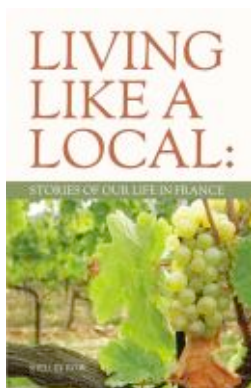


# LIVING LIKE A LOCAL:

STORIES OF OUR LIFE IN FRANCE



SHELLEY ROW



*Many dream of living abroad but Shelley and her husband, Mike, did it. They left the security of their careers, the comfort of their home, and the familiarity of their neighborhood, and moved to France. For ten months, they made their home in the village of Cotignac. Shelley's stories take you into local life like baking bread or shopping at the truffle market. She brings alive feelings from life lived in another country.*

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## Gregorian Chants



If reverence had a sound, it would be a Gregorian chant. Mike and I went to a Gregorian chant concert tonight. Why, you may ask, would you go to such a concert? It's a far cry from the Barbershop Quartet music I was raised with. Mike and I went because we discovered that the more we put ourselves into the way of life – whether it be watching a World Cup soccer match in a bar in Cotignac, or listening to Gregorian chants in an 11th century abbey – the more enriched we feel.

The concert was at Abbey du Thoronet, which we had visited soon after our arrival in France. It is striking due to its simplicity. The monks who built it believed that

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ornamentation distracted from worship. The beauty of the abbey comes from the simplicity of its forms with the slightly pointed vaults ending in a half dome over the altar. For the concert, the lights were dim with only the altar lit. The old stones glowed with a soft ocher light.

The chanters – eight men – walked in singing. Of course, there were no microphones but their voices completely filled the space. They sang in unison and slowly separated into gentle harmonies. Two of the chanters kept up a deep, constant drone. The sound seemed to resonate inside your body so that you were a part of the music. As they released a note, the sound floated through the chambers of the abbey with soft reverberation. It was lovely. The effect was powerful but humble and simple.

I can't say that I want to go back anytime soon. A little chanting goes a long way. But it was a special experience. As a friend of mine says, go out and make a memory. Tonight, we did that.

*Tuesday, October 19, 2010*

## Shopping at the Gourmet Spar



We never miss an opportunity to savor shopping for French foods. My darling husband is a wonderful cook and he loves food shops. When we arrived in France, Mike and I knew about the weekly fresh markets, but we knew much less about the garden-variety French grocery stores. We assumed that a village the size of Cotignac (roughly 2,000 people) would have limited grocery-shopping opportunities.

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We were prepared to, and, in fact, *did* drive to larger towns for our shopping. The longer we live here, however, the more we have come to appreciate the availability and variety of grocery stores in the village.

Here's the inventory: three bakeries, a butcher shop, a gourmet market, a small produce shop and the Spar. I've written about the two of the three bakeries but not about the other shops. It's time they had their names in print, too.

Mike loves the butcher shop. That's saying a lot since he spent time working as a butcher during his college years. He's particular about his meat and how it is cut. The butcher shop here is like the butcher counter I remember as a kid at Shirocky's Grocery in Texas. The meat is laid out in the case and neatly labeled. The assortment is broad including the usual chicken, pork and beef – but here we also have duck, rabbit and an assortment of terrines and pâtés. It's a tiny shop – as all of them are – and it's a bit intimidating. We can't hide in the corner while we figure out how to ask for what we want. It took a while for us to warm up to it and be brave enough to attempt an order, but once we did, we were hooked. We met the butcher and his wife who run the shop only to discover that they sold the shop to new owners who took over in September. We were in the shop last week and were graciously introduced to the new owner. Mike was thrilled to discover that the quality and attentiveness was the same. Here's how it works.

We tell them generally what we want. They ask how we will prepare the meat and then he cuts it for us. *Right there. In front of us.* Take something as simple as ground beef. Mike orders 300 grams of *steak haché*, the butcher picks up a piece of beef chuck, carefully cuts off any fat as though he is

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doing intricate surgery, and grinds it as we watch. Then there was the turkey. It is not as prevalent here but they had a filleted turkey breast in the meat case. We told him that it would be roasted. He went to the back, brought out a larger breast and, before we knew it, he had carefully rolled it and tied it into a neat bundle for roasting. *How nice.*

We do most of our produce shopping at the weekly market. But if we forget something at the market, the small produce stand or the gourmet market is a great option. I particularly like the husband and wife team who run the gourmet market. They have a nice assortment of terrines, pâtés and cheeses. They also carry big bowls of fresh butter and *crème fraîche*. This shop is a good option to have at your doorstep.

But the shop that amazes us is the Spar. It is smaller than a typical 7-11 in the U.S., and yet has the variety of a small, gourmet supermarket. The Spar is two aisles wide and maybe 150 square feet including the exterior. Each morning at 7:30 am, I see Sebastien, Remi or Julien wheeling out their produce carts which line the entry into the Spar. The Spar is family-run and is a small miracle of efficiency. They have literally floor-to-ceiling products carefully organized and displayed. Every inch of space is accounted for. Like any major grocery store, they have all of the departments. The produce department is outside so that you enter through the colorful fruits and vegetables. Inside, there is the meat section and the cheese section with its wide variety of cheeses from the Camembert of northern France to locally produced cheeses. The dairy section includes six types of butter, a variety of yogurts, milks and packaged desserts like flan and *pots du chocolat* (that last item is their version of chocolate pudding). There is the hardware section with everything from straws to corkscrews; the paper goods

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section, the cleaning section, and the housewares section. Mike is particularly enamored with the canned meats and fish. There are nine types of canned tuna alone. This doesn't include the sardines, anchovy or mackerel. There is a broad range of coffees, cookies, biscuits and chocolate. Mike even found tortilla chips!

Lurking behind the cash register is the spice section – floor to ceiling glass bottles of spices. But the wine section may be the largest part of the store. There are red, rosé and white wines from all over France, including the Cotignac wine from the local cooperative. They also have liqueurs and liquor. All of this, squished into two aisles. The checkout counters are barely big enough for a few items and shopping carts don't exist. It's BYOB – bring your own basket, or carry your products in your arms. If we have any problem finding something, Julien or Sebastien will literally stop what they are doing – even checking someone out – and come to our aid. They are great. They always have a smile and cheery “*bonjour*” whenever I'm in the shop. Once I stopped in for a handful of green beans that we'd forgotten but that were essential for our salad niçoise. It was only a few beans and they refused to let me pay.

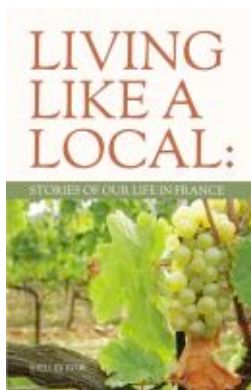
Julien said it was “*pas problème*” and “*c'est normale*.” To me – it was far from normal; it was extraordinary. These three young men, Julien, Sebastien and Remi, along with Carole, are a delight. I look forward to the Spar for the experience. I can't say that for a typical 7-11 with its empty, sterile shelves, overpriced goods and surly staff. Unfortunately, that's “*c'est normale*” for convenience stores in the U.S.

Grocery shopping at the Spar in Cotignac may not be exactly like Whole Foods, but... you know, it's not that far off either.

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With good quality meats, cheeses and a variety of products, topped off with a smile and friendly service, well – we think, it's a winner. Thanks to Sebastien, Remi, Julien and Carole for making grocery shopping fun!





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