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INTAG 497E

The AgroParisTech Experience

On May 30, 2008, I embarked to the city of Paris, France for the two-week study abroad program at AgroParisTech. I had traveled to France several times before, so I was not as overwhelmed as some might be when traveling to Europe for the first time. I was, however, very excited to be in Paris.

Once I arrived, it did not take long for me to establish friendships with my new traveling companions. On our first full day there, we went to museums (Musee d'Orsay and Pompidou) and found some time for other sightseeing. From then on everyday, we had class all day during the week. During those two weeks of class, I learned about French agriculture, government policy, and traditions. Before I came on this trip, I had a general knowledge of French beliefs and culture. However, being in France and talking with the people I met gave me much more valuable insight and knowledge into the traditions and practices of the French. Of the several lectures and field trips we had during those two weeks in Paris, there were six that stood out in my mind as worth mentioning.

I thought the most valuable and educational excursion was the day we went to Rungis. This was the oversized fish, meat, produce, cheese, and flower market located right outside Paris. Though we had to get up at 4 am, the experience was well-worth getting up early. Our tour guide was a lively young French woman with a lot of energy and spirit. It must have taken *beaucoup de café* to be that energetic at 5 am.

The most interesting part of the day for me was the meat locker. I have seen carcasses before in the meats lab at Penn State, however not on this scale. Everywhere you looked were

giant meat hangings, red muscle marbled with white fat. The locker contained cow (and maybe horse?) but no pig. Pig is considered unclean and is therefore processed in other locations, away from the rest of the dead beasts. In the meat lab at Penn State, the stench of dead flesh and blood can be overwhelming and nauseating (especially on a hot day with no ventilation). Scraps of flesh and fat litter the concrete floor and the drains have fresh blood flowing into them. In comparison, this place was cold, pristine, and immaculate, not to mention odorless. Every animal in the facility had its own life history on file that the technicians could look up at a moments notice for buyers. Where it was born, raised, slaughtered, who its mother was, anything it ever ate, is all accessible information. No such system exists like this in America. Unless you live in rural America and you are buying from the farmer that lives down the road, it would be very difficult to find out where that hamburger on your plate was killed and processed; and to trace it back to the farm might take you awhile.

The following week, we visited the region of Champagne. First, we visited with Phillipe Wibrotte in Epernay who worked for the CIVC to protect the brand name of Champagne. He discussed with us the strict regulations of using the name Champagne for any other sparkling white wine not made in Champagne. The French have a belief known as "*terroir*" which deals with the place a food is grown and how it affects the final product. They believe all aspects of the land such as climate and soil make the food grown there unique. That is why many French products are protected by AOC labeling which ensures that products made in a specific region are not called by the same name in any other region. The rules are especially strict for Champagne where they go so far as to sue perfume companies or any other type of commercial product that uses the name Champagne. There was a brief period in which we argued with Monsieur Wibrotte about whether these strict regulations might just be borderline ridiculous until

it was time our first champagne tasting of the day (before any of us had breakfast). This made for an interesting morning.

Next on the agenda was the high school of Avize, which teaches students everything about how to make champagne. We were able to sit down to lunch with them and learn what it is like to be a high school student in Champagne. Though their English was not good, and my French was worse, I was able to talk with a few students about their plans to become great wine makers in the region of Champagne. Most students grew up in or near the region and had families who grew grapes for Champagne. The students seemed to take immense pride in their education of champagne production. After lunch with our new friends, the infamous Ms. Sergine Revillion, guided us around their facility and showed us all the machinery where the grapes are crushed, fermented, and ultimately made into champagne.

The next day, we had two speakers in the morning that I found interesting. The first was Paul Menecier, a director from the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries who was in charge of food safety. He discussed the functional separation between risk assessment and risk management. In France, risk assessment is handled by the French Food Safety Agency (AFSSA). Risk management is handled by the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries. One difference he pointed out between the United States and France is that in France they have less trust in these agencies to handle recalls and food scares. In contrast, in America, food scares may last a few months but people are quick to forget once the USDA or FDA clears the threat. Another difference between these agencies is the way in which their responsibilities are organized. In France, AFSSA provides technical support for the government and is responsible for all food products. In America, the USDA has FSIS which regulates all meat, poultry and eggs. The FDA regulates all other food products not to mention all drugs and pharmaceuticals.

Our next speaker was Catherine Rogy, another director from the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries in charge of food quality. When discussing the objectives of protecting food quality, she stressed the importance of maintaining rural development. This point was brought up by other speakers several times earlier in the week. Maintaining the beauty of the farmland is very important to the inhabitants of this country the size of Texas. An American would instantly see the difference when driving through the countryside of France. There is minimal urban sprawl and the farmland is beautifully well-maintained. Her main topic dealt with the many types of special labels put on food products in France to distinguish them from other products as being higher in quality in some way. For example, PDO stands for Protected Designation of Origin, which addresses the “*terroir*” of a product. If a product has higher quality that is linked to the production and the process, it will bear the Red Label or *Label Rouge*. Another label that could be considered the French equivalent of USDA certified organic is the AB label which stands for *agriculture biologique*. This specific label links quality in favor of the environment. After our discussion of food quality, we had lunch on the roof of the building and sampled several high quality cheeses, wines and other products that bore the labels we had just discussed.

