – like a symphony by Saint-Saëns.

For the main course there were many temptations but all three of us opted for veal liver with a subtle sauce of parsley, garlic and aged vinegar – *foie de veau français poêlé en persillade, vinaigre d’Orléans “Vielle Réserve” et purée de pommes de terre à la fleur de sel.* The liver was delicately breaded and pan-fried to pink perfection, accompanied by a purée of potatoes. A seemingly mundane dish, these mashed potatoes were a stand-out due to the intense flavor of the variety of potato (which no one could identify) and inclusion of generous amounts of creamy and flavorful French butter as well as the special finish known as “flower of salt” (that we learned more about from a TV show on Air France on the way home). We washed it all down with a *pichet* of red Bordeaux, a great alternative to ordering a whole bottle. Michael was the only one who opted for dessert, but it was a doozy and the best of the trip – a chocolate, raspberry and salted caramel extravaganza described as

*croquante feuillantine à grand cru de chocolat Manjari et framboises, caramel laitier à la fleur de sel.*

After the meal, we bundled up and strolled back to our hotel along the Rue du Quatre-Septembre, a street commemorating a key date in the Franco-Prussian War. It empties onto the Place de L’Opéra where flood lights illuminated the magnificent Opéra Garnier in its Neo-Baroque splendor. A feast for the senses, Paris knows better than any city on earth how to enchant visitors and keep them coming back with a hunger and a thirst for more.



Le Bistrot des Halles, 15 Rue des Halles, 75001 Paris (no website)

Le Vaudeville, 29 rue Vivienne, 75002 Paris <http://www.vaudevilleparis.com>

Next time, bingeing on *Modernismo* in Barcelona.

## UP IN SMOKE IN GAUDÍ'S BARCELONA

BY MERIL MARKLEY

Ever since Dr. Olga Colli's Spanish classes in high school, when I first glimpsed Antoni Gaudí's *Basilica de la Sagrada Família* in the ALM textbook, I have longed to visit Barcelona and experience this remarkable church first-hand. Little did I dream that the same textbook had a similar impact on my husband, Michael, although we studied Spanish at different times and in different states. It wasn't until we were planning our annual business trip to France, and decided to make a side-trip somewhere within a two-hour flight radius of Paris, that we hit on Barcelona. We discovered that the photo in our textbook had ignited a lifelong desire to visit the massive Modernismo church framed by tall, slim towers designed and built (or at least started) by this enigmatic Catalan architect and engineer. Surely, we presumed, five days would be sufficient to visit all of Gaudí's magnificent buildings in the city he called home, while we enjoyed a host of regional tapas and wines. How wrong we were.



The morning following our arrival, we set off for the Basilica and opted not only for a ticket admitting us to the church but also one for the elevator ride to the top of the Passion Tower, close to 500 feet tall. Begun in 1872 when Gaudí was just 31 years old, the Basilica was his passion for the next 43 years. He lived and worked at the site while taking on a host of other commissions in the city and the region. Still unfinished when he was killed by a streetcar in 1926, construction stalled for almost three decades, taken up again in 1954, but still not complete as evidenced by the presence of numerous tower cranes.



Taking inspiration from shapes Gaudí observed in nature, the nave is breathtaking in its height of some 245 feet, framed by pillars that branch upward like tree trunks and are crowned by semicircular shapes with zigzag edges resembling giant leaves. Despite the massive elements supporting this tallest of churches, sunlight filtered through enormous skylights in the ceiling and massive windows in the walls imparted lightness and a mystical intensity as we wandered the nave and apse.

The ride to the top of the Passion Tower in the tiny elevator, admitting only four people plus the operator, is not for the claustrophobe. Thankfully, Michael resisted the urge to ask how often it got stuck until after we had spent a tortuous five minutes on the tower's vertigo-inducing sky-high walkway and descended safely to earth. "About twice a month" was the operator's response, "but no one has ever been hurt." "Just scared to death!" we muttered as we returned to the nave and gave thanks for surviving the journey.

Our intention had been to visit all of the Gaudí buildings within the city's limits but we fell hopelessly short of our goal. There was just too much to explore and admire in the first few we encountered, as we expended precious time on scholarly exhibits and fascinating interactive displays about Gaudí's designs and construction techniques. Our pace slowed to a crawl.

## UP IN SMOKE IN GAUDÍ'S BARCELONA (CONTINUED)



Casa Batlló

Even the gift shops were marvels, chock-full of scholarly information about Gaudí and the Modernismo movement in Catalonia in addition to coffee mugs and t-shirts emblazoned with iconic Gaudí chimneys.

We loved that residential commissions such as La Pedrera apartment building (also known as the Milà), the Casa Batlló and the Palau Güell encouraged poking around from basement to roof and examining countless decorative details such as door knobs, window frames, and lighting fixtures, as well as pieces of furniture that Gaudí had designed along with the buildings housing them. How could one man have had the imagination and the engineering ability to create all these things in just one lifetime?

What intrigued us especially were the eclectic designs of the chimneys atop these buildings. More than just tubes through which smoke escapes, these are artistic triumphs in their own right. Some resembled clusters of medieval helmeted soldiers, others fir trees, and still others papier-mâché clown hats. All command attention and dazzle visitors with their colorful, almost whimsical designs, on rooftops whose undulating surface makes clambering about challenging.

In between visits to Gaudí's masterpieces, we found time for tapas and regional wines at eateries around the city. We grew to adore the variety and creativity of tapas on a visit to Madrid some years back, so the chance to experience the Catalan take on these small, satisfying dishes proved irresistible. As a coastal city, Barcelona offered a wealth of seafood-themed tapas

including what turned out to be our favorite – octopus prepared in numerous ways.

The most memorable selection of tapas was at El Puchero de Baralántra, a tiny establishment catty-corner from our hotel and, thankfully, open on a Sunday evening when we wanted to celebrate Michael's birthday with our friend from France, Pierre, who was working in Barcelona. Guided by our knowledgeable and charismatic waiter, José, our favorite offering turned out to be *tacos de filete de ternera al Roquefort* – succulent strips of roasted veal in a creamy sauce of Roquefort cheese. Less rich but equally memorable were the *pimientos al padrón* – sweet green peppers the size of jalapeños but without the heat, roasted to perfection and sprinkled with sea salt. We were unable to resist a staple of tapas cuisine that found its pinnacle at El Puchero – *patatas bravas* – little discs of potatoes fried to perfection and smothered in aioli. To accompany these and other dishes we enjoyed a local red



Chimneys at La Pedrera

## UP IN SMOKE IN GAUDÍ'S BARCELONA (CONTINUED)



wine, a blend of cabernet sauvignon and tempranillo from the Raimat winery in the Costers del Segre region of Catalonia.

We found Barcelona a richly cosmopolitan place with the perfect winter-time climate, sunny but not too cold. This city demands strolling, not just on the wide boulevards such as Las Ramblas, but the side streets and small parks as well. The only drawback is the scourge of petty thieves, characterized by the locals as gypsies, who prey on tourists using elaborate schemes and misdirection designed to separate us from purses, wallets, and jewelry. If only all that creativity had been invested in legitimate enterprise, the EU's economic woes would vanish! Fortunately, we were provided with a one-page summary of chicaneries when we checked in at the Hotel Dante. The thug who surreptitiously threw a wad of goop on Michael's jacket and then "volunteered" to wash it off was befuddled by our lack of valuables and eventually ambled off in search of more lucrative prey. Without the hotel's warning and carefully securing our valuables, our entire trip might have gone up in smoke.

Restaurante El Puchero de Baralantra - Muntaner 103 (corner of Mallorca), 08036 Barcelona – [www.elpucherodebaralantra.com](http://www.elpucherodebaralantra.com)

Hotel Dante, Mallorca, 181, 08036 Barcelona – [www.bestwesterndante.com](http://www.bestwesterndante.com)

Next time, a visit to a best-kept secret with a resurgent wine industry.

## CROSSING MALTA OFF THE LIST

BY MERIL MARKLEY



As our Alitalia flight took off from Rome's Leonardo da Vinci Airport for the hour-and-a-quarter trip to Malta, we could not help but overhear the American in the row behind us telling a fellow passenger he would be in Malta for less than 24 hours, just stopping in so he could check it off the list of countries he wanted to visit. He had already been to 131, along with the North and South Poles, and was planning to make Malta number 132. Now that we have been there too, and heard Malta described repeatedly as "the Mediterranean's best kept secret," we can only despair at what

he missed on such a short visit. Ours was four times longer but still not enough time to discover all that this fascinating country offers, including its wines, and to know that it shouldn't be a secret at all.

While the island of Malta, largest of five islands comprising the country of Malta, is just 96 square miles with a population of slightly over 400,000 and with a history dating back to 7000 B.C., it was the Knights of Malta who really put it on the map. And that spot on the map, strategically positioned between Sicily and the coast of North Africa, proved a challenge to the Knights and subsequent defenders as recently as World War II. Malta has been a coveted piece of real estate since prehistoric times for anyone seeking to dominate the Mediterranean including the Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, French, British, and Germans. A part of the British Empire from 1814 to 1964, Malta is an independent country and, since 2004, a member of the European Union.

It was the ancient Phoenicians who gave Malta its start in the wine business and the Knights of Malta who ensured its permanence with members of the Order bringing cuttings from their original homes in France, Italy, and Spain. But after the Knights' complete expulsion from the island in 1798 by Napoleon, who decided to stop by and conquer Malta on his way to Egypt, arable land was given over to other items such as cotton. Wine was still produced in Malta but using grapes imported from Italy until late in the last century when traditional grape varieties such as Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Grenache, as well as a local grape called Gellewza, were planted and an indigenous wine industry was reborn. Production of red, white, and sparkling wines remains limited, but we enjoyed some remarkable reds. The best was the Melquart from the Meridiana Wine Estate of Ta' Qali just below Mdina, the favorite of David Pace, head of UHY Malta and our conference host whose exhortations to visit him in Malta over the last seven years finally paid off. Sadly, visiting a winery was not in the cards for us during this trip.



Moira and David Pace

## CROSSING MALTA OFF THE LIST (CONTINUED)



The Knights of Malta were originally known as the Knights of St. John or the Knights Hospitaller for their religious military order established to care for pilgrims in the Holy Land at the time of the Crusades, and for the hospital they established in Jerusalem and dedicated to St. John the Baptist. Malta wasn't their first headquarters and likely not their first choice, but after the last Christian stronghold in the Holy Land was defeated in 1291, and then establishing themselves on Rhodes only to be defeated again in 1523 by the Turks, they were granted Malta by King Charles I of Spain in 1530 in exchange for the annual gift of a Maltese Falcon (bestowed to this day).

