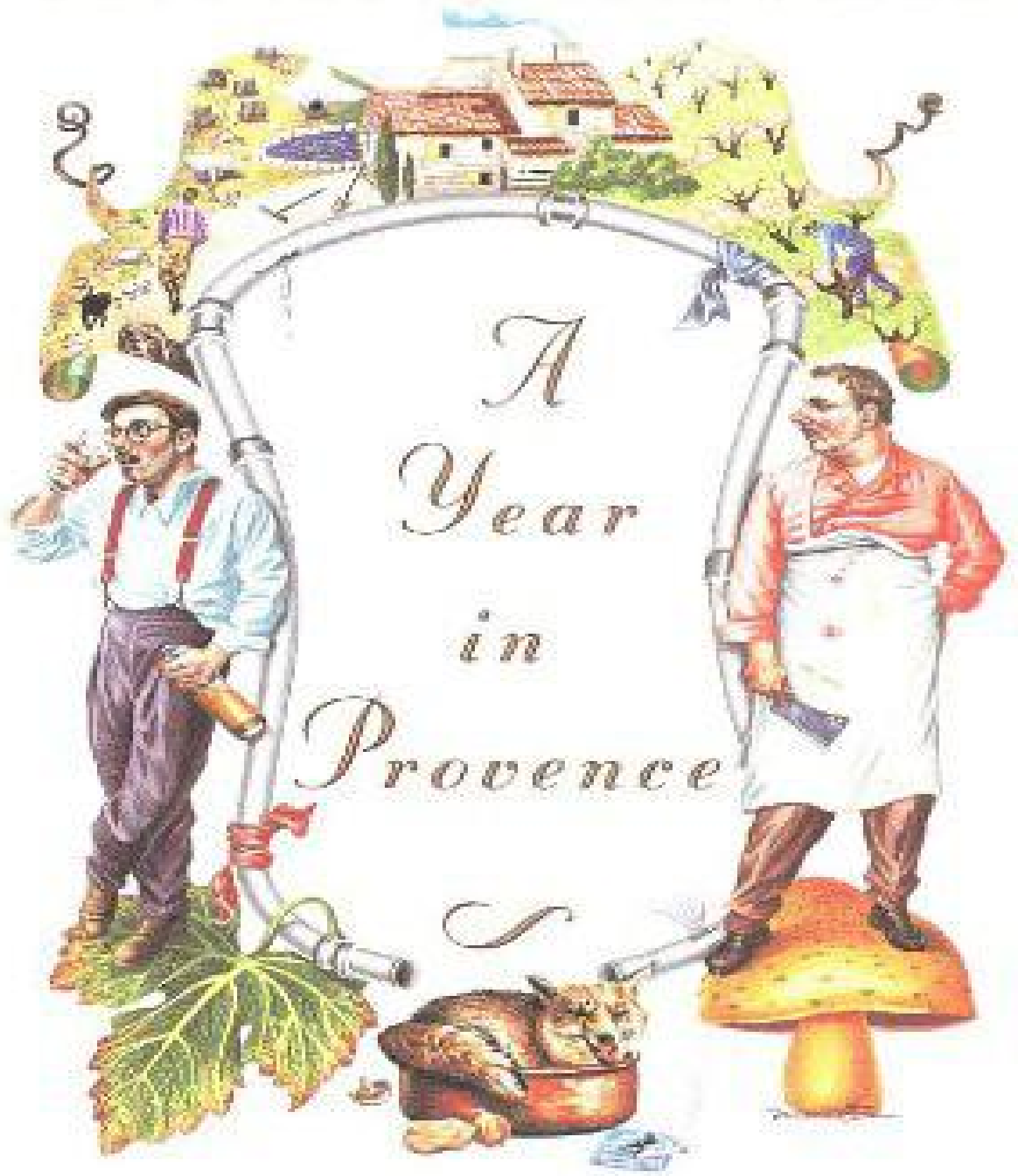


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PETER MAYLE

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A YEAR IN PROVENCE

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JANUARY

THE YEAR BEGAN with lunch.

We have always found that New Year's Eve, with its eleventh-hour excesses and doomed resolutions, is a dismal occasion for all the forced jollity and midnight toasts and kisses. And so, when we heard that over in the village of Lacoste, a few miles away, the proprietor of Le Simiane was offering a six-course lunch with pink champagne to his amiable clientele, it seemed like a much more cheerful way to start the next twelve months.

