



THE FRENCH CONNECTION
WRINGTON TWINNING ASSOCIATION
The John Locke Room, Silver Street, Wrington BS40 5QE
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News from The French Connection/VLB

- Jane Finn writes: Another Zoom meeting with our twinning counterparts in South of France was held last week. The topic was recipes and cooking tips. The culinary delights ranged from potato mayonnaise to Indian chicken and an amazing tart. The next meeting is scheduled on Monday 25th October with the theme of 'Vin'. Let me know if you'd like to join in - not the drinking part just the Zoom call!! (jane@wringtontwinning.co.uk)
- The first face to face French conversation meeting since lockdown was held on 30th September at the Langford Inn.
- A new *Cinéphiles* film session is planned for 5th October. The film will be *Vérité* with Catherine Deneuve. It can be streamed on Amazon. If you want to take part in the discussion contact Shail Patel on (chair@wringtontwinning.co.uk)

News from France

- The French government is seeking authority to extend the right to impose health pass restrictions until summer 2022. A pass is required to enter restaurants, cinemas and other large public gatherings. It is issued to people who are fully vaccinated or who have passed a recent negative test. If not extended the requirement will expire on 15th November.
- People driving UK-registered cars in France must now have a 'UK' sticker on their car instead of the previous 'GB' sticker. This is not being imposed by either the EU or United Nations, but is due to a British government decision. The UK earlier this year informed the UN that it was changing its 'national signifier' to UK from GB.
- France is experiencing a shortage of 40,000-50,000 lorry drivers, a leading industry union has said. However the situation is not as bad as in the UK where around double that number of drivers are lacking.
- The EU will give its official view in early October on whether it recommends everyone aged 16 or above to have a booster jab. The European Medicines Agency has said that data so far suggest that immunity against Covid obtained with initial doses decreases with time. The World Health Organisation has retained its stance that boosters are unnecessary at present, as the first jabs remain effective against serious forms of the disease.

French cheese

It was Charles de Gaulle who famously said, "How can you govern a country that has 246 varieties of cheese"? France now produces over 1,000 varieties of cheese. Cheese is an essential part of the French diet and you will find shops in towns devoted to selling only cheese. It is habitually eaten at a main meal, after the main course and before the dessert. It is served with *baguette*, not with biscuits, and is usually accompanied by a red wine, although white wine is quite acceptable. In times gone by it was more usual to serve white wine with cheese. Cheese was traditionally made from cow's milk, but goat's milk and, more recently, ewe's milk are now often used. Cheeses are often known by the names of their area of origin and, as with wine, there is a system of *appellations contrôlées* for cheese. It would be impossible here to mention all the French cheeses, but we will take a look at just a few of the better known ones.



Hard cheeses:

Cantal is a very tasty uncooked, pressed, cow's milk cheese from the Auvergne. **Some people** consider it to be similar to English farmhouse cheddar. It comes in two varieties: 'jeune' (young) and 'entre deux' (between two), meaning cheese that has matured for longer. Its strength and taste increase with ageing. Cantal cheese is stronger than most cheddar.

Comté is a cousin of the Swiss "Gruyère" and comes from the *Franche Comté* area of eastern France, stretching along the Swiss border. The milk comes from cows grazing at at least 400 metres altitude. Although produced village by village in the local village dairies (*fruitières*), comté is often matured for up to two years in the industrial cellars of dairy companies. Comté usually comes without holes, but sometimes it may have small holes. It comes in different varieties, 'fruité' or 'salé' (fruity or salty). The *fruité* variety is often more elastic. 'Salé' is more brittle. Comté is traditionally used in cheese fondue.

Cheeses similar to *comté* are *Beaufort*, and *Abondance*, made in a similar manner in the French Alps.

Emmental is a traditional cheese with holes. It is not an *appellation contrôlée* and so can be produced anywhere. It is usually produced industrially.

Mimolette is a round cheese, made near Lille in the North of France. Its orange colour is the result of the addition of natural colouring. It is similar to the Dutch Edam cheese.

