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INTAG 497: Comparing US/French Agricultural Systems

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This study abroad experience was, for me, one of academic, cultural, and personal growth. The program itself was well structured to offer quality academic information, particularly covering the American and French agricultural systems and techniques. But the experience was more than just in-classroom learning; there was plenty to learn outside of the classroom as well. Through a combination of field trips and “free time,” the structure of the program allowed students many opportunities to learn from the people and places that make France unique. With access to things such as museums, other tourist attractions, French natives, other students, and faculty and staff of the French University AgroParisTech, the program was much more than a simple, academic lecture series. Instead, the program combined lectures with hands-on learning in the streets of Paris, enabling the students to immerse themselves in an entirely new language, culture, and landscape, and to gain as much from the experience as possible.

The structure of the academic portion of the study abroad program was based on a lecture series, each lecture having a different speaker with a different job and perspective on French agriculture. Our speakers varied across the occupational spectrum, from a farmer with a community base all the way to an employee of the Ministry of Agriculture. Out of all of the speakers, five particularly stood out to me personally. First, we listened to Bernard Roman-Amat speak about the French forests. With a major in Environmental Resource Management, I found this presentation on forestry especially interesting. He taught us about the “sustainable management” of the French forests, and showed maps of the reserved forested areas across France. He also spoke of the recreational uses of forests, and named some of the tree species native to France. I was interested to learn that a large majority of French forests are privately owned, and in terms of preservation this can often lead to difficulties in tracking down the actual owners of the land.

Another program I enjoyed was Jean-Marc Siefferman's. He spoke on Sensory Perception, and this topic turned out to be rather interesting and unique. He explained to us that everyone qualifies to do sensory analysis, but went further to say that everyone has different perceptions. This led to the idea that no two analyzers could have the exact same results. Sensory analysis, he taught us, is complex, and is both objective and subjective at the same time. What I found most interesting is when he suggested that odor, taste, and color do not really exist, but that instead they exist only because of our perception of them.

Next came our field trip to the Kitchen Garden of Versailles, the garden that grew all the food for the Palace of Versailles in its glory days. We ended up having great weather, and I think everyone enjoyed walking around the garden grounds. Our tour guide, Antoine Jacobsohn, was a great speaker. He gave us a tour of the grounds, showing us all the flowers and vegetation that is still grown in the large garden today. I thought it was a great idea how the Kitchen Garden was turned into an educational tool. It was also interesting how some of the plants were grown using modern techniques while others were grown to replicate the techniques of the times when the garden served as the food source of the palace.

Another favorite of mine was the tour of the agricultural high school, which specialized in preparing students to make champagne and manage vineyards. Our eccentric tour guide, Sergine Revillion, showed us all the stages of Champagne production. We even got to tour the cellars, where the Champagne was stored in cold, dark basements after being bottled. We also got to watch as the labels were put on the finished products, and the bottles were corked and packaged. Then, to end our tour, we had a Champagne-tasting session, where we tasted the brand of Champagne that the school's students produce.

As much as I enjoyed those four presentations, I think my favorite would have to be Philippe Wibrotte's presentation in the Champagne region of France. We heard him speak at CIVC of Epernay about the true identity of Champagne. It was so interesting to learn about what made the grapes grown solely in that region of France the actual Champagne grapes, and what made "Champagne" produced with any other grapes simply "sparkling wine" instead. It was also surprising that not even all vineyards in Champagne were qualified to produce actual Champagne; there were, in fact, further criteria to meet besides simply growing Champagne grapes in Champagne! He went on to explain the differences in soil, especially the chalk contents native only to the region of Champagne, and the extreme climate conditions found only in the region. What I first thought to be just a marketing gimmick—just as I thought of their attempts to censure the use of the name "Champagne" by all the sparkling wines produced outside of Champagne, France—turned out to be the intriguing identity and culture monopolized by the Champagne region of France, with traditions and standards dating back for centuries.

To conclude the program, on our final day of class we students were divided into three groups and given topics on which to present. These topics were taken from the various lecturers and speakers we had heard throughout the program. This served as an opportunity to revisit some of the information, while also trying to draw comparisons between French and American agriculture.

