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By Lynn McBride

# Southern Fried French

*A move to France lands a Furman alum in a medieval château, writing on food and culture and living la belle vie.*

**W**hen I was at Furman in 1968, one of my toughest courses was Madame Brown's French class.

The night before a test, my friend Nancy and I, having delayed studying until the last minute, would pull an all-nighter — it is possible that this may sound familiar to some of you — during the course of which we would gossip, play games, dance around the parlor, and do anything to put off studying a bit longer.

Although I have many fond memories of those long nights, little did I know how important French would someday become to me. Now that I live in France, I will say this: Mme. Brown, I wish I'd taken your class a little more seriously.

Thirty-five years after that class, my husband, Ron, and I decided to take an early retirement, and we began looking for an adventure that would take us out of our comfort zone. We were living in Charleston, S.C., where Ron was a commercial realtor and I was a regional editor for *Better Homes & Gardens* magazine.

We started out looking for a summer home in France, but at some point we said, "Oh, why not?" And we sold our house in Charleston and took off for good. So what if we didn't really speak French? Off we went, in blissful but enthusiastic ignorance. Our adventures led us to a life in a 13th-century château. Here's how it happened.

**After trying** unsuccessfully to buy the perfect farmhouse on various vacation trips to France, we befriended a Brit who suggested we rent an apartment she knew about in southern Burgundy. Mischievously, she offered no further information. When she drove us to a fairy-tale château in a charming village, our eyes popped. We said yes on the spot.

That wasn't the best part, though. The château came complete with an amazing French couple who had the patience of angels. They were willing to help us get oriented, answer our questions, and even correct our bad French.

We had the whole top floor of the château, with fabulous views over the village and valley. The owners lived on a lower floor, just down the winding stairway of the turret. And even if it was 62 steps up to our front door, well, lugging the groceries up would keep us in shape.

A bit of info about our *châtelains* (the French term for lord and lady of the castle): Pierre inherited the château from his family, who bought it just after the French Revolution. When Pierre and Nicole married, the place was a wreck, without plumbing or electricity. While managing teaching careers, they've spent a lifetime making it wonderful, pouring every spare cent into the project. Think your house renovation was difficult? It took 30 years just to replace every inch of roof on their four-story castle with the appropriate historic tiles. Little by little, though, they did it.

But like any old house, a château is never really finished. My husband, who loves to putter on building projects, was in handyman heaven. Most days he and Pierre could be found somewhere around the castle, scratching their heads and commiserating over the latest maintenance challenge. Pierre speaks no English and Ron spoke little French at first, so they sort of invented their own language, which only they can understand.

After a few years in the château, we finally found our perfect French farmhouse in a little village nearby, but we are still close to Nicole and Pierre, who have become our French family.

**So now** I will answer that question that has been put to us a zillion times by friends back in the States: What do you DO all day?

Since we live in Burgundy, the country's food and wine capital, you might think a lot of our activities revolve around eating, drinking and wine-tasting. You would be absolutely



right — so much so that I've started a weekly subscription blog called Southern Fried French ([www.southernfriedfrench.com](http://www.southernfriedfrench.com)). The blog is the story of our life at the château and features thoughts on French culture and customs, food, wine, and a bit of a travelogue thrown in. Each week I include a recipe, usually a fusion of French cuisine and down-home Southern cooking. Y'all are kindly invited to visit.

Our area of Burgundy, which is relatively close to the Swiss, Belgian, German and Italian borders and near the TGV (high-speed train) line to England, is chock full of expatriates from all these countries, which means we have an international set of friends. This group is augmented by the French friends who are willing to endure hearing their lovely language spoken with a Southern drawl. Many of the ex-pats take part in the Wednesday morning French conversation class led by Nicole at the château, which is also an excuse to drink espresso, eat croissants, and debate the latest in French politics.

On Saturdays, *toute le monde* (everyone) goes to the market, where we spend the morning shopping for veggies, drinking at the café, listening to street music, and having a festive good time. Sunday is sacred; that's flea market day. Since most every French village holds one each year, it's a great way to see the countryside. Afterward is Sunday lunch, the food event of the week, which is typically at the best restaurant we can find near the flea market *du jour*.

