

Sunday Lunch [© on April 23, 2020]

In my limited experience the two English words "Sunday" and "lunch" do not, when juxtaposed, convey the cultural complexities of the event as it unfolds in France. More than forty years of frequent visits to that country between 1968 and 2013, none of them longer than a few months, finally made me realize how sadly ill-equipped I was by background and conditioning to luxuriate in the prescribed indulgences and obligations of the mid-day Sunday meal, whether taken in restaurants or in the homes of friends.

Looking farther back, I think the only meal of the year which achieved the status of ritual in my own upbringing was Christmas. Christmas dinner with family in Winnipeg was a meal with a structure that comprehended menu, comportment and familial expectations. Sunday lunch, on the other hand, whether preceded by church or not, tended to be perfunctory and often the prelude to some activity or outing. And then I left home.

My lunch education began in the winter of 1969 when I found myself teaching English at the Berlitz School of Languages in Paris. I made friends with one of my pupils, a young widow with an infant son who had decided to invest the insurance money she received upon her husband's death in English lessons. I often spent weekends at her apartment in Saint-Cloud, a western suburb of Paris, weekends that included conversation in both French and English, leisurely breakfasts and the arrival, sometimes, of relatives and friends for Sunday lunch. I think I misunderstood these long, conversational repasts to have been organized in my honour and may have been flattered to have been shown off as a cultural curiosity.

A few years later, when my husband and I were driven into central Paris on a Sunday evening by my friend's mother after a long afternoon at table in Saint-Cloud, we were somewhat dismayed to discover the lunch's stifling effect on our pre-arranged dinner plans. We attempted to deconstruct the event we had just participated in. By what definition of hospitality, we wondered, would a host strive to bind guests to the table for an entire afternoon with a succession of dishes and an intoxicating sufficiency of wine? We gave up on deconstruction and thereafter took to evasion whenever possible.

The sabbatical year my husband and I spent in England was concluded in the spring and summer of 1978 by a few months in France. From London we made arrangements to rent a small stone cottage in a walled hill town in the Dordogne, a property owned by a local farmer. We arrived late one afternoon in April to find a basket of walnuts and a bottle of Cahors wine on a round table by a big window looking out into the garden. We spent the summer pattering in the garden and getting to know our landlord Paul, and his wife Marinette, who lived nearby on a small subsistence farm. Once a week Paul drove his moped into our yard to take a cup of coffee and to leave us with several little round fresh cow's milk cheeses made by Marinette with milk from their cows. Once a week we drove to the main town of the region to buy our food directly from local producers and artisans at the weekly market. Almost daily we braved the local butcher shop in our small town to be grilled by Monsieur Lambert, the butcher, about the number of people

we intended to serve and how we planned to prepare our purchase. By summer's end we wondered how we would revert to our Canadian ways which were so much less sociable, so much less discriminating regarding the quality, freshness and preparation of food. But we had forgotten our first mystifying encounter with another weekly ritual in France, Sunday lunch.

A good decade later, my husband began a multi-year research project which took him to various provincial and municipal libraries and archives in cities and towns all over France. I often accompanied him on these research trips, generally bringing projects of my own to work on and occasionally acting as research assistant.

One fine November Sunday, while we were staying outside Nantes in Vertou, a town which advertised itself as the gateway to the Muscadet vineyards in Brittany, we decided to combine a Sunday-walk with a stop for lunch. We thought to moderate the excesses of the ritual meal so as to avoid waddling several miles back to our hotel from our chosen lunch spot—a hotel in the small village of La Haie-Fouassière. In retrospect, I see that the two major criteria for our choice of restaurant showed that we were not serious. We picked it for its situation on the trajectory of our walk and for its perfunctory and even dilapidated aspect which we thought appropriate to our intentions. We made no inquiries or reservations. When we arrived in the town, the church bells were ringing noon and village residents were making end-of-the-morning purchases from patisseries and charcuteries, both of which turn out special delicacies on Sunday morning for those who lunch at home. The hotel dining-room, unfortunately, was closed. The town boasted no other restaurant that we could see and our inquiries revealed the only other possibility to be a popular and renowned establishment located just outside the town for which we were neither dressed nor mentally prepared.

