

Château fine print

Idyllic holiday amid the vineyards of Bordeaux ends with a sour taste in the mouth

Saturday, Sept. 27, 2008

Text & photos by: Jeff Heinrich

© Jeff Heinrich



BEYCHAC ET CAILLAU, France – The letter was friendly, inviting. It lay next to a bottle of red wine and two glasses on the front table as we came in.

"*Chers amis*," it began.

"You've just made the acquaintance of Micheline and Serge. You can count on their kindness throughout your stay. Don't hesitate to contact them; they'll be glad to answer all your questions. You'll certainly have the pleasure of crossing paths with them around the park in the days to come."

Actually, as it turned out, we did cross paths – and, briefly, swords.

We'd come to spend a week in July at a fancy French château, smack in the heart of Bordeaux wine country – in the middle of our own private vineyard, in fact. The estate was huge – 90 hectares – its working farm planted with row upon row of vines, 70 hectares of Bordeaux Supérieur red and five of Bordeaux Blanc sec, flanked by forest and graced by picturesque vistas in all directions.



Along with the estate came a couple of helpful caretakers: Micheline, a bustling woman with an easy smile, and Serge, a sturdy man with a deep tan and military brushcut. They would look after the gardens and swimming pool and, at the end of our stay, come inside the villa to do a final inspection before closing the contract.

Our pied-à-terre was a 19th-century manor called Château La France: two wings, three floors, four French windows, five bedrooms, six bathrooms, and, accessible down a ramp from the drive, a small wine cellar we could temporarily stock with our purchases from the region.



A big Italian insurance company, Generali, owns the property and rents it out as a luxury vacation home to francophiles like us whose idea of a good time is quaffing fine merlots and cabs. Not for us, those overpriced French tourist traps like Euro Disney. No, we fancied ourselves amateur wine lovers, hobbyists of the vine, cultural tourists with a taste for terroir.

Wine snobs, you might say, but you'd only be half right. We'd just come for a good time, and hoped nothing bad would ruin it. This vacation was going to be a prime vintage for us. We didn't want it to end up tasting corked.

We were two families – four adults with children ages 4 and 7 (the other couple's) and 10 and 12 (ours) – and there was something for everyone at this splendid *gîte de prestige*: walks in the vineyards for me and my wife; the pool and a big lawn out back under the trees for the kids; easy drives to nearby St. Émilion, Pomerol and the Médoc for my oenophile friend, and a bit of rural R&R for his city-weary young wife.

The couple and their kids live year-round in a swank area of Paris, where my friend is an executive with a large multinational.

His wine cellar there is impressive, to say the least; there's no shortage of Haut-Brion and d'Yquem in the cases that line the walls and crowd the floor, most of it bought *en primeur* at bargain prices over the Internet.



It was my friend who, a couple of years ago, had found Château La France advertised online. It was booked solid for the summer of 2008, but he had kept an eye on it in case an opening came up, and now it had. In a cryptic series of emails, he proposed we stay there together on our July vacation.

"We're really lucky to get it," he told me. "There was a cancellation, and the agency called to ask if I was still interested. We have to act fast."

What was the cost? My friend wouldn't say. Where were we going, exactly? A little place called Beychac-et-Caillau. I Google-mapped it and there it was, off the E70 highway about 20 kilometres due east of Bordeaux.

On the appointed day, we pulled into the long, winding limestone drive leading to the château and laughed in disbelief. Was this place really going to be ours for a whole week? Neatly spaced rows of leafy vines, their grapes still green in the mid-July heat, rippled by as we rolled up to the front entrance. Our hosts were waiting for us.

After taking a security deposit - their guarantee against any damage we might cause - Micheline and Serge made themselves discreet. They would remain so for most of our stay. Serge came in once to replace a cue for the pool table (the previous guests - British, I think - had broken it). And

when my son got stung on the foot by a hornet while traipsing across the lawn one morning, Serge was good enough to drive him to the local clinic (my son survived). But mostly it was out-of-sight, out-of-mind.