Included in Spain's Viceroyalty of Sicily, moving the Knights to Malta was part of Charles' grand plan to keep the Mediterranean quiet while Spain focused on conquest of the New World. The Turks didn't buy this, though, and set about trying to conquer Malta in 1565 both by land and by sea. But the Knights held out, just barely, and repelled the Turkish invasion. To celebrate their victory, they built the city of Valletta, now the capital of Malta and named for the Order's Grand Master and leader throughout the Turkish siege, Jean de la Vallette. A magnificent city of light-colored limestone and one of the modern world's first master-planned communities, it sits on a hill overlooking the Grand Har-

bor with commanding views in all the directions from which an invasion might come. Narrow streets channel cool sea breezes and open out onto wide plazas, all of which are jam-packed on the 15 or so days a month when giant cruise ships dock and their passengers besiege the city's landmarks.

For a country with such a small population, the architectural and artistic riches are beyond all expectations. In particular, there is the Co-Cathedral of St. John the Baptist in central Valletta. Built as the main place of worship for the Knights and recently restored and re-gilded, it is overwhelming in scale and richness of ornament. On either side of the central area or nave are chapels dedicated to each of the *langues* or language groups through which the Order, with members hailing from all over Europe, was administered. Throughout the chapels are sculptures and other monuments to the Knights and their Grand Masters. Spanning the entire length of the vaulted ceiling is an enormous fresco depicting scenes from the life of St. John, rich in trompe l'oeil effects and painted in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century by Mattia Preti. The floor of the Cathedral is comprised of tombstones in *pietra dura* for over 400 Knights, each with a brief dedication including name, noble lineage, heraldry, and accomplishments of the individual whose remains rest below it.

Off to one side of the building is the Oratory. A huge and elaborate room for private prayer, it was built in the early 1600s after the completion of the main part of the Cathedral. The possibility of lucrative commissions attracted Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, the gifted painter whose bad boy reputation had gotten him into trouble back home in Milan, Rome, and Naples, especially after being accused of killing a man in a fight. Legend has it that to grease the skids, so to speak, after arriving in Valletta he painted *St. Jerome in His Study* and gave the saint a face closely resembling the Grand Master's. Eventually he joined the Order and landed the commission to paint the *Beheading of Saint John* as the centerpiece of the Oratory.

## CROSSING MALTA OFF THE LIST (CONTINUED)

We have always admired Caravaggio and his flair for the dramatic while keeping things a bit off balance visually, especially when it comes to the placement of figures and use of light and shadow. He excelled at including elements which might seem out of place, such as the dirty soles of a shepherd's feet in a Nativity scene, or a partially carved roast chicken. In stories from the Bible, it is as if he comes upon the scene and freezes it in oils at the most dramatic moment. Whether it's the *Supper at Emmaus* when the diners realize it is Christ sitting at their table, or the *Conversion of St. Paul* when the future saint lies sprawled under his horse on the road to Damascus, there is no want of theater. And so my husband, Michael, and I were looking forward to seeing Caravaggio's enormous depiction of the beheading of St. John, the only painting signed by the artist -- drawn out in the rivulet of blood that has spurted from the saint's neck as a servant bends over with a platter ready to scoop up the soon-to-be-severed head. Sadly, we couldn't get as close to the painting as we had hoped. But it was enough just to glimpse it from afar in the room where the genius created his masterpiece before getting into trouble again, landing in prison, and eventually dying just shy of 37 on his way back to Rome to accept a pardon from the Pope.



As we turned to leave the Oratory, we noticed one of the tombstones in the floor. It depicted a rabbit soaring over what looked like a cityscape of Valletta and reminded us of what we had learned about Maltese cuisine. An island with little agricultural land, sources of animal protein had been limited to creatures smaller than cows and pigs. Rabbit had proved the meat of choice and is celebrated in *Stuffat Tal-Fenek* the national dish of rabbit stew. We didn't try it during our stay but countless restaurants offered it.

Instead we focused on the bounty from the sea on the evening when we dined with French friends Muriel and Raymond at Sale e Pepe, a small, family-owned Italian restaurant overlooking the harbor at Porto Maso. Being French, Muriel was concerned about whether the fish would really be fresh but our waiter brought out a tray of specimens caught that morning from which we could choose. We selected turbot and grouper to be poached on a bed of potatoes, mussels, and clams – a winning combination in a perfumed broth accompanying the moist and flaky fish. Much as we loved our main courses, we had to admit that the starter of *fritto misto* involved the abso-

## CROSSING MALTA OFF THE LIST (CONTINUED)

lute best squid any of us had ever tasted. A cliché of rubberiness in thick breading and inevitably served with a marinara sauce, *calamari* are something we typically avoid in the U.S. So the delicately breaded, fried, and utterly tender squid and vegetables, served with a tartar sauce rich in capers and with a slight peppery zing from anchovy paste, proved a culinary highlight of our visit to Malta.

If Malta is the Med's best kept secret, we shared over dinner what we knew was the best kept secret within the secret – a set of tapestries. Spaniard Ramón Perellos y Roccaful commissioned a set of 29 gigantic tapestries from weavers in Brussels, based on designs by Peter Paul Rubens, as his gift to the Co-Cathedral upon election as Grand Master in 1697. Subjects ranging from New Testament themes to allegories of a Catholic Church triumphant comprise the world's largest complete set of tapestries. Originally hung from the cornices along either side of the nave, a few are on display in the Cathedral's museum while others are rolled up along the walls in other rooms, apparently just having come back from the restorers. Our jaws dropped as we beheld these masterpieces of the weaver's art, surpassing all others we have seen in terms of virtuosic depictions of flames, pools of water, and stunning effects of textures such as glass, armor, furs, and silks. Regrettably, no photos are permitted and nary a book or even a postcard is to be found in the museum's shop. We have only our memories and a couple of photos available on the Co-Cathedral's website, so it looks as though this secret will be kept.

Less secret but equally noteworthy was the Palace Armoury, a museum located in the Grand Master's Palace and one of the largest collections of armor still housed in its original building. It offers a sizeable selection of the Knights' armor and weapons including huge and richly ornamented cannons used in the Siege of Malta and later battles as well as suits of armor worn on ceremonial occasions. We had the opportunity to visit with the Curator, Robert Cassar, and we found him an inspiration as we learned of his passion for preserving Malta's artistic heritage and his dedication to conserving the collection while expanding the museum in the coming years. He was able to divulge at least one secret to us – that the dents appearing to be evidence of a direct hit by a musket ball on some of the breastplates were really just the result of the maker's bravado in demonstrating the armor's toughness to a prospective user.



On our last sightseeing foray, to the ancient towns of Mdina and Rabat, we found a location that should definitely not be a secret. Searching for a place to have a relaxing gourmet lunch, we came upon the Xara Palace Hotel. Unfortunately for us, its restaurant was closed for the day due to a wedding taking place at the hotel that afternoon, but we enjoyed looking around the property and marveling at the magnificent antique décor. The possibility of staying in Mdina's only hotel and enjoying the quiet at nighttime of the deserted town that was the former headquarters of the Knights of Malta, are reason enough to return.

As we headed to the plane on our final day in Malta, including the obligatory exit through the Duty Free store, we stopped to chat with Carlo in the wine department and selected his favorite Maltese red, Marnisi from the Marsovin vineyard, to take back with us to Rome. Free samples of Bajtra Liqueur, a pleasing nectar made from the local prickly pear cactus, led us to pick up a bottle of that as well.

## CROSSING MALTA OFF THE LIST (CONTINUED)

Not ready to cross Malta off any list, we're anxious to go back and experience what we missed, including the rabbit stew.

Saint John's Co-Cathedral, St. John Street, Valletta, <http://stjohnscocathedral.com/the-collections/flemish-tapestries.html>

The Palace Armoury, The Grandmaster's Palace, Palace Square, Valletta, <https://heritagemalta.org/the-palace-armoury/>

Sale e Pepe, Porto Maso Marina, St. Julian's, <https://www.themarinarestaurants.com/restaurants/saleepepe>

Next time, discovering the bounties of the Campania region while avoiding the staples of Naples.

## AVOIDING THE STAPLES OF NAPLES

BY MERIL MARKLEY

At a recent business seminar, I was struck by the comments of a public company CEO. “Whenever someone tries to excuse their failure to complete an assignment by claiming that ‘I didn’t have enough time,’ I tell them time wasn’t the problem; they failed in setting priorities.” Looking back on our visit to Naples this past May, our priorities were fine. That our assignment remains incomplete is a compelling reason to return to this enchanting ancient metropolis in the shadow of the volcano and to allow more time to discover remarkable foods, wines, and cultural treasures.



The plan for Naples was hatched on a frigid winter afternoon this past February as a belated homework assignment from a beloved teacher, Eugene A. Carroll, Professor Emeritus of Art History at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York. As my husband, Michael, and I stood in Eugene’s study surrounded by the books amassed during more than a half century of scholarship, I was intrigued by the image on his computer monitor. It was *Portrait of a Young Man* by Giovanni Battista di Jacopo (1494-1540), known as il Rosso Fiorentino or the redhead from Florence. Eugene was writing about it for the website he is creating. It is dedicated to this Italian artist who crossed the Alps to France and spent a decade at the court of King Francis I, transforming Fontainebleau Castle outside Paris from rustic hunting lodge to sumptuous showcase of Renaissance design. As we discovered, this portrait involved several enigmas and mysteries including the origin of a Turkish carpet depicted so exactly in the foreground as a symbol of the sitter’s wealth and sophistication.

Since we were going to be in Rome in May on business anyway, why not make a side-trip to Naples with a visit to Rosso’s portrait in the Museo di Capodimonte to check as eyewitnesses several details for the project? It sounded like a fun assignment until days before our departure from Houston when we received bad news from Eugene. The picture was in Florence for a special exhibit and wouldn’t return home for several months. But with so many other things to see in Naples, we stuck to our original itinerary and headed for the Mezzogiorno, Italy’s fabled south.