Thirsty, and a little hungry, we decided to refresh ourselves in the town's Café des Sports which had been doing excellent business all morning serving drinks to the husbands of church-going wives. Tobacco smoke was thick in the air when we arrived and almost every table was being rapidly vacated by groups of men returning home to Sunday lunch. Each of these tables, we noticed, had been furnished with a large, round, thin-necked carafe from which glasses of what looked to be a muddy white wine had been amply poured throughout the morning. Despite the apparent popularity of this beverage, we were dubious. We selected a spot as far from the pool table and the thick cloud of now-diminishing smoke as we could find and decided to order two glasses of Muscadet. Which Muscadet, the owner's wife asked? Did we want the new vintage? The just-completed harvest (*vendange*) was in the early throes of its conversion to wine, she explained. It was still "troubled" and had a "special" taste. We decided on the troubled wine and in due course the bartender's wife arrived with our carafe of the new harvest alongside which she had placed a complimentary glass of the previous year's bottled vintage—lighter in colour, sparkling clear and, as she had explained, not at all the same taste as the un-bottled vintage. Before we left the Café des Sports and La Haie-Fouassière, the bartender's wife kindly cooked us a simple lunch—bread, an omelet for me and a plate of sausages for my husband. We felt humbled. Our tactics of evasion had been met in the generous spirit of hospitality that is part of the Sunday ritual.

Serious travel on Sundays in France is complicated by lunch. While the roads are blissfully free of trucks, hotels and restaurants often close as soon as the Sunday lunch service has ended. Twice one cold winter we stayed in hotels vacated by their staff and owners from Sunday lunch 'til Monday morning at breakfast. And when we did travel on Sunday, if we dared to stop for lunch, we emerged hours later in no mood or condition to tackle the few hundred kilometers required to make our destination.

One memorable Sunday, for instance, we drove at lunch time through the wine-producing commune of Gaillac in southwest France. It was half past noon when we saw the place we had marked in the Michelin Guide as a likely lunch spot. It was on the highway outside the town of Gaillac and the ample "parking" was ominously full. Any hopes we may have had for modest, roadside fare were wiped away by the picture that greeted us when we opened the door. Every tiny table was crowded to its corners with comestibles and the accoutrements required to eat and drink them. Faces were flushed and table conversations mingled to create a noise of din-like proportions. A haze of smoke in the air competed with the rich smells drifting off plates being conveyed precariously to tables. We had not reserved? Well, perhaps a small table could be found.

A small table was found. The set lunches or menus, tailored to Sunday appetites and time lines, were festive. Our small table began to fill up with dishes, cutlery and wine glasses. Before leaving we would have to visit the toilet which, as I recall, consisted of one water closet, one sink and one limp towel which was far beyond serving its intended purpose when I reached it. I no longer remember where we had intended to drive that day or whether we got there but I do remember, perhaps for the first time, registering the need for even more strategy when travel on Sunday was planned.

When Sunday travel is to friends, lunch is the best time to arrive. That is what friends who lived in Dijon told us when we asked if they had a preference for the time of our arrival. At noon exactly we wedged our Renault Mégane through the stone-buttressed portal and into the courtyard of the 17th century town-house in Dijon in which our friend's apartment was situated. It was May but chilly for the time of year so the small fire in the grate was warming and gave off a wonderful scent. Generous glasses of a rich, golden Savigny-les-Beaune were poured before we had a chance to put down our bags. At 4 PM, after a spring lunch of asparagus, pintade with fresh green peas, salad, cheese, strawberries and four bottles of wine, one of which was an Aloxe-Corton chosen especially for the cheese, our friends proposed an afternoon drive to Gevrey-Chambertin to pay a promised visit. Before 6 o'clock the four of us were ensconced en famille with a couple and their two adult daughters. The husband proposed a small wine-tasting and produced four bottles including, after the whites, a grand cru of the village and what turned out to be a superb Volnay. As we sipped, the daughters disappeared from time to time to replenish plates of warm hors d'oeuvres. After the eight bottles of Burgundy we had helped to consume that day, it was no wonder our friend proposed, later that evening, a Bordeaux to accompany the supper of salad, jambon blanc, bread and cheese with which we brought that Sunday to a close.

