



**THE FRENCH CONNECTION**  
WRINGTON TWINNING ASSOCIATION  
The John Locke Room, Silver Street, Wrington BS40 5QE

**NEWSLETTER** *March 2022*

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*Welcome to your March newsletter*

## **La Nouvelle Année Romaine et Le Mardi Gras**



The French have been celebrating *Mardi Gras* since the 4<sup>th</sup> century. It represents, like our Shrove Tuesday, the eve of Lent, the forty days of fasting that aims to replicate Christ's 40-day fast in the desert. The length of the celebration varies in Latin countries all over the world, from Epiphany until Ash Wednesday, to three days (more common in France), to just one day. The idea is to eat all of the fat (*gras*) in the house before the period of fasting begins, but *Mardi Gras* festivals are

essentially carnivals. It is regarded in France as *une fête incontournable* (a do-not-miss party), and a survey in (pre-pandemic) 2018 showed that 7/10 French people celebrate *Mardi Gras*. The most famous carnival in France is held in Nice, pictured above. It attracts more than a million visitors every year and has been celebrated since 1294. The festival is also very popular in Hauts-de-France (North of France) but least popular in Brittany (ah! The Celts! Ever the non-conformists ...). The masks that are worn were probably inspired by Venetian masked balls, and there are three colours associated with the festival: purple (justice), green (faith) and gold (power). This colour symbolism and its masked manifestations are more modern and may have other, more sinister associations with racist cults.

Food that celebrates Mardi Gras includes *crêpes* (pancakes), *gaufres* (Belgian waffles), *beignets*, *bugnes* ('angels wings') and *pets-de-nonnes* (nun's farts). The last three are essentially doughnuts, traditionally made from choux pastry that is deep-fried and tossed in sugar, but now they are often made with dough.



*Beignets* have their origin in ancient Rome, which brings me to the Roman new year. This year, *Mardi Gras* coincides with the Roman calendar, where the new year began on 1<sup>st</sup> March. Thus September, October, November and December all had numerically correct names, and the new year began with spring, and new growth, not at the dreariest time of winter. Let's bring it back!

\* \* \* \* \*

## **News from France**

The French rugby team is looking very good in the Six Nations and roundly beat Scotland 36:17.

Some departments in France are refusing to have the Olympic torch for the 2024 games cross their territories. It is supposed to cross every separate territory on its way to the Olympic village, but the cost of €180,000 per department (including taxes) is too much for eight departments, who are declining to take part. They are Haute-Loire, Indre-et-Loire, Lot-et-Garonne, Creuse, Haute-Vienne, Loire-Atlantique, Côtes-d'Armor and Orne. The flame represents the theft of fire by Prometheus from Zeus, to give to humans, and it is considered as much the source of human life and prosperity as its opposite, water. The route from Olympia will not be entirely over land this time, the runner(s) will take a boat from Greece to France, a concession to sustainability.

France is doing all it can to assist the Ukraine and resist Russian invasion, by confiscating Russian sea traffic in its waters and, like the rest of the EU countries, refusing Russian planes into their airspace.

The French parliament has passed a law to make bullying at school (which affects 10% of French students) a criminal offence, including cyber-bullying.

## **News from VLB**

The emphasis on shopping locally is clear in VLB with its thrice-weekly market in Place Michel-Solans. Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays, there is a gorgeous range of stalls, selling clothes as well as beautiful local foodstuffs.

VLB is hosting a Manga Festival, called Manga Mania, 2–4 March, with drawing workshops and celebrations of Japanese Manga culture.

Six plane trees are being cut down from alongside the Canal du Midi, a big operation causing considerable disruption.

A chain of sports shops in France has made a gift of 1,000 pieces of clothing for needy people in in VLB.

Four statues that were abandoned in the old Pernod headquarters for 20 years have been put on display. The ideas for the sculptures were developed with very young Villeneuve children in 2002. They represent a horse, a child, a flame (a *stèle*

for those killed in the Algerian war) and an obelisk, on which the names of the children are recorded. You can see pictures of them at <https://fr.calameo.com/read/00307380749004d5535c4> .

### **Conversations with our friends in VLB**

March 21<sup>st</sup> 6pm Zoom

If you would like to take part, please email Jane Finn at [janefinn20@hotmail.com](mailto:janefinn20@hotmail.com)

### **French Conversation in Langford and on Zoom**

11<sup>th</sup> March 5pm Zoom

*If you would like to attend the Zoom meeting, just drop Margaret Hancock a line ([hancock.divonne@gmail.com](mailto:hancock.divonne@gmail.com)). It is a recurring meeting, so the universal protocols apply (see below).*

24<sup>th</sup> March 3pm The Langford Inn Just turn up!

***In April we shall recommence face-to-face meetings twice a month. See the April newsletter for dates.***

### **Cinéphiles de Wrington**

1<sup>st</sup> March at 5pm on Zoom, when we shall discuss *Etre et Avoir* (2002), a documentary about a small, rural school, with one class of mixed ages, directed by Nicolas Philibert.

5<sup>th</sup> April will be the following meeting, where we shall talk about *Amélie* (2001), the full title of which is *Le Fabuleux Destin d'Amélie Poulain*, directed by Jean-Pierre Jeunet. It was the film that launched the career of the extraordinary Audrey Tautou.