We regretted that decision almost immediately after arriving on the high-speed train from Rome, when the taxi deposited us at a doorway huge enough to admit a carriage or several riders abreast on horseback. Above it a banner proclaimed “Decumani Hotel de Charme.” A bucket-full of something, ejected from an upper-story window across the street, had only just missed us while we alighted from the cab in a street so narrow it was barely possible to open the taxi’s doors. We made our way into the darkened courtyard, our attention attracted by noisy flapping of wings. We looked upward and saw boarded-up windows with pigeons flying in and out through gaping holes. Finally, we spotted an arrow pointing toward a stairway and the elevator to the second floor where the part of the building occupied by the hotel is located. I looked at Michael skeptically, suppressing the urge to panic. Had Trip Advisor steered me wrong, for the first time ever, and lulled me into booking the Neapolitan equivalent of a flop-house? With little sleep since leaving Houston the previous afternoon, we decided to give it a shot and consider an alternative the next morning, if we survived the night!

## AVOIDING THE STAPLES OF NAPLES (CONTINUED)

Dragging our bags out of the tiny lift, we were surprised (and relieved) to find a bright and modern reception area staffed by welcoming and helpful young Neapolitans eager to share their hotel and their city with us. Getting to our room meant following Elena along a lengthy corridor leading through the magnificent breakfast room that had been the reception hall for the archbishop whose residence the building once comprised. Not only was our room spacious and filled with antique furniture ingeniously adapted for use in modern lodgings, but the bed proved the most comfortable one on which we have ever slept. So much for first impressions, a lesson learned throughout our stay when run-down and graffiti-covered exteriors masked treasures within.

Thanks to Elena's suggestion as well as her reassurance that the darkened streets were perfectly safe, we strolled around 100 yards toward the Spaccanapoli, the main drag splitting the city in two, to eat at Pulcinella Bistro before collapsing from jet lag. The restaurant, housed in a former museum dedicated to the plump and beloved figure from the *Comedia dell'Arte*, was small and with its kitchen located downstairs. As we were a bit early for dinner by Italian standards, we had the chance to visit with owner Eduardo. He explained that the bistro was new, dedicated to the freshest of ingredients from the Campania region and to the bounty from the Mediterranean. Since Eduardo's English was on a par with my halting Italian, our lingua franca became French as we learned that the years Eduardo spent working in Southern France had inspired him to open this restaurant dedicated to all but what Naples is renowned for – pizza.



His recommendation for a full-bodied red from the area resulted in the most enjoyable wine of the trip – Paestum Rosso 2011 from the Fratis vineyard – a tribute to the site of several ancient Greek temples south of Naples. As the wine breathed, we feasted on an *amuse-bouche* highlighting the seasonal delicacy of fried zucchini blossoms stuffed with an herb-infused cheese mousse. My main course was *scialiatelli* (typical noodles of the region) with mussels and more zucchini blossoms. The pasta was rich and chewy (in a good way) while the mussels lent their liquor to the light, wonderfully perfumed sauce.

A salad of arugula with *bresaola* (cured beef), topped with intensely flavorful tomatoes grown in the rich volcanic soil on the slopes of Mount Vesuvius and curls of pungent cheese, rounded things off. Michael opted for potato-encrusted *bronzino*, the intense flavor owing to small discs of fried potato encasing the delicate and savory fish. Continuing his decades-long and thorough investigation into the desserts of Italy, Michael pronounced the *tiramisu* the best he had ever tasted, owing to an artisanal mascarpone cheese whose flavor was not overpowered by other ingredients such as chocolate and coffee. We loved the

## AVOIDING THE STAPLES OF NAPLES (CONTINUED)

food and wine so much that we ate at Pulcinella Bistro all three nights we were in Naples.

As we quickly found, the area within a 15-minute walk of the Decumani Hotel is full of history, museums, churches, and shops whose windows offer renditions of Mount Vesuvius in pastry, chocolate, plastic, and gelato. We didn't see the legendary volcano itself until a drive up the hillside to the Capodimonte Park, the one-time hunting preserve of the Bourbon rulers where the impressive Museo di Capodimonte is housed in a huge palace completed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

We had taken along on our trip Robert Edsel's *Saving Italy*, the account of the Monuments Men responsible for preserving ancient buildings as well as rescuing works of art comprising Italy's patrimony while World War II raged around them. While we strolled the quiet galleries, almost completely devoid of visitors, we wished the paintings could tell us of their harrowing journeys to secret hiding places in castles and monasteries, of hasty departures stacked like so many loaves of bread in the back of military trucks dodging bomb craters and sniper fire. Yet here they hung in this secure refuge surrounded by the park whose towering oak trees contribute to a sense of peace and timelessness. That so many people had risked so much to preserve them made these works all the more precious to us.

The paintings of Titian, Caravaggio, and other Italian masters, as well as an exhibit of Urbinoware, were dazzling. A huge room was devoted to a collection of tapestries commemorating the Battle of Pavia in 1525 when

King Francis I of France, Rosso's future patron, was not only defeated but captured by the Spanish forces in the ascendancy on the peninsula of a not yet unified Italy. But Francis ultimately snatched a symbolic victory from the jaws of defeat by having not only Rosso but also Leonardo da Vinci in his employ. From the latter's estate the king purchased the Mona Lisa and hung it in Fontainebleau Palace. Did he envision that this painting he found so mesmerizing would someday reside in one of his other palaces, the Louvre, and have a similar effect on millions of visitors each year from all over the world?

Famished from spending most of the day in the Museum, we were ready for a late lunch. With the help of the App from TripAdvisor.com we were able to eliminate all the pizza joints near our hotel and peruse the menu at Ecomesarà, another gem of a restaurant devoted to local ingredients and featuring wines from the region. The last of the luncheon patrons was departing as we arrived. We spent the next several hours enjoying the food and talking with owner Cristiano, a former boat captain from Capri, whose love of food and wine led him to open this stylish restaurant on the Via Santa Chiara near the entrance to that church's famous gardens.



## AVOIDING THE STAPLES OF NAPLES (CONTINUED)

It's not often we see goose breast on a menu and so Michael could not resist it. Pan-seared with green peppercorns, it was served with a carrot sauce and tomato confit. I opted for *lasagnetta* with strawberries, shrimp, and pistachios from their hometown of Bronte in Sicily. The *lasagnetta* was light and scrumptious, constructed of delicate layers of *crêpes* instead of pasta. For dessert, Michael had *cassata al forno*, which we could term "cheese cake" but which would not begin to do justice to this traditional confection from southern Italy involving baked ricotta cheese, brilliantly reinterpreted at Ecomesarà. We loved the food so much that we returned for lunch the next day, enjoying noodles tossed with fresh marjoram, zucchini, and a special cheese from Sorrento, plus more *cassata*, before catching the high-speed train for the hour-long trip back to Rome.



Rosso Fiorentino's *Portrait of a Young Man* will eventually make its way back to Naples and so, we hope, will we, with the chance to complete our homework assignment and enjoy more of what this captivating corner of Italy has to offer.

Decumani Hotel de Charme, Via San Giovanni Maggiore Pignatelli, 15, [www.decumani.com](http://www.decumani.com)

Pulcinella Bistro, Via San Giovanni Maggiore Pignatelli <http://pulcinellabistro.com/> (corner of Via Benedetto Croce and Spaccanapoli)

Ecomesarà Ristorante, Via Santa Chiara, 49, [www.ecomesararistorante.it](http://www.ecomesararistorante.it)

Next time, stuck in La Belle Epoque and loving it.

## PARIS AT A SNAIL'S PACE

BY MERIL MARKLEY

Our recent wintertime visit to Paris got off to an inauspicious start when the sniffles I arrived with progressed into a nasty respiratory infection. As a result, we had to lighten our hectic schedule of meetings with antique dealers and museum curators in between pilgrimages to *Les Puces de Saint-Ouen*, the world's largest antiques market. Our relaxed pace proved enjoyable, leading to the discovery of a wonderful old eatery in the heart of the Right Bank and affording us time to drink an entire bottle of wine at lunch.

Instead of our usual and preferred means of transport – zipping around on the *Métro* below streets clogged by perpetual traffic jams – we strolled the avenues and boulevards like *flâneurs* from the *Belle Époque* and reveled in the sights and sounds. Again and again we passed shops we'd never seen before and whose main products were bagels and cupcakes. Why, we asked ourselves, when Paris already offers some of the most delectable objects ever to emerge from an oven, would anyone buy these distinctly American items that even McCafé does not sell? We despaired that the interlopers might displace *baguettes* and *croissants* but found hope in recalling the chocolate chip cookie invasion of a quarter century ago, which faded away as swiftly as last season's couture.

Our annual trips to Paris mean a chance to savor beloved dishes from our list of favorite haunts, which grows lengthier and more daunting with each visit. My husband, Michael, is passionate about French cuisine of all sorts, from superb duck breast sampled at the temples of gastronomy in Paris and Lyon to whole chickens served up in rural market towns from glass-sided box trucks fitted with rotisserie ovens emitting the irresistible fragrance of roasting poultry. While Michael is a formidable cook, adventuresome eater, and relentless when it comes to chasing down beloved dishes, I am happily along for the ride. And so it was that we uncovered a new favorite spot. And, as often happens, the discovery was accidental.

Miryam, on duty at our hotel's front desk, is accustomed to fielding all sorts of tourist entreaties. She overheard Michael's laments upon learning that *parmentier de canard* was no longer available at Les Caprices de Charlotte, our beloved breakfast-through-dinner-and-great-pastry-anytime eatery on the corner. Named for Antoine-Augustin Parmentier, who championed cooking with potatoes back when they were exotic tubers new to European cooks, *parmentier de canard* is a stick-to-your-ribs wintertime casserole of duck and puréed potatoes. Miryam's internet sleuthing yielded a bistro, just off the Place de la Concorde, whose website proclaimed *parmentier de canard* among its specialties. We decided to amble over and check it out.



As often happens in France, websites tout information as a digital billboard but are rarely updated. On arriving, we learned that the bistro didn't offer *parmentier de canard* anymore and so Michael rattled off a catalogue of other traditional favorites in the hope that one of them might be available.

## PARIS AT A SNAIL'S PACE (CONTINUED)

Eric, the enthusiastic manager, latched onto one item on the list – *ris de veau* (veal sweetbreads) – in the hope of salvaging things. No, the bistro didn't offer this dish but a sister eatery where he was also a manager, L'Escargot Montorgueil (the snail on Montorgueil Street), was open seven days a week and prepared it every day.

We kept this in mind as we headed out the next morning for some serious shopping, but not of the fashion variety. Our destination was the BHV with a plan for lunch afterward at L'Escargot Montorgueil, a ten-minute walk away.

