

## Year 3 week 18 to 24

### FIG, grapes, and apples: autumn in Entre-deux-Eaux

The season of mellow fruitfulness lasted for about 5 days. Now we are back to low cloud and incessant rain. It must be time for tranquil recollection of those few precious days of sunshine and a newsletter.

St Die really comes to life during its annual *Festival International de Géographie*, referred to affectionately by locals as *le FIG*. All the cafes and restaurants, after setting out their tables out on the pavements, propose a special geographical menu. The colleges, social centres, museum, library, and cathedral and cloisters all fling wide their doors for lectures and exhibitions. A curving row of wooden booths sprouts underneath the spreading white “wings” of the Tower of Liberty. Soon they are stacked with sausages, cheeses, wines patisseries, honey, jam, and coffees. Flags of the world festoon *the Hotel de Ville* and the main streets. Cars with the FIG logo dart between venues. Elegant ladies in colourful flowing FIG shirts welcome and inform. Lecturers, identifiable by large lapel badges and an air of self-importance, stride around the streets, bookshops and cafes. The forestry rangers re-create a (very small) forest by the Cathedral fountain, serve different forest soups each day (chestnut, pumpkin, garlic and ginger) from a huge cauldron suspended from three poles, play a forest game with young children, and display two rather sad forestry ponies (who obviously aren't taken in by the re-created forest in the midst of paving slabs and traffic). And up in the Cloisters are tents with more foods of the world.

The theme this year is Food. The international flavour is given by the invited guest country, Jordan, and by the fact that one of the first lectures is in a foreign language - English. I feel I cannot miss this, so turn up at the chapel of the prettily named *Lycée Beaujardin*, along with about fifty of their students and a handful of other people prepared to listen in English. The mayor is in his element as he introduces the speaker and exchanges quips (all in the good English of a smooth practising Parisian lawyer) with professors in the front row (what a show-off that man is). One of his asides is to the students, explaining that the lecturer in fact has an Irish accent, so they may find it a little difficult to understand her pronunciation of “kews”. The lecturer obliges with “coos”. The lecture is in fact entitled “Are all the cows mad?” I get increasingly concerned as the lecture proceeds. It must be reinforcing all the stereotypes about English food which the students could have hitherto amassed. This representative of the Royal Geographical Society, points out that first there was the egg and salmonella problem (the students, not surprisingly, didn't get her laboured joke about Mrs Curry), followed by the problems with beef, lamb and then chicken, so that now the English can only safely eat fish. But throughout all this, the English didn't care and have done nothing to rectify the situation as there is no *appellation contrôlée* to regulate their food. (No mention of the stringent Food Regulations I'd laboured over back in the eighties). The favourite food of the English remains roast beef and a curious lumpy substance called Yorkshire pudding. (I thought I'd heard something about chicken tikka masala being now a favourite?) It was a more

subtle anti-English attack than any terrorist could devise. None of those students will dare to travel to England.

After that gloom and doom, a session on *la fourchette de l'ami Fritz: hier et aujourd'hui, la gastronomie du Nord Est* was a far jollier affair, one of the debaters being Marc Haebler, the chef at John's favourite restaurant. The Geographer tried to wind the up Chef by suggesting that the Protestants of Alsace were not good cooks, but the chef merely responded with humorous tales of the Catholic fishermen coming out of mass on the other side of the river, and crossing the bridge to drink at the bar of his restaurant rather than the nearer Catholic restaurant. John attended a couple of the cookery demonstrations; the presenter's sarcastic comments seemed to result in another enthusiastic spectator ceasing to attend further demonstrations. No protracted dog barking punctuated the later session. *A table avec St-Augustin* was a cold affair in the cathedral, as the Town hadn't paid the Church for heating; the invited Algerian delegate walked out (was she cold or were there insufficient mentions of Algeria, which I hadn't previously realised was St Augustine's country of birth and residence?) The Michelin guides had a session devoted to them, and there were lots of sessions about Jordan. We picked up all the Jordan travel brochures.... Maybe next Spring...