We quickly began to feel at home. But before settling in, I had to get rid of a lot of annoying little notices left everywhere. The house rules were propped up on the antique furniture and stuck to the windows with little suction cups: Do not walk on the wood floors with wet feet (it leaves marks), Do not light the fireplace (it doesn't work), Don't park the car at the front of the château (it's unsightly for the rare visitors who come for tours of the winery). I took them all down and put them away in drawers.

The wives got the kitchen organized, stocking it with local produce we bought on runs into the nearby villages. The nearest had

an unfortunate name, St-Germain-du-Puch, which we pronounced Puke. The other, bigger and better known, was called Libourne, and it had a farmers' market three times a week in its medieval main square. My friend went out on sorties to visit wineries and bring back exquisite bottles of this and that, some of which we quaffed for supper, most of which he stored in the cellar (the château's own offerings were lamentably awful). And I raided the high glass-doored cabinet in the TV room for guidebooks on French wine and, late into the night, watched a DVD of Mondovino, the documentary exposé on the modern, global wine industry that should be required viewing for anyone with a passion for plonk.

On our final night, capping a week of sunshine and good times, we had a great supper and dedicated the rest of the evening to dancing up a storm with the kids. To make room in the downstairs salon, we rolled the love seat and wingback chairs to the sides of the room (they were actually on casters, how thoughtful). I slid the soundtrack of American Graffiti into the château's CD player, and, under the huge glass chandelier, we twisted and shouted to Buddy Holly and Chuck Berry and the Big Bopper until we were all exhausted. At midnight, the braver among us took a skinny dip in the pool, our bodies illuminated by underwater lights, the château glowing across the lawn under a full moon.



The next morning, we got up early. The contract said we had to be out by 10 a.m. on the Saturday, and had to tidy up for the incoming guests, so we did. We took out the garbage, made the beds, cleaned up the kitchen and brought our luggage down to the front entrance. My daughter, the eldest of the children, left a nice note in the guest book, praising the place she'd been privileged to spend a week in and also complimenting Serge and Micheline for being "*très gentils*".

Then the caretakers themselves showed up, all smiles, to give the place a final once-over. As they entered the house, I noticed they had a checklist. Then I

noticed the smiles on their faces quickly fading. After a cursory inspection, Serge hovered at the top of the stone steps. He asked my friend if he hadn't read the rental agreement properly.

"He doesn't want to give me my deposit back," my friend fumed, rummaging around in the car to retrieve the contract. "He says we were supposed to *nettoyer* – like, clean the floors and toilets and everything. He's got to be kidding."

We looked at the document. It called for the place to be *rangé* – tidied up. Nowhere was there any question of a full-blown, get-down-on-your-knees-and-scrub cleaning of the place. We weren't supposed to *nettoyer* – that was for the staff, surely!

Not according to Serge.

"*On n'a jamais vu le château dans un tel état,*" he huffed, and I followed him in to see what he meant. One chair hadn't been put back in its place; I moved it into the right position. The reminder notices were still in the drawers I'd put them in; I now got them out and placed them in their original positions. My friend argued some more with Serge, took out the contract and refused to do any more than we'd already done.

The standoff lasted several minutes, but happily, it ended well. A bit cowed by my friend's reading of the fine print, Serge eventually returned the deposit (500 euros, not exactly chump change), took a final signature, and went back to tidying up the "mess" we'd left behind. Micheline disappeared up the stairs to start stripping the beds. Was there anything else to do?

Yes, one last thing. Without telling anyone, my 12-year-old daughter got out the guestbook, crossed out part of her inscription and wrote something else in its place. I took a peek before leaving. Serge and Micheline no longer rated "*très gentils*". Now they were simply "*corrects*".

I don't expect we'll be invited back.

* * *

IF YOU GO:

Open year-round, Château La France can be booked online through rental sites like gites-de-france.com, vacapedia.com or cottage-choice.co.uk. The château itself is at



chateaulafrance.com. A one-week stay ranges from \$1,800 in the off-season (most of January to May and October to mid-December) to \$5,300 at the height of summer (mid-July to mid-August). For more on luxury châteaux rentals in general, go to sites like simplychateau.com and castlesinfrance.com.

© *Jeff Heinrich*