

Crémant, chandelles, champignons, et les garçons chimiques: birthday edition (Year 5, weeks 22 -28)

October 26th. The sun was shining. The trees were flirting with shades of lemon and gold, but resisting a total change to autumnal shades. The sky was blue. The distant hills hazy. Crisp white tablecloths covered the tables outside the Blanche Neige restaurant. Bottles of *crémant* basked in ice in a silver tureen.

“Bring raincoats and boots for outdoors and slippers to prevent mud trailing indoors” I'd e-mailed pessimistically earlier in October when the radio and newspapers had graphic accounts of local floods. The River Meurthe had swollen and covered bridges round St Dié. The firemen were busy pumping out cellars. The N83 linking St Dié to the routes from Calais had been closed at various points. “Maps might be useful” my e-mail also suggested, thinking of unexpected closures and diversions.

And here was this innocent sunshine, demanding shirt-sleeves, T-shirts and open toed sandals! The guests grouped and re-grouped around the outdoor tables, chatting to old friends and introducing themselves to new faces. The discreetly smart waiters (who had, unlike the many of the guests, retained their jackets and ties) circulated with *flûtes* of *crémant*. There was a sudden silence as everyone raised their glasses. And John even gave a speech, so happy was he to welcome everyone after their long drives and late night and early morning flights.

Eventually we trooped indoors, and upstairs, to the three large round tables glittering with slim wine glasses, tall white candles in glass holders, and square glass vases enclosing a single pink orchids. Overhead the candles in the hanging glass lamps lit up the sloping burgundy and gold walls.

In the weeks beforehand, it had felt as if we'd been really pestering everyone with unwanted e-mails about what they might fancy eating on this far-off date. But, since the restaurant was opening specially and the chef was shopping and cooking just for us this lunchtime, it had been necessary. And in order that no-one accidentally ate anyone else's choice, we'd officiously printed out individual menus. Fortunately, it all worked very smoothly, as the staff could quietly check their armload of plates against our menus while conversations continued uninterrupted. So a succession of dishes (which looked nothing like we'd envisaged, thanks to the chef's elegant arrangements) appeared in front of us, complicated by a few unannounced *amuses bouches*. We even managed to change places before dessert, coffee, and bonbons without confusing the waiters.

John's dessert was one of the last to arrive. His choice was on a rectangular white plate with three compartments. In the first was a glass of chocolate mousse, in the centre was a scoop of apples in calvados and in the last was a spoonful of vanilla ice cream with a fan of caramelised apples). Across the top of the plate, chef had written in chocolate and in English *HAPPY Birthday “60”*. And to finish it off, a sparkler was fizzing in his chocolate mousse.

It must have been well after 4.30 by the time the last coffee had been finished on the balcony. The tall candles had burnt low in their glasses. And the staff needed to prepare for their normal evening opening. How should we round off our protracted meal? The early risers (who'd caught a morning flight from Stansted to be with us) retreated for a post-prandial nap, Martin and Ann bade farewell and set off in quest of an organic wine seller of repute, some of us drove through the forest and took a short walk round the World War One trenches at Le Linge, and some detoured to Munster to see the storks on their nests at dusk. Then we all reassembled in the evening and started eating again.

John had said he didn't want birthday presents as it would be sufficient pleasure to see so many friends and relatives. His birthday cards perhaps reflected certain obsessions of ours: there was the cheeky mole digging up the lawn, the frantic chef in the kitchen, the shelves of books, the message about bonfires and the jazz musicians. So he was overwhelmed when John S. presented him with an apple wood bowl which he had been lovingly turning over the months since our apple tree had met its sad fate in May 2005 (felled by a passing timber lorry). Equally by the delicious cakes (one complete with a candle kit) and attractive plates. And bless you, Barbara and Bruce who brought the quintessentially English supplies we yearned for - quantities of baked beans, ginger marmalade, bread flour, and disinfectant!. And then there were the revelations of "The Chemistry Boys" album with its photos which Graham had dredged up from their shared past in the Science Sixth at Barking Abbey Grammar.

The birthday evening (and the next two) echoed with sound: the clink of *crémant* glasses, clatter of Rummycub tiles, competitive groans of the card players, blowing out of candle flames (and another short speech), and, interspersed through all the strands of conversation, the hitherto unheard reminiscences of three of the assembled "Chemistry Boys": the school open day demonstration of dying techniques with John in his impeccably dyed boudoir-pink lab coat; the car rallies (run by a police club!) around London and Wales with John "spotting" in the front of the car and Alan crouched with a lamp and map behind a curtain in the back.