All ex-pats, and some of our French friends, seem to have a renovation project going, so Ron stays busy. He has also adopted the beloved French sport of cycling. For me, there's the garden, my blog, and writing for British travel magazines that cater to Francophiles. I'm involved with a cat rescue group, and I teach English lessons to anyone who's interested. Then there are the wonderful travel destinations nearby, which was one of our main motivations for moving. Geneva and the Alps are a couple of hours away, we can be in Aix-en-Provence by lunchtime, and it's a four-hour drive to Italy.

Living in a rural French village means daily life is full of new experiences. Our village, which is close to the historic town of Cluny, is small — about 60 people — and is a *mélange* of retired ex-pats, farmers who've lived there for generations, and French folks who have escaped city life for the countryside. The village is perched on the crest of a hill and has one of those Romanesque churches that are trademarks of Burgundy. Built about 1,200 years ago, it sits directly across from our house and serenades us daily with its glorious bells. In our small group of villages there are only 250 people but 13 nationalities, hailing from as far away as Chile and Australia.

If you're a Francophile, all this may sound too good to be true. It's a charmed life, for sure, for which we are grateful. All is not perfect, though. We miss family and friends, who come to visit but not always



as often as we'd like. We miss our lovely life in Charleston, which we visit once a year. We're crazy about France, but it has its little quirks that keep life, shall we say, interesting (the French bureaucracy, for example, and their disdain for that pesky necessity, customer service).

Still, we love the adventure and challenge of it all. And Mme. Brown would be pleased to know that I'm still studying my French.

**Since my blog** is about French food, customs and culture, here's a brief primer on entertaining the French way.

Like a Southern Sunday supper, a French meal is long and slow, with lots of conversation and good wine. If you want to host a French meal for your friends, here's the drill.

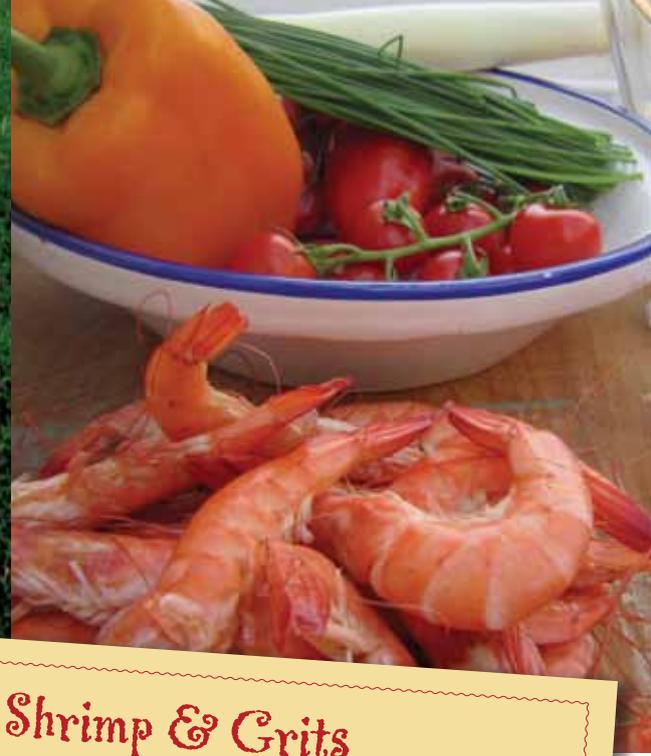
Start with *apéritifs*, typically champagne mixed with a splash of Cassis or peach liqueur, and some olives and radishes. Then, *à table*, serve the *entrée* (starter), which can be a salad, soup, *paté*, or any small dish. Then on to *le plat*, the main course, typically roasted meat or fish with a fabulous sauce, and a vegetable.

Next comes the really good part, even before dessert: The Cheese Course. No festive French meal would be complete without one.

