

MENUJETTE

Life at Les Saumais

Making
home in
the heart
of the
BOCAGE

Fancy a financier?

Number 1 | May 2021

INTRODUCTION

BOCAGE is the French term for a lush, enclosed cultural landscape, featuring a network of hedges, often with earth banks and solitary large trees in the hedgerows and small fields they enclose. While there aren't communities of plants and animals particularly associated with bocage, they are rich in both diversity and abundance, creating connectivity and providing safe passage across the landscape.

Our house, Les Saumais, sits right in the middle of one of the most intact areas of bocage in the southern Morvan. As our knowledge and appreciation of the wildlife in, and around, our garden and little *prairie* grows, our imagination, rather than being limited by the hedgerows, is gripped by their vitality. The discovery and exploration of a new wooded lane holds as much excitement now as once the exploration of silent coires and humid gorges did in Scotland.

Menuette is Charlotte's space where, now and again, she will share the best aspects of our life in France, separate from our Retreats.



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A while ago I posted a few photos of the winter garden here, and had this idea of writing “A year at Les Saumais” (*Une année chez Les Saumais*). This was back in January, when I had realised that from mid-January until early April, we had never actually been here, despite having had our cottage for over five years. We had spent Christmases and New Year celebrations here, visited in the summer and once during springtime...but never during February or March. So recently I have discovered that all along, there were hidden gems which we knew nothing of. Like snowdrops tucked in by the woodshed, lots of little patches of dog violets and lesser celandines. And so many garden birds. Goldfinches, greenfinches, siskins, blue, great, coal and long tailed tits, and two great spotted woodpeckers and jays on their daily visit to have their breakfast and lunch. And dinner. In fact, I do believe that once the word was ‘tweeted’ by the first visitors to the feeders, it was suddenly “Party at Les Saumais!”. The birds don’t have to abide by any lockdown or curfew, so they come and go at will, enjoying the never-ending buffet and, unbeknown to them, giving me such pleasure as I watch them from the window. I could “waste” many hours sitting with my camera, trying to get

the perfect capture but there is always work to be done. It’s amazing given that we aren’t running any Retreats at the moment just how busy we both are!

If you don’t already know, we moved here permanently last May, during the lockdown. This had been our plan ever since buying the cottage, before Brexit or pandemic. We got together all the documents we needed to travel - proof of house ownership, a signed statement from the local Mayor confirming that we were known to him and were travelling to relocate at the end of May, evidence that we no longer had a residence in Scotland - and headed south. A car towing a big box trailer trailer, a cat, Niall, Iona and myself, and barely any room to move our legs. The trailer was so full that we didn’t dare open the back door once it was locked. We could bring only the bare essentials and our valuables; the rest, stored temporarily in my sister-in-law’s barn, would follow in a removal van at some yet-to-be-determined time in the summer. Probably. We drove down to Dover - 900 km away - in a day. Niall was dumfounded that this was even possible!...and remarked that he didn’t understand why people stressed so much about the almost-empty M25.

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We arrived in Dover and it was all bit surreal. The roads were empty, there was no one to greet us in the guest house. We had our picnic tea and we tried to sleep but it was one of those times where you can't quite take in what you are doing. But we knew we just had to keep going and not think about how crazy it all was. And so the next morning, it was off to the ferry, passing through border control. The young French official barely looked at our papers, asking only the purpose of our journey. Even Gitzo our cat, was more than a little put out that they didn't want to see his passport! Don't they even know how much it cost to get that done?! Onwards to France, and a quiet and fast crossing, straight off the ferry and that was it. We saw no-one. Then we drove again, seemingly endless hours along the long toll routes and eventually into the beautiful Morvan Natural Regional Park. We arrived at half past ten at night, a bit emotional and dead tired but very, *very* relieved. On the doorstep there lay a beautiful array of flowers and plants left by my family earlier that day, and inside the fridge, bottles of Champagne, lovely ingredients and fresh fruit and vegetables. On the side, a roasted chicken, my mother had cooked for us was still warm, along with a note saying, "Welcome



Home. Chicken, chips, salad and bubbles all waiting for you...congratulations...you did it!. Enjoy your new home xx".

Although it was late, we spent time reacquainting ourselves with our lovely home, and introducing Gitzo to it. Boy was he glad to be out of his travel cage! At one o'clock in the morning, we sat down, opened the bubbles and ate our dinner. It was SO good! We fell in to bed and slept like we hadn't slept for weeks.

Two weeks of isolation followed because of the pandemic, and I have to say, it was a welcome time-off. The lead up to the move was, well let's put it this way, "interesting". The late spring and summer months were filled with further renovations and finishing work along with more new discoveries of life in our garden. Gitzo settled in and found lots of secret hiding holes to sleep in during the long hot days, and Iona developed a fondness for reading in the hammock. In fairness, she didn't get much chance to do this as she was cooking most of our meals and producing endless baking so that we could build and paint, panel and organise.



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And so now, after a late spring, summer, autumn and winter here, we've completed the entire cycle. The trees have mostly leafed out although some have been badly affected by late frosts in April when it dipped to minus 6 degrees several mornings in a row. It must have been hard for the migratory birds recently arrived from Africa and resident ones on eggs. But now we have warmer days and nights and the lovely early summer soundscape created by the nightingales and crickets, hoopoes and turtle doves fills the air on still evenings. We're just waiting on the golden oriole now. The first hornets have appeared in the house - which aren't welcome - along with what seems like a trillion ladybirds. I think they are like, "Erm! Hang on, you weren't here this time last year!" It's only a matter of time before baby wall lizards find their way into our bedroom, although I hope I don't find another one in my pillowcase when I waken up as happened last summer.

