

MAGIC IN MEDOC

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Things I love about France: the music of language, the tempo of life, the crescendo of celebration. I savor their insouciant joi de vivre, their respect for manners, their value of ritual, and their culinary courage. Who would have considered eating snails? So it seemed fitting I should celebrate my 75th birthday as only one of French ancestry should, with a run through the land of my grandfather, he who left this amazingly glorious country in the 1800's...I can only wonder why.

I had a schema created before we left on this adventure...my mother's father came to America as a 16-year-old stow-away on a ship. A tall, handsome, imposing man, always in charge, he sang opera, did vaudeville with a dwarf companion, was an amazing cook; owned two farms by the time he was 30. Widowed early, he raised his four children alone, took on life with a hearty laugh and found joy in everything. He insisted I try things, ignored fear, and demanded full respect, courtesy, and NO whining! He was very funny and very fun; Gaillaume Des Camps came from poverty and created a great life in his beloved America.

I also spent over a year in France when I was 19...thanks to the US Army...my first son was born there, and I developed a love of 'my people' in formative years.

So, welcome to my party, albeit after the fact.

September 8, 2012, Medoc, France

Dangling precariously from a slowly swirling ball suspended seven stories high, lithe acrobats performed gracefully above the jostling masses. The French Air Force split the sky with twin jets in a swooping dive, a giant wind machine blew sparkling confetti like a mammoth flock of birds, and nine thousand runners danced to the start. As a sizzling sun fueled the 98-degree heat index, an ancient canon fired a shot launching the 29th running of the famed Medoc Marathon.

Unique in both inception and actualization... the aid stations do not offer Gatorade or water, but instead politely ask, "Red or white, Madame?" and

ninety-five percent of the participants run in costume. The focus being to showcase the beauty and productivity of the land, it is one giant party in the Bordeaux region of France...the birthplace of wine.

We began the journey at an imperative walk. The crowd was wall to wall Cleopatras, cave men, French Foreign Legion, barbarians, Kings and queens; even Caesar in a chariot pulled by four 'horses'...and a couple from South Dakota in tuxedos. (Our costumes didn't arrive in time so we improvised).

The race progressed through some of the finest vineyards in the world, each one offering small glasses of wine in their classic cobbled courtyards as we ran through. I have to say, the wine is quickly converted to sugar energy, the alcohol burned off in a short run and waaaaay easier than a Power Bar.... It could catch on.

Experiencing much more than the race, we were on a tour that took us through several vineyards in the Bordeaux region. We learned about the region, how wine is made, rated, and the rich history surrounding each sensory stop. One of the most interesting and breathtaking was Chateaux du Taillan, the 500-year-old monastery where we had our pre-race dinner and party.... surreal. It was also where our host chose to honor the three of us who coincidentally had our birthdays on the same day. We had cake, sparklers, and birthday wishes sung by our new French, Slavic, Asian, Colombian, African and American friends.

A challenging recovery walk the day after the marathon (1,000 people embarked on the Balade {promenade}...a touted 9 K which wound up to be a 12 K) was a scenic hike through the vineyards and an opportunity to sample the wines of each. Entertained by a different band at each stop, festive doesn't even touch it.

We finished at a grandiose Chateau, the huge courtyard shaded almost entirely by a giant tree. A massive tent housed the full thousand, and we were served a four-course meal as efficiently as though we were in a small cafe. They say if you want to eat, go to France.... I agree. A dance floor and barrels of wine in the tent facilitated our dancing the afternoon away to a dynamic Latin band. Great recovery idea!

Our last full day took us to Chateau Haut Sarpe in the ancient walled city of St. Emilion. Enchanting with cobblestone streets, small wine shops and outdoor restaurants perched on side hills, we ate and shopped and relaxed in a small town atmosphere. The whole of the city is dwarfed by a cathedral built in honor of the hermit saint, St. Emilion, and topped with a massive clock tower that overlooks the city and the surrounding agricultural maze of grape vines and sunflowers.

That evening we had the gala of all galas, held in the Chateau Bouscaut. It was requested jacket and tie for men, elegant wear for women. A formal dinner served by black suited impeccable waiters, and with more silver around my plate than I have in my drawer at home, was mellowed by candle light, soft music and great stories. A fairytale finish to a magical party.

In short, don't miss Marathon Tours inimitable hosting of this magnificent experience. Time together, time alone, a wildly intelligent leader with wit, wisdom and wonder...and history like you never received in school. Accompanied, of course, by just the right wine.

A' votre santé'