

Nicole O'Block
June 30, 2010

Travelogue: Comparison of France and United State Agriculture

The United States of America and France are two countries that every person on Earth recognizes. No matter where one goes, there is some touch of their influence on the world, through culture, government, commerce or agriculture. They are two powerful countries with many similar goals and practices. However, every topic has a twist on it that personalizes it to that country and distinctly separates it on issues, some only by the degree of regulation, some on polar opposites of a powerful issue. The varying viewpoints of France and the United States on genetically modified organisms, the local food movement, and on food quality and safety are three major topics of comparison between these two world powers.

While America and France are both reputable countries with a varied, ever-developing sense of agriculture, their focuses often lie in different directions. America and France are quite different in their stances on their importance of the origin of food. The French have a laid-back, gourmet-focused culture which emphasizes the history and heritage of everything from their buildings to what city in the Basque region first crafted the cherry-custard tart at dinner, as if they are tasting that original region's fruit or a facsimile shipped from some place in Canada. To most Americans, a package of mozzarella could come from Vermont or Venice but the interest is in which is more affordable and if the flavor is good. France prefers to preserve the traditional history of their crops, whether in their DNA or distribution or food composition. America is ever-industrializing, leading research in genetic modification and new processing techniques for food production and sanitation.

In a way, this class confirmed my concerns about the American state of over-complicating, hyper-processing, and contortion of what was once a whole food. American diets consume a greater quantity of processed, packaged foods versus fresh produce than the average French diet. As for my preference, I can only say that if you go to any corner in Paris, you'll find an oven-fresh, croissant better than any Twinkie you've ever tasted.

Each country's viewpoints has its benefits and downfalls: there is huge potential in the biotechnology of genetic engineering, but there is danger replacing the superiority of a fresh-picked garden tomato with global monoculture, and using less chemical additives in our food is better for the producer and consumer. There is much to be learned from both countries, and many similarities despite their differences. I personally feel honored to have had the chance to experience the distinctive personality of both of these influential cultures possess.



Our class trip to Paris was amazing, life-changing, and the best two weeks of my life so far. Every morning we were educated on aspects of French agriculture, government, business, ethics, past traditions and modern technology. Every evening we explored Paris to the fullest. We went through museums and side-street vendors,

architecture and atmosphere, history, culture, food and more food until we would collapse in the Metro's fold-out seats on the last train of the night to figure out when we were meeting for the next day's class field trip. In particular, I loved the lectures we had on Food Science in Paris and on Sensory Analysis. The Food Sensory



Analyst that came in and lectured us left me in awe. I loved every aspect of his job, from the precise analyzing of scientific experiments on sociological psyches to see what people want where and why, to the social communication and constant movement of the job, to its international opportunities. It fit me perfectly. I would love to learn more about how I can make my career as a Food Sensory Analyst. However, there were many more lessons of life that I learned outside of the classroom...

The food amazed me. The American ideal is, "how much can I get and how cheap?" Dessert is "how much chocolate and how sweet?" Even the cheapest street cart

vendor 'peasant food' of Nutella in a crepe was of astonishing gastronomic sensation in my mouth. The only way this would be found in America would be prepackaged by a machine and wrapped in an economical tube to fit more in one cardboard box, placed somewhere in the refrigerated section next to the twenty flavors of Eggo waffles.

Hands touched food here, people made it, and they made it for today. A beautiful golden French baguette will lose its luster by the second morning; a delicate would probably not make it through the walk home without crushing. The artisanal pastries in the patisserie cabinet were



meant to be relished the day that up to a week of preparation of its components culminates in its final glory. The only option is to share and devour it immediately. At home, a Bundt cake bought from Wal-Mart may last weeks in its plastic lid without a single change in moisture or taste – the same as the other two hundred made in the factory with it that hour of production. You buy things to use them, not to store them. Food was real as well; nothing was fortified or fat-reduced, aspartame was hard to find and their Coke wasn't made of corn syrup. Food tasted real in a way I cannot explain.



Which would you prefer: One day, one hour, spent slowly savoring Pierre-Hermé's bliss outdoors on the steps of your apartment, gazing at the people and the cobblestone reflection of sun off the buildings as your afternoon winds to a close; or a week of resisting and then giving in to slicing slivers of the sugar-flavored and glazed machine-churned dessert leftovers when boredom or impulse takes you through your kitchen. Is industrial quantity really better if you can't interest people in eating it in the first place?



The best part was not the joy of eating, but the joy of life. One could eat that buttery croissant because everyone walks to wherever they need to go. There's a Metro for those spots far away, and once you walk through the Metro and get on the train, you walk off to the next destination. There is movement and life going on at all times. Whenever we wandered, we ran into some festival. The first

day in Paris, Marilyn, Ketja, Ted and I were on our way to Notre Dame and found an annual Festival of Bread. There could be no more appropriate place to start the Paris journey than with a festival of tradition in front of a monument of culture, to appreciate what has come before and that putting time and care into your work truly makes a superior product worth remembering for the ages. I enjoyed every moment in Paris. The moment I arrived, I felt astonishingly comfortable. There are many aspects to European culture that simply click with how I have always lived, with ideals that seem strange in an American environment. I'm not sure how I'd been born in America and had the humor and ideals of a European, but I felt more welcomed in Europe than I ever have in America. The moment I landed in Pennsylvania, it felt like I left home. Hopefully we will cross paths again, Paris and I: but for now, I will remember what I've learned about life, open-mindedness, and seizing the opportunities to live without a second thought.

