

IM INSIGHTS



EXTRACURRICULAR INSIGHTS FROM ABROAD

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Having authored these columns without interruption since 1993, this article will depart slightly from the usual format: vacation insights will be added to thoughts about internal medicine. The most immediate of these was to determine whether 2 weeks of pampering in France would invoke the French Paradox and protect me from the ill effects of Burgundy wine and foie gras as it does most Frenchmen.

My wife and I had long coveted a stay at the Parc Royal Hotel on the south shore of Lac Léman, opposite the Swiss city of Lausanne. It is one of the world's great hotels, perched high above the lake with acres of manicured grounds, a golf course and spa, and an outdoor swimming pool dramatically designed to make it appear that the far edge is all that protects you from falling into the lake far below.

I convinced myself that imprudence with everyday expenses is more likely to wreck the family budget than a single 4-day splurge. Our lake-view room was mysteriously upgraded to a suite with panoramic views. It was wonderful to "live" there, even during a windstorm that whipped the lake into an angry froth. Getting up late, breakfast in bed, reading and listening to music very satisfactorily substituted for an extra day of sightseeing—not to mention office hours.

Champagne receptions and chamber music concerts in the lobby enlivened the evenings. Many of the hotel guests were politicians or chief executive officers of leading French or German companies attending a "friendship" meeting. Many were brought in and out by helicopter. It was another world.

A 3-hour drive that scrupulously avoided big cities took us to Burgundy for the wine harvest. Everywhere a mixture of students, local people, and itinerants were busy handpicking the clusters. We were amazed at the sugar-sweetness of the wine grapes, which are hauled in little carts at breakneck speed to be immediately pressed (so as not to lose any innate quality) in a myriad of little village wineries. La Bourgogne, as it is named in French, wasn't new to us, but this time we really took the time to savor the experience of "being there." The

wine, food, and scenery calmed any medical concerns that intruded into this idyllic undertaking.

The countryside to the west of the city of Mâcon is underrated but may be the prettiest in Burgundy. It inspired the French romantic poet, Lamartine. It is also less formal than the pricier areas in the Côtes de Beaune and Côtes de Nuit to the north. On arrival in the village of Igé, we encountered Mme. Germond, an attorney who quit practicing law to operate her gem of a small hotel, the Château d'Igé, for the well-being of her guests. Pondering the commoditization that threatens to take over everywhere, particularly in our own professional lives, made us love our very personal visit with Mme. Germond (in the middle of nowhere) all the more.

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Nearby, the sumptuous Pouilly-Fuissé wines at the Château de Fuissé made for a memorable tasting. And the view of Lamartine's favorite valley from the hilltop fortress Château Berzé-le-Châtel was indeed magnificent.

Our next residence, the **Château de Gilly**, is surrounded by a moat and is illuminated at night. Excellent dinners are served in a crypt with Gothic arched ceilings. This former palatial home of the abbots of the monastery of Gilly-les-Citeaux supplies a full dose of medieval romance combined with elegance and sufficient modern comfort. Initial doubts about the small dormer window were soon more than counteracted by the soaring ceiling, wood beams, and period furnishings of our spacious room. Not altogether the Parc Royal, but neither was the price. Gilly makes an ideal base for exploring the surrounding legendary wine villages that bring the pinot noir grape to its ultimate expression.

I was also struck by how hardworking the artisanal Burgundians are—"almost like physicians," it seemed to me. Many live quite modestly when one thinks of the price of their wines, ranging from dozens to hundreds of dollars per bottle. Even at the much lower price range I tasted some wonderful wines, many of which aren't imported into the United States. Between Mâcon and



Château d'Igé

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Dijon, advanced technology is somehow incorporated into winemaking, without impairing either artistry or individualism. Just the variety and differences in aroma, taste, and finish were amazing.

Doors are more open to visitors than they have been in recent years, perhaps because of increased competition from around the world. In fact, when a surly waiter got us to decide against eating in a restaurant in the town of Fixin, we were taken in by Mme. Claudine Moine-Champy, whose winery is around the corner. She apologized for the bad experience in the restaurant that she said had recently been taken over by a "newcomer." Then she personally fixed us a lunch of Burgundian parsleyed ham, bread, fruit, and—of course—a glass of wine. That was after she had fed her contingent of harvesters and before she got to the dishes. The cellars date back to the 12th century, and the family has owned its prized acreage for nearly as long. Incredibly, our hostess is not just the owner but also the winemaker!

On reflection, by not accepting the waiter's unacceptable behavior we created an opportunity for something far better. I felt a real kinship with Mme. Moine-Champy in our both having to practice our respective arts while also dealing with unending business considerations (she has to sell her own wine).

Beaune is a must-see Medieval city that is the site of the world-famous annual wine auction in the Hospices de Beaune. The former hospital for the poor is fascinating to visit, not in the least because of the medical implements on display. We stayed right around the corner in the old town in the exceptional **Hôtel Le Cep**, parts of which date

back to the 14th century. A climb up the stone staircase of the hotel's 16th-century tower provides an overview of the multicolored tiled roofs of the city.

This was our second visit to Beaune, and it made us realize how much we had missed the first time, as we now made mustard in the Fallois Mustard Museum, toured the nearby fortress castle of Rochepot, and lunched at the Château de Chassagne in Chassagne-Montrachet, surrounded by its own Chardonnay vineyards, with exceptionally tasteful (and truly artistic) guest accommodations. Everywhere, the harvest was in full progress. Afterwards, it was a delight to luxuriate in our large, lovely room at Le Cep.

Last stop was the **Château de Divonne** in Divonne-les-Bains, on the north shore of Lac Léman. In its own park, the chateau-hotel dominates the small spa (and casino) town below. Like Gilly and Le Cep, it is a member of the group of **Small Luxury Hotels of the World**. We chose it because it is less than half an hour's drive to Geneva Airport—and has a reputed kitchen. A 2-night stay afforded us an afternoon stroll in the Old City of Geneva and a chance to rehearse the drive to the airport, followed by a gala in-house dinner on our last evening.

Maybe the biggest French Paradox is that my wife and I loved our visit to France but were equally tickled to get back to our own home, usual cooking, and minimal use of alcohol in seemingly good shape. And why I find myself absolutely delighted to be back seeing patients without a trace of guilt. ■

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