

March 2006

Easter in France and Chuck's French brother

Meet Jean Claude – my French brother.

I first met Jean Claude in the summer of 1960. I had just finished my sophomore year in college, and had decided to major in French Literature. I enrolled in the Experiment In International Living – now known as World Learning. It's a kind of student exchange program, where college-age kids travel to a foreign country and live with a host family.

Our group of 11 travelled from New York to Le Havre by “student ship”, an Italian cruise ship the SS Aurelia. Designed to accommodate 800 passengers, the population totalled 1500. We had a great time! Everyone was excited about what lay ahead. Everyone danced and drank. Drinks cost only \$.50. The food was wonderful, to my uncultivated palate.

On each of the five days we had two classes in French. At that time I spoke French like a “Spanish cow”, as someone described it. It seems as though my French classes both at Loomis and Hamilton were targeted more toward literature than toward everyday conversation. I could read Camus, but I couldn't understand directions given by a Frenchman. The other members of my group appeared to be way ahead of me. I tried hard, sometimes with embarrassing results. On the train down to Bordeaux we passed a huge swimming pool. We were sitting in one of those wonderful compartments with a couple of French women, and we were trying our darndest to communicate. I pointed past the women to the window and exclaimed, “Look at that chest (poitrine)!”, when I meant to say, “Look at that swimming pool (piscine)!” The woman nearest the window, who was fairly well-endowed if memory serves, glanced down at her chest with a worried look. Someone corrected me, and I made a hasty exit muttering apologies. I walked up and down the train beating myself up, fearing that the whole trip was a mistake, that I would never be able to communicate.

At the Bordeaux train station we were met by our host families. Jean Claude met me, welcomed me, and asked if I had a good trip. At least, that's what I assume he said. All I could say at that point was, “My name is Charles”.

For the next two months I stayed with Jean Claude and the Philippe family. His mother was a pharmacist; his father was a wine grower. J.C. and I were the same age. He was a bit shorter than I, with the long Gallic nose, brown hair and a stocky build. He exuded self-confidence, which I did not. He was in his element. I was not.

On my second morning I discovered why J.C possessed a stocky build. We woke up bright and early, and, after a breakfast of french bread, coffee and hot chocolate, were driven out to the farm by Mr. Philippe. The farm consisted of several acres of vineyards and hayfields. Our first day was spent “making hay”, following father's tractor-mower raking the hay into piles. That took up the morning. In the afternoon we piled father's tractor-pulled hayrick, tossing the hay into it with pitchforks. No

balers here. Using the same pitchforks we tossed the hay from the rick into the barn loft.

We quit at sundown. At home above the pharmacy we sat down to dinner. I was ravenous, and thirsty. All they offered was wine and water. At age 20 my appreciation for wines hadn't advanced beyond Thunderbird and Ripple. I sipped my glass of Boudreaux Rouge until it was half gone. I then proceeded to replenish it with water. All became silent. Mr. Philippe spoke solemnly, "The only people who mix water with their wine are either sick or pregnant. Are you either?" "No sir," I replied. Lesson learned, I continued to force down Bordeaux Grand Cru for the remainder of my stay.

The next day we went through the same routine, as we did every weekday for the next two months. We either worked in the hayfields or in the vineyards. That's why J.C. was in such good shape.

I remember one day that J.C. had to study for entrance exams to medical school. So I worked with two other labourers in the vineyards performing "defeuillage". Using a small hand sickle, we cut the leaves that prevented the grape clusters from getting the full sunlight. The rows extended probably 300 yards, and took about ½ hour to complete. At the end of each row we took a break. A goatskin wine bag appeared, and we smoked and drank for a bit. Then on to the next row. I would have killed for a nice cold Coke.