The BHV or *Bazar de l'Hôtel de Ville* is a French department store located by City Hall and whose basement houses a home improvement and sundries store like no other, spanning a city block. They even stock all the supplies needed for home wine-making – except the grapes. We spent hours enjoying the impressive array of products and chatting with the knowledgeable staff about electrical issues Michael was hoping to resolve for renovating antique chandeliers. While he didn't find the light bulb adapter he was seeking, I snared a pair of violet leather shoelaces I'd been stalking for years. Such is the typical BHV story and why this one-of-a-kind em-



porium should be on every tourist itinerary. Emerging from the basement into brilliant winter sunshine, like snails peering out of our shells, we were ready for lunch.

Located just steps from the Châtelet-Les-Halles transport and shopping hub that was previously the location of the city's central food market and slaughter houses since medieval times, L'Escargot Montorgueil dates back to 1832 when Paris' most popular restaurants surrounded the market area and offered items such as *ris de veau* routinely. Dedication to

serving offal and utilizing all of a slaughtered animal was at the heart of these eateries, pre-dating the "whole hog" or "nose-to-tail" movements of the last decade.

On this first visit, we were seated on the second floor by the top of a narrow spiral staircase at a little table from where we could observe the restaurant's devotion to snails. This included the giant gold ones outside the front window, the tinier gold ones in the pattern of the carpet, and the designs etched onto the water glasses. Best of all were the plates of *escargots*, borne skillfully up the stairs by the staff and destined for eager diners, trailing an intense aroma of garlic butter which engulfed us as we perused the menu.

I'm not a snail eater and am squeamish about the whole process of purging, killing, removal from the shell and eventually inserting snail meat back into a shell for cooking. But Michael adores them. He started with a plate of six, prepared the traditional way with garlic butter and a bit of white wine and parsley, based on a recipe dating back to the founding of L'Escargot Montorgueil. Wielding like a pro the contraption for holding the snail shell and the short slender fork for extracting the meat, he deftly captured every morsel and pronounced the snails superb.

But how to explain this French obsession with snails? Other snail sightings on our walks through the city included *escargots* displayed in bakery windows. Spiral-shaped and made from dough with raisins, they resemble American cinnamon buns.

## PARIS AT A SNAIL'S PACE (CONTINUED)

Even the Louvre contributed, exhibiting a 17<sup>th</sup> century still life by Abraham Mignon where the tiny gastropod is portrayed among lavish banquet-makings amassed in a grotto.



Considered meek, lazy, and a garden pest in our times, snails enjoyed a more ferocious reputation in the Middle Ages when, along the borders of numerous French manuscripts, they were depicted larger than life and in bellicose poses. Was the snail a generic stand-in for deadly warriors, menacing and anonymous while hidden behind their helmet's visor, which a valiant knight might be forced to vanquish? Traveling around with its shell like a protective suit of armor, the snail could emerge at any time, ready for battle, just like a knight of unknown allegiance...maybe



friend, maybe foe. Whatever the explanation, these snails are intriguing and signal their importance in French culture beyond the kitchen.

Continuing with our meal, Michael feasted on *ris de veau* as his main course. It was cooked to perfection with the creamy texture and delicate crustiness only an accomplished master of the *sautoir* pan can produce. Served on a bed of petite flavorful potatoes and mushrooms (*pleurotes*) along with a drizzle of veal reduction sauce, the dish was a masterpiece. Having

passed on the snails and delegated to Michael the role of guinea pig for *ris de veau*, I opted for a pork chop – farm-raised, pan-fried, and deeply flavorful. It was served with puréed potatoes and a sauce of intense and fragrant pan drippings. Verbal descriptions cannot begin to do justice to these dishes or evoke the utter pleasure they provided.



To accompany our meal we drank a red Sancerre wine, Les Châtaigniers 2012, from the Loire Valley. Its light and fruity nature made it the perfect accompaniment to our main courses.

Hooked on L'Escargot Montorgueil, we immediately reserved our next meal. We would have lunch on New Year's Day as the ideal way to usher in 2015. On this second visit, Eric greeted us warmly and seated us in the dining room on the ground floor where the décor, including beautifully painted ceilings, velvet banquettes, elaborate brass lighting fixtures, and huge mirrors,

## PARIS AT A SNAIL'S PACE (CONTINUED)

evokes a *Belle Epoque* pedigree. One half expected Musetta to waltz in on the arm of a moneyed beau and break into song.

We both ordered *ris de veau* but Michael preceded it with pan-seared *foie gras* accompanied by fig jam. The slices of duck liver were perfectly cooked, slightly pink, and entirely scrumptious. After our main course we finished off our bottle of Sancerre with some artisanal Cantal cheese and hunks of L'Escargot's signature *baguette* encrusted with poppy seeds – a reminder never to skip the cheese course at a fine French eatery. Capping our meal was L'Escargot's exquisite take on the traditional dessert we had heard about all our lives but never tried – *crêpes suzette*. Delicate pancakes with an intensely orange-flavored sauce, they were prepared by Eric tableside with a flaming flourish.

If this all sounds touristy, it wasn't. While some patrons were foreigners keen on their first experience with snails, most were discernably French and delighted to partake of traditional cuisine expertly cooked, reasonably priced, and served in surroundings celebrating its origins.

My being a bit under the weather meant spending most nights "at home" in our hotel room where we watched TV while consuming slices of cherry crumb cake or chocolate pistachio tarte procured from Les Caprices de Charlotte. One evening's broadcast marked the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the classic film called "French Cancan" directed by Jean Renoir, son of the impressionist painter. The English word "French" in its title reflects the cancan's origins as a marketing ploy to attract well-heeled English-speaking patrons to the newly opened Moulin Rouge night club. All that dancing, discovery of an ingénue, and the show-must-go-on intrigues, put us in the mood for more *Belle Epoque* fare.



The next morning, our final full-day in Paris, we lingered over breakfast while weighing the possibilities for lunch. We could go back to some of our favorite places in the neighborhood but L'Escargot Montorgueil still beckoned. Why not wander in the direction of the Marais, past the Opéra Garnier, the Stock Exchange, and the Palais Royal, and see where we end up? Along the way we peered at many a restaurant menu, just in case something else might tempt us, but in the end nothing could diminish the siren song of L'Escargot Montorgueil. This time, we preceded our *ris de veau* with a *velouté de parmentier* or light and creamy soup of leeks and potatoes – a marriage made in heaven. Regrettably, we had to bid Eric and his colleagues farewell, vowing to return with renewed dedication to enjoying Paris at a snail's pace.

L'Escargot Montorgueil, 38 rue Montorgueil, 75001 Paris <https://www.escargotmontorgueil.com/>

Les Caprices de Charlotte, 14 rue de Castellane, 75008 Paris, [www.lescapricesdecharlotte.net](http://www.lescapricesdecharlotte.net)

Hôtel Folkestone Opéra, 9 rue de Castellane, 75008 Paris, [www.bestwestern-folkestoneopera.com](http://www.bestwestern-folkestoneopera.com)

BHV, 52-56 rue de Rivoli, 75004 Paris, [www.bhv.fr](http://www.bhv.fr)

Next time, an excursion to a royal hunting lodge where we bag an unexpected feast.

## A HONEY OF A DUCK AFTER THE HUNT AT FONTAINEBLEAU

BY MERIL MARKLEY



In January, on one of those dark, damp, drizzly mornings that northern European winters offer in abundance, we ventured to Fontainebleau Castle, a rustic hunting lodge transformed over the course of several centuries into a sumptuous palace some forty miles south of Paris. As our train neared its destination, chugging through miles and miles of dense and formerly royal forest, we caught glimpses of modern hunters in florescent orange jackets with rifles at the ready but a far cry from the pageantry of the hunts that put Fontainebleau on the map.

Our quarry? A tiny evanescent figure of a man, in a fresco no larger than a placemat, apparently eliminated or obscured in a recent restoration sparking an art historian's quest to document it and our visit to the chateau to photo-

graph it. Depicting the wing of the castle added during the reign of King Francis I (1494-1547), the fresco was painted by Rosso Fiorentino (1494-1540), the red-headed master from Renaissance Florence, whose greatest accomplishment was the design and execution of the Gallery Francis I to the delight of his royal patron and of art lovers down the centuries.

The diminutive fresco, below a larger one depicting Venus, was part of the transformation of a long narrow room, more like a wide corridor with windows, into an opulent gallery designed by Rosso to house over a dozen of his paintings glorifying Roman mythology and history, including a depiction of King Francis as Caesar. Rosso also designed the elaborate stucco figures surrounding the paintings and containing elements of ancient architecture, mythological creatures, decorative motifs such as bunches of flowers and grotesque masks, highlighted by gleaming gold leaf and mosaic tiles. Every inch of walls and ceiling was decorated, including magnificent wood paneling bearing in gold the letter "F" for Francis along with his royal emblem, the salamander, so there was no doubt in visitors' minds as to the power and erudition of this king. Copied in books of etchings, prints, and engravings that circulated throughout Europe for centuries, these works established the School of Fontainebleau and themes embodied in furniture, ceramics, tapestries, and architecture well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

As kings go, Francis I was a fascinating character combining monarch and warrior as he sought to protect France from encirclement by the expanding Habsburg Empire after his arch rival, King Charles V of Spain, was elected Holy Roman Emperor. Drawn to the Renaissance art of Italy experienced



## A HONEY OF A DUCK AFTER THE HUNT AT FONTAINEBLEAU (CONTINUED)



firsthand on his military campaigns and when captured during the Battle of Pavia, King Francis gathered around him some of the finest artists and craftsmen the Apennine Peninsula had ever produced. He even convinced the aging Leonardo da Vinci to trek across the Alps (with his beloved *Mona Lisa* in tow), to reside in a house connected to the royal castle at Amboise by a secret tunnel used by the monarch to visit the legendary artist, whom he referred to affectionately as *mon père* or “my father.”

King Francis’ enthusiasm for Italy did not encompass wine, where his tastes were decidedly homegrown. His favorite was the dark purplish Malbec, the black wine of Cahors so prized by royalty on both sides of the Channel and first featured at the wedding banquet of England’s King Henry II to Eleanor of Aquitaine in 1152. To ensure a ready supply when he was resident at Fontainebleau, King Francis ordered a vineyard of Malbec grapes planted on the castle grounds.