By 12:30 the little stone-walled restaurant was full. There were some serious stomachs to be seen—entire families with the embonpoint that comes from spending two or three diligent hours every day at the table, eyes down and conversation postponed in the observance of France's favorite ritual. The proprietor of the restaurant, a man who had somehow perfected the art of hovering despite his considerable size, was dressed for the day in a velvet smoking jacket and bow tie. His mustache, sleek with pomade, quivered with enthusiasm as he rhapsodized over the menu: foie gras, lobster mousse, beef en croûte, salads dressed in virgin oil, hand-picked cheeses, desserts of a miraculous lightness, digestifs. It was a gastronomic aria which he performed at each table, kissing the tips of his fingers so often that he must have blistered his lips.

The final "bon appétit" died away and a companionable near-silence descended on the restaurant as the food received its due attention. While we ate, my wife and I thought of previous New Year's Days, most of them spent under impenetrable cloud in England. It was hard to associate the sunshine and dense blue sky outside with the first of January but, as everyone kept telling us, it was quite normal. After all, we were in Provence.

We had been here often before as tourists, desperate for our annual ration of two or three weeks of true heat and sharp light. Always when we left, with peeling noses and regret, we promised ourselves that one day we would live here. We had talked about it during the long gray winters and the damp green summers, looked with an addict's longing at photographs of village markets and vineyards, dreamed of being woken up by the sun slanting through the bedroom window. And now, somewhat to our surprise,

we had done it. We had committed ourselves. We had bought a house, taken French lessons, said our good-byes, shipped over our two dogs, and become foreigners.

In the end, it had happened quickly—almost impulsively—because of the house. We saw it one afternoon and had mentally moved in by dinner.

It was set above the country road that runs between the two medieval hill villages of Ménerbes and Bonnieux, at the end of a dirt track through cherry trees and vines. It was a mas, or farmhouse, built from local stone which two hundred years of wind and sun had weathered to a color somewhere between pale honey and pale gray. It had started life in the eighteenth century as one room and, in the haphazard manner of agricultural buildings, had spread to accommodate children, grandmothers, goats, and farm implements until it had become an irregular three-story house. Everything about it was solid. The spiral staircase which rose from the wine cave to the top floor was cut from massive slabs of stone. The walls, some of them a meter thick, were built to keep out the winds of the Mistral which, they say, can blow the ears off a donkey. Attached to the back of the house was an enclosed courtyard, and beyond that a bleached white stone swimming pool. There were three wells, there were established shade trees and slim green cypresses, hedges of rosemary, a giant almond tree. In the afternoon sun, with the wooden shutters half-closed like sleepy eyelids, it was irresistible.

It was also immune, as much as any house could be, from the creeping horrors of property development. The French have a weakness for erecting jolies villas wherever building regulations permit, and sometimes where they don't, particularly in areas of hitherto unspoiled and beautiful countryside. We had seen them in a ghastly rash around the old market town of Apt, boxes made from that special kind of livid pink cement which remains livid no matter what the weather may throw at it. Very few areas of rural France are safe unless they have been officially protected, and one of the great attractions of this house was that it sat within the boundaries of a national park, sacred to the French heritage and out of bounds to concrete mixers.

The Lubéron Mountains rise up immediately behind the house to a high point of nearly 3,500 feet and run in deep folds for about forty miles from west to east. Cedars and pines and scrub oak keep them perpetually green and provide cover for boar, rabbits, and game birds. Wild flowers,

thyme, lavender, and mushrooms grow between the rocks and under the trees, and from the summit on a clear day the view is of the Basses-Alpes on one side and the Mediterranean on the other. For most of the year, it is possible to walk for eight or nine hours without seeing a car or a human being. It is a 247,000-acre extension of the back garden, a paradise for the dogs and a permanent barricade against assault from the rear by unforeseen neighbors.

Neighbors, we have found, take on an importance in the country that they don't begin to have in cities. You can live for years in an apartment in London or New York and barely speak to the people who live six inches away from you on the other side of a wall. In the country, separated from the next house though you may be by hundreds of yards, your neighbors are part of your life, and you are part of theirs. If you happen to be foreign and therefore slightly exotic, you are inspected with more than usual interest. And if, in addition, you inherit a long-standing and delicate agricultural arrangement, you are quickly made aware that your attitudes and decisions have a direct effect on another family's well-being.