J.C. tried to teach me French. I tried to teach him English. He had more success than I. You remember the movie, "My Big Fat Greek Wedding" where the brother of the bride and his friends trick the American into saying swear words? J.C. and his buddies pulled that on me. We were at a dance in the resort town of Arcachon, where the Philippes owned a cottage. I wanted to ask a girl to dance, and asked J.C. if there was a cooler way of asking besides, "Voulez-vous dansez?" Sure, he said, and gave me the words. I looked to his buddies for assurance, and they all nodded sincerely. So, I ambled over to this attractive lady and repeated the question. Her eyebrows shot up, and she and her girlfriends looked at me as if I was a creature from outer space. I hurriedly excused myself, rushed back to where J.C. and his buddies were standing with knowing smiles. "What does 'Voulez-vous une suer avec moi' really mean?" J.C. and the rest of them laughed as he explained, "It means 'Will you sweat one with me?'".

After two months of working as a slave labourer, I had lost ten pounds and could beat J.C. in wrestling. In the meantime the rest of our Experiment group were living the high life happily ensconced with families in the big city of Bordeaux. I said goodbye to the Philippe family and spent the next month biking and camping with my group and an equal number of French kids through various areas of France, including Brittany, Normandy, the Loire Valley and Provence. We traveled between areas by train. We ended up in Paris for our final week.

Unfortunately, J.C. couldn't join us for the camping trip. He had to take his entrance exams for medical school that summer. I wrote a couple of letters to him from college, and never received a response. So that summer ended our relationship, seemingly forever.

Until this year. Anzie's contract with Peace Corps in Dakar, Senegal ended last November, 2005. Since our house in Newburyport, MA was leased until the following May we decided to spend the interim six months traveling through North Africa and Europe. In Morocco we travelled around in a rental car. We did the same in Europe. We picked up a car in Nice. Renault and Citroen offer a very reasonable package for long term rentals. We clocked over 15,000 kms., or 12,000 miles, over the next 4 ½ months. We usually stayed in rental apartments that we arranged over the internet. Isn't it truly amazing how the internet has changed our lives?

We stayed for one week in an apartment in Brantome, in the Dordogne area, about one hour outside of Bordeaux. This area is famous for its chateaux, truffles, foie gras and caves. Our garage was one of a series of caves behind the house. Sure, we wanted to visit the area to partake of the above features. But I also had this fantasy of finding my long lost French brother after 45 years.

So, on a Saturday we drove to the village of Cadillac, situated about 40 kms. southeast of Bordeaux. We drove through the portal in the ancient wall that surrounds a good portion of the "old town" and parked in one of the very few spaces. Much of the old town is "pedestrian-only". We walked over to the town hall, which is located in an ancient castle surrounded by a deep, grass covered moat. Unfortunately it was closed. We walked through a busy outdoor market to the police station. Closed for a three-hour lunch. Over to the post office. It, too, was closed. I was getting discouraged, deciding that Saturday wasn't the best day to search for a missing person in Cadillac. I decided to throw in the towel.

Walking back to our car we passed a small office/store that sold residential water filters. A single lady sat at a desk smoking a cigarette and typing on a computer. I decided to take a chance. I entered the nearly empty office, greeted her, saying, "I have a rather strange request." I proceeded to explain my search. As I finished she replied that she knew of a family that fit the description. The mother was a pharmacist, the father a wine-grower, and the son was a doctor. But the family name wasn't Philippe. As a matter of fact, the mother's pharmacy was just across the way. We thanked the lady, and visited the pharmacy. Regretfully, the mother was on lunch break, but would return in an hour. We decided that this lead was worth following. Even if it wasn't the right family, the parallel was so close that we figured they would be familiar with the Philippes.

We found an excellent restaurant. Our meal lasted more than an hour. As we were about to leave, I noted an older man sporting a farmer's tan who was dining alone. I asked him if he was from the area. "All my life", he replied. Would he happen to know of the Philippe family? "Certainly. They moved away some years ago". Did he know where they went? He wasn't certain, but thought they may have moved to the St. Emilion area. I thanked him profusely, paid our bill, and left for the pharmacy.

