

THE ROMANCE OF FRANCE HAS ITS LIMITS

When my husband and I were dating, I knew within months that he was the one. But two years into our relationship, he was taking a little longer to figure that out, so I came up with a brilliant plan; a ten-day trip starting in Paris, making a loop down through the Rhone Valley and up through the Loire to celebrate the anniversary of our first date. I made reservations at bed and breakfasts, private inns, and even one castle. Each day the sun rose into the crisp blue sky. We traveled the side roads through quaint villages and countryside, dotted with the brilliant colors of autumn. We stopped in local markets and made picnics of Saint-Marcellin, a farmhouse cheese, and paired it with a Saumur Champigny, a lovely burgundy wine given to us by one of our innkeepers. We even listened to Edith Piaf as we drove from one breathtaking vista to the next. Then, with the scene set and Van Gogh's afternoon light draping over us like a warm blanket, I waited for those four simple words, "Will you marry me?" Nothing. Day after day, one Hollywood set-up after the next, I didn't hear a peep.

When I closed my eyes, I could still see the blazing foliage coming toward me at warp speed. Burgundy, crimson, amber and mustard colored leaves blurred together as we zoomed past the backlit trees. We were on hour six of our drive from Avignon to the small town of Le Blanc in the Loire Valley, and despite the enchanting beauty at every turn, I was drunk on flora overload, like a sailor finding his balance on land after a month at sea. I was ready to stop for the night, but we still had a few hours to go.

"How are you holding up? Do we need to stop to feed you?" teased Dan.

Not finding any humor in his questions, I responded, "Very funny. No, let's have dinner in town when we get there. I'm sure there will be a bistro or café open. But, could you step on it? You're driving like an old lady."



Our rented red Citroen gallantly sped through the kaleidoscopic forests, down into the verdant green valleys of wine country. The lines of perfectly placed vines seemed to animate as we raced past vineyard after vineyard. The sun's rays sparkled off the dew settling on the engorged grapes, hinting at the harvest soon to come. And that made me think of wine, which made me think of food, which coincided with my blood sugar dipping below a safe level, whereupon I turned into a venom-spewing psychopath. Hunger and I did not get along. Dan bore the burden of my tirades, as nothing would make me human until I was fed. Like a caged animal, my claws and fangs came out just ready to pounce on any unsuspecting passersby.

Sensing my mood shift, Dan suggested, "Maybe we should stop somewhere, just for a quick snack."

"You think?" I spit back at him.

"Well, you know how you get," he rebutted, trying to sound reasonable.

"No, how do I get?" I bit back.

He knew better than to engage with me at this point, as we drove silently in search of any place for a morsel of anything. But, we were deep in farm country and unless we pulled over and slaughtered a cow, there was nothing to eat. The sun was setting, the sky was going from indigo to black, and if there was a full moon, I suspected the hair on my knuckles would have burst out from my skin.

Just past 9:30, we arrived in Le Blanc, only to find that every restaurant was closed for the night. I could feel the rush of panic rising up, forcing the first few tears down my cheeks. We arrived at our B&B, and although I tried to keep it together, my voice quivered as I asked the owner in my high school French, "*Y a-t-il un endroit ouvert pour le dîner?* Is there any place open for dinner?"

Looking at me with a combination of disdain and pity, Madame Martin answered, "Zere iz nowhere. All cloze at nine."

She hesitated for a bit, sensing I might burst into sobs, and grudgingly continued, "But, uh, maybe I can bring some cheese, some wine. Zat be good?"

I was so overcome I could not speak. Dan stepped in and said, "That would be perfect. *Merci Madame, Merci.*"

As we opened the door to our room, we were welcomed by a light breeze floating in through the floor to ceiling windows that led out to a veranda. The silk drapes undulated like a dancer performing in Madame Butterfly. We could smell eucalyptus and pine mixing with the distant scent of Gitanes wafting up from Madame's kitchen. Dan came up behind me and pulled me close.

For a fleeting moment I was overwhelmed by the romance of the moment only to be shocked back to reality as my stomach continued to growl. Knowing all too well that I was close to the point of no return, Dan whispered, "Just hang on a few more minutes."

"I'm fine!" I snapped.

Moments later, Madame entered our room with a tray of all of God's best gifts; a glorious chunk of Curé Nantais, one of the valley's best raw cow's milk cheeses, a slice of country pâté with cornichons and Dijon mustard on the side, a cluster of local purple grapes, a bowl of fresh raspberries, a classic French baguette, and a bottle of Sancerre. Like a prisoner being given her first meal after freedom, Madame could see the gratitude on my face. She smiled, half laughing to herself as she said, "Bon Appétit," and left us to feast.



Tears of joy streamed down my cheeks. I never had a meal that was simpler or more satisfying. As we popped the last grapes in our mouths, I exhaled in relief, finally sated. Dan quietly asked, "Are we better now?" I smiled lovingly, shook my head "yes," and then licked the last morsel of pâté off the knife as I curled up next to him, hoping against hope that he would see that this was another perfect moment to propose. But he

still hadn't read the memo.

–Excerpted from *GETTING SAUCED—How I Learned Everything I Know About Food from TV*