We haven't yet seen the really fabulous autumn reds, oranges, and golds of the forests. But there was a riot of colour at the other local autumn international event - the 10<sup>th</sup> European Patchwork Meeting at Ste-Marie-aux-Mines. The many churches of Ste-Marie and surrounding silver mining villages were draped with huge quilts and hangings from all over the world - Irish, Amish, Mennonite, Icelandic, African, South American, Russian and Japanese. Considerably more international than the vaunted Geography Festival! Having consulted the internet, John told me that Yasser Arrafat was also going to be there. This puzzled me, as I'd completely forgotten a long-ago enquiry at Sherwood Library for a craft book by Yasser Arrafat, which took a while to refine to Kaffe Fassett. I did indeed run into Kaffe Fassett in the church with the luminous Russian quilts; his teaching session (according also to John) was cancelled (perhaps his session was too expansive at 110 euro per participant).

Crossing the mountain pass to Ste Marie-aux-Mines, right on the boundary between Alsace and Lorraine, you pass the *Belle Vue* hotel and restaurant. You can't miss it, as it has recently changed ownership and its walls have recently been painted bright blue. So it came to mind last Sunday when Nicola proposed lunch out. Sunday was the day when another Alsace town, Marlenheim, celebrated its grape harvest. In other years we have watched the barrels of wine rapidly emptying, the folk dancers and the hundreds of stalls (food as well as *vide-grenier*). But in Sunday's torrential rain we felt that the wine and dances would be very sodden affairs and the antiques and jumble impenetrable under in plastic sheeting. So we decided instead to celebrate the first anniversary of Roger and Dorinda's purchase of their Mandray house. (Incidentally, if you've been following this saga with obsessive interest, you may recall that this week it will be the 14<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our Entre-deux-Eaux house purchase!). We toasted the Mandray house in Alsace fizzy and feasted on goats cheese or paté Lorraine, duck, the famous Munster cheese, excellent (varied) deserts, and coffees. The restaurant had emptied by the time we

finished. But as we came out, the belle vue itself was still hidden from sight by low cloud and driving rain. We later repaired to Roger and Dorinda's to toast the house again - this time in kir!

The villagers of Mandray had meanwhile been toasting a St Dié artist, Robert George, at a retrospective exhibition in the Social Centre almost opposite Roger and Dorinda's house. Dorinda described the pictures as mainly large nudes, with a huge scene of St Dié being burnt by the Germans. Nicola and I examined the nudes with interest, as we'd been on the anti-Iraq-invasion demonstration in St Die with his wife and fellow artist, Françoise; we'd subsequently done an interview with the local newspaper with her. There was an early portrait of her, and perhaps one of the later nudes. There was also a very moving large painting of women grieving at the deaths of four young men from a single family during the war. This, like most of the nudes, was done in the 1990s, a handful (perhaps four) were from the seventies, and some schoolboy sketches of tanks and retreating German soldiers were done in 1944. We wondered what he was painting during the intervening years. Someone bought a lovely charcoal sketch, and another bottle of wine was being opened, no doubt to celebrate the purchase, as we left.

All the reputable wine making in this area is done over on Alsace side of the Vosges. However one gathers that in times past the monks had planted plenty of vines in Lorraine. John has attempted to reinstate that particular contribution of the monks in our fruit and vegetable patch, but production is not impressive. So it was lovely to come across a small rural Lorraine vineyard on one of our walks. Whilst Snowy was being serviced and checked for a recall fault, we drove further west into Lorraine to investigate another area we'd never visited. We strolled along the tranquil wooded riverside of Mirecourt, the centre for making violins and similar stringed instruments. We passed a couple of fishermen. Then the path emerged from the woods and we turned up a lane which ascended the hill. A woman in a car bumped down past us. When we came level with some rows of vines, we realised that she'd been delivering lunch, as all the men were seated round a large table under the shaded terrace of a little stone vineyard building, tucking into a spread. It was an idyllic scene. And the grapes looked good too! The lower half the plot was harvested, and the afternoon's work stretched dark against the lemon-coloured leaves of the upper half. Our walk took us along the summit of the rolling hills among the dried stalks of harvested maize, then dropped back down to the town. The scene had made us hungry and we repaired to the restaurant on the far side of the river which was serving a hearty (and cheap) lunch of salad, chicken, fruit tart, and coffee in the crowded bar. We strolled back through the streets lined with instrument makers (lovely skeletons of violins in the windows).