Lavish banquets thrown by King Francis both preceded and followed the hunting forays that were the center of life at Fontainebleau. In the pre-hunt festivities, scat from a pre-selected stag would be presented on platters lined with leaves to demonstrate the worthiness of the quarry and give the dogs a sample of the scent. The privileged would then set off on horseback, preceded by the hounds and their handlers, until the stag was cornered and slain with lances. Similar rituals accompanied the hunt for

wild boar, a more ferocious adversary, as well as large waterfowl such as swans and herons to be served with duck as a first course at lavish post-hunt banquets featuring musical pageants and dancing. Such celebrations at the court of King Francis I became the subject of Victor Hugo’s play, *Le Roi S’Amuse* (the King Enjoys Himself), which French censors shuttered after one performance. It became the basis for Giuseppe Verdi’s opera cataloging royal excess but transplanted back to Italy as the Duke of Mantua in *Rigoletto*.

Because the needs of the over 500 troops, courtiers, and servants comprising the court at Fontainebleau quickly overcame the sanitation infrastructure, the entourage was constantly on the move among King Francis’ various hunting venues throughout France. Such a transfer could involve 18,000 horses bearing furniture, chests of decorative items, tapestries, barrels of wine, armaments, and other provisions. The tapestries he took along included those created in a workshop he installed at Fontainebleau to make copies of Rosso’s masterpieces from the Gallery Francis



I. Symbolic of the high regard in which he held Rosso’s work, the tapestries accompanied the king wherever he went to remind him of his beloved home at Fontainebleau and to acquaint his far-flung subjects with his su-

## A HONEY OF A DUCK AFTER THE HUNT AT FONTAINEBLEAU (CONTINUED)

preme accomplishment there. Six of the tapestries eventually found their way into Habsburg hands thanks to the marriage of Francis' grandson, Charles IX, to Elizabeth of Austria.

Although we never did detect the tiny figure in Rosso's fresco, we enjoyed hours of wandering the castle and admiring the masterpieces of each succeeding generation of artists who called Fontainebleau home. What started life as a simple refuge for hunting deer amidst the forest remains a showcase on which the dynasties of France left their mark. We love that the Canadian *telenovela*, *Reign* (on the CW Network) evokes this style in telling a fictionalized story of Francis II (1544-1560), who was born at Fontainebleau, and his consort, Mary Queen of Scots. Royals engage in dangerous liaisons amidst luxurious costumes and sets, including some of our antique furniture. The series has run far longer than Francis II's brief seventeen months on the throne, before he succumbed at age 16 to complications of an ear infection.

By the time we exited the castle, it was 4 o'clock and twilight was already enveloping the grounds. Famished after having skipped lunch, we looked around for a place to eat on the street facing the main gate. The fancy restaurants were already closed after the lunch rush with staffs taking a break before the dinner onslaught at 8 pm. Our only hope was an eatery on the corner, by the bus stop, where the lights were burning brightly. Peering inside, we spied a pastry case (always a good sign for my husband, Michael), a bar, and lots of people. A glance at the menu revealed *confit de canard*, *sauce de miel*, *gratin dauphinoise* or a leg-thigh of duck preserved in duck fat and pan fried, topped with a honey sauce, accompanied by a classic potato side dish. But could we have it at 4 pm, a time when no self-respecting French person would eat a meal? Thankfully the response was "yes" and we tucked in for a delicious dining experience.

The duck skin was crispy and luscious, the meat fork-tender and flavorful in a fragrant sauce combining pan drippings with a hint of sweetness from the honey. Much as I loved the duck, I had to admit that the side dish was the triumph of the meal. Thin layers of potato alternated with gruyere cheese in a creamy sauce spiced with nutmeg. Sadly, no Malbec was on offer and the wine, available only by the glass, was an unremarkable Brouilly. But nothing could diminish our enjoyment of the duck and potatoes that proved the perfect restorative for weary travelers on a cold winter's day and a reminder that a delicious meal may be had where you least expect it. If such fare had fueled Rosso Fiorentino and his team of assistants, it is no wonder that the Gallery Francis I remains an artistic triumph attracting visitors from around the world on the hunt for Renaissance treasures.

Le Délice Impérial, 1 Rue Grande, 77300 Fontainebleau, <https://www.le-delice-imperial-fontainebleau.fr>

Eugene Carroll's website dedicated to Rosso Fiorentino <https://pages.vassar.edu/rosso/>

Next time, back to school at Oxford to learn more about Morse Code.

## CRACKING THE MORSE CODE ON A VISIT TO OXFORD

BY MERIL MARKLEY

I first glimpsed the magnificent gothic spires of Oxford on my initial trip to Europe, as a 19-year-old, on the Vas-sar Madrigal Singers' tour. The highlight of our journey was singing in Oxford's Holywell Music Room, a concert hall where the titans of the 18<sup>th</sup> century music world, Handel and Haydn, had also performed.

However, there had been little time between rehearsals and performances to explore the city. I had always wanted to go back and so was delighted when my husband, Michael, proposed that we spend a few days there in conjunction with a business trip to London. His



desire was not born of academic curiosity or classical music but rather sprang from the *Inspector Morse* TV series that began in 1987 and ran through 2003, followed by sequels called *Inspector Lewis* and a prequel called *Endeavour* (after Morse's improbable first name). Making lavish use of the city and its colleges, the series have excelled at transforming fans into tourists while sparking a cottage industry of Morse-related offerings.\*

The *Inspector Morse* novels, from which the TV series derived, were the brainchild of Classics scholar, crossword maven, and Cambridge graduate, Colin Dexter. His fictional policeman was an Oxford graduate, curmudgeonly bachelor, aficionado of grand opera, and veteran tippler who never touched wine. The murders Morse investigated involved complex lives and plots. Homicides sprang from jealousy (whether romantic or academic), philandering, revenge, drug-dealing, or to put an end to blackmail. Weapons of choice included poisons, scarves, classic cars, and occasionally a firearm, but only if connected with a genteel bit of hunting. Perpetrators included Oxford dons, aristocrats, choristers, undergraduates, and opera-goers. Thankfully, the real murder rate in the city falls far below the fictional body count.

Numerous Oxford colleges, with their gothic and neo-gothic architecture surrounding quadrangles of meticulously mowed and manicured grass, formed the backdrop for many a murder or encounter with a suspect. Exterior shots of *Inspector Morse* and his protégé, *Inspector Lewis*, en route to yet another murder scene, also took them by the Radcliffe Camera, the Sheldonian Theatre, and under the Bridge of Sighs. One murder even took place during a performance at Holywell Music Room.

Operating under various pseudonyms, and supplying a guest room for the murder of a fictional American tourist, was the Randolph Hotel, the base of operations for our stay in Oxford. Its petite and cozy bar was the site of many a conversation between Morse and Lewis as they puzzled over clues. Now named the Morse Bar, it is a magnet for fans of the show hoping to encounter Colin Dexter on one of his regular visits.



## CRACKING THE MORSE CODE ON A VISIT TO OXFORD (CONTINUED)

Our sojourn in Oxford began by bus from Heathrow Airport after an overnight flight from Houston. No matter how often we traverse the English countryside, we are charmed by the tidy villages, the neatly groomed pastures, and the lambs gamboling about in the late spring sunshine. That these locales have been inhabited since the dawn of history leaves us half expecting to see a knight or two galloping past.

After checking in at the Randolph, we headed out to explore. But not before confronting the biggest who-done-it of our journey – how the bellman got back to the entrance through the maze of narrow corridors connecting the various structures fused onto and now comprising the hotel. Instead, we learned to just follow our noses to the sumptuous English breakfast that awaited us each morning in the elegant dining room. We chuckled as we recalled the banker's wry observation from



another long-running British series, *Chef*, set at a restaurant on the outskirts of Oxford. "If you want a good meal in England, eat breakfast three times a day!"

We dared not spend all our time obsessing over breakfast when this city of architectural gems beckoned and the gray clouds were lifting to reveal a somewhat sunny afternoon. We set out through the pedestrian zone to Christ Church College; the University's largest, and home to a gothic cathedral that is the world's smallest. For a time, Christ Church was called King Henry VIII's College. Gazing out from a full-length portrait, he still surveys the



great dining hall that inspired the one at Hogwarts in the Harry Potter films. The college and its colorful gardens were featured often on the Morse series as well.

Being lovers of gothic architecture and always on the prowl for interesting stylistic elements, the buildings comprising the college, as well as their interiors, are a feast for the eyes. The wooden carvings inside the cathedral, of elaborate *fleur-de-lis* and fantastic animals, are among our favorites. While lingering there, we found ourselves over-



## CRACKING THE MORSE CODE ON A VISIT TO OXFORD (CONTINUED)

whelmed by emotion as we contemplated that, but for this church, we probably would never have met. It was here that John Wesley worshiped during his student days and was ordained as a minister. Eventually he rebelled against Anglican teachings to found the Methodist Movement whose first church was in Oxford. He later visited America and established Methodist churches which came to include, a century or two later, the one in Sherman Oaks, California where Michael and I met almost three decades ago.

By the time we left Christ Church College it was getting late and time for us to pick up a light “dinner” at the Marks & Spencer’s *Simply Food* on our way back to the hotel. The shops, found in many European cities, never fail to remind us of our years living in Paris when the signature M&S sandwiches and Indian-inspired foods provided a welcome break from the glories of French cuisine. We were relieved that our favorites were on offer in Oxford, including free range egg & watercress sandwich, chicken tikka sandwich, cheddar cheese ploughman’s sandwich, fresh mango spears, and sweet Thai chili coriander crisps (potato chips).

The next day, after a grand English breakfast at the Randolph, including eggs, rashers (bacon), ham, sausage, blood pudding, toast, and coffee, we crossed the street to visit the Ashmolean Museum. The first museum associated with a university and founded in 1677 with the collection bestowed by Elias Ashmole, the Ashmolean is still free of charge for its visitors. We explored the rooms filled with Old Master paintings, Renaissance Italian ceramics, and an intriguing collection of finger rings, all the while recalling Morse episodes in which the clue to solving a murder was found among the Ashmolean’s collections.

Renovations since Morse’s time include a rooftop restaurant with lovely views of the city. It ended up providing the most memorable meal of our trip. Michael had half of a roasted *poussin* (young chicken) while I had the spring *frittata* and Stilton cheese plate. We had no problem polishing off a bottle of Cuvée Alice, a light and fruity red wine from Château Ollieux Romanis in Corbières (Languedoc). The desserts were stunners. Michael had chocolate *mousse* with salted caramel (threatening to order a second) and I had poached pear on *pain perdu*. Suitably fortified, we finished up with a stroll through the archaeology collections.

We awoke on our final day in Oxford to what had made a bigger impression on me than breakfast during my first visit – the sound of church bells ringing all over the city on Sunday morning. There didn’t seem to be as many this time, nor did they go on for as long, but their sound was a reminder of the music that first brought me to this city so many decades ago.

