

Eurolink Club Reunion to Castelsagrat France 23 October – 27 October 2009

James Wallis and Mark Stroude were this year's Eurolink novices placed under the watchful eye of Paddy Cumberledge and taken to the Reunion at Castelsagrat on 23rd – 27th October 2009.

Both Mark and I were aware of Eurolink through the South Of England Agricultural Society but it was a revelation to see the diverse programme of visits planned for us over our three day excursion. A brief resume of our visit follows:

Day One – Visits to two very contrasting Foie Gras enterprises; the first of which was to Les Conserves d'autrefois at Caylus. It was a surprise to see a regional speciality produced on such a large scale in near laboratory conditions. The part Government funded facility attracted support because it provided local employment in an area that relied heavily upon agriculture and regional produce. Despite the intensity of production the quality of foie gras and other pates was exceptional.

By contrast the visit post a fine lunch at Caylus was to a small scale producer of foie gras – the husband and wife team of the Boubie family. As farmers this visit was particularly interesting to see how the France tackle "value added" – how the whole process of duck keeping through to processing was done. It was encouraging to see on a relatively small scale family farming operation that the level of investment required to undertake the processing was backed up by the French consumer and their enthusiasm for quality local produce.

To finish the day's outing we visited the Rosingnol father and son team. Another very interesting business based around an 80 hectare pasture farm. Prior to our visit we had always assumed the heavily coated sheep was capable of surviving the rigours of the Southern French climate. Oh this farm however, the sheep were housed in doors all year round in pens of 100 in a state of the art purpose built dairy unit. Once again the regional government funded this facility, The proprietors of the business felt that they should expand the milking flock, but wanted to see more stability in the milk price, and also recognised the importance of a work/life balance.

Day Two – A day of culture! -_A truly enjoyable day studying architecture, religion and art of the region. It was wonderful to absorb some of the culture of the south of France and eat a traditional regional Sunday lunch – of seven courses! The food was of course all local and typical of the area, and eaten every week, not just when visitors arrived.

A lasting memory will be our guided tour around The Simonow Art Collection which our very own Melvin Bragg (aka Paddy Cumberledge).

Day Three – With high expectation we visited the Co-op de Bio energie at Larrazet. This regionally funded facility crushed sunflower and oilseeds to produce bio-fuel. Although very interesting from a technical point of view it reinforced our belief that nobody is quite sure that the production of biofuel is viable in Northern Europe even with a guaranteed customer in the form of the local council!

Post lunch in Savenes we visited one of the very few local vineyards. The proprietor spoke at some length about the future direction of his farming business. He was in talks with other organic wine producers in the area and was debating whether organic conversion and collaboration with his neighbours would strengthen a marginally profitable business. His initial conclusions were that he would go down this route. We felt that organic production would not in any way reduce the quaffability of his wine!

Our last visit was to Monsieur Raymond Barcella and his son. This enterprise was one that most closely reflected our respective businesses and was the one most easy to understand with regard to margins, costs, machinery etc. The father and son team clearly enjoyed working together, ran a very professional operation producing high quality produce on good land and investing heavily in machinery. They were both confident enough in the production of melons, maize and wheat to invest in an irrigation project of biblical scale and cost, something that would make us very nervous in the UK.

Throughout our visit it became apparent that the national and regional assistance (grant aid) helped on many levels. The French Government is obviously committed to a nation with a working rural

economy. More importantly the French population are willing to lend their support by buying and eating French produce.

It was fascinating to see small scale producers making a decent living from farming; to see farms providing a living for several generations of farmers; to see confidence in agriculture and a will to invest; to see the importance of regional grant aid in ensuring viable alternative enterprises or successful “value added” enterprises; to see how cooperatives work at their best – nearly all the produce we saw was sold to co-operatives; to see the financial benefits and practicalities of collaboration and to see the farmers believe in this; to see the support of a local council, Government and the public at large of their farmers; to see that regional food (a relatively new concept in the UK – five years old!) is the mainstay of their agricultural system in this part of France, and I suspect replicated elsewhere in France; to see regional food being produced on a large scale (Les Conserves d'autrefois) and on a small scale (Monsieur Boubie); to see a farming economy not constrained by the icy grip of the supermarkets. As producers of milk, cereals and vegetables we can only hope that the British public, Government and farmers learn some of the lessons that we have on this trip.

We were incredibly fortunate also to stay with Mark and Julie Sellars, our hosts and organisers of the trip. We benefited enormously from our evenings at the table with Mark and Julie learning about their twelve years of farming and working in France and their transition from the UK.

We are extremely grateful to the Club for sponsoring us on our trip and very much look forward to meeting the Eurolink members this summer at the South of England Show. We would both heartily recommend Eurolink to any farmer and would like to help by encouraging a younger generation to be involved with the Club and forging links with France and other European countries, so that knowledge can be shared, with benefits on both sides.