

Reflections in the Fountain

French culture, language and my life. By KATIE GALBREATH, BA'02

Having studied French for six years, I thought I possessed at least a fundamental vocabulary. But during my semester abroad in France, I came across a word that was unfamiliar, that did not translate easily. Every day a friend, a professor, or a member of my French family told me that I had to *profiter* from one thing or another. There is no English equivalent, but the closest translation would be “to take advantage of.” I learned the definition right away, but it took me a semester in the sun off the coast of southern France to melt the rigidity of my habits.



NEIL BRANE

Aix-en-Provence is a beautiful town in the region of France known as Provence, which borders the French Riviera. Provence has a rich history that dates as far back as the Roman Empire, but is a cultural city also concerned with its place in modern France. The Romans used the town as a military base and resort due to its natural thermal springs and its strategic location between

Italy and Spain. Today, Aix, home to the artist Cezanne and author Emile Zola, flaunts its position as the intellectual and cultural capital of Provence while maintaining its 18th-century charm, with most buildings, cafes, universities and infamous fountains dating back to the mid-1700s.

While abroad I intended to take as many classes as possible so I would be able to finish all the requirements for my major. Instead of spreading obligatory courses over my last three semesters, I preferred to sacrifice my semester in France in hopes that I would have more time to pursue other interests upon my return to Vanderbilt.

One day at the end of September, I opened the heavy sculpted door and exited from the shadowy hall of the Vanderbilt-in-France Institute. I saw a vibrant blue sky framed by the contrasting blond stone of the bell tower of the 13th-century Saint Jean de Malte Cathedral across the street, and my intentions of spending the afternoon studying in my apartment melted away. Instead, I bought some cheese and an apple from my favorite vendor at the open-air market in the center of town and spent the afternoon resting on

the lawn in a local park, realizing that my life was in danger of becoming a series of effervescent hopes for tomorrow. I thought of an experience from a backpacking trip a year earlier when arriving at the summit of a mountain in southwest Utah. I no longer could see the mountain itself, but only the small patch of ground upon which I stood at the moment, and realized that in my quest to rush to the top, I had forgotten to regard the view along the way. The destination is meaningless without the journey.

So I began to learn how one *profiter*s. I didn't abandon my studies; I enriched them.

Some weekends I traveled. I climbed to the top of the Monte Sainte Victoire and spent the night in the refuge for hikers on the summit, where I learned the French names for constellations from an old man and his wife who were also there for the night. I took a trip to Arles and saw the ancient coliseum still standing as a reminder of the region's Roman history. I went to the beach at Cassis and spent a whole day perched in a tree on a cliff overlooking the Mediterranean while I read a book and wrote in my journal. Other weekends, I stayed in Aix. I would get up early to take advantage of the fresh vegetable market Saturday morning, to spend afternoons in the park reading or in a café, and to spend nights out with friends.

My new determination to *profiter* appeared in little aspects of my daily life, such as night-



NATALIE COX

ly dinners with my French family, the Faurets. Whereas before I had the habit of going to dinner on time and leaving right away afterwards, I tried to arrive in time to watch the news with Monsieur Fauret or sit in the kitchen with Madame Fauret as she prepared the evening meal. I made an effort to stay afterwards to talk or listen to music with their teenage son, Pierre. Thanks to one such conversation after dinner concerning the differences between French and American food, I learned the valuable lesson that the word *preservatif* is a false friend in the French language, meaning “condom” instead of “preser-

vatives,” as I had intended. I now know that the difference between the two cuisines is that American food contains more *conservateurs*. I will always laugh when I remember the faces of my French family when I told them that even though French food is rich and full of cream, I believe it is healthier because at least it is not full of condoms.

I would like to say that this change for the better was the result of some grand revelation or the result of my own thoughts, but it wasn't. As I sat in my favorite café next to the water of one of Aix's many fountains reflecting on my last few months, I realized I

I bought some cheese and an apple from my favorite vendor at the open-air market in the center of town and spent the afternoon resting on the lawn in a local park, realizing that my life was in danger of becoming a series of effervescent hopes for tomorrow.

would be lying if I didn't admit that the decision had not been my own, for no one can spend a significant amount of time in Provence without absorbing the relaxed, easy-going *joie de vie* typical of the region. In English, there is no direct or succinct translation for the French verb *profiter*. It's a little word, but it communicates the large idea that one must always enjoy things while they last, because nothing lasts forever.

Katie Galbreath, who worked as an intern in the Vanderbilt Office of Alumni Publications, received her B.A. from the College of Arts & Science in December.