Tomme is a hard cheese produced in the Pyrenees. It does not have an *appellation contrôlée* label. It has a distinctive black skin and is a fairly bland cheese that appeals to those who do not like strong-tasting cheeses.

Turning now to soft cheeses:

Reblochon is a rich soft pressed cheese made in the Alps with a strong flavour and a creamy texture. It is traditionally used as an ingredient in *tartiflette*, a speciality of the



Haute Savoie, the other principal ingredients of which are ham and potatoes (for which the local name was '*tartifle*').

Brie There are two sorts of Brie, *Brie de Meaux* and *Brie de Melun*, both *appellations* *contrôlées* cheeses. named after two nearby towns 80 km. south East of Paris. Brie is a thin round cheese about 45 cm. in diameter, with a soft white crust that can be eaten. It is a mild creamy cheese that appeals to those who do not enjoy strong tasting cheeses.

Camembert is a soft cheese from Normandy and is perhaps the most famous French cheese. A young camembert will be hard and dry. An overripe one smells strongly and is to be recommended only to those who enjoy strong cheeses. The crust of a camembert is edible. Supermarkets are full of camembert lookalikes, since any similar cheese that is not manufactured in the *appellation contrôlée* area cannot call itself camembert. To test a camembert, open the box and press gently. The cheese should be just soft, but not spongy.

Munster is a strong, rind-washed, soft cheese from the *Vosges* in Alsace. It is not for those who do not like strong tasting cheeses. It comes in two varieties, normal and '*au cumin*' (with cumin seed).

Pont l'Evêque is a creamy soft cheese, uncooked and unpressed, from Normandy. It is one of the oldest cheeses in France and has been documented since the 12th century.

France also produces **Blue cheeses**:

Bleu d'Auvergne is an *appellation contrôlée* cheese whose taste varies considerably. A popular modern variant of *Bleu d'Auvergne* is *Saint Agur*, a creamy blue cheese made in the *Velay* hills of *Haute Loire*.

Bleu de Bresse is not an *appellation contrôlée* cheese, but a French industrial dairy's attempt to imitate the success of Danish blue.

Bleu des Causses is an *appellation contrôlée* cheese which is strong tasting, without being sharp. It is manufactured in the same area as Roquefort and similar tasting.

Bleu de Gex is a blue cheese from the *Pays de Gex* on the Swiss border, rather hard and not very strong.

Fourme d'Ambert is a mild blue cheese from the Auvergne, often with an almost nutty flavour and not too strong.

Roquefort is the most famous French blue cheese. It is an *appellation contrôlée* cheese, made from the milk of one particular breed of sheep, the '*Lacaune*' breed. It has been made since the Middle Ages. Over 18,000 tons of roquefort are manufactured each year, and it is exported worldwide. It is made in the *Causses* mountains of southern France, in the department of the *Aveyron*, and matured in caves.



Goat's cheeses (*chèvre*) There are dozens of different goats' cheeses, and many local producers market their cheese under their own local village or regional name. Goats' cheeses can be sold either very young (*frais*), when they are soft and spreadable, medium matured, when they are still soft, but not spreadable, or fully matured, when they are hard. One of the principal *chèvre* cheeses is *crottin de chavignol* which

comes from the Loire Valley, near Sancerre.



Ewe's milk cheeses (*brébis*) These are increasingly popular and there are now several of them including *Ineguy* a pressed cheese from the Basque country, similar to other southern European ewe's milk cheeses such as *Pecorino*.

England v. France

This will be my last newsletter. It is time that somebody new took over and created a new style. So I thought I would abandon my fake anonymity and say a little about the differences between living in France and living in the UK. Both Margaret and I spent many years living in and around France. During our last years there we lived in an almost totally French environment and made a number of good French friends. We were a part of the French system.

