Rene & Me tells the story of George and Donella East's attempt to live off little more than their wits in an isolated corner of Normandy.

Arriving at Le Moulin de la Place with no experience in country living (especially in a foreign country) the East struggle to survive with a selection of hare-brained schemes, while coming to terms with a vastly different culture where time is of little value, and reluctant tractors are brought to life with a ton of homebrew Calvados.

As Rene Ribot - the wily Fox of Courtain - moves on to their land and in to their lives, plans for crayfish farming, natural spring water bottling plants and metal-detecting weekends to uncover the miller's secret hoard crash about the couple's ears, and disaster looms.

Following a series of hilarious encounters with bizarre situations and unforgivable characters, tragedy comes to the tiny community, and the newcomers finally discover where the real treasure of their new home is to be found....

René & Me

by

George East

Illustrations by Robin Evans

La Pipe Publications

My wife and I first met Renée Ridon when he moved out to our land and to our lives at Le Moulin de la Paix. During an eventful year, he taught us much about the commerce and people of the Cévennes, and in the process, much about ourselves.

For that, we will always be grateful to our friend Ilse Fox.

Merci, mon pote.

French Letters and Home Truths

As usual, and for those who may wish to know what I *think* I mean when using French words or phrases throughout *Rosé & Me*, there is a glossary of sorts at the end of the book. To avoid hindering the action for those readers whose command of the language is as shaky as mine, I have also hopefully managed to make most of the words in italics self-explanatory by context, or the simple device of using an English equivalent in the direct vicinity.

On the subject of action and context, all the following *events* were either experienced directly by my wife and I, or related by the people named.

Finally, however this homage to the people of a small corner of a great country is ultimately perceived, I would like to make it very clear that we shall remember our year with the Fox of Courtin and everyone else mentioned with no other emotions than sincere gratitude and affection.

NB: All the recipes in this book are as genuine as the characters described. Due to my condition when sampling and recording most of them, I may have got the proportions wrong, or left out or mistakenly included any number of ingredients. But, as all enthusiastic cooks will know, half of the fun is in the experimentation. The only items which may not be left out in any circumstances are, naturally, the home-made cider and calva. To get your hands on the genuine article, you may have to visit its source, but that, I promise you, will be a journey well worth the making.

Rose & Me

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The reason that all of us naturally began to live in France is because France has scientific methods, machines and electricity, but really does not believe that these things have anything to do with the real business of living.

Life is tradition and human nature.

French people really do not believe that anything is important except daily living and the ground that gives it to them...

Gertrude Stein (From 'Paris France')

When people learn we live in the Cotentin, their first question is invariably 'Where's that?'

When we tell them it's the top bit of the Cherbourg peninsula, they often look disappointed on our behalf, and are quite likely to say 'Oh, you're not in real France, then.'

Contrary to popular British belief, real France does not start south of the Loire valley, and the Cotentin is as French as it is unique.

When they have spent a little time in our particular neck of the *bocage*, another common voices frequently make is: 'It's just like rural England must have been a hundred years ago.'

Of course, it isn't.

The most isolated or rustic cottages may not have inside toilets or a bathroom, but there's usually a television aerial on the original 19th-century roof, and a car parked outside, even if its primary function is as a chicken coop. What is so evocative of a long-gone time about the small and isolated rural communes of the Cotentin is the people and the way they look at life.

They are every bit as sophisticated as other modern Europeans, and (as they will waste no time in telling you) much more so than the most *snooty* Parisian.

It's just that they have thoughtfully watched the world around them change, and much prefer to keep to the old ways when it comes to family, friends, daily life in the countryside, and other matters which, in their opinion, really matter.

And that suits people like us right down to the ground.

WINTER

Midnight, and the Nelson Christmas party is in full swing. I am outside counting stars from the vantage point of the village pissoir. My wife is dancing to the Birdie Song with Christian the Goat, and Mr Maurice is telling an audience of schoolchildren about the night the Yanks invaded his wardrobe. Rémi has not begun his whirling dervish routine, but the night is yet young. Jean-Pierre has done us proud with the catering arrangements, and is twirling his moustaches in a most lascivious manner at his understandably nervous wife. Given his track record for these occasions, it would not take a local Nostradamus to predict a welcome addition to the commune head count by next summer.

All is as it should be at this trial run for the seasonal celebrations, but I am worried about the bar bill. Our evening started at the Bar Gladaine with a round or so of fizzed merely frightened with the water jug, followed by a brace of *calvados* to see us through the hundred metre walk to the hall. Since we arrived, however, our Jolly Boys Club has been drinking its way around France, and I have not bought a single bottle. So far on our journey of exploration, detailed analysis and criticism, we have visited the Loire, Bordeaux, Burgundy and Gascony.

Along the way, we've paid tribute to food of the relevant region, with Jeffrey unveiling and presenting each complementary course like a magician pulling a ready-cooked rabbit from the ether. Every time our table reaches the bottom of a bottle, another takes its place courtesy of Big Freddie, official strimmer for the evening.

As he leaves to visit the open-air facilities, I follow to tackle him about the likely size of the drinks bill and, more importantly, who will be settling it. Now, we stand shoulder to shoulder beside the *pissoir* window and solemnly observe local custom by aiming at the epicentre of the enamelled Gauloises poster. As usual, Freddie is spot on. Across the road, the church clock chimes the witching hour and a nearby stallion snorts with derision at my feeble efforts to match my companion's head of pressure, trajectory and projection.

accuracy.

Eventually and as relief comes, I ask how we are to sort out the finances. I appreciate his generosity, but surely it means he my turn to buy a round?

Sighing with contentment, Big Freddie turns towards me and I see that his nickname is not entirely attributable to the size of his moustache. Shaking vigorously and casting a sympathetic glance downwards in my direction, he explains. As it is Christmas and a good time for party pieces, we will be playing the sausage game. Pressed for further details of this ancient Countrytown ritual, he summarises the basic rules. At the end of the evening, all the men at our table will line up at this very spot. As one, we will unzip, display and compare our assets. The member of the carnal with the furthest to reach to the Genitalia power will be (like the poor chap's wife) the loser, and must stump up for all bevies consumed that evening.

