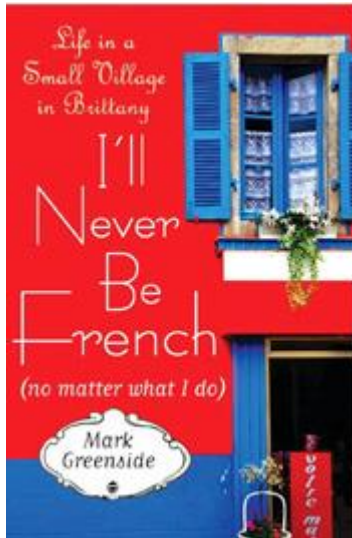


Mark Greenside

Author of *I'll Never Be French, (no matter what I do)*



Volume 1, Number 1, May 2017



Dear Friend,

Years ago you asked me about my faux pas-filled life in Brittany. I told you some things—and ever since I've been meaning to tell you more. Now, I can. My next book, *(not quite) Mastering the Art of French Living*, will be published in 2018. If you want to know about other follies, foibles, and faux pas this is the book for you. It's about me trying to figure out how to master, or at least grasp, how French people live their daily lives, and how I should too when I'm in France. You can tell from the title how well I've fared.

And, finally, after much hee-hawing, backward and forwarding, and lots of prodding from Donna, who's happiest when I'm busiest, I've decided to write a newsletter. The purpose is to keep you apprised of my latest adventure, which you seemed inordinately interested in hearing about—like, for example, the time our next door neighbor, Françoise, invited Donna and me to her and Bruno's house for apéritif....

Françoise speaks little English, tries not to use it all, and understands a lot. Bruno is truly bilingual, and Donna, who actually studies and practices her French, is an excellent speaker and listener. In situations like this, as at Monsieur and Madame P's, where their son Henri is fluent in English, we speak French so Monsieur and Madame and Françoise won't be left out. After all, it's their country. Someone periodically stops

the conversation and explains to me what's being said, and occasionally I add something that fits, or doesn't.

Bruno is watering the garden when we arrive at seven. Bruno is always working at something: mowing the grass in the dark, cutting trees in the rain, building a barbecue in ninety-degree heat, fixing a fence, planting, cooking.... The only times I've seen him sit are to eat, drink, or read. I've yet to see him wear long pants.

He puts down the hose, and we go into their house to start apéritifing. Bruno has the largest liquor cabinet of anyone I've ever met in France *and* the U.S. He even has twenty-five-year-old single malt Scotch, which hardly anyone I know drinks in France. Several times he's opened a bottle of fifty-plus-year-old cognac just to offer me a taste. He'll call on the phone and invite me over to try a particular wine and then tell me all about it, giving me my own private wine tasting, all of which means Donna and I are in for some serious drinking.

Luckily, French people do not drink without eating—except for work, French people don't do much of *anything* without eating—so there are sliced dry sausages, cashews, chips, and green and black olives to nibble while we drink white, red, and rosé wines. By 9:30, I'm sloshed and hungry.

At 10:00, Bruno begins cooking dinner. He makes individual, fluffy mushroom-onion omelets, which we eat with bread and butter and whatever wine is best to drink with eggs.

We drink and eat until 1:30, when Donna and I stand while we can. I kiss Bruno once and give Françoise the four-cheek kiss, and say, "Au revoir. Bonne nuit. Merci. La prochaine fois à chez nous. À demain. Merci." Good bye. Good night. Thanks. Next time at our house. See you tomorrow. Thanks..." It doesn't get much better than that from me.

The following evening Donna and I are going to dinner at Sharon and Jean's. I'm waiting for Donna, who's upstairs changing socks or sandals or shorts or shirts, trying to decide what to wear. There's a knock on the

door. I open it and see Bruno and Françoise. Bruno is clean-shaved, wearing a pressed Hawaiian shirt, and pressed shorts—all firsts for me. Françoise is dressed as usual: clean-pressed slacks, bright, cheery blouse, and smells terrific. I'm perplexed—until I see an Île de Ré brochure in Bruno's hand and remember there was some conversation about their vacation on the Île the previous night.

“Merci,” I say, and reach for the brochure. Bruno releases it, looking slightly befuddled.

“Entrez, entrez,” I invite them in. “Mai, j'ai dix minutes parce que nous mangon à mes amis ce soir.”

Bruno looks at Françoise in a way that makes me wonder what I just said. I repeat it in my head: I only have ten minutes because we are eating with friends tonight... It's clear to me, though it doesn't seem clear to them, so I offer them a beer.

“Une bier?”

“Oui,” they say, in unison.

I open two Heinekens, empty them into two glasses, and the three of us sit at the table waiting for Donna.

She comes downstairs and looks at them the way Bruno and Françoise looked at me. She kisses them twice on each cheek, says, “Bon soir,” and sits at the table. Everyone is obviously confused.

Bruno and Françoise sip.

Donna and I peruse the brochure.

When Bruno finishes his beer, I pick up the glass, put it in the sink, and say, “Bon.” I do the same when Françoise finishes hers. I wave the Île de Ré brochure, and say, “Merci.”

Bruno stands, and says, “Merci.”

Françoise stands, and says, “Bonne soiree.”

They leave fifteen minutes after arriving—a record short visit in France.

“You know,” Donna says, “I think they think you invited them to dinner tonight.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“I said we have to do this again. *Next* time at our place. Not tonight. *Next* time, some time in the future...”

She points to the door, at the now departed, clean and spiffily dressed Bruno and Françoise.

“Shit!”

We hurry next door, where Bruno is already watering the lawn. Françoise is standing there, looking lost. “Bruno,” I say, “J’ai une question—en anglais... Did I invite you to dinner tonight?”

He hesitates and looks at Françoise, who immediately answers in perfect English, “Yes.”

“Why didn’t you say something?”

“I was embarrassed. I thought I made a mistake.”

He was embarrassed. He’s fluent in English, totally bilingual, understands French *and* English grammar better than I ever will, and he thought *he* made a mistake. Oh, my god! The social pressures on these people are unbearable. It’s enough to make *me* feel sorry for them.

I invite them for dinner the following evening, and for the rest of the summer we joke about “dix minutes”. It’s dix minutes to do this, dix

minutes to do that, but the truth is I'm mortified I made Bruno feel bad because of my mistake, and I wonder how many others I've made I don't even know about.

This is an excerpt from (*not quite*) *Mastering the Art of French Living*. I'll write more about this and add another excerpt in my next newsletter. If you don't want to receive the next newsletter, please let me know.

In the interregnum (three to four months), if you have any questions, queries, comments, observations, thoughts, fears, anything really except invoices, you can contact me at mark@markgreenside.com, or go to my web page at www.markgreenside.com. I'm happy to hear from you and happy to respond.

Thanks for being so patient.

À bientôt,

Mark