Our little lane was busy during that sunny interlude as farmers Duhaut and Olivier (and a couple of friends or relatives) were up and down to the huge cowshed with open trucks of dried, chopped maize for winter feed. As I gathered windfall apples in the orchard and cleared the overgrown herb garden I was very aware of the steady traffic.

And what else have we been doing during all the wet weather? John ordered a

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new Dell computer as he'd finally got fed up with all my complaints about the eight-year old computer I used being so slow and crashing. After various conversations with their Morocco call centre over the alleged delivery problems of UPS, the delivery company, (who'd obviously decided before even setting out that they wouldn't be able to find their way in such a rural part of France, so hadn't bothered), three of the four parcels eventually arrived. A small one containing a webcam has yet to surface, having mysteriously disappeared somewhere in their Lille distribution centre, according to their web site. Meanwhile Nicola's new computer (she'd taken advantage of a similar offer a week later) had been delivered without any problems. So John's had endless wet-weather fun installing software on them both (and playing with Nicola's webcam!). As I've inherited his one-year old similar specification computer I'm pleased, as things happen fast on this one!

The other wet weather activity was clearing the boxes out of our prospective spare bedroom in the West Wing. With winter approaching and with winter guests expected (lured by conferences and Christmas markets) we thought they might prefer to sleep in the warmth of underfloor-heated accommodation. It didn't take long for John to finish the plastering (he'd done more than he remembered in the long ago days before we moved in and obscured those walls with stacked boxes). Next the conventional white paint for the ceiling. Then, with a flourish, he mixed two small tins of "Spanish Red" paint into a large tub of white and set to with a paintbrush and roller. The result is a bit more lurid than the cool creams of the rest of the house! Then he fixed the door frame and skirting board.

Since starting this newsletter, we've had four days of sunshine. We seized the second day to drive over the hills to - yes, you know by now - IKEA, to buy a wall's worth of wardrobes and a couple of bedside tables (which were so nice that I appropriated one). As it turned out, we managed to fit all the boxes inside a near seat-less Bluto without resorting to the roof rack. All we need now is a bed (though we do have some old ones to hand!) and a replacement bedside table and a few pictures unpacked (from one of the aforementioned boxes) and all will be ready for winter visitors. And we still need to find storage space for those boxes! The last of those four days of sunshine (yesterday) we seized the opportunity for a drive through the autumn colours of the wooded mountains and vineyards to go to a couple of vide greniers near Mulhouse. At the second one, Nicola negotiated for an aquarium (her fifth - the fish population is expanding!) from an almost incoherent man and his frightened wife. When we went back for it the man was sleeping off the effects of the alcohol in the cab of his truck, whilst his wife (now more relaxed) was left with the prospect of loading up all the unsold goods. She didn't dare bargain too much with Nicola - "otherwise he'll break my jaw". Meanwhile John had seen some delightful brass stacking hedgehogs. The marked price of 12 euro was too much. The stall holder stuck at ten euro. Then her friend pointed out that they were, in fact, stacking ashtrays. Horrified, the anti-smoking stall holder instantly reduced her price to five euro.

So when you next come here, look out for our autumn harvest - a bright spare bedroom, a new computer and some stacking hedgehogs. Today we're back to rain. A bientôt!

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