Now I see why, in the midst of such informality, the table plan was drawn up and enforced so rigidly by Freddie. And also why it occasioned so many sly comments and asides by the women of the village.

"If you like," says Freddie politely as we zip up and make our way back to the celebrations, "...we can ask your wife to be the judge?"

"No need to bother," I reply limply, "...will you take a cheque?"

At our table, Freddie explains in an unnecessarily loud voice that I have offered to pay for all the drinks this evening, and suggests another round. He, I note, orders a giant two litre bottle of farmhouse cider.

I, in final and complete capitulation, call for a miniature of scotch.

* * * * *

Some hours later, and we are nearing the end of our vigil by the big pond. At this time of year, we do not expect any sightings of the local wildlife, but are determined to savour every minute of

this, our first night as proper residents at La Place.

For the past three years we had made the monthly pilgrimage from our terraced house in Portsmouth to the heart of the Cherbourg peninsula, and driven off the ferryboat knowing we must desert our Normandy home in a few days time. Each visit had been a frenzy of activity, hurrying to restore the ruined farmhouse and make some impression on the even more ruined mill cottage at La Place before time and funds ran out. We had slept with the cement mixer, learned the pseudo for 'actually, we wanted the toilet bowl in the bathroom, not the kitchen', and experienced the full horror of employing French and British craftsmen at the same time and in the same place. We had a property in each country, and felt truly at home in neither. Like a gallic Brigadoon, La Place would vanish in the legendary Gaumont mists as we left, existing only in our imagination till the moment we drove again down the old cart track to walk the fields, touch the trees and pretend to live there for another heartbeat of its long history.

Back in England and in between those brief encounters, I would find myself drifting away to the water meadow and leaking septic tank while discussing the practicalities of a topless darts match with a Nottinghamshire licensee or inventing a fairly credible PR story for a London publican with no sense of publicity. Worse, I would find myself driving on the right hand side of any road without a white line down its middle, and seeing our friends dive for cover each time some innocent asked how the place in France was coming on.

Each night in Normandy we would sit beside the grotto at La Place, listing a dozen good reasons why we should take the final step across the Channel. The following week in the UK we would invent thirteen good excuses why we could or should not.

For nearly thirty years we had lived in Portsmouth, moving regularly towards the city boundary like a convict edging towards the prison wall. Finally, we had arrived within a mile of the ferryport,

and both realised that it was time to make a final bid for freedom, or give up our dreams and settle for a lifetime stretch on home turf.

Then, as if an impatient deity had grown weary of our timid gestures and mewling excuses and decided to take a hand, three of our best brewery customers called in the same week to give us the sack. Re-organisation, re-staffing and reducing costs meant that they would not be renewing our retainer fees in the autumn. They would, of course, still be interested in any ideas for public house publications, PR and publicity packages we might wish to offer, but could not guarantee us an income.

In shock, we sat and considered our immediate reactions and alternatives. We could start again and crawl the country seeking new clients for my specialist talents of writing about pubs and spending a lot of time in them. We could also conduct our own cost-cutting exercise, which would require somehow living off a quarter of last year's income. This would involve selling La Puce to the highest bidder, but any sort of bidder would be hard to find in the current market, and two years is a speedy property transfer time in France.

Something had to be done, and as usual when big problems surfaced, we went down the pub.

At the end of a long session in our Portsmouth local, we took stock of our situation and our options. On the debit side, we had a terminally failing business, a minus equity figure in our Portsmouth house, an overdraft at the bank and no pension fund or any source of regular income.

On the plus side, we had La Puce, which was in hock to the Credit Agricole bank for a relatively small sum, and the farmhouse building was virtually ready for habitation.

Then, as we have often found, inspiration arrived with the last round. Starting on her fifth pint, my wife observed that we could just cover our UK and foreign mortgages by renting the two

properties out. With unassailable logic, I pointed out that this would leave us with nowhere to live on either side of the Channel. She responded swiftly that I had forgotten the tiny mill cottage at La Place. It had been good enough for cows to live in for the last half-century; with a little imagination and a lot more work, it could make a comfortable if basic home while we sorted ourselves out. We could simply reverse our situation and base ourselves in Normandy, a move we had endlessly discussed and rejected. There, we could return each month like latter-day Vikings to raid and pillage any pub publicity business in England, and virtually live off the land at La Place in between times. There was more than enough room to grow vegetables and graze sheep, pigs, ducks and every other creature below us in the food chain. Also, how often had we considered and devised foolproof schemes for making money out of our property in France and its proximity to England? Were we not a nation of explorers, entrepreneurs and traders? It was time to put our heritage to the test. And just think of the book I could write about our year in Normandy with Rémi Rihet and all our other friends at Nibou.

It would be an adventure beyond compare, and we would still be hedging our bets. If, after a year, we had not waxed fat on the fruits of the land and my fertile imagination, we would be on the spot and in a better position to sell La Place and return to reclaim our home in England. At least, she concluded, we would have given it our best shot. To surrender now and meekly await certain financial disaster would be unworthy of us. It would also be an insult to all our ancestors, who had set forth from Portsmouth harbour to make a new home in far remoter corners of the earth than the Cherbourg peninsula with hardly a sovereign in their breeches. Were we going to talk about it for another thirty years, or were we going to make the break and follow our hearts desire?

As a young couple at a nearby table broke into spontaneous applause at my wife's rousing address, I sat and considered the arguments for the defence.

I could and probably should have pointed out that her

experience of living off the land was limited to a yearly harvest of growing tomatoes in the back yard of number 97 Laburnum Grove, North End. Or that the closest she had come to animal husbandry was taking the dog for a walk. Or that we had seen dozens of other people's schemes for survival in France go tragically wrong. Or, indeed, that most of our immediate ancestors had limited their adventuring abroad to the odd trip on the Isle of Wight ferry. Finally, and thanks to Peter Mayle, statistics proved that there were now more British people trying to write and sell books about their adventures in France than actually live there.

