

NOTE: You may recognize this from my novel, but this is really from my France memoir. Am wondering if this could work as a stand alone piece. Jill

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The Cantine

By French standards, the cantine at Lycée Javel was quite good. To me, an American Fulbright Exchange Teacher in France for the year, it was sheer luxury. When we arrived, the first course would be on a tray, ready to be passed around. There was always a bottle of red wine, a carafe of water and a baguette at each table. Kitchen workers would peek through the door occasionally to see if a table was ready for the next course. Menus consisted of soup, salad, and cold cuts to begin with, then meat or fish with vegetables, followed by dessert or cheese and fruit, ending with rich dark coffee.

The French gift for conversation was sheer entertainment during the hour *à table*, beginning with a discussion of the day's menu. With each course, conversation switched to a variety of controversial topics, from teaching methods, politics and ecology, to hunting. I've always admired how the French maintain a sense of humor during heated discussions. The mixture of personalities and manners of speech in the cantine was a lesson in itself and this is where I improved my French.

Madame Mennerat, a science teacher, was by far the brightest, most articulate, fast talking person I've ever met, and a constant challenge for my concentration skills. It wasn't surprising her daughter, Cécile, would be my greatest challenge in class.

English teacher by profession, but bird watcher by passion, Monsieur Berne would quietly swoop into his place at the table and inevitably get into a heated discussion with one of the avid hunters on the faculty. Gentle by nature, he had little respect for his colleagues passion for hunting and stood strong in his convictions. But, when they discussed the best spots to find *morilles* (gourmet wild mushrooms), Monsieur Berne was all ears.

From time to time, Monsieur Moreau, another English teacher would pop in, not to eat but to campaign for *les Verts*, an ecologist political party who over the past few years had been surprising the polls in the Mayor's elections around France: "It's disgraceful that we continue to cut down our precious trees to burn in the winter. It only pollutes the air." Glancing at me with a smile, he would continue: "Now, if we used California as an example, we could be using solar energy instead. But oh no, France wouldn't dare take a step forward in that regard!" Someone on the staff would inevitably remind him: "Now Mr. Moreau, you know that California has endless sunshine, and we *Jurassiens* rarely see it!" I didn't dare destroy his belief by letting him know that, inspite of our endless sunshine, we Californians had made little progress using it for in energy.

Monsieur Diaz, the Spanish teacher, was a very exotic brown-eyed blond and the snazziest dresser on the faculty who rarely took off his panama hat to dine, which made him seem taller than he already was. Life was difficult for everyone if he ended up at the same table as Monsieur Villet, the philosophy teacher, who, after a long sigh would commence: "I'm so sick of these stupid students who have no creative thinking skills. Six hours a week in my class and the majority still fail their exams. It's distressing. I don't know where education is headed with such *imbéciles*" Diaz would rave back: "*Voyons*. Monsieur Villet. I have many of the same students as

you and find them most brilliant in Spanish. I don't understand, they are such enthusiastic learners. Perhaps you should have a look at your teaching methods!"