For more than thirty-five years our frequent visits to the Dordogne, particularly to the area around the small walled town of Domme, yielded many opportunities to lunch on Sunday with our by-then friends and former landlords. Marinette's tiny kitchen, even when it was not equipped with running water, yielded everyday meals whose apparent simplicity disguised the careful labour that went into preparing them. Everything we ate, including the wine we drank and the small, fragrant cow cheeses which always came just before dessert, were made by Marinette and her husband, Paul. On Sundays, however, the larder was raided of its home-made delectables, particularly the rich, preserved livers of local geese and ducks and the cellar was plumbed for an aged Cahors or Bordeaux to drink with the rich, smokey dishes of the Perigord-- duck confits cooked with the meaty mushrooms known as cèpes and potatoes cooked slowly in goose fat with onions in the style of Sarlat, a gamey pintade which had been killed and plucked on Saturday to be served with a mountain of fresh-picked peas, or perhaps even one of the rabbits for which we saved the vegetable greens and harvested long grass and weeds that otherwise would disfigure the verges. For dessert perhaps Marinette would have taken the time to crush enough walnuts, harvested from a tree in the garden, to make the nut cake which is a specialty of the Perigord. After lunch the crumbs from the table were diligently brushed into a bowl for the hens. The ends of bottles were tucked away to be retrieved in the evening when we four sat down to a meal which we all claimed was not needed or wanted but which passed successfully nonetheless. Among the series of lighter supper dishes, even on Sundays, was always a plain green salad made by Paul which featured one or two large garlic cloves coarsely chopped into it. And after the cheese, perhaps some warm strawberries just picked from the garden or a bowl of fruit which Marinette had preserved from the fall harvest.

I don't recall driving anywhere after Sunday lunch in the Dordogne, which is a good thing as the police are often a lurking presence on the roads after mid-afternoon. I do remember trying to leave Auxerre before late afternoon one Monday, the day our hosts, Liliane and Michel, had decided to prepare the Sunday lunch we had managed to miss the day before. Before we arose on Monday morning Michel, aproned and with an eye on the television propped in the corner of the kitchen, laboured to prepare a stew made from the marinated meat of a deer he had shot that hunting season. At the same time Liliane, busied herself shopping for and preparing the other courses. Late in the morning we set off for Chablis to visit a vigneron and taste some of his 2000 vintage. The visit was not perfunctory. By the time we left to drive back to Auxerre for lunch I knew both the departure time and our sobriety were under threat. The meal progressed a little slowly due to our marked reluctance to do our share of the wine-drinking. The Sancerre with the fish was a nice change after the Chablis of the morning and the 1988 Pic Caillou pulled from the Bordeaux section of our host's Burgundian wine cellar was a perfect match for the deer stew. The apple tart which preceded the coffee was superb but, before beginning it, my husband and I committed the irreparable sin of refusing the cheese course, just as Liliane appeared around the corner of the kitchen door with a large plate of ripe cheeses. In the moment which followed, as the cheese plate was returned to the kitchen and the prospect of a prize Burgundy to accompany it was abandoned by our host, I experienced an overwhelming sense of failure. Much as I had admired, and even attempted to emulate, French culture, especially those aspects of the culture which revolved around food and hospitality, I simply could not master the nuances; I would never be French.