But the way things were, it seemed to me that someone somewhere was trying to tell us something. The fates had rolled the dice and mischievously pushed us into a corner, and it was time to put up or shut up. I ordered another pint of Dutch courage and agreed that it would be so.

We would have our year with René, and take each day as it came.

* * * * *

Above us, the big Normandy sky goes on for ever, and the night is as still as death. I start to tell my wife that she was right, and that I love her for it. A terrible fear for the future still grips my heart, but I would rather be here with her at this moment than anywhere else in the world. I reach towards her but she stays my hand and silently bids me listen.

Somewhere, from out in the velvet blackness, a visitor has arrived. A crackle of breaking undergrowth is followed by a regular series of low, breathless grunts. Domella turns to me, her face alight with joy.

"There," she says, in a voice trembling with emotion, "I told you we had a badger. *Now* will you believe me?"

I smile and nod and take her hand.

I have heard that sound before, and know it is René trying to re-start his moped after falling into the roadside hedge. Unlike

him, sound much later at night, and the Christmas party at Nibbs must finally have ended.

I shiver and suggest we return to the mill, lest we scare the badgers away and spoil a perfect day.

December 23rd:

Having settled the monumental bottle bill, we decide to take a break before our first Christmas in Gascoigne and visit friends in the South. Colin and Anne Scott had taken the plunge, sold their two very successful pubs in Sussex and moved permanently to the Dordogne a year ago. Perhaps they will have some sage words of advice on how to adapt, survive and prosper in France.

We travel through the night, and twelve hours later sit in their tiny restaurant on the outskirts of the village of Caron as they get us up to date with their situation.

Learning the ropes of running an Anglo-Irish restaurant in a rural area of France has been, they tell us, an interesting, frustrating and sometimes expensive business, not helped by their initial communication problems. Both had picked up the basics of the *lingua franca* during visits to their holiday home in the village, but Anne's soft Irish brogue does not convert well to Dordognese.

In the first week, she had made what she thought was a modest order of coal, and taken delivery of two lorryloads. This had not been a total disaster, however, as the black mountain had become a local landmark and site of pilgrimage for the villagers, and a playground for their children. Determined that they should get to grips with the language before any more expensive mistakes were made, Colin had heard two travelling salesmen from Nantes discussing their surefire language system and plumped for the complete course of books, video and audio cassettes. Taking delivery a week later, the couple had eagerly opened the packing case and found a comprehensive guide to mastering every aspect of the English language.

Despite these early setbacks, Colin told us, they seemed to be winning the battle to capture the hearts, minds and stomachs of the local people, which would keep the business afloat during the long and lonely winter months. The summer season was no problem, with more English visitors in search of familiar food and accents than could be packed at any one time into Scott's

Restaurant. The premises had also become the HQ for the local expatriate community, where members would regularly gather to curse the French and their funny ways and recall the golden days of their lives and times at home in Leeds and Leeds. We had arrived on market day, and already the bar was filling with natives come to gape in undisguised fascination at the shrine in the corner where Anne had set up a trading post stocked with vital commodities for the English residents. Packets of suet, bottles of brown sauce, tins of real baked beans, custard powder and rental videos of ancient episodes of Coronation Street were obviously at a premium.

But, as our friends explained, the brisk turnover of Marmite and Sugar Puffs would not pay their way. They would know they had made it when the locals came to eat, and returned for more.

The big breakthrough had come recently, when Scott's restaurant had been elected the official lunchtime venue for council workmen resurfacing the road outside. A long, impeccable and paid-for midday meal was a mainstay of their working conditions, and the men chose where it would take place. With a catch in his throat, Colin explained that the workers had voted to break with tradition, loyalty to the French-owned bar down the road and a lifetime's schooling in the horrors of English cooking. The foreman had arrived a month ago, and after much inspecting of the kitchen, the proposed menus and a lengthy interrogation as to the patron's attitude and commitment to the pleasures of the table, the deal had been struck. They would give Scott's a chance.

Starting conservatively with well-rehearsed regional favourites, Colin had then taken their reputation and financial future literally in his hands, and started to introduce his own specialities to the set menu. On the first Best of British day he had unveiled and presented a giant steak and kidney pudding to the shirts and suspicious crew. With bated breath, he and Anne had watched through the porthole in the kitchen window as their guests sniffed, poked, prodded and finally tried the offerings. One muscular navvy had even taken the dish outside to analyse the contents in

the full light of day. After an agonising interlude of delicate yet stringent sampling, debate and consideration, the men had declared the pudding not only fit for human consumption, but even acceptable. Aflame with enthusiasm and intendentary zeal, Colin had moved on to Lancashire hotpot, Bedfordshire clangers, and ultimately, Anne's particular *pièce de résistance*, boiled bacon and cabbage *à la* Donegal.

Unfortunately, there was a downside to the bold experiments. The culinary conversion of the road gang had been such a success that the men had started to demand similar foreign adventures at table from their wives.

Where, they would ask irritably at weekends, were the spotted dicks and apple crumble they had grown to know and love at the *Café Lionel*?

Why could Madame not create a gravy solide which would cling to the plate like ivy and turn a morsel of bread into a thing of sodden beauty?

Worse of all, there were now tangible signs of their infidelity as the men were getting noticeably fatter. Murmurings were heard in the market that the classic cuisine of the region was being underrated. The very French way of life might even be under threat. If things continued as they were, a petition would be drawn up and sent to the *Académie Française* demanding action and reaffirmation.

Fortunately for international relations and local harmony, the road outside was now repaired, and the men had moved on to another village. The British special would be officially dropped from the menu during the winter months, though still be available under a coded heading for English residents - and those locals bold enough to put their longing for *saucisse paysanne* (bangers and mash) above the risk of marital discord. With a final and inspired touch of English duplicity, Colin had invited a committee of local women to advise on and oversee the preparation of classic regional specialities for Scott's. In a moment of wild enthusiasm, Anne had even suggested that she respond in kind by hosting evening classes in British and Irish cuisine. Perhaps wisely, the

couple had decided that, cosmopolitan as it was becoming, Gamo and particularly its womenfolk were not yet ready for this ultimate *example of extreme conduit.*

December 23rd:

Having driven straight back from the south much enthused and heartened by our friends' success, we arrive to find a new member for our clutch of the month club.