The first group, comprised of Jess, Brit, Michiko, and Joe, had the topic of "Terroir, Labeling, and Marketing Locally." They recapped and summarized the different labels used in France, such as AOC Labeling (used to denote the specific area or region of origin) and TSG Labeling (used to protect the traditional manner and techniques of creating certain products). There are also labels used to denote good quality, such as the Label Rouge (a stamp of quality used for beef, poultry, vegetables, etc.). They also discussed the growing demand for organically grown goods in France, the label for which is AB

(Agriculture Biologique). Additionally, they revisited the idea of “terroir,” which is very important in France. “Terroir” is used to preserve the identity of certain regions or places based on the products they produce and the manner in which they produce them, one example being Champagne from the Champagne region of France.

The second group, including Jenna, Collin, Maddie, Laura, and Audrey, had the topic of “Food Quality and Safety.” They also generalized what we had heard in our lectures about food safety and food quality and their related issues, and then proceeded to begin the discussion on these topics comparing those of the U.S. to those of France. Interestingly, they suggested that generally America (headed by the USDA and FDA) stresses the quality of the final product and is less concerned with the processes leading to its creation, while France (headed by AFSA) on the other hand tends to be conscientious of the entire process up to and including the end result.

And the third group, which included Katie, Casey, Gustavo, and I, was assigned the topic of “Pesticides and GMOs.” We revisited the main points from the speakers’ presentations on these topics, and then began a class discussion comparing America to France. We specifically tried to focus the discussion on the different techniques for pesticide and GMO use, as well as the general opinions of the public in each country on each of the two topics.

In terms of advice for future participating students, I have only a few suggestions, since I found the structuring of the program to be strong. Much of the program has already been fine-tuned over the past few program years. But as for the students, I would really recommend either trying to learn some key phrases (if you have never learned any French) or brushing up on your French (if you have learned it previously) before taking this trip. This is certainly not necessary, and the majority of the students in my participating group knew little to no French. However, it was obvious to me that the French people appreciated even a basic knowledge of their language on the part of the American students, and out of

politeness and respect for the French people it is good to have a little French background. So, even if it is only enough to help you order dinner in a French restaurant, find your way or ask directions in the subway, and buy stamps at the Post Office to send postcards to your friends back home, I found a small French language base to be very helpful and much appreciated.

My only other recommendation to student participants involves the use of “free time.” Who knows when, if ever, you will return to France? I encourage the students to make the most of their free time in Paris. Make a list of the places you would like to see, and use your resources to plan your time wisely. Many maps are available, and the programs teachers and staff are invaluable knowledgeable as well. With free afternoons after class, you can see a lot. If two sites you would like to visit are near each other, it is possible to easily see them both. And as long as you can read the metro map, you can do and see a lot with your metro passes. Also, I strongly encourage the students to use the free weekend to take a trip, to go see another part of France. After all, Paris isn’t all France has to offer! A few friends and I used the free weekend to take a long day-trip to Normandy. While it was pricier than staying in Paris and using a metro pass to get around, it was well worth the cost of the day. We took a train to Caen (a city in the Normandy region of France) and rented a car, which we drove to a quaint little town called Bayeux, and then on to the Normandy American cemetery and the D-Day cliffs along the coast. It turned out to be my favorite part of the entire study-abroad program, and I would strongly recommend to other students to take the opportunity to travel to other parts of France during the trip.

To advertise this program to interested student I would summarize the structure and contents of the program, as I have in this paper, so the students would have an idea of what the academic side of the program entails. It was truly comprised of interesting lectures and speakers, not just boring, useless information. I would want to stress the fact that this trip is open to anyone and everyone. You don’t have to be interested in agriculture to find this program worthwhile; after all, everyone eats food and

learning about the food you eat each day can be interesting in and of itself. For instance, in my study abroad group, we had agriculture majors, but we also had an art major, photography major, and other non-agriculture majors. And each lecture was different, given by a different official at vastly differing levels, each covering a different topic. This trip has something for everyone!

The program destination, the structure and topics of the lectures, as well as the short length of the trip, made this opportunity one that I could easily and gladly take advantage of. I didn't have to miss any school or classes since it was towards the beginning of the summer, the program earned two credits towards my degree, and it made traveling to another country affordable. I would recommend this program to anyone—regardless of his or her major. It was a great experience that I will never forget.