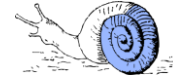




## Understanding French Culture

By Rick Steves



*I love France* – it is one of Europe’s most diverse, tasty, and exciting countries. It brims with good life and a special appreciation for culture, music, art, food, and wine. But Americans can feel pretty dowdy when confronted with the casual sophistication of the French who are matchless when it comes to just about anything suave and urbane. In my early days of touring France, I worried about being a cultural bumpkin – but now I embrace it. After all, I travel to learn.

Take cheese, for example, which I used to think of as a yellow square wrapped in plastic. It was daunting when I first faced a French cheese course – even more so when it was offered as dessert and arrived on a *chariot de fromages* (cheese cart). But that cheese board – on which every gooey, stinky, and moldy product was the happy creation of a local artisan – was my invitation into *l’art de vivre* – the art of living.

For the French, the art of living is not just a pleasing expression: it’s a building block for a sound life. With five weeks of paid vacation, plus every Catholic holiday ever invented, the French have become experts at living well. It’s no accident that France is home to linger-longer pastimes like café lounging, fine dining, and barge cruising.

As a guide, it’s fun to introduce people to the finer things of French life, especially when it’s something they’re afraid of for no good reason. As I traveled with a group in France this summer, we timed it just right for snail season – but not everyone was eager when I ordered up several dozen of the little guys. But after a little coaching on fork technique, I got all but one traveler to try an escargot – and they all responded with a yummy thumbs up.

While it’s easy enough to push one’s gastronomic envelope, handling the French language is another thing. I am a miserable linguist. I got into my alma mater thanks to a one-month summer intensive French class that fulfilled my foreign-language requirement. But it was probably the worst month of my life. The four ways the French pronounce *un* broke my spirit. I remain the travel guy who can’t speak the languages. But my lack of anything like fluency doesn’t matter – the French people value politeness just as much as they take pride in their language. I get fine treatment everywhere in France just by saying the simplest of French pleasantries. If you begin every encounter with *bonjour* or *s’il vous plait*, and end it with *merci* and *au revoir*, you’ll earn a smile.

To make any trip more personal – and more memorable – find ways to connect with the locals. Consider participating in a cooking class with a visit to the local market, inviting your local guide to join you for lunch, and tasting local wines in an informal setting are all fun ways to break down barriers, sip by sip.

The French have a Michelin Guide-certainty in their judgements and are often frank in how they convey their opinions. Don’t misinterpret their confidence for arrogance. For a long time, I thought there was something affected and pseudo-sophisticated about all this finicky Frenchness. I once asked a wine merchant in Paris to suggest a good bottle to go with snails, and he wanted to know how I planned to cook them. I had envisioned a good Chardonnay, but *mais non* – not “flinty” enough; only a Chablis would do. I felt inept for having suggested the wrong pairing and annoyed by the wine seller’s hair-splitting choosiness. But then I thought of the ways I obsessively catalogue the nuances of baseball. Thankfully people are knowledgeable about different things. And when we have the opportunity to meet an expert in good living, it’s a pleasure to be a student.