It rains frequently in Gourmin, and the sensibly deep channels on each side of every road and lane lie in wait for unwary drivers like still and patient lions at a waterhole.

Curiously, it is invariably the locals who play the part of doomed gazelles. Visitors soon learn to keep clear of the treacherously soft verges, while the Gourminoise seem almost proud of the way their clinging embrace claims so many victims. There is still talk in the village of an encounter with *les accidents non stabilisés* by a rather pompous English lady some years ago. A new member of the Bricquebec swimming committee, she arrived very late for a reception and meal and apologised during her after-dinner speech, made in her best Franglais. She had, she haltingly explained, pulled off the road to get her bearings on the way to the venue, and become bogged down. 'Everything about your countryside is so charming,' she gushed in schoolgirl French, '...but you do have such soft... verges.' Understandably, she had not known the correct term for the dangerous grass bits on the side of the road, so in the way of Britons abroad had used our 'verge', saying it confidently and loudly in English with a French pronunciation, assuming that the audience would get her drift. She had also obviously not known that verge is the French word for penis, and thus she had consequently offered the male members present the most deadly insult imaginable. After convening a hasty meeting, the bemused leader of the all-men boating committee had responded by welcoming her to the region but passionately rebutting her claim that it was famed for its topography. Necessary steps should surely be taken to disprove this regrettable

misunderstanding, and the entire committee was happy to volunteer with a demonstration at the time and place of her choosing. History and local legend do not, sadly, record whether the offer was taken up.

La Poste sits alongside the main route from St Sauveur to Bricquebec, so we have seen much evidence of the Gourmitrew affinity for ditches and their magnetic properties. Hardly a week goes by without our finding an injured car on its side and off the road, and any offer of help will inevitably be met with a frosty look and curt rejection as if acceptance would be an admission that the position of their vehicle is anything other than deliberate. Of all the many examples of cultural idiosyncrasy, the French approach to driving seems the most bizarre and potentially lethal. On our earliest visits to their country, we found many preconceptions about the French and their strange habits to be patently untrue, but in the matter of road safety, they are even worse than we give them credit for.

I have never seen a copy of a French Highway Code for British visitors, but have already begun a manual which will be based upon some basic laws and laws. Sub headings will include:

1. Close Encounters

The favoured position for any driver (male or female) is about six inches behind your rear bumper. So much do they like this position that they only leave it reluctantly, and then preferably on a particularly dangerous and sharp blind corner, or just before a humpy-back bridge. In particularly bad weather and visibility, the distance between bumpers will decrease pro rata.

On one occasion my wife actually thought she was towing a car in a thunderstorm, so closely was it following her every move. Looking into the rear-view mirror after navigating a particularly tight bend, she saw that it had disappeared, and stopped to investigate.

Rounding the bend on foot, she found the ancient Citroën

lying wounded in a waterlogged ditch, with two elderly ladies sitting calmly inside. Both refused all offers of help and may, for all we know, be there still. On another occasion, I grew tired of counting the liver spots on the face of an aged passenger through miles of winding country lanes, and after taking a dozen random turns to try to shake him off, finally careered into a convenient driveway to escape.

As he arrived alongside and skidded to a halt in a shower of gravel, I got out to apologise for parking outside his house. He looked at me as if I were mad, and said that he lived elsewhere in the region, and was merely following me to see where I lived....

2. *After You*

*The right of way on any roundabout may belong to the driver already on it or arriving on it, depending on local tradition and established usage. All drivers with foreign - or not local** - number plates have no legal right to be on any road point, and are therefore fair game for every other vehicle in any situation. Local drivers may and probably will gang up together to box in, intimidate or even force intruders off the road.*

** In Britain, number plates follow a sequence obviously designed by a former and very demented MI5 codemaker. In France, the last number in the sequence sensibly indicates where the registered owner lives. All plates on vehicles belonging to the inhabitants of Manche end with a 50, while numbers on cars from neighbouring Calvados conclude with a 14. Officially, this at least enables the police to know immediately where a gang of escaping bank robbers stole the getaway car. Unofficially, it allows local drivers to use their superior knowledge of the highways to create considers into mortal danger.

3. *Taking Sides*

Depending on the area, season of the year or time of month and day, traffic entering a main route from a side road or lane may or may not have

priority. Tractors towing long and badly loaded trailers obviously win extra points for stalling halfway out on to the highway.

4. Jump or Die

Pedestrian crossings are not there to guarantee safe passage, but to channel potential targets for bread or irritable motorists, and will always be located in a particularly ill-lit or obscure location. Some villages have as many as five crossings in a row, giving local pedestrians a whole range of choices as to where they would most prefer to be run down.

On an early visit to Bricquebec, I drew up at a pedestrian crossing as an elderly lady hobbled off the kerb without looking to my or any direction. Not only did the queue of drivers behind sound their horns in a frenzy of outrage at being cheated of their quarry, but the old woman glared ferociously and shook her fist at me before continuing on her painful way. My wife believes there were two possible reasons for her anger. Either my actions implied she was now too elderly and infirm to play the traditional dicing-with-death crossing game, or she felt I had cheated her of the opportunity to ensure future security for her family, courtesy of a foreign and therefore soft insurance company.

NB. *All or any of the above rules, regulations and conventions will not apply between the hours of 2 and 5pm, when drivers are returning from their luncheon venue. During this time, any vehicle from a tractor to a seventeen-tonne juggernaut is likely to come and go to and from wherever fancy dictates, and on either side of the road.*

* * * * *

Investigation of the van occupying the ditch outside La Puce reveals that our new club member is Mr Jamme. A local farmer, he follows the Corrèzienne tradition of being close to the earth, and is somewhat wider than tall. His hands are about the same size as the blade of my wife's trenching spade, his moustache almost as luxuriant as Big Freddie's, and on a good day he looks

like his favourite breakfast dish is live rats. He is, however, a gentle and considerate man who raises thoroughbred horses on his farm a mile away from La Place, which makes him one of our closest neighbours. The latest victim of the ravine outside our farmhouse, he presently lies slumped motionless behind the wheel of his Renault, and we fear he is injured. Closer examination of the empty lemonade bottle in his lap reveals, however, that he is merely paralytic.