On our way we passed another pharmacy located across from the police station. It had a familiar feeling about it. I went in, and asked the pharmacist if this had been the pharmacy of Madame Philippe. She said it was, and showed me a picture of herself and Mme. Philippe. Did she know where the family went? She wasn't sure, but thought it was somewhere north. St. Emilion is to the north. So, this is the

building where I had lived 45 years ago. Bedrooms were upstairs. The kitchen was behind the pharmacy facing a courtyard. I felt we were getting close.

A memory flashed. I was in the courtyard holding a live chicken by the head. J.C. was holding the body while J.C.'s sister inserted a knife into the stretched neck. The blood flowed into a frying pan on the ground. When the flowing stopped, sister prepared the chicken for the oven. Meantime; J.C. mixed olive oil with the blood, and cooked the mixture on the stove until it became a "blood cake". He sat down at the kitchen table, and tucked into the "cake" with relish. He offered some to me. I politely declined while trying to keep a look of disgust off my face. Another cross-cultural moment.

We walked back to the other pharmacy. Before entering we looked across the street. There was the filter lady still at her desk. We decided to give her an update. She was glad to see us, as she had nothing else to do but smoke cigarettes and play Solitaire on her computer. At the end of our report she said, "Let me try something." She pulled up Google on her computer. She then did a search for "Philippe, Jean Claude, physician". She announced excitedly that she found only one entry – in the town of Libourne, just outside of St. Emilion. She also had a phone number. We began to dial it on our cell phone. She said, "Here, let me dial it for you on my phone. This is so cool!" When she made the connection I got on the phone. It was the voice of a young man. I asked for Jean Claude Philippe, and gave my name. After a few moments J.C. came on the phone. I explained who I was and why I was calling. He seemed a bit mystified, but invited us to come up and gave directions. He then added, "It's my 65th birthday today". My eyes were moist. I had chills up and down my spine. To think that I was about to be re-united with my French brother after 45 years! We thanked our helper, Monique, who replied, also with moist eyes, that it was indeed a pleasure. I do think that we made her day.

It took us about 40 minutes to get to Libourne. It took another 10 minutes to get through busy traffic to arrive at the rail station where J.C. said that he would meet us. After we parked I called J.C. on our cell phone. Five minutes later a rather distinguished gentleman with appropriate grey hair, topped by a Resistol-type wide-brimmed hat, approached us. "Jean Claude?," I inquired. "Charles?," he asked in return. We couldn't recognize each other. 45 years does alter a person's appearance a trifle; after all I had hair back then. I introduced Anzie, and we walked to his house, two blocks from the station.

Over the next two hours we reminisced, or rather, I reminisced about that summer 45 years ago. Finally some of my memories rang bells. The year before my visit J.C. had hosted another American, Kim Abbott, through a program operated by the Jesuits. He got the two of us confused. I realized the problem was two-fold. While that summer was so special for me, it was no big deal for him. He wasn't visiting a foreign country for the first time. He didn't feel like he had been thrown into a completely strange environment – strange language, strange culture. Also, he was pre-occupied with the pre-med exams, so he couldn't join our camping/biking trip. Before we left we agreed to return the following Monday to meet wife Nicole and to tour the village of St. Emilion and the family winery.

Monday we arrived early afternoon, and met Nicole, an attractive, young-looking 64 year-old. She's delightfully vivacious and easy to know. Anzie and she hit it off immediately. After coffee made in J.C.'s new Nespresso machine (a fresh-ground cup of espresso in less than 30 seconds), we left for St. Emilion. This town of 3,000 is profoundly medieval. The "old town" is located in a small valley, almost completely surrounded by stone walls that were built by the Romans. We toured through the town and around its complete perimeter – truly a journey back through time. J.C. pointed out caves underneath the town walls where his great-grandfather bottled and stored wine. The Philippe and Gailhaud families were two of the largest landholders in the area back then. J.C.'s grandfather married a Gailhaud. It was a marriage and a merger. The two families joined forces to become a powerhouse in the local wine industry. For some reason a falling-out occurred. That's when J.C.'s father elected to move to Cadillac, 45 minutes south, and start his own winery. They lived there until J.C.'s parents decided to retire and move back to St. Emilion, about seven years ago.

