

# Feel like newlyweds again with trip to France

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I knew I was in trouble when every man in Allard's restaurant was wearing a tuxedo but me.

It was 8 p.m. on New Year's Eve in Paris, France, and my wife, Carol, and I were celebrating our 10th wedding anniversary in a grand, traditional French kitchen where English was not on the menu.

We were greeted like the first guests at a party with *bon jour* and wide smiles all around. I had never had occasion to visit an eatery that offered a \$900 dollar bottle of wine, so the fact that we were the only customers in the place was cause for concern. Two thoughts came to mind: Either I had inadvertently committed financial suicide by renting the whole place or the locals thought it wasn't worthy. I silently hoped for the latter as we were escorted to our table.

With great flair, our waiter gave us a menu with a maneuver that he had obviously perfected in front of a mirror. *Aperitif?* He asked. Carol recognized the word (she took French in college) and gave me a tacit nod that said an aperitif was a splendid idea. After several painful minutes of me talking at the waiter and he not understanding a word, he brought us each a drink and begrudgingly uttered his first and last words of English for the evening — GIN

FIZZ.

Until now our tenuous grasp of the native language hadn't caused many problems. We had been in France for five days and managed to see the Louvre, the Eiffel Tower, that Big Arch (the Arc de Triomphe for you purists), the gardens of Palais de Luxembourg and the great cathedral, Notre Dame, with little trouble. That very morning we had toured Louis XIV's house — Chateau de Versailles — without incident because the velvet ropes and lasers that herded tourists through room after garish room chanced nothing.

Unfortunately, the Allard's menu and wine list were not so helpful. Carol scoured the pages for *Poulet* (chicken) and I looked for *Boeuf* (beef) but neither were part of the seven-course culinary extravaganza we were about to experience.

The fixed menu was a relief but ordering wine when you don't know what you are about to eat isn't easy. I tried to convey my trepidation to the waiter and he quickly summoned his boss like a baseball manager calling for an ace reliever with the bases loaded in the bottom of the ninth. He easily understood we were partial to white grapes and suggested two bottles that would be suitable for the meal. I chose the more expensive (\$90) figuring it had to be good.

Since much of the wine I consume is of the boxed variety, my endorsement could easily be called into question, but this

wine was better than good, and I was content with our decision to spend whatever it took to celebrate our big night in style.

Soon after our first glass was empty other people began to arrive. By 8:30 p.m. every seat in the house was filled with tastily attired couples. Carol struck up a conversation with the only other Americans in the place who just happened to get the table next to us. They were Texans who had been to Paris last year and they navigated the menu with ease.

They were our best friends for the next four hours as courses after course of delectable but unfamiliar food was served. As I ate lobster bisque, pheasant and a mystery meat bathed in cognac, I periodically gazed into the pyramid of sliced potatoes and beets before me and wondered whether I could ever eat a \$3 fast-food sandwich again.

By the time dessert was served it was 11:30 and we had intended to see the fireworks at the Place de la Concorde, the very spot where thousands of people had lost their heads to the guillotine including Louis XVI, Marie Antoinette and Mme du Barry, who reportedly went kicking and screaming the entire way.

After settling *l'addition* (the bill) we ran the four blocks to our hotel and changed into jeans and sweatshirts. It was raining so we grabbed our umbrellas and raced to the spotlights that encircled our destination two



Royal grounds: A trip to the Palace of Versailles wouldn't be complete without a stroll through Louis XIV's back yard.

miles away. Traffic on the city's streets was at a standstill.

Just as we approached a bridge crossing the Seine, a bunch of revelers poured out of a tiny car like clowns in a circus. They each had a bottle of champagne and they were shaking them with vigor. The motion had the desired effect as bubbles and foam soon chased corks into the Paris sky.

It was surely too soon — we were still a mile away from the spotlights but drenched people were kissing in the streets and

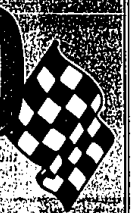

on sidewalks and bridges. Bont horns blared and fireworks launched so we paused for a kiss and a few well wishes with the locals before proceeding.

The rain washed out the fireworks but we eventually joined the thousands of people at the Place de la Concorde who were bringing in the new year with a light show, music, dancing and hundreds of bottles of champagne. In a mere 15 hours Carol and I were home.

We went straight to Arby's.



Fine Dining: Allard's was an excellent place to celebrate our 10th anniversary.



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