With no little effort, we ease his giant bulk from behind the wheel and help him into the kitchen. Here, his story unfolds over several mugs of coffee, brewed to local taste. As they say, the perfect composition is as black as night, as sweet as a young man, and as thick as a bull's most important appendage.

The present condition and position of Mr Jamne's van is, he explains with a shrug of his massive shoulders, entirely the responsibility of the ridiculous laws appertaining to the transport of the region's favourite beverage. It is simply because he is such a law-abiding citizen that things have come to this pretty pass.

At this point, it is perhaps useful to attempt an explanation of the complex relationship between Norman countryfolk, the apple, what they do with it and the importance it plays in their everyday lives.

As with Somerset, the soil and climatic conditions found in the north-western region of France particularly favour the growth of small, sweet and often exceptionally ugly apples. I have never seen a Norman actually eat one fresh from a tree, but they know more ways to preserve, cook or distil its essence for consumption than there are days in a leap year. The women are naturally the experts in all matters concerning apple tarts, puddings and cakes, while every Norman countryman absorbs with his mother's milk the family recipes for the specialist drinks the fruit will provide with little effort and less cost.

By tradition, every country dweller will have at least one apple

tree in his garden, or access to someone else's. The harvest will be taken in October, either during the day or night depending upon who is officially belongs to, and the apples left in a pile in the open air to mature, or as we might say, rot.

Over the long winter months, the ancient rituals will then begin in conditions of almost obsessive secrecy and security. The basic ingredients for cider are apples and more apples, but most households in our region will make some small addition as a final stage to ensure unique flavour and taste. Pieces of dead animal are much favoured for the creation of further zest and body, and one elderly brewer of our acquaintance is alleged to add a pinch of gunpowder to every litre to increase its purgative qualities. As with English prize vegetable growers, competition is fierce to produce best in class each year. Unlike vegetable growers, however, Countryside cider halls will rarely allow anyone else to taste their produce without money changing hands, so most judging and subsequent status relies on the claims of the maker and the forensic evidence of the odd tasting or burglary. This leads to much debate and arguments in the local bars as to who produces the superior vintage each year, but that's how they like it. Occasionally, a villager will bring a bottle of his best cider into the bar and leave it casually on a table for observation and comment, and a purely visual process of judging will begin. Points will be awarded for degree of murkiness and the number of small pieces of apple and other grisly remains suspended in the liquid, and even the age, design and general grubbiness of the bottle may win grudging approval.

A by-product of the apple fermenting and distilling process is a viscous liquid called pommeau, usually made and drunk solely by the women of the household. Defying the laws of nature and science, any bottle will contain more dissolved sugar than its own volume and weight. A favourite trick to demonstrate its sweetness and medicinal properties is to leave an ancient and discoloured 20 centime piece in a glassful overnight. By morning, the coin will be in mint condition, unlike the teeth of the persistent drinker.

In extreme cases, the coin may have disappeared, though whether as a result of total disintegration of the legendary Norman reluctance to leave hard cash laying around will depend upon the circumstances and situation.

Unquestionably the acme of the regional home brewer's art is calvados, turned for another country, but (according to our village) hijacked after its invention by the Cognitiens. This fierce distillation of cider is loosely described by those who have never tried it as a sort of apple brandy. All patriotic Normans, however, place calva somewhere higher up the league table of great French beverages, and local conviction claims it to be the precursor for the mythical elixir of life which foreign alchemists have been trying to create since the dawn of time. As every Norman knows, a tot of classic calva will cure a host of maladies, preserve life when all other practices of modern medical science have failed, and start the most reluctant of tractors on a frosty morning.

Also known colloquially as *trou Normand* because of its traditional use to fill the hole between courses at table, locals may refer to farm or home-made calvados simply as *gnole*, elsewhere meaning any small amount of strong drink. Though they will take a glass at any time and with the slightest excuse, most Cognitiens are also firm believers in its employment to cleanse the palate during meals. Actually, the smallest glass will briefly paralyse all nerve endings in the upper body while perversely liberating the vocal chords, stimulating the libido and burning out all sensations of taste. Having attended a number of Norman dinner parties, I believe this may provide a strong clue to the real reason for which it was first conceived and created.

According to local tradition, regular consumption also negates the need for dental hygiene, and the purchase ratio of toothpaste and brushes in Cognitiens is, it is proudly claimed, the lowest in France.

Because of the special and enduring relationship between the Countryside and their cider, a whole set of rules and regulations governing its production have been in place for centuries. To the outsider, some may seem archaic, illogical and even bizarre; virtually all are completely ignored by the locals.

In our region, for example, it is still an offence for the orchard owner to allow foreign growths to infest his trees. Mistletoe flourishes on apple wood, and the *gendarmerie* has the power to call at an appropriate time to solemnly check that the parasite is not strangling its host and threatening the next harvest. In practice, every leaf and berry of *gui* will have been carefully collected for seasonal export by the bemused farmer, amazed at his good fortune that the English will actually pay to display the weed in their homes as an excuse (as if one were needed) to kiss a pretty girl.

An attempt to control the production and circulation of farm cider and placate the region's licensed vendors is enshrined in a law permitting each amateur grower to employ the services of a travelling still once a year. There, the golden essence of the season's harvest will be created and reverently transferred to oaken barrels, where it will hibernate contentedly away from the light of day for up to a decade. A considerable amount will never reach the barrel stage, however as a sample must be boiled for intermediate assessments, possible scaling, and to scare the tractor when all else fails.