Music was the theme for our final meal before heading back to London. We arranged to meet up with Emily van Evera, who lives outside Oxford. Emily is originally from Minnesota but came to England to pursue a career in Early Music and has long been soprano-of-choice for performances of the Baroque and before. We had not seen each other since college and so there was a lot of catching up to do at the Old Parsonage over roast beef and Yorkshire pudding, the tradi-



## CRACKING THE MORSE CODE ON A VISIT TO OXFORD (CONTINUED)

tional Sunday carvery meal. The most delicious elements were fresh asparagus with hollandaise sauce and a molten chocolate dessert, all accompanied by a pleasing Malbec.

We hated to bid farewell to Oxford but we take comfort in visiting, virtually, with each new episode of *Endeavour*.



The second one, called *Fugue*, offered one of the most exquisitely atmospheric scenes ever shot for the apprehension of a murderer, while the characters channeled the second act of *Tosca*. Filmed on the roof of Trinity College, the setting sun seems to ignite the gilded torches atop ornamental urns at the “magic hour” so prized by cinematographers, lighting the way to heaven for the hapless victims of a serial killer.

While we may not have cracked his code, we loved every minute of our visit to Oxford and the chance to wander through locations made memorable by *Inspector Morse*.

\**The Oxford of Inspector Morse and Lewis* by Bill Leonard (The History Press, 2010) is available all over Oxford, including at Blackwell’s Bookshop where several scenes in the series were shot.

Macdonald Randolph Hotel, Beaumont St., Oxford, OX1 2LN, <http://www.macdonaldhotels.co.uk/our-hotels/macdonald-randolph-hotel/>

Christ Church College, St. Aldates, Oxford, OX1 1DP, <http://www.chch.ox.ac.uk/>

Ashmolean Museum, Beaumont St., Oxford, OX1 2PH, <http://www.ashmolean.org/>

The Old Parsonage, 1 Banbury Road, OX2 6NN, <https://www.oldparsonage-hotel.co.uk/food-and-drink/>

Inspector Morse <http://www.itv.com/hub/inspector-morse/MORSE>

Next time, a quick trip to Lisbon and an introduction to the remarkable food and wine of Portugal.

## *Lisbon for the Spice of Life*

By Meril Markley

When I headed to Lisbon, it was a last-minute trip to attend an RSM conference of accounting and tax colleagues from Europe where we concluded a refinancing plan for a client. That London-based RSM International had selected Portugal as the venue was a choice not lost on tax history buffs. England's close relations with Portugal stretch back at least as far as the Hundred Years War with France (1337-1453) when John of Gaunt, the Duke of Lancaster, became father-in-law to the King of Portugal. The war's disruption of supplies of French Malbec left the English thirsty for a high-quality replacement. That gap was filled by their Portuguese ally whose wine was imported tax-free thanks to Europe's first bilateral free trade agreement, the Treaty of Windsor (1386).

My curiosity about Portugal dates back to grade school when we learned of voyages along Africa's coast and on to India, by explorers such as Vasco da Gama, on a quest to corner the spice trade by cutting out the Ottoman middlemen and their Venetian partners dominating the pricey land route to voracious European consumers. The sheer audacity of these high risk ventures put the Portuguese at the top of the heap during the early decades of the Age of Discovery. Once Columbus got into the act on behalf of the Spaniards, looking for a westbound route to India and the Spice Islands, the heat was turned up on the Portuguese, leading to a less than advantageous division of the New World enshrined in the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494). That the Spanish ended up with the gold from Peru, while graciously sharing its potatoes with the rest of Europe, shifted the balance of power away from Portugal for centuries to come.

To feed their crews on long sea voyages, the Portuguese developed a process for air-drying fish so that it could be reconstituted with water and cooked up to provide nourishment for famished sailors. While they initially used fish caught near Portugal, the oily and abundant ones such as mackerel and sardines proved unsuitable. When a less unctuous yet plentiful species of codfish was discovered in the seas off Newfoundland, *bacalhau* was born. This dried cod has been a staple of Portuguese gastronomy ever since.

With potatoes from the New World coming along on voyages back home, *bacalhau* found its ideal match for a long-term marriage made in culinary heaven. Armed with scant preparation but lots of enthusiasm for discovering a city built with the wealth of globe-trotting merchants, I arrived in Lisbon on a sunny and hot afternoon. My command of the Portuguese language is limited to a few phrases memorized for business trips to Brazil. Fortunately, my taxi driver spoke some English. Like every *Lisboeta* I encountered, he was proud of his city and eager to share his

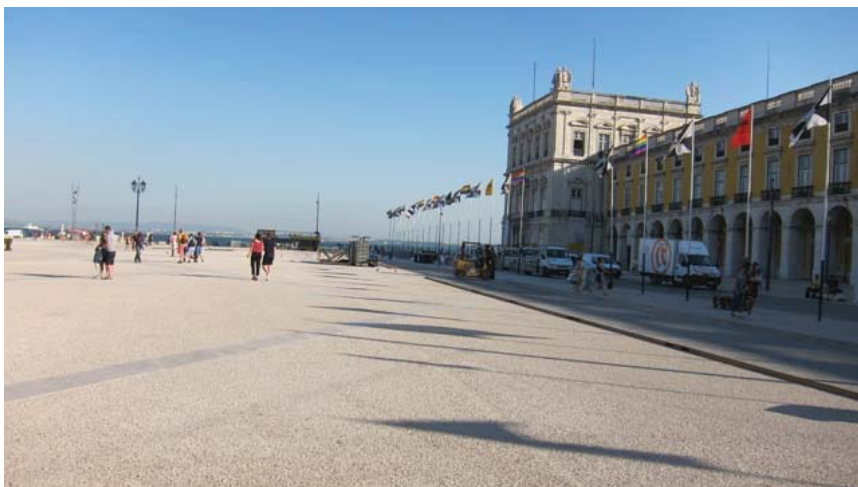


## *Lisbon for the Spice of Life (continued)*

knowledge with a first time visitor. Hilly, Lisbon is a city of grand parks encompassed by streets lined with colorful flowering trees and blessed with a perfect climate. The great earthquake of 1755 and subsequent tidal wave leveled most of the structures but a rebuilding boom ensued, resulting in the monumental architecture gracing today's wide boulevards and spacious plazas.

Over lunch on the first day of the conference, I met Carlos Carvalho and Ana Antas from RSM Portugal's office in Porto. Passionate wine enthusiasts, they gave me a crash course on Douro, their favorite of the country's 14 wine regions, as I scribbled down their recommendations including its crowning glory, *Barca Velha*.

Portugal's urge to share its high quality vintages with the rest of the world dates back to the Roman Empire when wine was shipped to Italy along with *garum*, a fish-based sauce described as the ketchup of the ancient world and experiencing its own renaissance. Despite limited wine production compared to titans such as France and Italy, Portugal is now a net exporter whose domestic output is downed by the country's enthusiastic inhabitants who rank sixth in the world for per capita consumption of wine.



The gala dinner of our conference focused on traditional Portuguese cuisine catered in the covered courtyard of one of the government buildings lining the Praça do Comércio, the huge open square by the Tagus River. For the main course, the marriage of *bacalhau* and potatoes took center stage. The tender and flavorful cod was seared in a coating of cornmeal and accompanied by *batatas a murro* or potatoes that have been baked and then bashed,

after which they are topped with garlic, salt, and olive oil before a brief second baking. This process intensifies the potato flavor far beyond what any conventional baked spud could offer. Dessert was *Pudim Abade de Priscos*, a custard-like concoction of rich creaminess and subtle flavors. It was named for Manuel Joaquim Machado Rebelo, a 19th century abbot of the church of Santiago de Priscos, who was more renowned for cooking (including for Portugal's royal family) than pastoring. The evening was capped by a performance of *fado*, Portugal's iconic vocal music conveying passion, loss, and longing, the enjoyment of which was boosted by numerous glasses of delectable port.

I snuck away from the conference one evening for dinner with Valentina and Vladimir, friends of friends from Russia but who live in Lisbon as home base for their business as sports agent and Olympic coach.

## *Lisbon for the Spice of Life (continued)*

They promised me outstanding local food away from the touristy areas, on one of the narrow cobblestone streets lined with small eateries.

[Casa dos Passarinhos](#) proved a great choice where the small dining room was decorated with expansive photos of early 20th century Lisbon and packed with families enjoying a night out. We started with appetizers of cheese, cured ham, and bite-sized morsels that reminded me of Spanish *croquetas*, but much spicier. For my main course I had a steamed whole fish that was teeming with tiny bones compelling a leisurely pace of contented consumption. Accompanying it were French-cut green beans and boiled potatoes destined for drizzling with fragrant Portuguese olive oil. Everything had rich flavors, enlivened but never obscured by such fundamental elements as garlic and fresh herbs along with the olive oil. Accompanying it all was a local mineral water called Vitalis and a crisp white wine from the Alentejo region, Cartuxa Evora, whose chill was maintained by a charming little quilted cozy.



On my final night in Lisbon, I joined colleagues from Scotland for a dinner at [Sabor e Arte](#) on the ground floor of an office building near our hotel. The style was contemporary and the walls were decorated with life-size scenes from nearby streets, including of a streetcar whose collision with our table seemed imminent. As an appetizer we shared a plate of shrimp and papaya with a light mayonnaise sauce, an intriguing mixture of fresh flavors. For my main course I had roasted octopus

with potatoes and olives, a stunning medley of tastes and textures with the olives complementing but never overpowering the dish. Dessert was a pear poached in red wine. Its perfectly calibrated aromatics and perfumed effect were reminders of Portugal's one-time domination of the global spice business.

The wines picked by my Scottish colleague, a frequent traveler to Portugal, were stellar. We started with a white wine made from the Encruzado grape by Quinta dos Carvalhais in the mountainous Dão region. It

## *Lisbon for the Spice of Life (continued)*

was fresh, dry, and just “minerally” enough. Following it was a Grande Reserva red from the Carm winery in the Douro Valley. Full-bodied, intense, wonderfully satisfying in its complexity, this was the best pour of my stay.

While Portugal shares the Iberian Peninsula with Spain, it endures as a richly distinct culture with cuisine and wines to match. With so much to explore and experience, Lisbon deserves far more of an effort than my hastily arranged trip had afforded.

Next time, we’re on the trail of Mary, Queen of Scots.



