

La Vie en France

Traditions

In France, when you greet someone you always kiss them on the cheek three times. It does not matter if you know them, are just meeting them or have never even been introduced. There is no obligation to say anything, not even your name, but you absolutely must kiss on the cheek. I always knew it was polite and sometimes even necessary to follow custom, but I never really realized how much people kept to their traditions until I was invited to a French girl's soiree. I had never met the girl, Clem, but had been introduced, over Facebook (as a typical child of the 21st century) by another mutual friend. Determined to take any opportunity to meet new and especially French students, I decided to accept her invitation. As soon as I walked through the door she embraced me with the three customary kisses on the cheek. I assumed since we were girls, had previously communicated and had just met face to face, that was only to be expected. But two more guys who came in right after also came up to kiss my cheek, and five more after. They did not sit down until each and every one of them had kissed me. A few moments later another girl walked in. All the guys that had previously come in were sitting down around a small table in the living room. There were seven guys in total. No way, I thought to myself, no matter what custom dictates, will this girl kiss every single one of these people. But she did, three times. To me, it looked bizarre. Back in the US so much of what we do is driven by comfort, and kissing everyone in the room, three times on the cheek would definitely be a hassle. But here, in Montpellier, customs like these not only still exist, but are alive and will keep going, as the generation of today abides by them consciously.

Traditions seem to sneak up on you in the weirdest ways. I would have never considered bringing a bottle of wine to a dinner party strange, let alone rude. However, when I mentioned my intention of buying wine for Clem's party, my roommate Eva was shocked. Eva, a student at University of Minnesota, has been living in Montpellier for the year, studying as I am at the university here in Montpellier. She has come to know both the French as well as the familiar American customs, and understand how discrepancies can so easily turn into huge cultural gaps. I did not want to bring wine to dinner, she said, because in France that implies that the host (usually the person also preparing and serving the meal) does not have good taste in wine. To an ignorant American like me, bringing wine to a dinner party seemed like a perfectly legitimate idea. And so I decided that this one time I would be different, and instead of trying so hard to fit into the French mold, instead of trying and failing at being French, I would just be myself. So I purchased a bottle of nice red wine and decided that since I was American, and since in America wine is what you brought to a party, it would be my way of embracing the fact that I was, after all, the American at the party that night. I would stand out with or without the wine. Thankfully, the students I met at Clem's were much more typical students than they were typical French. Almost every single one of them brought some sort of drink, and some even brought chips and snacks.

Fall 2011

The night was an awkward, mellow affair, but I was delighted to be surrounded by a group of people that talked about similar and completely different things than what I was used to. They talked about movies, but movies I had never heard of. They played music, some which was very familiar, and some that was totally unfamiliar. They were loud and happy, much like a group of American students would be. One thing I doubt any of them really understood was exactly how poor my French comprehension was. I don't think it was difficult to understand that my French conversational skills were basic at best, but I definitely think they overrated my ability to understand them, as they fired across the room French slang in a typical southern accent. I spent most of the night speaking to a guy named Emanuel, who had, just four months before, emigrated to France from Reunion, a small island just right of Madagascar. To be fair, he was the one doing most of the talking, I was just struggling to listen and try to understand. It was frustrating to be among people my own age, interesting, fun people, and have absolutely nothing to say, not for lack of interest or ideas, but simply because I had no idea what they were saying, nor really how to contribute to the conversation. There are so many more things I could have asked Emanuel, things he said I probably did not understand, and so many more things he probably would have said if I had anything more than the basic head nod to add to our conversation.

They say that French people are the worst at accepting foreigners, the ones most willing to correct you or ignore you. In some ways it is true, but as with all stereotypes, there are plenty of exceptions to break the rule. During the first few minutes at Clem's apartment I spoke very briefly to the first few guests, in particular two guys who seemed nice but quite shy. They asked me very basic things, among which what my nationality was. It must have been my accent, or maybe my name that gave it away, so I said casually: "Je suis roumanian." You mean "Roumaine," one of the guys corrected me sharply. I was not sure what his name was, and I did not speak another word to him the rest of the night, but he did make sure to correct the only word I spoke to him. On many occasions I have felt the glaring eyes and judgmental stares of store clerks, taxi drivers and waiters who seem just simply annoyed with this silly American that has trouble ordering a coffee. However, I have found just as many French people, like Clem, who seem genuinely interested in learning more about foreign students, that are happy to accommodate for my poor language skills and lack of French culture. It has not been easy starting conversations in French, when English comes so much easier, and it has been quite demoralizing having store clerks talk back to me in English as soon as they realize my French is not yet fluent. But it would mean defeat allowing negative attitudes and impatient people to influence my approach to this semester. It is in the American tradition to keep going against all odds, and that is one tradition I am willing to carry on. So I will keep speaking French, even if it is exhausting, embarrassing and sometimes even ridiculous.