Officially, the amounts produced by each orchard owner is regulated by the number of trees and their yield, and be strictly for home consumption. Given the going rate for illicit cider, it is hardly surprising that there is a permanent shortage of empty bottles in our neck of the woods, and that manufacture takes place on a considerable scale in the most unlikely places. Many properties in our area have security systems worth more than the outhouses they protect, and we know of a local man who somehow produces 3,000 litre bottles of *gentle* a year while living in a bed sitter.

To stem the annual torrent of bootlegging activity, there is also a law which could only *divide* in France. A sealed and full bottle of *calva* in a car could be in transit for illegal sale, reasoned the authorities, so a suitable statute would have to be framed and enforced to prohibit the practice. With supreme gallic logic, the legislators decreed that only the transport of unsealed and part-filled bottles of home-made *calva* should be permissible. Consequently, anyone found driving a car with an unopened bottle in the boot risks investigation and prosecution. If the bottle is loosely corked, half empty and rolling about on the front seat, the driver is obviously complying with state requirements and using it for personal consumption only, so is in the clear.

* * * * *

After a reviving *gouttes* from our emergency supply, Mr Jamme recovers enough to tell us his story. Hearing from Rémi of our imminent arrival from the ungodly south, he had selected a bottle of his best *calva* to welcome us back in traditional fashion. Before departure, he had broken the seal and poured a little of the golden liquid safely away into a jug to conform with the law. Obviously, it would have been unthinkable to have done so without ensuring that all had gone well since the contents of the bottle had last breached the evening air. In all modesty, he assured us, it was close to perfection. To be doubly sure, he had tried another glass before setting out, and even stopped off at a convenient point on the mile-long journey to check that his precious cargo was travelling well. Somehow and most probably due to a fault in the steering, he had eventually found himself in the ditch outside La Puce, and kept his spirits up while awaiting our arrival with the remains of the gift bottle. Now we must help him out of the ditch, but much more importantly, out of trouble with Madame Jamme.

Would it be possible, he pleads, for us to go to his farm and find Henri the labourer, explain the situation and return with the necessary equipment to rescue the car? If he were to return on foot, Madame would ask all sorts of awkward questions, and

the implications with regard to both his capacity for strong drink and driving skills would surely diminish his standing throughout the region. A confrontation with a ditch is, as we realise, of no consequence to the average Norman, but, as we also know, Madame Jaume is not as understanding about his occasional tipping as most wives of hard working farmers...

A little later, and Henri, the tractor and a cow rope have been summoned, and the road is completely blocked with nosey-parkers anxious to observe and advise if not actually help. They are mostly dispersed by a passing policeman, who arrives on his motorbike to sympathise with Mr Jaume's predicament, make copious notes about the incident and officially take over arm-waving, traffic directing and shooting responsibilities.

At last the van is parked in our yard while Mr Jaume, Henri, the bobby and two complete strangers settle down in the kitchen to celebrate a successful conclusion to the evening's drama. Donella rings the medicine cabinet for another bottle of emergency calos and suggests she runs Mr Jaume home to ensure that he arrives safely. All the men look at her as if she has just suggested they have soft negs. A better idea, proposes Mr Jaume, would be for him to drive us all to the Bar Ghislaine, where he may properly thank us all for our assistance and relate the story of our adventures to the Jolly Boys Club. In spite of much wobbling and general agreements, we politely refuse his invitation.

There are at least two miles of ditches en route, and besides, we know of Ghislaine's general opinion of men, men drinking, and especially men drinking off the premises.

December 24th:

Christmas Eve, and we decide to visit all the bars in the area for a traditional British pub crawl. Donella suggests inviting Mr Jaume to be our chauffeur, but we settle for playing stop to select the driver. I win with a grand slam of Mr Bean The Baker and we set

off in high hopes of a convivial evening. Unfortunately, the doors to virtually every bar in the area are firmly shut. From inside come the sounds of much jollity, and we conclude that Christmas is still a strictly family affair in Cognac. Eventually, we find a warm welcome from Madame Nellie, who unbolts the doors to her bar at St Sauveur le Vicomte and invites us to join the small gathering of lonely people without families or friends to be with at this special time. A large, lovely and extremely maternal young woman, Nellie seems to attract a certain type of clientele who are not always at ease in other company. Soon after arrival, Domella is in deep conversation with Mike The Bike, a Nelson resident and new friend who often cycles down our track with his briefcase containing lengthy magazine articles about himself, colourful pictures of his many operations, and detailed notes of his complete medical history. Michel is a local celebrity by virtue of contracting a mystery illness which kept the most distinguished Parisian doctors perplexed for almost a decade, and speaks a little English as a result of being regularly exhibited to visiting Harley Street specialists. He is a complete innocent, kind and trusting with a childlike enthusiasm for the little gifts which Domella regularly brings him from England. I, meanwhile, have been backed into a corner between the juke box and football table by a tall man with staring eyes and a marked facial twitch who is interrogating me about our plans for La Place. His paranoia is even stronger than Rene's, but from what I can make out he is threatening to visit us at dead of night and kill every living animal if we decide to go into livestock farming. I make my excuses and go to the toilet, only to find he has followed me and is brandishing a huge and deadly looking knife. I promise that we will stick to purely arable pursuits, and apparently disappointed, he sheathes his weapon and leaves.

After settling my nerves with a swift glass of calva, I relate my experience to Madame Nellie, who explains that I have misconstrued the situation. Mr Guy is a harmless individual who happens to work at the local slaughterhouse. Unofficially, which means totally illegally, he earns a little extra income by making late night visits to smallholders who wish to have their animals

butchered, and was merely offering me this service should we have need of it. It is understandable that the misunderstanding has taken place, Nellie remarks as she notes my shaking hand and pours another measure in the glass with some difficulty. Mr Guy is a lonely, withdrawn and sometimes intense personality even by local standards, and people say he carries the smell of death with him wherever he goes. As I now know, he also carries the main tool of his trade.

December 25th:

Christmas Day. We rise late and exchange presents. Opening mine, I solve a month-long mystery regarding the contents of the large and strangely shaped parcel beside the gaily decorated fir tree in our orchard. Dorella has thoughtfully bought me a new wheelbarrow, complete with a list of pressing outdoor tasks attached by a jaunty bow to the handle. She seems equally pleased with her second-hand chainsaw, which I bought from Rossi after his assurances that it is as good as when his father bought it twenty years before, and far superior to modern rubbish with all the unnecessary safety devices.