## *Scotland in the Footsteps of her Queen*

By Meril Markley

Now that I have been there twice, I can attest that Scotland in the flesh is every bit as enchanting as Scotland in the state of mind conjured by movies, TV shows, and hauntingly beautiful melodies. Its wine industry, however, has not fared as well.

On my first trip to Scotland in 2015, to speak at a conference in Aberdeen, the day's headlines heralded a wine venture located not far from the city. Anticipating increased global warming, an Aberdonian had planted grapevines in Upper Largo. The hope was to yield 1200 bottles of dry white wine annually.

It took several more years before my husband, Michael, and I managed a vacation trip to Scotland. Hoping to visit the winery, we learned that the vines had succumbed to years of cold, rainy weather resulting in the venture being abandoned. We still drank many enjoyable wines, but they were mainly from France.

The close trading relationship between Scotland and France dates back to the Auld Alliance of 1295, assuring regular supplies of claret for thirsty Scots. Two centuries later, in the aftermath of the Hundred Years War, Scottish merchants edged out the English in garnering first dibs on the best output of Bordeaux. Mary, Queen of Scots (1542-1587), embodied the enduring relationship of these two countries whose alliance against the English united royal families, and their palates, for centuries.

For both Michael and me a trip to Scotland marked the realization of a lifelong dream. Our fascination crystallized in Los Angeles, three decades earlier, where I sang annual concerts of Scottish music conducted by a Scottish transplant, John Currie. His choral arrangements of traditional tunes were accompanied by bagpipes and drums with tartan-clad performers flown in by British Airways for the occasion. Michael enjoyed especially the post-concert receptions, for performers and audience, hosted and well-lubricated by the makers of Drambuie liqueur (scotch whisky blended with honey, herbs and spices). The unforgettable melodies born of legendary battles, fog-enshrouded castles, and glorious landscapes of lochs and mountains, cemented our intention to travel there one day.



Our friends and hosts for the first leg of our trip, Ian and Fiona (transplants from England), live out in the hilly countryside in a home stocked with excellent wines from their extensive travels. Nestled amidst pastures with lambs gamboling about and with a front yard where Highland cattle graze, their house was the focus of delicious meals conceived and executed by Ian, reflecting the bounty of the Scottish larder.

We took in several sites connected to Queen Mary within a short drive from Ian and Fiona's home. Mary was, both figuratively and literally, a towering figure. Like her French mother, Marie de Guise, she was almost six feet tall in a time when most people barely cleared five. Crowned Queen of Scotland as an infant after the untimely death of her father, she was betrothed to François, eldest son of King Henri II of France, and sent abroad at age five to be raised at Henri's court.



## Scotland (cont'd)

Mary married at Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris in 1558, at which time François became King Consort of Scotland. She became Queen of France when François II was crowned at the age of 15 in 1559 after an accident at a jousting tournament led to the death of King Henri II. François and Mary took up residence at the [Chateau of Blois](#) in the Loire Valley, although not for long. The young king followed his father to the grave barely a year later, felled by an illness thought to have been provoked by an ear infection.



Widowed and no longer Queen of France, Mary headed back to Scotland, the land she had last seen as a little girl. Rebellious clans, religious strife, romantic intrigue, marriages, betrayals, English plots, the birth of a son (and future king of England), imprisonment, escape and more imprisonment, were all in store for her there.

Visiting some of the places she lived, one can grasp how bleak life in Scotland may have seemed to Mary, compared to France. Perhaps this is why the TV series about Queen Mary, [Reign](#), devoted only the last few episodes to her time in the British Isles even though more than half her life was spent there. Like so many people we queried in Scotland, we are not ashamed to admit that we enjoyed watching Mary's romanticized exploits on this series. Having supplied some of the French antique furniture used for the sets, our curiosity had intensified about the tragic life of this legendary monarch as we strove to separate historical truth from Hollywood fiction.

With Ian and Fiona, we visited [Falkland Palace](#) where Mary had resided and excelled at something called "real tennis," more akin to modern squash. Her tennis court remains on the grounds and open to visitors. Our next stop was [Loch Leven](#) and lunch including our first taste of *cullen skink*, the rich and creamy soup made from smoked haddock, potatoes, and leeks. From the restaurant's dock, we peered across the loch to the ruins of the castle where Mary was imprisoned before escaping in 1568 and fleeing into the arms of her enemies in England.

On a sunny and blustery Sunday morning we visited [Saint Andrews](#), the university town and hallowed bastion of golf. In the early years after Queen Mary's return to Scotland, she visited Saint Andrews often to escape the intrigues of courtly life in Edinburgh. It was there that she determined to marry Lord Darnley, a fateful decision leading to his murder as well as her eventual abdication and execution.

Saint Andrews' attractions included the array of Scottish farmhouse and artisan cheeses at [I.J. Mellis](#) and our introduction to the ideal vehicle for their consumption – the oatcake in all its variations (especially "rough"). We stopped for lunch just outside town, at [Balgove Larder](#), a butcher, farmers' market, and restaurant offering all manner of Scottish treats including fluffy, buttery scones to consume on-site or to take home.

We will always be grateful to Ian for introducing us to the Maris Piper variety of potato (or what the Scottish call a "tattie") that we consumed at every opportunity. Not available in the U.S., the Maris Piper was introduced in the U.K. in 1966 and is the most widely grown of any variety. Intensely flavored in a buttery way its American cousins can only dream of, the Maris Piper delights – whether mashed, as chips (French fries), as crisps (potato chips), and especially when oven-roasted. Had they existed in her time, we are confident Mary would have enjoyed tucking into a plate of Maris Pipers, washed down with a glass of claret, after a match of real tennis or a round of golf.

After our days in the countryside, headquarters for the next phase of our Mary-themed quest shifted to Edinburgh and the [Macdonald Holyrood Hotel](#). A few steps away, the [Palace of Holyroodhouse](#) is still a royal residence where Queen Elizabeth II stays for a week each year. The building sits within a verdant park that backs up to a mountain, giving the visitor a sense of a rural haven amidst a thriving city.

## Scotland (cont'd)

Mary lived at the palace during some of the most tumultuous times of her reign, including the murder of one of her courtiers in her private quarters. Included among the artifacts in the museum dedicated to Mary's life are examples of her needlework, created during years of imprisonment in exile. They offer a touching and intimate peek into how she filled those days of seemingly interminable monotony in contrast to the fullness of her former life at court in Paris and Edinburgh.

We struggled against the incessant wind and cold to make several strolls up the steep Royal Mile from Mary's palace at Holyrood to her other residence, [Edinburgh Castle](#), where her crown jewels are on display. A bagpiper in traditional dress was stationed opposite [St. Giles' Cathedral](#), serenading tourists like us on the final leg up to the castle while stoking a reverence for the romance and history all around us.

Our first meal in Edinburgh was at the [Scottish Café & Restaurant](#) in the [Scottish National Gallery](#). Michael fell in love with the *buttery* (a traditional Aberdeen butter pastry) topped with Connage Clava Brie and Ramsay of Carluke smoked ham with dark muscovado and Glengoyne Whisky marmalade. I enjoyed the Bellhaven smoked salmon with celeriac remoulade accompanied by artisan bread. With these we drank cider from [Thistly Cross](#) in East Lothian. When the Little Ice Age halted the wine industry in the British Isles in the 14th century, cider made from apples and other fruits prevailed as the low-alcohol beverage of choice for those who could not afford wine imported from France. Thistly Cross carries on this tradition, including a tangy cider made from apples, and with other varieties such as strawberry and elderflower.

Later that day, our friend Fraser phoned from Glasgow to propose that we meet Carina and Victor Contini, scions of two legendary Italian families involved in the food business in Edinburgh for generations. United in marriage as well as commerce, they have three restaurants: [Contini George Street](#); the Scottish Café and Restaurant we had visited earlier in the day; and the [Cannonball Restaurant & Bar](#) near Edinburgh Castle.



We met up with the Continis at their flagship restaurant on George Street. It occupies a magnificent stately building that was formerly a bank, and before that the region's corn exchange, dating back to the 19th century in this part of Edinburgh known as New Town. A Mediterranean vibe, with a nod to Carina's passion for art, emanates from frescoes channeling Raphael and Tiepolo. The food too combines Scottish and Italian influences and ingredients, including vegetables and herbs from the restaurant's kitchen garden, and especially the Italian wines.

We enjoyed a bottle of one of Victor's favorites called [Imprint](#). A Primitivo Appassito (old growth Zinfandel made from dried grapes), its winemaker is a Californian, Mark Shannon, who fell in love with and married an Italian woman. They moved to Puglia in Southern Italy to make remarkable and intense red wines.

Consuming various dishes, we never decided which one was our favorite, although oven-roasted new potatoes (Maris Piper, of course) with wild garlic could have been the default choice. Other things we enjoyed were fried baby squid (with homemade mayonnaise), asparagus (with mint, yogurt, chili and Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese), Isle of Mull scallops (with peas, wild garlic, and *speck di prosciutto*) and sea bass (with Pachino tomatoes and Taggiasca olives). We were captivated by the Continis' passion for their business as well as the food and wine comprising it.



## Scotland (cont'd)



No visit to Scotland could omit a tour of a distillery where scotch whisky is made. Amidst early spring snow showers blanketing daffodils on the hillsides and with mists shrouding the nearby mountains, we spent a morning with Ian at [Edradour](#), Scotland's smallest distillery dating back to 1825. The tour commenced with a wee dram and ended in the distillery's gift shop. Along the way we learned about the age-old processes in production, including the "angel's share." Early innovations included incentive compensation, in the form of a quota of

scotch, for workers willing to endure the hot and sweaty job of drying the barley with smoke produced from burning peat.

About an hour away by train from Edinburgh, and perfect for a day-trip, we visited Scotland's largest city, Glasgow. So different in terrain, history, and character from its long-time rival, Edinburgh, Glasgow has been the industrial and ship-building heart of Scotland for centuries.

Our day in Glasgow was capped by dinner with our friend, Fraser, at [Ubiquitous Chip](#). Dating back to 1971, "the Chip" was founded to feature Scottish seafood, game, and traditional offerings such as *haggis* (minced sheep's organs combined with onions and other savory ingredients boiled in a sheep's stomach). Our first taste of this iconic dish was an appetizer based on venison, rather than mutton, and accompanied by mashed Maris Piper potatoes. It was rich in meaty flavors and delicious. Michael followed it with venison, paired with a dark chocolate sauce and roasted beets,



an improbable combination that proved delectable. Fraser and I both opted for Barra scallops, perfectly seared and with their coral intact. The sweet, understated flavor of the sea was fresh and tantalizing. We washed it all down with a French Malbec, from Maison Castell, a gorgeous dark purple wine redolent of black currants.