There is a perception among some British people that the French and the British are too different to get on with each other. They are taught that the French do not much like the British and that they are unfriendly and inhospitable. We found, living in small communities in rural France, that the opposite is true. We were quickly accepted as part of the community and became involved in local life. We made friends and were frequently entertained in French homes. We had to be prepared to speak French. The French, at least the older generations, are no better linguists than the English, although younger people nowadays follow the universal trend of learning to speak good (americanised) English as a second language. The French people we knew made excellent friends. They were sociable and hospitable, although there was a tendency for them to keep their family lives and their other friendships separate and it was rare for us to get to know their families well. In Southern and rural France Parisians are regarded as '*étrangers*' and we were for most local people more socially acceptable than Parisians. The French tend to be 'last minute' people and do not always plan far ahead.

Amongst the British the French have a reputation for being a highly intelligent race, motivated by logic rather than whim. Some French people, on the other hand, regard the British as over-sentimental and '*léger*', (shallow). These are both generalisations that can be neither proved nor disproved.

It is an inescapable fact that Britain is linked to France geographically, ethnically and historically. For many years the Normans of what is now France ruled England and for many years the kings of England, whose language and culture were French, ruled large areas of what is now France.

The problems of everyday life in France are not unlike those in Britain, but the solutions are sometimes different and habits are frequently different. Food plays a more important part in life in France and is the subject of much discussion, even between men. Lunchtime is still respected and there is usually a break of one to two hours for this. Small restaurants offer a '*plat du jour*' which is usually good value. Instead of pubs the French drink in *brasseries*, which also offer food. There are also bars that do not serve food. The French drink mainly wine and beer. Whisky and port, when drunk, are *aperitifs*. The French do not drink gin. Like everywhere, Asian and fast food habits are growing, but more slowly than in Britain.

The state school system is highly centralised and has an excellent reputation. University education is free, although the most prestigious higher education is in the *grandes écoles*, are not free and for which entry is competitive.

The health service is excellent. It works on a reimbursement principle. The patient pays and is reimbursed a proportion of the cost, usually 80% of the state-approved cost, although it can rise to 100% in complex cases or as the result of a means test. Many people take out a private insurance to top up to 100%. Waiting times are generally much shorter than in the UK and patients have a free choice of where and by whom they are treated. Care quality is high.

Driving licences are for life and road tax was abolished in 2000. The road and rail systems are generally very good. The extensive motorway system is expensive, but it is very well maintained and, because of the cost, tends to be less crowded than British motorways. Air travel between some French cities that have good road and rail connections are being suspended, partly on climate change grounds.

Moving house in France tends to be more expensive than in the UK. The legal work is a monopoly of notaries. The level of home ownership is lower than in the UK, but leaseholders have a much higher level of protection. In general, town centres are better adapted for living in than British ones.

There are 3 national TV stations and a number of privately owned ones. The national stations are all commercial, but the publicity comes between programmes and does not break into them.

British people speak of the horrors of French bureaucracy, but it has greatly improved in recent years and in our experience British bureaucracy is now worse. Postal, telephone and other public services work very well. There is a system of national identity cards and it is obligatory to carry with you your *carte d'identité*. There was much opposition to a proposal to introduce identity cards in Britain, giving rise to cries that this would be a breach of privacy. However the benefits of the system far outweigh any disadvantages (which are largely illusory). They provide a high degree of certainty about who a person is and where they can be found, they are evidence of dates of birth and avoid the need for much expensive and often fruitless investigation.

Having got used to the differences from what we had grown up with we enjoyed living in France and would happily have stayed there had circumstances not dictated otherwise. One cannot really label either British life or French life as superior, but it would be quite wrong to regard life in France as an inferior existence. France is a better place to live in some respects and Britain in others. Both countries have had eventful pasts, some parts of which they can be rightly proud of and some parts of which they should not. The relationship between the two countries has varied between hostile and cordial. Today, following Brexit, it hovers between the two. Britain and France are both sophisticated countries. The similarities between them are greater than the differences. Each should respect the other. *Vive l'entente cordiale et vive The French Connection. A bientôt.*