Like children impatient to play with our new toys, we decide to spend the day outside. Loading my new wheelbarrow with a picnic, bottle of wine and the chainsaw, we make our way down to the water meadow so that my wife may give her presents to the livestock.

Unable to keep our own animals in the past as mostly absentee landlords, we have sublet the land to a variety of tenants in an attempt to keep the land in trim, and Dorella has adopted them all. Two goats belonging to our distant neighbour Christian do good work on the scrub in the one acre garden behind the farmhouse, and my wife has bought them a gift-wrapped packet of extra strength Capstan cigarettes, which are their favourite brand.

We learned of this enthusiasm for tobacco from an eccentric Englishman in a neighbouring village who shares his house with an alpine goat. While most amiable, the creature also likes pot plants and is not house trained, so even my wife has not invited the happy couple to dinner as yet.

Apart from the occasional arrival of friends' sheep or pigs in need of rough grazing, the two sloping and well-drained roadside fields at La Puce are reserved for the beef cattle owned by Jean Chevalier, the mayor of Nibou. We inherited the arrangement from the previous owner, and are very glad to have done so. Typical of the farmers in the region, John and his wife Solange have their own fields around their farmhouse in a nearby hamlet, but rent extra grazing land at a very nominal fee. Apart from keeping the land, hedges and gates in impeccable condition and their tireless efforts in helping us become accepted by the community, having such a close relationship with the local mayor has been of great practical assistance during the renovation of La Puce. Every commune in France has its own elected mayor, and each wields considerable power, particularly in matters of planning consent for building works and improvements. Even before buying our first house in Cognac we had learned that the French love of bureaucracy is matched only by their total disregard of due procedure when it suits them or the situation. One of our first requirements at La Puce was to seek the best way to let some light into the former hay loft which would become our bedroom, and this at first seemed to present no problem. Skylight windows being as common as crows in this region of traditional single storey Norman longhouses, we made some rough sketches of where we thought they should be fitted, and wishing to go by the book from the start of operations, asked John to help with any necessary paperwork.

The next day, he arrived with a sheaf of forms and wearing a tie with his usual bib and brace overalls and gumboots to signify the official nature of his visit. We then spent an hour going through the details of how to proceed with bureaucratic communications. Firstly, we must take photographs from all angles of how the roof

looked at the roomers, and commission professional drawings of how it would look after the alterations. Also, we must fill in three duplicate forms asking such relevant questions as how long we had been married and where our children were to school. These would be despatched to the local mairie, to the main administration centre for the department, and to Paris, presumably to ensure that the President had no objection to our changing the aesthetic oddness of a roof which was about to collapse before we bought it. Over the coming days, we diligently compiled, confidently ordered the windows, and awaited a favourable outcome of our application. Three weeks later, a more apologetic John told us that for some unexplained reason, our request was irreconcilable. For whatever reason, the authorities appeared to have decided that it must remain forever midnight in our bedrooms, and the farmhouse at La Puce be the only property in the region without even one roof window.

Fired with indignation and having taken advice from a local English expatriate who had developed a small outhouse into a sprawling five bedroomed home without bothering to ask anyone's permission, we decided to take the law into our own hands and risk fines, imprisonment and expulsion. Following the necessary adjustments to the upper part of the gable end wall with a five pound sledgehammer, we fitted an economy size pair of French windows which would let in more light to the bedrooms than a dozen skylight windows. While the mood was on us, we also designed and erected a massive wooden balcony giving incomparable views across the whole of our terrain. As we slapped a final coat of wood preservative on the huge timber logs, the mayor arrived to move his cattle from the field alongside. While we held our breath, he took off his hat, scratched his head and spent a long moment surveying the totally unapproved structure with a quizzical frown. Then he shook our hands vigorously, complimented us on the standard of workmanship and speed of erection, and graciously accepted our invitation to officially open the new balcony with a drinks and ribbon-cutting ceremony later that day.

It was some time before we discovered that skylight windows are the one alteration to any existing building that do not require planning permission in France.

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Down at the big pond, we find the crayfish gang have extended their territory and reign of terror.

Reggie and Ronnie Cray and their heavy mob appeared in the east end of the pond shortly after we had it dug, and immediately set about ruling their new manor with almost inhuman ferocity. We had first spotted their aggressive swagger through the shallows as they visited the frog colony and put the frightener on, and even the largest cross would turn tail at their approach. Burrow holes had regularly appeared around the bank as new generations of the gang set up home, and now it seems they hold total sway. They are, according to our enquiries, a particularly large and succulent species of native freshwater crayfish, who have reappeared since we began clearing out the stream and gradually attempting to restore life to the polluted waters of La Place. Hearing of our new tenants during a visit to the *Café de Paris*, Freddie the patron had told us of his happy childhood days at our pond fishing for cray and cross, and advised that we keep their presence a deadly secret. The first action we should take would be the removal of the No Fishing signs Domella has put up all around the terrain. Their very presence would let *everyone* in the area know there were now fish to be caught at La Place, and the temptation would be too strong for the most law-abiding Norman angler. Even more importantly, we must make sure that Remi does not find out there is anything remotely eatable or sellable in our waters.

We know this to be sound advice, having become aware of our friend's appetite for unusual delicacies when we dug a tiny pond in the garden at La Place and filled it with goldfish cunningly smuggled across the Channel in a couple of large thermos flasks. The day after they had taken up residence, Domella had found him looking thoughtfully at the innocent creatures, and asked if

goldfish are as popular in France as they are with English people. He had nodded enthusiastically, and told her of his special recipe for *poissons rouges* in Issoire.

Given the rapid expansion of the Cray gang as evidenced by their territorial gains, Remi has hopefully not yet tested their presence, in spite of their tendency to wreak havoc where in drink.