Perhaps the reason for the falling-out was the mis-management of funds by J.C.'s uncle. He was a bon vivant. The story goes that he rented the entire restaurant atop the Eiffel Tower for a party. Before long the family was forced to sell off some valuable vineyards. The Philippe-Gailhaud holdings went from being a major player in the St. Emilion region to a relatively small estate.

We visited Chateau Clos Saint-Emilion Philippe. When one hears "chateau" an image of a castle comes to mind. Not so in the wine region. Any house belonging to the owner that rests in the vineyard is called a "chateau". Chateau Philippe is a rather modest bungalow attached to the winery. As soon as I entered the house I was struck by the nostalgic fragrance of fermenting grapes that I remembered smelling 45 years ago. J.C. toured us through the winery and answered all of our questions. We then sampled wines from 2002, '03 and '04 – the Grand Cru and the Centennial wines (from vines over 100 years old). Despite our uneducated palettes we knew that this stuff was primo!

Sandrine arrived. She's J.C.'s 35 year old daughter who manages the winery. She's a tall, rather attractive no-nonsense brunette who walks comfortably in a man's world. She studied Oenology at university, and has taken over the daily activities of the enterprise. She explained that their winery isn't big. They produce around 40,000 bottles/year. Their market is Western Europe. I asked if they exported any to the U.S. Sandrine said no. J.C. interjected that he would be very interested. I said that I would be very happy to scout out the potential when we returned home.

We stopped back at the Libourne house to say goodbye to Nicole. We mentioned that our journey would end with a month in Paris in April. Nicole suggested that we take a train down to Libourne – only three hours – and stay with them a few days. We thanked them for the invite and said we would certainly consider it. J.C. asked me to send him a picture of myself taken around 1960. We bid them "Au revoir", and drove the 1 ½ hours back to Brantome.

I did contact sister Kate to go through Mom's archives to find a photo of me at age 20 and send it to J.C. She followed through, and we received an e-mail from J.C. in early March confirming receipt of said photo. "I remember now. Don't forget our

invitation. We mean it.” When we arrived in Paris we discovered that our apartment included a computer with internet access. Praise the Lord! We corresponded with J.C. and finally agreed to spend Easter weekend with them. We bought train tickets and were surprised at how costly they were. The ticket agent explained that Easter weekend was a prime travel time, and that prices were consequently higher than usual.

We started our journey Good Friday morning with some trepidation. We were about to spend four days with people whom we barely knew, and we would have to speak French the whole time. The train ride on the TGV was slick. This is their high-speed train, travelling most of the time well over 100 mph. We arrived on time within three hours, walked two blocks to the house and presented ourselves.

Our fears were ill-founded. J.C. and Nicole welcomed us like family. Nicole and Anne didn't stop talking to each other for three days. J.C. and I discovered that we had a similar sense of humor. We were wined and dined to the point where we were on the verge of suffering that chronic French complaint, “mal au foie”, liver trouble. It's brought on by eating too much rich food and drinking too much.

After an exquisite lunch we drove to St. Emilion. We toured the basilica of St. Emilion, a good-sized church which was carved out of solid rock. St. Emilion lived there as a hermit. We visited his cave and additional chambers that were carved out to contain the remains of all the prominent people who wished to be interred close to his burial place.

Next, they put us to work. Nicole's brother is a baseball fanatic. He arranged a tournament to which he invited Americans and Japanese. This was for kids ages 10-14. He also arranged activities for the parents, one of which was a tour of the wineries. When we arrived at Chateau Philippe we met daughter Sandrine again. Soon thereafter a tour bus arrived full of Americans. We then discovered that we were to translate for the tour. We quickly established relationships with the group. One father was an actor living in Los Angeles who was born and raised in Boston. Another couple lived on Skaneateles Lake in upstate New York. Both he and I were graduates of the MBA program at Syracuse.

