
The following is from *Savoir-faire des Anciens - Un village des Corbières Maritimes, hier et demain*, my 190-page illustrated book that's just gone to print with French publishers Les Cahiers de la Salce. It's a single-informant, ethnographic oral history. As there isn't an English version of the book, I've just translated this extract from the introduction literally, word for word. The title itself I translate in my own mind less literally, as something like *Green Knowledge in the French hills, yesterday and tomorrow*.

After the siesta

Across 2012 and 2013, when he was 87 and 88 years old, the shepherd René Marty did fifty-six hours of formal ethnographic work with me in twenty-eight sessions in Feuilla, his village in the southernmost hills of the French Mediterranean. I asked him questions, he spoke and I transcribed his words, either at his side or later from digital recordings.



Besides him, the other big personality behind these pages, though you won't see it or feel it, is the weather. For the interviews we were almost always outdoors, so a range of extreme weathers blew in and out between the lines of this book. The direction of the wind, sun or rain dictated to him where we would sit for each interview. Most often, we sat on an oak tree-trunk at the edge of his vineyard, facing north over the foot of the Sierra mountain.

When the sea-winds from the Mediterranean below lobbed thick, sopping mists up into the valley, my glasses fogged over while I scribbled at his side, hunched over my damp notes. Other days, in the merciless north wind, I (enfolded head to toe in thermal mountaineering gear) would shiver and wince while he sat serene for two hours in his thin, threadbare v-neck sweater with the very frayed sleeves. My favourite sessions, meteorologically speaking, were when he would sit us on a different log facing the setting sun, our backs against his shed, looking out over the vineyard into the golden, balmy west.

On a few rare occasions we took shelter indoors, when he judged that it really was raining too hard. (Under a light rain we stayed outside, the ink blowing black watery puddles across my wet pages.) We'd sit just inside his back door, the door wedged open, so he could inhale the smell of the bare earth outside and watch the raindrops bounce on it.

Before I ever met him, the villagers had always said he was the one to interview, the one who knew everything about the old way of life. 'But', they'd add sadly with a gallic shrug, '*c'est impossible*'. It can't be done. 'He'd never talk to you because he's too shy. He never talks to anyone. And he would never talk to women anyway, even in the old days.'

At the tiny weekly veg-market, he always sat apart on a little wall to watch people making their purchases. One day, feeling really nervous and shouting loudly in my head that this was a bad idea, I went up to him and tried to introduce myself. He froze rigid, eyes riveted to the ground. I gushed on in my grating foreign accent about how we'd bought the wine-grower's house a hundred yards from his place, so we were *neighbours* really... and that I wanted to gather a few memories of what life was like in the village in the old days... and that, er, people had said he'd tell me about the old way of life... (a lie). No reaction. A fortress, his silence was as stony as the wall he sat on. He continued to study his torn old shoes.

Cheeks hot and blazing, I cursed myself. I should have listened to the villagers. *Of course* they knew best - local knowledge, *remember?* And how to get away from this horrible individual now? I garbled something like 'Well, I'd better be going' and was two yards away when he said...



Yes. I will talk to you.

I don't know everything. But it is true that I am the last one left now from the old world, and it seems to me that I should speak. I've been thinking for some time that if someone didn't ask me soon, it would be too late, and all that knowledge from the old world would be lost forever. I am approaching the end of my existence now. I feel like the last survivor of a disappeared world. All my contemporaries are gone, so I feel I have to speak for them too.

Because I've thought a lot about all this and sometimes I think, maybe they weren't so backward after all, our people in the old world. Because when I was a young man these villages were entirely self-sufficient, hunting and raising and growing all our own food and wines. And our food was so much more varied and healthier and tastier than anything you can get in supermarkets today. It was what they call the traditional Mediterranean diet now, do you know about it?

We had never heard of unemployment because once you live from the land there is work for everyone for life. We managed the natural resources here in a sustainable way, so there was always enough for everyone. You knew 300 people intimately, working and trading with them every day of your life, and chatting with them every evening. And there were always immigrant workers passing through as well, so four languages were spoken in these streets. Spanish, Catalan, Portugese - people just learned them off each other by listening.

Of course I'll tell you too about all the things that are so much better now. There's medicine, social security payments, products for getting fleas off kids... so many improvements, and lots of things I'd never want to go back to. But on the big things, I worry for the people of the future - not just in this valley but everywhere. When you see the state of the economy, the unemployment, the climate heating up, the scarcity of water, the health problems from industrial food... I just really wonder whether people's current way of living is *sustainable*. I won't see the outcome, but I worry for them.

So I wanted to give a proper account of some of the skills that we had here in the past, because some of them are likely to be useful again in the decades to come. There will have to be a different way of life then. Governments and experts are trying to plan for it already, aren't they - how to manage water, manage without petrol, produce healthier food... So I just wanted to leave an account that people can use in the future, to know the specific details of how things were done when things worked well here... What the skills and techniques were and exactly how it was done, when we lived self-sufficiently with full employment and little need for cash, and had a healthier, more varied diet.

And it's good to talk anyway, isn't it? To take the time to listen and discuss together. I find that people don't do that anymore, like we did in the old days. Our way of life was to sit and discuss together for hours every evening, all gathering in the different houses or sitting out in the street when it was warm enough. People would bring their own chair and up to a dozen would sit together for the evening, just talking about things. There was no television or radio, no books or magazines. For entertainment all we had was each other, and talk.

Because you have asked me, I will tell you all I know. Come on Sunday after the siesta, because I don't work in the fields on Sunday. I will wait for you at the back of my vineyard.