We had first become aware of the Crays' liking for alcohol when preparing a special dinner for a visiting Burgundian friend. Wishing to impress him with our mastery of his regional classic dish, we had visited JayPay with a bottle of scotch and a request for a crash course in creating *bœuf bourguignon*.

Following the lengthy verbal and written instructions to the letter, we marinated the beef for the requisite time, and then fished out the carrots which had been sitting in a bottle's worth of best Burgundy for a day and a night. This, JayPay had stressed, was a vital step, as they would become discoloured in the process and totally ruin the overall visual effect if left in place. Having read that crayfish are not averse to vegetables, we had taken the thoroughly soaked carrots down to the big pond and dropped them by Reggie and Ronnie's front door. In moments, the duo had emerged and snapped up the unexpected treat. Inevitably the alcohol had taken effect and trouble broke out. With nobody else to pick on, they had started a drunken brawl with each other and we were unable to separate them. Eventually, a lost claw declared Big Reg the winner, and all was still again as they retired to sleep it off.

Knowing their susceptibility to strong liquor, Domella has prepared them some pork crackling in low alcohol lager, and respectfully leaving their special Christmas lunch at the entrance to their manor, we continue our rounds.

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As his caravan, all in quiet, which means Remi has found an open bar, is visiting The Widow of Negreville, or sleeping off the effects of the night before. We leave his presents of real ale-flavoured

Christmas puddings and a bottle of malt whisky, and an invitation to join us for dinner.

Rémi Rifort and his mobile home arrived in the big field last year, shortly after he told us that he was being evicted from his tiny cottage on the outskirts of Nébou and needed somewhere else to stay till times became better. The arrangements, he said, would be to our great benefit, as his presence would deter poachers, burglars and other miscreants who would otherwise take advantage of our absence. Under his stewardship, our estate would be in safe hands, and he would not only manage the land, but carry out all renovation work on the buildings at La Place at half the price of any other specialist tradesman in the area. As anyone would tell us, there was little he did not know about nature, farming and building work.

In fact, most people in the area seem keen to tell us that Rémi is known locally as Rifort The Fox and is not to be trusted, but, for all his failings he has a big heart and has become my friend. From him, I have already learned much about the culture and character of the Gourmitous people, and am prepared to pay the price for that knowledge. My wife seems to think that the price is often too high, but I am sure she will warm to him now that we are here to stay.

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The roast is almost ready when Rémi arrives. As Dominella prepares the drinks, he explains he has been out on the traditional Christmas Day hunt, in full hue and cry for what must be one of the few surviving mammals bigger than a mouse left in Gourmitis. As in other regions of France, the country people seem to like to pursue and kill any wild creature that can be broadly classified as either eatable or a pest, and take a very liberal view of the results of the occasional mistake. Last year, two gamblers in the St Saturnin forest were quite badly injured by a salvo from a hunting party, but the trial judge said it was their fault for being there at the start of the wild boar season.

Before we sit down at table, Rémi passes me a carrier bag

containing our Christmas presents, and I see that it is a dead squirrel. Hoping that it is not the same undernourished animal that my wife has been encouraging to take up residence in our copse, I thank him and slip the still warm corpse in the rubbish bin while Donella hands him a glass of mulled wine spiced with nutmeg and ginger. Our guest takes a sip, makes a grim face but eventually pronounces it as perfectly acceptable for English tastes as he puts the glass to one side. It is the first time in our acquaintance that he has not finished a drink.

After dinner, which seemed to go quite well except for the vegetables, Rémi accepts a tumbler of whisky and asks if our burglars had taken anything. Pressed for details, he describes a dramatic incident at La Place during our visit to the south. Just after dusk, the mayor had arrived at Rémi's caravan in a state of high excitement. Knowing of our absence, he had stopped off at the farmhouse to check all was well and that all doors and windows were secured. As he had walked around the building, however, an outside light had been turned on and off, indicating that intruders must be inside. Armed with Rémi's ancient shotgun and a billhook, they had surrounded the farmhouse, when once again a light had signalled the presence of careless trespassers. As the official keyholder, Rémi had then led an assault through the front door, only to find the building empty.

An investigation of the premises proving fruitless, they had concluded that the would-be thieves had made good their escape during the search upstairs, that the flashing lights had been operated by a power surge, or even more likely and satisfactory that it was the manifestation of some supernatural force. After disconnecting the electricity supply we had stupidly left on, the intrepid pair had returned to Rémi's caravan for a revalying glass of *ratafia* and a full debriefing on the mystery.

I express our thanks for their brave action in protecting our property, and think it best not to point out that, before leaving to visit our friends, I had installed a set of newfangled British

security floodlights with special sensors which react to any movements in the yard.

And so, the legend of the *fantôme* of La Place was born.

December 30th:

We are invited to dinner with the mayor, a signal honour. It should be an interesting evening. Other guests will include my mother, who has joined us to see the New Year in, and Helen Patton, grand daughter of the famous American general. Patton was based at an orchard just down the road from La Place during the D-Day operations, and Helen is restoring a grand house in Nehou in memory of the great man. Twenty miles from Cherbourg, our area has always played an important part in the history of the peninsula, and many illustrious figures have visited, stayed or died here, especially in times of war. Like the extravagant claims of patronage by Queen Elizabeth I made by so many English innkeepers, Rommel seems to have spent at least one night in every farm house and *chambre d'hôte* in the region, despite having his permanent defence headquarters at the Old Chateau hotel in Bricquebec. We also know that Richard The Lionheart was a frequent traveller through the nearby port of Barfleur on his way to the Crusades, but the local tourist board does not seem to consider the passage of an English king worthy of plaque or record, despite the fact that he spoke better French than English.

A considerable celebrity in the area, Helen Patton is much respected in the village, and has just asked John Chevalier to take on the responsibility and honour of aiding progress with restoration work on the orchard and house. A grim coincidence, she confides over a pommeau *apéritif*, in that like her grandfather, John's predecessor was killed in a car accident. She asks us not to make this fact public, as we know how superstitious the locals can be.

Over a simple but excellent dinner of pressed bull's tongue followed by roast chicken in a sauce made from its entrails, John tells us how his farm was a billet for German troops during the