

A LOVE AFFAIR WITH FRANCE

by Nancy Coons

EDITOR'S NOTE: *What is it about France that makes us fall in love? In The Feasting Season, a love affair is urged on by delectable foods, sultry wines, and astonishing scenery. France woos us heartily, sensually, gets under*



Nancy Coons,
author of
The Feasting Season

our skin. Author Nancy Coons moved to France several years ago and her unabashed affection for the country shows on every page. Coons describes how her love affair with France took hold.

I first started flirting with France on a youthful bus-camping tour, circling monuments from an air-conditioned distance, my nose pressed to the Plexiglas. The Eiffel Tower! The Place Vendôme! The Papal Palace of Avignon! My heart flip-flopped. What was happening to me? Then came that first shy dawn: Crawling out of my pup tent at the foot of a Provençal château, I watched the mist lift over an asparagus field and heard my first nightingale. My knees went weak. It was love.

I demurred, I resisted, I went back for more. The food alone was beguiling enough, but the markets added a sensual spark. The French shopped and cooked with all five senses: a man stripping open a pea pod and running a thumb over the green globes; a woman tapping a melon by her ear, hefting it to sniff. I got closer. Everything was hands-on. The cheese monger passed slabs of cantal down a bucket brigade of queu-

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ing customers. The charcutier handed out slices of sawn-off ham, while customers tore off the fat rind and dropped it at their feet with the day's accumulated scraps. All around me appetites were aroused. A toddler in a poussette cuddled a croissant instead of a teddy bear. An elegant businessman tore off a chunk of warm baguette on the way to the metro. I found myself glancing furtively into grocery carts—salt butter, pâté, goat cheese, peaches, an '82 Médoc—and wanting to follow them home. Just what was the moment of no return? When I sank my teeth into a silky slab of foie gras? Whiffed the pungent musk of truffle? Sipped one glass too many of velvety Sauternes? I wavered, I wobbled, I succumbed.

France proved to be a worthy lover, romancing me over the years, often gently, sometimes urgently, with its graces, nuances, and endearing quirks. There's the way the roughest *paysan* goes suddenly graceful with a knife and fork

in hand, the origami art of tying a scarf, whether heavy-gauge silk or gauzy Left-Bank muslin. There's the intimate ritual of drinking an espresso, stirred daintily with a tiny spoon, a sugar cube dipped and suckled unself-consciously. There are the thousand ways of holding a cigarette, whether cupping it over a hidden smile, pinching it in circling gesticulation, or timing the click of a lighter to a beat of skeptical silence. (I wave away the smoke and try to think of it as theater.) I savor the slow social dance as friends and colleagues move from formal distance to intimacy. Physical contact is a part of daily life—a hand resting amicably on a shoulder, confid-

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ing fingers pressing a forearm—but first names are earned as acquaintance deepens. (Waiters do not introduce themselves with the sea bass.) A cordial handshake graduates with time to a double-cheek kiss and a whiff of sweat or cologne. The respectful "*vous*" evolves into a sometimes startlingly intimate "*tu*."

As with any older lover, there is history; no need to rifle through a private drawer for clues. When I dig in my garden, I unearth shards of crockery and glass, coins and religious medals, shrapnel and barbed wire; my land has been fought over for centuries. Lorraine's orchards are peppered with Maginot Line pillboxes, now littered with condoms from stolen trysts. French freeway rest stops are named for massacres and generals, the schools for Résistants. For our village's medieval festival, my family dances at the foot of mossy rampart walls and sings by the treadmill that prisoners paced to

draw water from the château well. At the Armistice ceremony, the flagbearer's hands tremble with real memories. Like a good partner I listen, I sympathize, I pay homage.

Commitment creeps up on you as love takes root. At first we plugged our American appliances into temporary adaptors, then, one by one as the years stretched on, replaced them with Euro-gadgets—a compact washing machine that churns conscientiously for more than an hour, an oven with a thick iron simmering *plaque*, a five-speed Renault with espresso-size drink holders. Our children came along and drew us deeper into village life and language. They learned to pluck a chicken; I learned to braid

onions; my husband learned to distill eau-de-vie. We wake now to roosters, alerted to trespassers by barking geese. Our home, a damp stone farmhouse with shrapnel holes in the façade and musk weasels nesting in the walls, has spread comfortably over the years; the cow shed's now a laundry, the pigsty a kitchen. My relationship with France, like the wines we first laid down on arrival, has mellowed.

By the time you read this, France and I may have made it official. Along with my American husband and our two daughters, who ably straddle cultures, I have applied for French citizenship. I'm still faithful to my first love, America, and I value my U.S. passport as much as I do American humor, enterprise, flexibility, and cut-to-the-chase ways.

But after a twenty-year love affair, France will at last have made an honest woman of me. ■