We had been introduced to our new neighbors by the couple from whom we bought the house, over a five-hour dinner marked by a tremendous goodwill on all sides and an almost total lack of comprehension on our part. The language spoken was French, but it was not the French we had studied in textbooks and heard on cassettes; it was a rich, soupy patois, emanating from somewhere at the back of the throat and passing through a scrambling process in the nasal passages before coming out as speech. Half-familiar sounds could be dimly recognized as words through the swirls and eddies of Provençal: *demain* became *demang*, *vin* became *vang*, *maison* became *mesong*. That by itself would not have been a problem had the words been spoken at normal conversational speed and without further embroidery, but they were delivered like bullets from a machine gun, often with an extra vowel tacked on to the end for good luck. Thus an offer of more bread—page-one stuff in French for beginners—emerged as a single twanging question. *Encoredupanga?*

Fortunately for us, the good humor and niceness of our neighbors were apparent even if what they were saying was a mystery. Henriette was a brown, pretty woman with a permanent smile and a sprinter's enthusiasm for reaching the finish line of each sentence in record time. Her husband, Faustin—or Faustang, as we thought his name was spelled for many weeks

—was large and gentle, unhurried in his movements and relatively slow with his words. He had been born in the valley, he had spent his life in the valley, and he would die in the valley. His father, P  p   Andr   who lived next to him, had shot his last boar at the age of eighty and had given up hunting to take up the bicycle. Twice a week he would pedal to the village for his groceries and his gossip. They seemed to be a contented family.

They had, however, a concern about us, not only as neighbors but as prospective partners, and, through the fumes of marc and black tobacco and the even thicker fog of the accent, we eventually got to the bottom of it.

Most of the six acres of land we had bought with the house was planted with vines, and these had been looked after for years under the traditional system of metayage: the owner of the land pays the capital costs of new vine stock and fertilizer, while the farmer does the work of spraying, cropping, and pruning. At the end of the season, the farmer takes two-thirds of the profits and the owner one-third. If the property changes hands, the arrangement comes up for review, and there was Faustin's concern. It was well known that many of the properties in the Lub  ron were bought as residences secondaires, used for holidays and amusement, their good agricultural land turned into elaborately planted gardens. There were even cases of the ultimate blasphemy, when vines had been grubbed up to make way for tennis courts. Tennis courts! Faustin shrugged with disbelief, shoulders and eyebrows going up in unison as he contemplated the extraordinary idea of exchanging precious vines for the curious pleasures of chasing a little ball around in the heat.

He needn't have worried. We loved the vines—the ordered regularity of them against the sprawl of the mountain, the way they changed from bright green to darker green to yellow and red as spring and summer turned to autumn, the blue smoke in the pruning season as the clippings were burned, the pruned stumps studding the bare fields in the winter—they were meant to be here. Tennis courts and landscaped gardens weren't. (Nor, for that matter, was our swimming pool, but at least it hadn't replaced any vines.) And, besides, there was the wine. We had the option of taking our profit in cash or in the bottle, and in an average year our share of the crop would be nearly a thousand litres of good ordinary red and pink. As emphatically as we could in our unsteady French, we told Faustin that we would be delighted to continue the existing arrangement. He beamed. He

could see that we would all get along very well together. One day, we might even be able to talk to each other.

THE PROPRIETOR of Le Simiane wished us a happy new year and hovered in the doorway as we stood in the narrow street, blinking into the sun.

"Not bad, eh?" he said, with a flourish of one velvet-clad arm which took in the village, the ruins of the Marquis de Sade's chateau perched above, the view across to the mountains and the bright, clean sky. It was a casually possessive gesture, as if he was showing us a corner of his personal estate. "One is fortunate to be in Provence."

Yes indeed, we thought, one certainly was. If this was winter we wouldn't be needing all the foul-weather paraphernalia—boots and coats and inch-thick sweaters—that we had brought over from England. We drove home, warm and well fed, making bets on how soon we could take the first swim of the year, and feeling a smug sympathy for those poor souls in harsher climates who had to suffer real winters.

Meanwhile, a thousand miles to the north, the wind that had started in Siberia was picking up speed for the final part of its journey. We had heard stories about the Mistral. It drove people, and animals, mad. It was an extenuating circumstance in crimes of violence. It blew for fifteen days on end, uprooting trees, overturning cars, smashing windows, tossing old ladies into the gutter, splintering telegraph poles, moaning through houses like a cold and baleful ghost, causing la grippe, domestic squabbles, absenteeism from work, toothache, migraine—every problem in Provence that couldn't be blamed on the politicians was the fault of the *sâcré vent* which the Provençaux spoke about with a kind of masochistic pride.

Typical Gallic exaggeration, we thought. If they had to put up with the gales that come off the English Channel and bend the rain so that it hits you in the face almost horizontally, then they might know what a real wind was like. We listened to their stories and, to humor the tellers, pretended to be impressed.