Over dinner, we recounted our visit earlier in the day to the [Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum](#), an imposing edifice in the center of a park. Having arrived in the midst of the daily concert on the museum's awe-inspiring pipe organ, we were directed to the only two empty seats. We settled in



next to a gentleman who had a music score spread across his lap. When the music stopped, I leaned over and asked him if he knew what the piece was. "Yes," he replied. "It's the premiere of *Prelude on French* and I wrote it. I'm John Maxwell Geddes." We ended up visiting with him over tea in the museum's café. His career as a composer included a commission from his old friend and ours, John Currie, the conductor whose passion for the music of his homeland had inspired our trip to Scotland. It had all come full circle. The food, the drink, the scenery, and the history had merged into a grand finale of a musical link to a mystical land.

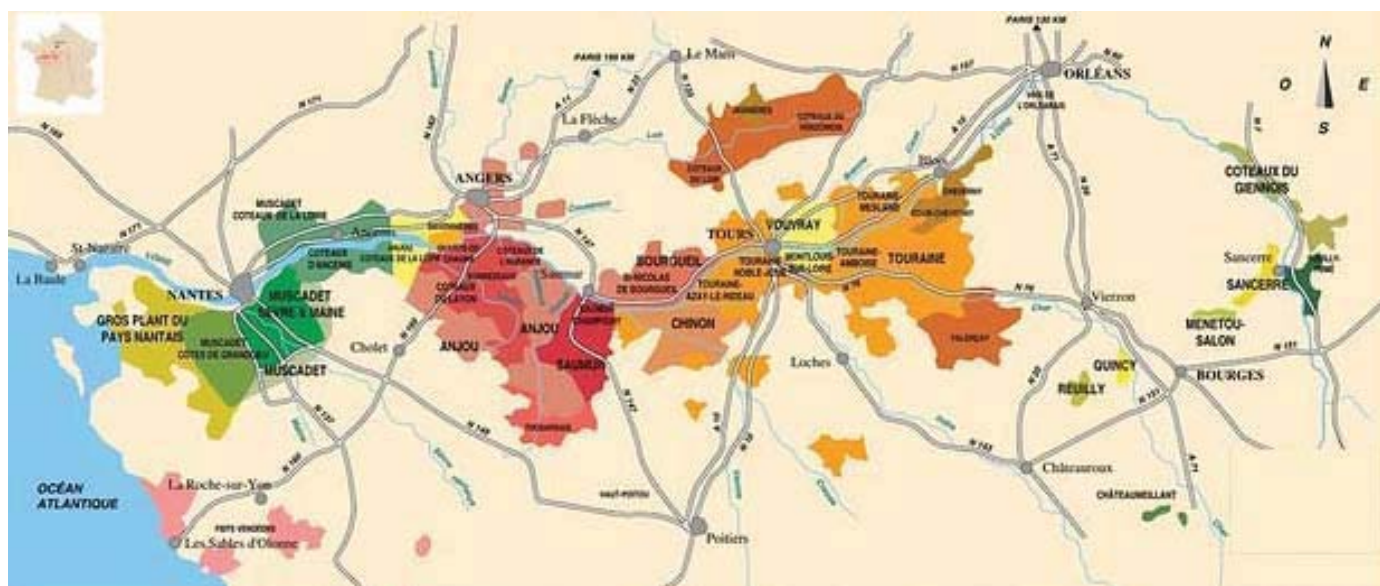


## *Missing the Crus on the Loire*

By Meril Markley

Of all France's wine regions we prefer the Loire Valley, in the country's northwest quadrant, home to favorites including Sancerre (both red and white) and especially Chinon. But it is French history rather than a wine which beckons us on our annual visits to France. No other wine region can compete in terms of momentous events, such as regime-changes and sagas of royal intrigue, unfolding in magnificent Renaissance chateaus nestled amidst vineyards producing wines fit for a king.

It was monks who first planted grapevines in the central Loire Valley where France's longest river makes a left turn near Gien and then flows westward for over 200 miles to reach the Atlantic Ocean at Saint-Nazaire in Brittany.



Things took off during the Hundred Years War (1337-1453) as local demand for wines increased dramatically. When English invaders spurred an exodus of France's hereditary rulers from the capital at Paris, the seat of government shifted to the Loire Valley. Generations of kings and their courtiers took up residence there, ushering in an extended building boom of luxurious chateaus constructed from the region's distinctive white *tuffeau* limestone. Tourists flock to some 50 chateaus found in towns and in the countryside near the Loire and along the many tributaries including the Vienne, the Indre, and the Cher. While the French word *château* is translated as "castle," the versions in the Loire Valley look more like pastoral pleasure palaces than military fortresses.

One of our favorite chateaus is the jewel of Renaissance design, Chenonceau, whose noteworthy history, including a contretemps between the queen and the mistress of King Henri II (reigned 1547-1559), did not end when the capital shifted back to Paris in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

## *Missing the Crus on the Loire (cont'd)*

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century and in private hands, Chenonceau served as a hospital during World War I. When the Cher River functioned as the border between free and German-occupied France during World War II, the chateau's enclosed bridge over the waterway was used to smuggle refugees. Five miles farther upstream at Montrichard, the Monmousseau winery aided the French Resistance by using delivery trucks to transport agents secreted in wine barrels past the German border guards along the Cher (as detailed on [Episode 3](#) of the Wine Show).

Happily for the royals who erected chateaus along the Loire, delectable wines were on offer at their doorsteps to accompany the tasty meals of wild game which had made the area a favorite for hunting, the obsession of monarchs and their entourages but especially of King Henri II's father, François I.



Born and raised at the chateau of Amboise, François I reigned from 1515 to 1547 and lived at other chateaus in the Loire Valley, such as Blois. He left his mark on the region by spending a massive chunk of French tax revenue building its largest chateau, Chambord, on reclaimed marshland in the midst of one of the country's largest forests.

The design, including an ingenious double staircase and an exquisitely complex roofline, is said to have been influenced by Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519). The artist's job description was "Chief Painter, Engineer, and Architect to the King" while he lived out his final years as François' neighbor in Amboise. There, the king kept him busy on a plan to divert the Loire River as part of the concept for a Renaissance "ideal city" and new French capital to be constructed at Romorantin. Leonardo did not live long enough to lay eyes on Chambord, but in a twist of fate his beloved *Mona Lisa* enjoyed a sojourn there when the Louvre Museum's most precious works were evacuated from Paris in 1939.

Construction that began on Chambord in 1519 remained incomplete when King François I died in 1547. But not before his royal symbols, an "F" with a crown atop it and a salamander, were emblazoned throughout lest anyone forget who built it. The sheer enormity coupled with the superbly detailed exterior strike awe, as intended 500 years ago, into any visitor approaching the chateau from afar (as the remoteness of the parking lot requires). With the structure looming ahead, it appears to float weightlessly in regal isolation from encroachment by the woods that still border it.

## *Missing the Crus on the Loire (cont'd)*

Unlike other chateaus in the valley, it was never destined to be home for extended periods. François spent no more than 50 nights there during his lifetime, doing what he loved best — hunting. Presumably the resulting game dishes were washed down with generous amounts of another of the monarch's passions — wine.

According to the chateau's official website, King François I arranged for a delivery from Burgundy of grapevines to be planted in what is now

the *appellation d'origine contrôlée* of Cour-Cheverny, some ten miles from Chambord. The grape he chose, used to make white wine, was re-named Romorantin in honor of the unfinished project for the new capital of France envisioned by him and his Italian protégé.

At least one of these vineyards survived the phylloxera infestation that devastated the Loire Valley in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In 2015, pre-phylloxera Romorantin and several other varieties of grapes (including Gamay and Pinot Noir) were planted on the grounds at Chambord, where an on-site winery is planned. Bottles of wine from this vineyard were unveiled at the chateau in May of 2019 marking a visit by French President Emmanuel Macron and Italian President Sergio Mattarella to celebrate the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Chambord's birth and Leonardo's death.

During France's Third Republic, Chambord was owned by the Duke of Bordeaux (1820-1883) who was also the Count of Chambord and the last eligible male in the royal line dating back to King Louis XV (1715-1774). It was at Chambord in 1871 that the Duke renounced all rights to inherit the French throne and to become King Henri V. This brought the curtain down on Chambord and the Loire Valley as the stage for centuries of kingly drama, except for a battle royal over wine which erupted two years ago.

If you ask an American "what is Chambord?" the answer you may get is "a raspberry liqueur in a fancy orb-shaped bottle with a crown on top, famed for ads in glossy magazines at Christmas time." Ask a French person and they'll say "a chateau in the Loire Valley," but have likely never tasted a Chambord-branded liqueur.



## *Missing the Crus on the Loire (cont'd)*

Legend has it that King Louis XIV (reigned 1643-1715) first sampled at Chambord an enchanting liqueur made from wild raspberries picked in the forests surrounding the chateau. We were astonished to learn, on our first visit to the chateau, that Chambord Liqueur was not for sale in the gift shop. Instead, the clerk directed our gaze to a high shelf where a dust-covered display with a miniature version of the orb-shaped bottle sat. She confessed that although the liqueur bore the chateau's name, it was not known in France. While on vacation in New York she had picked up the tiny sample in order to have something to point out whenever Americans inevitably inquired about it.

This disparity between American and French notions of Chambord came to a head in 2018 when a trademark lawsuit was filed in France in conjunction with the launch of the wines, mentioned above, to be marketed as *Clos de Chambord*.

Brown-Forman, the Kentucky-based owner of brands such as Jack Daniels, had acquired Chambord *liqueur royale de France* for \$255 million in cash in 2006 from its Philadelphia-based owner, Charles Jacquin et Cie. Inc. As owner of the right to use the Chambord name for its liqueur in France and the European Union, Brown-Forman argued that the chateau would create confusion by marketing wine using the Chambord name. The chateau countered by claiming that it was Brown-Forman who created confusion because the producer of the liqueur was not the 500 year-old chateau nor were the spirits made there. Even the website of a national beverage retailer perpetuates the mix-up when it states that Chambord is "produced on the grounds of a historic chateau" yet fails to mention which one. In fact, the liqueur is distilled at Château La Sistière in Cour-Cheverney.



The jury is still out on whether any wine made from the chateau's vineyard will ever bear the Chambord name or become a *cru* of its own. Whatever the outcome, the chateau will remain a favorite destination for us in a valley filled with history and the wines that made so many moments memorable.