The tour lasted half an hour. The tasting lasted almost an hour. The group enjoyed the wine so much that they purchased many bottles. We bid them a fond farewell and said that we would try to attend a game the next day. The next day was so beautiful that we went to the beach instead. The Philippes were pleased with the results of the tour as we sat around the living room finishing off the leftovers from the tasting.

We finished the evening at a delightful restaurant located next to St. Emilion's church. The restaurant was also carved out of the rock.

The next day was Easter. Yes, the Easter bunny lives in France also, and delivers eggs (chocolate) to deserving girls and boys of all ages. We travelled to Arcachon, located on the Bassin (Bay) D'Arcachon, immediately west of Bordeaux. This was another nostalgia trip for me, for I spent some time here in 1960. I could remember the cottage, even though it had been expanded: chalet-style, white with yellow trim.

Two blocks from the beach; two blocks from the largest sand dune on the Atlantic coast of France. The town has a Carmel feel to it: lots of trees and vegetation; tall pine trees filter the sun giving the light a greenish cast.

We toured the harbour while J.C. gave us his sailing history. He used to be into racing with 32 footers. He's sailed in the Antilles and the Adriatic. Now he's down to a 19-foot day sailor. Judging from the floating inventory we saw there, he's definitely not alone in his love of the sail.

We sat down in the back garden to a three-hour lunch. J.C. grilled a 2-inch thick steak outside, over grape vine prunings. The smoke gave a wonderful flavour. Anzie claims that it was the best steak she ever ate. J.C. opened a bottle of Chateau Philippe from 1964. Excellent! We finished the meal with a platter of cheeses. Many were new to us, including a soft Camembert-like choice called "Epoisse". It's smooth with a robust taste. Apparently it is periodically painted with *Marc*, the French version of *Grappa*, during the aging process.

Regretfully this and many other great French cheeses cannot be exported to the U.S., according to J.C., because they aren't pasteurized. Lo and behold, we did discover Epoisse in a new shop in Newburyport, the Grand Trunk. We asked the owner how he could import un-pasteurized cheese like this. He attempted to explain that the cheese was "semi-pasteurized". Sounds something like being a semi-virgin.

After a good walk along the esplanade and a visit to the beach where we used to swim (J.C. pointed out the German *blockhaus*, a remnant of WWII, above the beach), we made the return trip home to Libourne. We almost got into a fight with a motorcyclist. J.C. is a fast driver. We can only assume that he pulled in front of the cyclist, and that said cyclist was forced to put on his brakes. Next thing we know, said cyclist is riding very close to J.C.'s side giving him the bird and mouthing some choice words. So what does J.C. do? Instead of ignoring the guy, he starts blowing him kisses. Now the guy is beside himself with road rage. He signals to indicate that J.C. should pull over so that they could "discuss" the matter. J.C. continues on as if nothing has happened. Meantime Nicole is giving him hell from the back seat for egging on this maniac. I'm picturing the two of us old dudes duking it out alongside the road with this guy -- who's dressed like one of Darth Vader's soldiers complete with helmet and full leather costume -- while Anzie and Nicole are trashing his motorcycle. Needless to say, we turned off at our exit, and the cyclist bid us a fond adieu with a final uplifted middle finger, undoubtedly signifying his I.Q. score.

We arrive home just in time for dinner, which we didn't need. Leeks with potatoes-au-gratin, more delicious wine, followed by a snifter of Armagnac, vintage 1980.

We followed out tummies up the stairs to bed. We awoke early the next morning for a light breakfast, fond adieus and grateful farewells.

As we departed J.C. reminded me of my upcoming task: to find a wine importer for Clos Chateau Philippe in the Northeast. He gave me six sample bottles and a bunch

of literature. I walked down the street toward the train station feeling like the Willy Loman of wines.

A la prochaine,

Chuck