And so we were poorly prepared when the first Mistral of the year came howling down the Rhone valley, turned left, and smacked into the west side of the house with enough force to skim roof tiles into the swimming pool and rip a window that had carelessly been left open off its hinges. The temperature dropped twenty degrees in twenty-four hours. It

went to zero, then six below. Readings taken in Marseilles showed a wind speed of 180 kilometers an hour. My wife was cooking in an overcoat. I was trying to type in gloves. We stopped talking about our first swim and thought wistfully about central heating. And then one morning, with the sound of branches snapping, the pipes burst one after the other under the pressure of water that had frozen in them overnight.

They hung off the wall, swollen and stopped up with ice, and Monsieur Menicucci studied them with his professional plumber's eye.

"Oh *lí lí*," he said. "Oh *lí lí*." He turned to his young apprentice, whom he invariably addressed as *jeune homme* or *jeune*. "You see what we have here, *jeune*. Naked pipes. No insulation. Côte d'Azur plumbing. In Cannes, in Nice, it would do, but here ..."

He made a clucking sound of disapproval and wagged his finger under *jeune's* nose to underline the difference between the soft winters of the coast and the biting cold in which we were now standing, and pulled his woolen bonnet firmly down over his ears. He was short and compact, built for plumbing, as he would say, because he could squeeze himself into constricted spaces that more ungainly men would find inaccessible. While we waited for *jeune* to set up the blowtorch, Monsieur Menicucci delivered the first of a series of lectures and collected *pensées* which I would listen to with increasing enjoyment throughout the coming year. Today, we had a geophysical dissertation on the increasing severity of Provençal winters.

For three years in a row, winters had been noticeably harder than anyone could remember—cold enough, in fact, to kill ancient olive trees. It was, to use the phrase that comes out in Provence whenever the sun goes in, *pas normal*. But why? Monsieur Menicucci gave me a token two seconds to ponder this phenomenon before warming to his thesis, tapping me with a finger from time to time to make sure I was paying attention.

It was clear, he said, that the winds which brought the cold down from Russia were arriving in Provence with greater velocity than before, taking less time to reach their destination and therefore having less time to warm up en route. And the reason for this—Monsieur Menicucci allowed himself a brief but dramatic pause—was a change in the configuration of the earth's crust. *Mais oui*. Somewhere between Siberia and Ménerbes the curvature of the earth had flattened, enabling the wind to take a more direct route south. It was entirely logical. Unfortunately, part two of the lecture (Why the Earth

Is Becoming Flatter) was interrupted by a crack of another burst pipe, and my education was put aside for some virtuoso work with the blowtorch.

The effect of the weather on the inhabitants of Provence is immediate and obvious. They expect every day to be sunny, and their disposition suffers when it isn't. Rain they take as a personal affront, shaking their heads and commiserating with each other in the cafés, looking with profound suspicion at the sky as though a plague of locusts is about to descend, and picking their way with distaste through the puddles on the pavement. If anything worse than a rainy day should come along, such as this sub-zero snap, the result is startling: most of the population disappears.

As the cold began to bite into the middle of January, the towns and villages became quiet. The weekly markets, normally jammed and boisterous, were reduced to a skeleton crew of intrepid stallholders who were prepared to risk frostbite for a living, stamping their feet and nipping from hip flasks. Customers moved briskly, bought and went, barely pausing to count their change. Bars closed their doors and windows tight and conducted their business in a pungent fog. There was none of the usual dawdling on the streets.

Our valley hibernated, and I missed the sounds that marked the passing of each day almost as precisely as a clock: Faustin's rooster having his morning cough; the demented clatter—like nuts and bolts trying to escape from a biscuit tin—of the small Citroen van that every farmer drives home at lunchtime; the hopeful fusillade of a hunter on afternoon patrol in the vines on the opposite hillside; the distant whine of a chainsaw in the forest; the twilight serenade of farm dogs. Now there was silence. For hours on end the valley would be completely still and empty, and we became curious. What was everybody doing?

Faustin, we knew, traveled around the neighboring farms as a visiting slaughterer, slitting the throats and breaking the necks of rabbits and ducks and pigs and geese so that they could be turned into terrines and hams and confits. We thought it an uncharacteristic occupation for a softhearted man who spoiled his dogs, but he was evidently skilled and quick and, like any true countryman, he wasn't distracted by sentiment. We might treat a rabbit as a pet or become emotionally attached to a goose, but we had come from cities and supermarkets, where flesh was hygienically distanced from any resemblance to living creatures. A shrink-wrapped pork chop has a sanitized, abstract appearance that has nothing whatever to do with the