Work has started in earnest in the garden, with a new hedgerow of native trees and shrubs planted, more fruit trees, a beautiful ginkgo tree and a tulip tree added, and an 8 metre long polytunnel Niall has improvised. I have bought so many seeds that I'd better produce some good



crops of vegetables in it after all Niall's hard work. We have also started working in the *prairie* to create strips of wild flowers for pollinators and have sown one with sunflowers. Well I mean, now we have all of these birds feeding, we are going to have to grow their food! And when the bush crickets, grasshoppers and praying mantis reappear, they will also notice a difference to their summer residence. For now, the garden is no longer a jungle, but rather a network of little havens, insect hotels, log piles for basking spots and shade for the lizards and slow worms. We're leaving corners to become overgrown again to provide protection and for creatures we haven't even met yet. We've seen evidence of badgers in the *prairie*, watched fat dormice in the hedge and had a ceiling collapse thanks to beech martens making a latrine above it. But that's another story.

In amongst the garden work I have been baking and cooking. Baking in France is a very different proposition from the UK. The French don't really do cupcakes, scones or Victoria sponge. But give them their due, they did come up with madeleines, eclairs and macarons - although strictly speaking, the latter is an Italian invention; the idea

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of adding a filling is what makes them French. I have been teaching some lovely people online to make macarons. We both love what Zoom has enabled us to do this last year and I've been able to help people in Canada, Germany, the US and the UK become macaron masters.

France is rich in traditions and customs. One I like is *l'heure du goûter*. This is the hour after school when a cake is given as a reward for a long day of learning. At the weekends, the children may join in to make delicious goodies to devour.

One new delight I have been making is called a *financier*. It's a small almond cake, flavoured with *beurre noisette* (made by gently browning the butter) that is baked in a special silicone mould, usually in the shape of a small loaf. Once baked, they are supposed to resemble a small bar of gold bullion. The story is that they originated in the financial district of Paris, so that when the adults wanted their own after-work snack they could eat a delicious mini cake without spreading crumbs all over their smart suits. There are many varieties of flavours, but I am going to



share with you my lemon version. You will need to have the little silicone mould (you can order it [here](#)). On the subject of lemons I also want to share a *really* easy recipe for some zingy lemon curd. It is nice to have a pot or two in the fridge, and it's a handy gift once we start visiting friends' homes again. I always tie a nice ribbon around it and attach a label - *et voilà; un joli cadeau!*

Happy springtime to you all. Enjoy the blossom and bird-song and maybe even give yourself a morning to create your own *goûter* with the recipe that follows.



Lemon financiers



Makes 9-12 cakes, depending on the size of your mould pan/tray.

Preheat the oven to 200°C (400°F) 180° Fan, Gas 6

If your cake mould tray is silicone you won't have to butter, however if it is not a non-stick tray, then butter the cups of the pan generously.

Ingredients

- 113 g (½ cup) unsalted butter
- 4 large egg whites
- 150 g (¾ cup) sugar
- 50 g (½ cup) ground almonds
- 50 g (½ cup) plain flour
- ¼ tsp salt
- finely grated rind of a lemon
- Icing sugar for sprinkling

Method

- First of all, weigh out all the ingredients so everything is easily to hand.
- Melt the butter in a heavy based pan and gently, on a low heat, bubble for a couple of minutes so it has a slightly toasted flavour. Set aside to cool.
- Whisk the egg whites with an electric whisk on a high speed for 1-2 minutes until frothy and light.
- In a separate large bowl, combine all the dry ingredients and mix well.
- Add the dry ingredients including the lemon rind, to the whisked egg whites and fold in gently until just combined.
- Add the cooled melted butter to the mix and gently mix until the butter is completely incorporated.
- Spoon the batter evenly into the cake moulds, filling each one almost to the top.
- Bake for 10-12 minutes, or until the centre is slightly puffed up and the edges are golden and coming away slightly from the edge of the cups.

- Once out of the oven, leave in the moulds for about 5 minutes then carefully remove them and place on a wire cooling rack.
- Once they have cooled completely, dust with icing sugar. You can also ice them if you want to; use the juice from the lemon to combine with icing sugar, making a lemon runny icing to drizzle over the cakes.
- They are best eaten the day they are made, however they will keep for a couple of days in an airtight container at room temperature.

Easy lemon curd recipe

This makes one regular sized jar or two smaller ones. Make sure the jars are clean and sterilised (wash, then put in the oven at 50 ° C for about 20 minutes) and set aside.

Ingredients

- 1 egg plus the egg yolks from the lemon financier recipe
- or
- 3 eggs
- 100 g sugar
- 50 g butter
- Zest and juice of 2 large lemons

Method

Put all the ingredients into a heavy based pan, heat gently, and whisk well until it thickens. I use a small whisk the whole time and keep stirring so it all mixes well. It is ready after all the ingredients are well combined, and the mixture would nicely coat the back of a wooden spoon in consistency. Pour into the prepared jars and leave to cool. Put the lids on to seal and keep in the fridge. It will last for a couple of weeks.

Charlotte x



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