I must tell you that serving this course to the French is the nightmare of every novice ex-pat. The French have more than 500 cheeses, they know them well, and they discuss their merits endlessly. And eventually you, the pitifully educated American who was raised on Velveeta, must serve The Cheese Course to the French.

It's not like I haven't tried to skip it. Once I invited our *châtelains* to a casual dinner party, and I asked Nicole what she thought about my serving an "American" dinner without a separate *plateau de fromage*. "Well," she said, "you know the French guests will like to have a little cheese to finish off the red wine." I knew I was toast.

Here's the scary bit: The cheese aisle at the supermarket is the length of a soccer field, with enormous rounds of brie in endless varieties, plump knobs of fresh goat cheeses (some covered in golden raisins or nuts), soft, fresh cow cheeses, and sheep cheeses from the Alps. There are Goudas



## Southern Fried French Shrimp & Grits

This lowcountry recipe gets a bit of a twist with the addition of that favorite French vegetable, leeks. For company, serve this over Frenchified baked cheese garlic grits. (See recipe at [www.southernfriedfrench.com](http://www.southernfriedfrench.com), April 26, 2010, under "First Posts.") Scoop out hot from the oven onto the plates and top with the shrimp. For everyday, just cook up some stove-top stone-ground grits.

4 tomatoes, quartered

Olive oil

1 large leek, white part only, thinly sliced crosswise and washed

3/4 cup yellow bell pepper, finely chopped

Butter

1½ pounds shrimp, shells removed

2 cloves garlic, minced (omit if using garlic grits)

Tabasco sauce

White wine

Chopped chives or other fresh herbs, to garnish

Heat oven to 400 degrees. Toss tomatoes in a bit of olive oil, salt and pepper and roast until soft, about 15 minutes.

In a heavy skillet sauté leeks and peppers in butter until tender, about 10 minutes. Add garlic during the last couple of minutes. Remove vegetables to a plate. Turn heat up, add a bit of olive oil to pan and cook shrimp about two minutes, turning once, until they are pink and just done.

Scoop tomatoes out of the pan with a slotted spoon and add them, along with vegetables, to pan with shrimp. Add a generous splash of white wine to thin sauce (or use broth, or the juice from the tomatoes). Season to taste with sea salt, pepper, and dash of tabasco. Heat the sauce quickly, and spoon it over hot grits on individual heated plates or pasta bowls. Top with fresh herbs and serve with a smile. Serves 4.

fragrant with spices, and rich, creamy cheeses stuffed with walnuts. There are rows of blues and huge wheels of assorted parmesans.

But don't think you can choose at your leisure. This is not a self-service operation. When it's your turn, Madame stands there impatiently, wielding her knife. Do I imagine she smiles smugly, assured of my ignorance and inadequate up-bringing? This exercise is not for the faint of heart.

Out of desperation I've developed a system for putting together a lovely *plateau de fromage*. OK, so I'm going for shallow beauty, not depth, but even the French can admire a sumptuous spread.

My first strategy is to pick a pretty tray, which I line with a doily or fresh grape leaves. Then I select from three to five cheeses, depending on the size of the crowd. For this I've borrowed the wedding mantra: something old, new, borrowed and blue.

"Old" is an aged cheese, usually hard — perhaps a gruyère. "New" is a fresh cheese, normally soft; it could be a goat cheese or something creamy and wonderfully fattening, like Brillant-Savarin or a brie. For the borrowed category, I steal from another country: some chunks of fresh parmesan, a manchego, or a cheddar. And for the blue, a good Roquefort.

On the platter I put some fresh fruit and roll the goat cheese (made daily by our neighbor down the road) in fresh herbs or nuts. Often I add a little pot of honey with walnuts stirred in, or some

homemade jam. Then I take a generous handful of toasted pecans and toss it over everything. I serve it with crusty bread and a good red wine, and *voilà!* I look like a pro.

And the French are right. No celebratory meal (which, in France, is most meals) should be served without a cheese course! Dessert, if you have room, is up to you.

*Bon appetit, y'all!* [F]

*Photos courtesy of the author, a member of the Class of '72.*