The next morning we woke to stillness and silence - and more sunshine. As we put the croissants to warm, we wondered if anyone else was awake! But Alistair and Sue had been out and about for hours studying the local fungi. He's building up quite an expertise, and was determined to prove that his latest "find", though closely related to a highly poisonous specimen, was in fact edible. So as the second day of the festivities began to take shape with people setting out on walks or driving down the silver and wine routes to start a specially devised birthday treasure hunt/quiz, Alistair drove off to the local pharmacy and later the local *dépôt de champignons*. However, he was unconvinced by their negative responses. Many of us regrouped later for a leisurely lunch at the Frankenbourg restaurant, at the end of which Alistair showed his fungi to Madame, who is a keen mushroom hunter. The curl of her lip as she pronounced "*non*", should have been sufficient. The photographs of the ensuing afternoon activities include a rugged group (in their walking

boots!) on the summit of the mountain above the Frankembourg, Kaiser Wilhelm's Disneyland castle, the macaque monkeys graciously accepting popcorn, wine villages in the sunset, and, inevitably, more fungi. But Madame's word *gluant* was sufficiently expressive for us not to include Alistair's "finds" in that evening's buffet.

Throughout the festivities we heard murmurs of recognition as people linked names they'd read about in newsletters with faces and real characters. Jessica summed it up in her e-mail afterwards: "What a brilliant house party and what great memories. We thoroughly enjoyed ourselves and enjoyed getting to know the people behind the stories (Alistair and his derring dos, Ann's jacket - the lovely multi-coloured one). Everyone was very happy to chat and share lives and I was particularly intrigued by the Chemistry Boys!" So to finish off, here are a few snapshot memories that other participants may have missed!

John and his sister Ann calmly and silently conjuring up in our small kitchen an array of creamy chicken, spag bol, quiches, sausage rolls, cheesecakes, chocolate cakes, fruit salads, crème caramels, jellies, and panacottas. And Derek doing endless washing up in one corner...

...Bruce working feverishly with lump hammer, gaffer tape and a bleeding finger to make a temporary repair to the battered wing of their car before darkness fell. Afterwards, Barbara still had to climb into the passenger seat via the driver's seat. But you'll all be glad to know the insurance has paid for the damage caused by that nasty skid on the wet roads of Luxembourg on their way here...

...Jessica and Mark, whose Putney parties have been an invaluable role model over the years, striding out along the ridge above the Route de Crêtes. They wrote, "Thank Alistair for his advice on the walk and best of the countryside drive up on the Hohneck. We loved the valley leading up to the pass and had a great walk with spectacular views on the GR5 back towards Munster sitting in the valley below amongst the trees and rocky outcrops. It was warm and sheltered for most of the time and we could see the jagged peaks of the Alps way in the distance. The tapestry of tree colours as we descended over the other side towards Basel was particularly beautiful and I thought must have been the inspiration for Ann's jacket material"...

...A quiet moment of relaxation between meals, with Toby stretched out on the sofa fast asleep and Stella peacefully reading. It was good to see them recuperating after their hectic few weeks of starting new jobs in London, flat hunting and moving...

...The Saturday walkers (Wendy, John S, Ann H, David, Alistair and Sue) who followed instructions (and quiz questions) that Leila and I had written a month earlier as we'd explored the route. They successfully found the little chapel of Sainte Claire, ascended or circumnavigated the Spitzemberg, refreshed themselves at the *auberge* and walked on past the shaggy highland cattle. Next they needed to take a sharp but well signposted turn onto a path descending through woods rutted with old world war 1 trenches. A few days

earlier we'd had strong winds. The posse paused to inspect yet more fungi at the foot of a tree that had blown down. But for Alistair's obsession, they would never have seen the signs which had been attached to tree and were now buried beneath it. As it was, being true walkers, they reattached the signs to the roots of the tree for posterity and proceeded by the indicated shortest route homewards...

...The triumphant return late on Friday evening of Alan, Marianne, and Tessa, who must surely have covered more kilometres than anyone else. They'd found the family in Sainte-Marie-les-Mines that Marianne had visited as a child; they'd fed the macaque monkeys, they'd strolled round a wine village, then they'd dined out...

...Julia and Graham sitting out on the balcony with us on their last morning for a leisurely coffee. It was very enjoyable just to sit and chat. In fact it felt like the first time during the festivities that we'd sat down in the sunshine!...

...And the very autumnal Sunday lunch of pumpkin and ginger soup, roast boar, red cabbage and roast potatoes, followed by bread-and-butter pudding before the last guests set out on their different return routes via Baden Baden, Basel and Verdun/Calais...

And that really should have been the end of the birthday story. But on the Monday night, the phone rang and I heard John giving instructions about how to find our house. It's not easy after nightfall, as there are no street lights in Entre-deux-Eaux. However, some time later, a large 4x4 drew up and from the darkness emerged a man with a huge bouquet of flowers. Julia and Graham had arranged a very French parting shot! And the flowers have lasted beautifully until today.