A few days later, the director of the Massy Campus at AgroParisTech, Gilles Trystram, came to talk with us about the French food industry. The French food industry is the first industrial sector in Europe and second in the world to the USA. France itself is the first in rank for exportation of transformed goods (USA is second). The PAN concept summarizes the philosophy of the French food industry. ‘P’ stands for preference, attributing to the sensory quality, innovation and convenience of products. ‘A’ stands for acceptance dealing with safety, hygiene and ethical issues. ‘N’ stands for needs dealing with issues of health, nutrition and performance. Their ideas for new products come from consumer expectation and their

recognition of market segmentation. They refer to this as reverse engineering, or “fork to farm.” The philosophy of the American industry is the opposite where the philosophy is “farm to fork” and the supply of goods influences new products. Similar to the American food industry, there is an ongoing concern about nutrition in France. The French government implemented a new program for health and nutrition and their goals are to reduce sugar, fat and salt in processed foods. Part of this new program includes agreements with companies that produce products such as Nutella, a high fat hazelnut spread, to not show television commercials that are geared towards children. The main difference between nutrition concerns in France and America is that France is focusing on a diversity of foods in the diet for optimum health, whereas America has put most of its efforts on selling “functional foods.” Along with functional foods, there have been many health claims on foods containing things such as whole grains or antioxidants, which may or may not help fight certain diseases. In France, they are much stricter with health claims and therefore they are not seen as frequently.

The next speaker was the professor of food chemistry, Barbara Riba Texier, at AgroParisTech who talked with us about food quality and safety in France. Currently, there is a paradoxical situation where the perception of food safety and trust in processed food is extremely low. However, in reality, food safety has never been higher in France. The risk of food borne illness in the EU is ten times lower than it is in America. The food safety situation in America may be considered at an all time low given the numerous outbreaks of salmonella and E. coli food poisoning that have shown up all over the food supply very recently.

There are other differences in the ways in which our countries regulate the food supply. In the EU, the whole process of food production is regulated to ensure safety of the final product, whereas in America, only the end product is regulated. New products made in America are

driven by the supply of goods produced from the farm, whereas in France, new products are demand-driven and dominated by consumer interest. In France, there are incentives for lower output and an emphasis on quality aspects of production. In America, farm policies encourage high production, which may compromise the quality of the final product. In summary, there is a much higher focus on food safety for the sake of quality in France. However, in America, food safety and quality has taken a backseat so that the focus remains on increasing productivity.

On the last day of class, three groups assembled to discuss what we had learned from our lectures over the past two weeks. The first group discussed *terroir* and AOC labeling. This included a review of all the special labels put on French food products to emphasize their higher quality that we discussed with Catherine Rogy. The class also discussed Champagne and whether or not we thought the regulations placed on the name were too strict. Most of us agreed that while it was important to protect the wine made in this region from being mistaken for any other sparkling white wine, it seemed excessive to not allow the name to be included in any other type of product unrelated to wine.

In the next group, we talked about food safety and quality in France vs. America. We pointed out the differences between the way each country handled the issue of nutrition where France focuses on variety of food and America focuses on function of food. We also recapped most of the lecture given by Barbara Texier about the different attitudes toward production practices. Consumer demand drives French industry whereas American industry is driven by supply and high productivity. In terms of food safety, we discussed some of the reasons for the French mistrust given their history with BSE (mad cow disease) and various other issues. We then contrasted this to the American way where food illness scandals have been recent and numerous, yet there seems to be a tendency to quickly forget the mistakes the industry has made.

The last group discussed the use of GMO's and the French attitude toward them vs. the American attitude. In France, they are strongly opposed to the use of GMO's in their food because they feel that they are unnatural. In addition, their general (and at times illogical) mistrust of their government makes them feel that they are unsafe to eat. Meanwhile, in America, it would be nearly impossible for the average American to go through a typical day without consuming some form of Bt corn or other type of genetically modified crop. It is not an important issue in America, and most people are not aware that they are eating GMO's or even what a GMO is. While Americans seem to be uninformed, it seems many French are misinformed. It was brought up during the discussion that some French people think of GMO's as crops that are unnatural simply because they contain DNA, whereas all other natural crops do not. Before we had this discussion, we had been talking a lot about GMO's during the two weeks of class and I still could not say for sure which side I was on. By the end of this discussion, I decided that the pros of GMO's outweighed the cons considering the whole reason for their invention was to stop the use of pesticides. The real reasons that the French were opposed to them did not seem fully justified, but appeared to be based on fear more than anything else. However, I am not fully convinced that they are safe because there is still more for science to discover and we have yet to see the potential environmental consequences of interfering with the genes of crops 20 years in the future.

In conclusion, this experience was very beneficial to my education and provided a successful forum to challenge my country's beliefs, while comparing them to, and learning about another. I would strongly recommend this trip to anyone with an interest in agriculture, food, or anyone who just wants a foreign experience, regardless of major. I would also recommend that students do some of their own research before they go on this trip so that they have a general

idea about French ideals and beliefs concerning food and agriculture. Also, it would be useful for students to look into activities that they would like to do or see before they go to Paris so that they can fully take advantage of all the things the city has to offer while they are there.

It might be helpful to advertise for this trip with flyers in all the dorm buildings and computer labs around campus. Also, allowing students to pass out flyers in their classrooms and talk with as many people as they can about their experience would be helpful to recruit new students. I would be willing to come back and talk with the next group of students and tell them about all the valuable experiences and fun I had on this trip to get them excited about it so that it can continue for years to come.









