

Mulled Wine Sorbet and Candle-lit Stables: Everyday Life in Entre-deux-Eaux, Year 7, Weeks 24 - 29

Everyone's far too busy in December to read a long newsletter, so just a few Vosgian vignettes to wish you all a peaceful and happy Christmas.

Fruity white wine Friday, dusk, snow on the hills, a deserted village wine cooperative, the name *Vogelgarten* on a list. We are questing for Christmas wine for friends and family. A lady emerges from the colder cellar regions, pulling off her anorak, and launches into her introduction to the wines of Alsace, assuming we are new visitors to the region. We pin her down to *Vogelgarten*, and as we sip the pinot gris, she explains that the grand crus come from the upper slopes which get the sun all day, and the Vogelgarten vines lie just below. We have often driven through the upper slopes to the hilltop area set aside at the end of the war for a military cemetery for all those who fell in the protracted battle to liberate Colmar; the moving last scene of *Indigenes (a.k.a. Days of Glory)* was shot there. At the foot of that road is the house and courtyard of Clarisse, where in May she sells the white, mauve and green asparagus she grows on the plain beyond the vineyards. And now, at the *Sigolsheim cave*, as an afterthought, purely for our own pleasure, we also try the gewürztraminer *Vieilles Vignes*. Irresistible. The 18 bottles clink gently as we drive home over the snowy Bonhomme pass.

Pointy shoes If you have ever dreamt of being a young head-waiter, the essential kit these days involves shoes (shiny patent leather optional) with much longer points than winkle-pickers ever had - more like those mediaeval ones whose long tips you could almost tie up round your calves. Thomas at the *Blanche Neige* has the kit, and regrettably, as the *Blanche Neige* has still not achieved Michelin stars, he is now taking his shoes and skills to a more prestigious two star restaurant in Obernai (whose prices, sadly, are beyond our everyday budget!). His assistant/somelier (who some of you may also remember from John's birthday) has already moved to a prestigious Swiss restaurant and Virginie, the waitress and flower arranger, now runs a *winstub* in Colmar. Of course, accessibility may be another motive. The *Blanche Neige* is well named, as most of our winter trips there have involved snow and drama. Last Friday was no exception. Surprisingly the little road leading to it hadn't even been gritted at their end. Less surprisingly, we were the only diners there that lunch time. Nevertheless, all the candles were lit and glittering in their glass containers and we were greeted like old friends. Thomas told us the previous weekend had been fully booked, especially for Sunday lunch. The first snow had fallen during Friday night, and the village council did not get the snow plough out at the weekend. The weekend diners had to walk from the main road and Thomas himself was unable to get back down the road in his own car that night, and had to get a friend with a 4x4 to pick him up. Incidentally, I wonder if you can drive (or walk easily in snow) in those pointy shoes?

Sorbet Fortunately the chef is not leaving the *Blanche Neige*. Though this time his *Fragrance* menu seemed to have a powerful dose of salt in every course. It might have been the assistant chefs going mad with the salt cellar on his day off. They'd have been better employed sprinkling it on the snowy road. The

soup then guinea fowl were followed by a dessert with sweet chestnut mousse, quince, caramel, and the most delicious mulled wine sorbet. But maybe the secret was more salt in the sorbet. Nevertheless, Christmas may never be the same again in the Blackmore household if we can find the ice-cream maker. It might just be in the attic.

Dusty attic There are still a few cardboard boxes in the unconverted section of our hayloft attic. Boxes dating from our move here. I was last in there looking for the long neglected box of camping equipment for a floor mat for John to use when doing the floor exercises prescribed after his latest and worst back problem. (The local doctors can't have seen many miners, as silver mining here has long since ceased and coal mining was much further north in Lorraine. Nevertheless our doctor, surveying the X-ray, said in surprise that John had the back of a man after a life of carrying sacks of coal). The Christmas decorations box is the next one to be opened. Last year it was covered with owl pellets, but no trace of owl this year. Perhaps the stone marten frightened him off. Which reminds me: the marten trap needs a fresh egg before we leave for England

Deer Alas, no deer grazing in our meadow since the hunting season started. But as the Christmas lights are put up, grazing deer are a popular illumination this year. Last night the pretty little village of Méménil opened its stables and barns for the annual Christmas market. Wine producers, water colourists, snail farmers, bee-keepers, chocolate makers, hat, cape and scarf makers, a knife smith, teddy-bear makers, basket weavers, bakers, cross-stitchers and olive vendors all crowd in for that one night with their wares. The prettiest barns are candle lit. And outside the gardens, doorways and even mail boxes are bright with lights, including fearless Christmas deer.

Happy Christmas everyone!