At the moment we are still meeting on Zoom, but, as with the French conversation group, we are hoping to meet face-to-face as the spring opens up.

***Please note the universal log-in for all French Connection and Wrington Twinning Association Zoom meetings, whether committee, conversation or Cinéphiles:***

<https://zoom.us/j/4933115546?pwd=bmhLSnZrSkIPRHZhRjhQaFFNczJHZz09>

Meeting ID: 493 311 5546

Passcode: 610359

One tap mobile

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***NB We are now publicising our events a little more widely, but still in the locality. This means I need to hear from you about dates for inclusion by 15<sup>th</sup> of the month, please! Otherwise, I cannot make the deadlines for the local press.***

## Recipe of the month

The emphasis this month is on Lent austerity rather than *Mardi-Gras*, so if, like your editor, you have a weekly organic veg box delivered (perhaps from the Community Farm in Chew Magna?), you may be getting a little tired of white and red cabbage. This month we turn, therefore, to Elizabeth David, the goddess of reconstructing the authentic, for a reconsideration of the overlooked *Choucroute*, a staple of Alsatian cuisine. I decline to get involved in the relative merits of the Alsatian and Lorrainian versions, and opt for her Alsatian classic, which has a very important ingredient. Fruit spirits being a definitive characteristic of the food and drink of this region (and they are not, she insists, liqueurs), the potential mediocrity of this dish is transformed by the addition of kirsch. I didn't have any kirsch, but I do have medlar brandy and sloe gin. And enough white cabbage to try both!

### Choucroute

About 2lb white cabbage, shredded or sliced very thinly, washed and drained  
3 ozs butter, or rather less of goose or pork fat  
1 onion, finely chopped  
10 crushed juniper berries  
½ pt light stock and a small glass white wine  
A grated raw potato  
A glass of Alsatian or Swiss kirsch

Melt the butter or fat in a heavy pot.

Put in the onion, and when it starts to sizzle, put in the cabbage and the juniper berries.

Stir and lift with a pair of wooden forks or other implements, for 15 minutes.

Add the white wine and a little of the stock.

Cook over a low heat for 1.5 hours, adding more stock from time to time, but never so much that the cabbage is floating in it.

Season with freshly milled pepper and a little salt.

Stir in the grated potato and cook for another 15 minutes.

Just before serving, add 4–6 tablespoons of kirsch.

Turn on to a hot dish in a mound.

If you like, surround the mound with pieces of lightly fried, smoked bacon.

It is very good with a roasted pheasant placed on the top.

Even some frankfurter sausages and some plain, boiled potatoes are good with it.



(If you have some left over, Mrs David suggests you make a **soup** by simmering a large cupful for another hour with a pint of stock, liquidize and finish with some thick, fresh cream. Add a few little cubes of bacon, or sausage, or serve with fried croutons.)

## Wine of the Month

In view of the above, this has to be a white Alsatian wine. They are mostly delicious, but I would especially recommend a Gewürztraminer. It has a distinctive character and complexity, and ranges from almost dry to almost sweet. The grape is pink and gives the wine a beautiful, golden colour. It is a pleasure to drink alone or with an aperitif, such as the olive cake from last month, but strong enough to stand up to oriental cuisine, excellent with the stronger tasting seafoods, such as lobster, and brilliant with really ripe French cheeses. It is a highly aromatic wine and can take a while to become familiar. The grape needs a cool climate, yet the wine can be darkly fruity and spicy, especially if it has been subject to the 'noble rot'. It can also be tangy with lychees, peaches and rose petals. It's the sort of wine to take in and roll around in the mouth before swallowing. You have to experiment to find the intensity and aroma that you like. If you are new to it, perhaps start with a dry one and, if you like it, work towards the sweeter end. Andrew Jefford has said 'Gewurztraminer is the wine world's equivalent of a peaty whisky such as Laphroaig ... it is either loved or loathed.'



Some of those made under German labels are grown on French soil. I've also had excellent Gewürz in New Zealand (where one does get very tired of Sauvignon Blanc), and some of the Chilean versions would be well worth trying as the climate is just right. Two to start with are Weingut Jülg, 2020 (£12.95), which is at the dry end, and Princes Abbes, Domaine Schlumberger 2019 (£17.00) at the spicier, medium end. Both are available from the Wine Society, who also bottle their own Exhibition Gewurztraminer, 2017 and 2018 £15.50/14.95. Plenty too on this list: <https://www.vivino.com/toplists/top-25-alsace-gewurztraminer-wines-right-now-global> .

### **Le mot juste**

**Le cafard**, cockroach. Straightforward, you might think, and not very pleasant, but surprisingly interesting in its metaphorical uses. **Avoir le cafard** is what you say if you are feeling down, and **accès de cafard** is a fit of the blues. **Cafardeux/se** means gloomy, and **ça lui donne le cafard** means 'that really gets them down'. Then there is **cafardage**, telling tales, sneaking, from the verb that has been made from the original noun; **cafarder**, to sneak. So the poor cockroach, with whom this all started, has lent its assumed negative qualities to both a low mood and a tendency to dob in your friend or neighbour. And all the cockroach has ever done is hide out in damp crannies and try to keep out of trouble. It's the price of being ugly, that humans use you as a scapegoat for negative qualities. Who'd be an insect?

*Lindsey Shaw-Miller, Newsletter Editor, Wrington Twinning Association and The French Connection.*