

DINNER HOUR IN FOIX 2010

It wasn't the best day of the 2010 home exchange to Foix, but it was the most memorable, maybe the most interesting. And considering the beaches, caves, and old city streets we had seen, not to mention the castles perched at the top of ridiculous peaks that we climbed (Montsegur, Roquefixade, check them out!), saying it was the most memorable is saying alot.

It was a dinner at the home of Robert and Sophie and their son Paul, and their parakeet Plume. They are close friends of our exchange family. And they wanted to have us over for dinner and they'll pick us up and bring us back so we don't get lost driving the back roads between Balmajou and Serre sur Arget in the foothills of the Pyrenees. What time will they be over to get us? How would 19:30 be? I guess that's good. We explained to the boys that our normal supper time of 6pm would be changed a little, that the custom here in SW France is to eat a later dinner, and we will adapt as part of the invitation and experience. But I'm sure we will eat shortly after arriving, so no need for a big snack to tide us over.

Wrong.

After the greeting kisses and firmly establishing that only Sophie could speak a bit of English so the evening would be spent *parlez en Francais seulement*, et cette situation c'est dommage pasque je comprend un petit peu et je parle mois, we got into some drinks. I had read about pastis in Peter Mayle's book *A Year In Provence*, an aperitif resident to southern France with regional differences and competitive boasts, and had my first a few days before at a neighbour's in Balmajou. So I told Robert to hold the wine, and no pepsi and rum or whatever it was, bring on the pastis. Damn it's good. It pours from the bottle quite dark, but after adding 3 parts or so of water, it looks a little like milk, and has the flavour of anises (liquorice). Arran chose the same. Paul took the boys to another part of the house to play. Olives and pistachios sat on the table for us to nibble on. And we chatted about stuff. Their recent trip through Ontario and Québec. American tourists. The difference in our schooling schedules. Their jobs in the forestry department (Robert) and the emergency ward of the hospital (Sophie). I understood most and when I didn't, Arran translated. I ignored the obvious grammar mistakes I was making and jumped in with my thoughts and Robert and Sophie followed what I was getting at, so communicating was a partial success. When Sophie related a story about some sites near where she was born in the northern half of France, she commented that Robert, being from this region, believed that Toulouse, just an hour north of them, was THE north of France. We laughed at that. I said Paris n'est pas existant. We laughed again. Hey, I can joke in this language too! Somewhere in there my drink worked its way down to almost nothing and Robert motioned that I should drink it up. He said something about my leg; I wasn't sure what it was, so I turned to Arran for an explanation. Her interpretation was that I can't walk on

just one leg, but she wasn't 100% sure. So I drank the rest and Robert poured me another and I was pretty sure we got it right somehow.

I thought it must be getting late to start dinner and noticed a clock that read a little after 9. Wow. It's going to be a late dinner. A little while later I noticed the time on the clock was the same. Broken clock. Uh-oh, I have no idea what time it is. More talk, really fun conversation, then the boys come back for a refill of pepsi. They're getting tired. Okay Sophie says, finish the drinks and let's head to the dinner table. I steal a look at a wrist watch. Five after 10. Oh well. I stand up and feel the effects of the pastis big time. Arran whispers as we start to walk that she thinks she's a little drunk. It's not just me! I weigh my footing carefully down the three steps to the table. I don't want these folks to think we Canadians can't handle our pastis.

A big loaf of bread is on the table at one end and after placing a salad at our end, Sophie cuts into it. Jackson accepts a slice and some salad. Drew just takes some bread. Not a big greens eater that boy. Plus he's looking a little quiet eating dinner an hour past his bed time. Wimp. I'm not a big greens eater either, but I take some to be polite, it looks good with fresh dark green leaves and croutons and cucumber and crushed tomatoes. The dressing smells good. Then Sophie digs a little deeper into the bowl and adds a little more. It seems the final ingredient has sunk to the bottom and I didn't get any. Quesque c'est I ask. It's dark red, looks like meat, that I can tell, but I'm not convinced it's cooked. Something of canard she responds. Duck. Not my favourite. Especially not cooked. Especially half corked on pastis and with an empty stomach. Parfait I say, though the 4 pieces look like slices of thick red bacon, soft and limp. A sudden urge to go vegan comes over me, but I don't know how to say that in french, so I start into it. It all goes down and with the help of the bread and rest of the salad, which are really good, it stays there. I do leave one piece on my plate, I just couldn't manage the last one.

All through this Robert has filled and is refilling our wine glasses with the bottle of red we brought. Arran explained when we got there that we hoped it was a good choice, that we didn't know the local wines or which one to choose at the local grocery store. Pas de problem said Sophie, though I caught Robert's expression as he placed it on the table (a little amused, as if to say, this will be interesting...). So we worked our way through our supermarket bottle. I really thought this was dinner, a light meal before bed, but Robert produced a plate of sausages (Jackson's eyes lit up) and a headlamp and went out to cook them over their outdoor fire. Drew had finished his bread and went into the sitting room to lie down. He was asleep in minutes. Robert brought in the finished meat and Sophie brought out a casserole of potatoes and zucchini. We dug in and enjoyed. Jackson kept going back for more. I think he took 5 portions of the coiled sausages and didn't ask for ketchup once. Arran and I each had one portion plus one link of the merguez sausage. Then Robert cooked more. We ate more. Around the end of that we finished our bottle of wine and Robert opened one of his. We went from child art to the Mona Lisa of wine. From a tricycle to the tour de France. From a speed bump to Pic Canigou. Well, you get the idea. And right about then Robert motioned behind me that Drew had awakened and was sitting up. I went to see what was up and he was clearly groggy because it took him 5 minutes to confirm he had to pee. NOW. FAST!! We rushed to the bathroom and in his

haste and desperation to begin, he decorated the back of the toilet seat. And the floor to the left of the seat. And the wall to the right. Plus his underwear. Sorry Drew, we don't have a change with us, pull them up and put on a brave face. And I rolled up wads of toilet paper and did my best to clean up. It's not easy reaching everywhere that he reached. I am a tad tipsy at this point if you recall. But we got Drew back to sleep and went on with the meal, the next stage of which is a regional specialty. When they go camping with friends, including Laurent, Karine, Mael and Natan (our exchange family), they put a round box of fresh camembert cheese in the fire embers to melt. Robert insisted we head out to the patio fireplace to watch the process. After 3 or 4 minutes it's done and Robert took it out, brushed the soot from the box and opened it up to reveal a runny, oozing goo of cheese that he quickly portioned out to everyone's ready slice of bread on their plate. It was delicious, but oh so rich. Jackson tried it, good for him to try, but that was his last gasp. Plus it stuck to his teeth. I finished my camembert and took him up to the sitting room to crash on a chair.

When I returned to the table the rice pudding and Sophie's special cake were waiting. More food! My wine glass was full again. Oh the torture!! I convinced myself that it was just good manners to finish it. So I did.

Our conversation turned again to visiting Canada. Robert would like to come in winter next time. Arran said when they visit they have to come and stay with us and they said they would. I really hope they do. We'll feed them dinner at 6 o'clock and see how they like it! Robert drove us back to Balmajou, dropping us off a little past 12:30. He had to get up 5 hours later for work. I hope they don't do this every night. But a memorable night it was, really capturing for us the reason we do home exchanges. The hangover was mild and the boys slept late, and I hope we can repay their kindness in Canada some day in the future.