



Fifteenth-Century Farmhouse

Beebe Bahrami

I made my way to Petrus and Jean’s olive stand just as Jean had placed the last folded table into the old market van. He climbed in and slowly made his way off the market square with other merchants’ vans in a row and onto the road north out of town.

The van was piled high with great containers of olives, spices, nuts, and dried fruits that could keep a man going for months if he ever got lost in the remote Massif Central. The smell inside was ten times the intoxication of Fez’s market, so how Jean could drive and think straight seemed a marvel to me. As he inched away, waiting for the passage to clear of people and other merchants packing up for the day, Petrus and I went the opposite direction and walked to her little blue car, the dashboard of which she stroked like a good horse as soon as we got in.

“We’ve been together since 1976, this car and I. Oh, and the adventures we’ve had!” She then recounted all the drives across Europe she or she and Jean had made in it.

“We even found Isabel in this car on a trip to Greece.” The kitten had apparently insisted on going home with them and they drove her back to the [Dordogne](#), where she has since become the cat of legacy. She was successful in creating generations of healthy and sound progeny. Moreover, Petrus explained, Isabel the cat and her progeny were working cats. No one lounges about at the farmhouse. Everyone is industrious. The cats were never fed cat food but instead given table scraps and then left to clean up any rodent situation around the house.

As we left Sarlat, also on the road north, Petrus began to tell me how she and Jean had been in the Dordogne for nearly thirty-five years. Before then

they lived in Holland, France, Saudi Arabia, and Indonesia, but finally decided to settle in one place and give their two sons *terra firma*.

I was curious how they’d chosen the Dordogne as their permanent home.

“We were driving through the southwest of France and came around a bend, and we just felt something. Our car also had trouble so we had to find a place for the night. We were in Terrasson. We found a place. We found help for our car. The locals came and shared their food and wine with us and acted as if we were long-lost friends.”

Petrus took her eyes off the road long enough to look at me and smile. “How often does one pass through a place and experience that?” She stroked the dashboard again. *Good horse, you found us home.*

I had been thinking the same thing. How often? Not very. Though a lot of people seemed to have found just that when they came here. Was there something like resonance fields that were left by the first humans? These resonance fields were something I’d read about years earlier in the work of biologist Rupert Sheldrake. He called it morphic resonance, a sort of resonance pattern that evolves, and he discovered that all living species lay these down and that they are transmitted through generations without obvious genetic involvement. Could the morphic resonance for *Homo sapiens* be especially thick and rich in the Dordogne given our long presence here?

Well north of Sarlat by now, I looked east and could see the vista of the Massif Central unfold in its entirety. It was France’s south central volcanic mountain plateau that separated the east from the west. It was a stunning millefeuille, a thousand layers of hills, colors, and changing contours. A

image info

Excerpted from [Cafe Oc: A Nomad’s Tales of Magic, Mystery, and Finding Home in the Dordogne of Southwestern France](#) (Shanti Arts, 2016)

cloudbank seemed half hidden, ready to spring unexpected precipitation on the inhabitants down below. It reminded me of where I grew up in Colorado, right on the edge of where the plains became the mountains. The mountains always half hid cloudbanks that were far bigger and menacing than one suspected. Many a late spring day had begun sunny and dry only to end with inches of freezing rain or snow.

We then turned off and drove through a sizeable village and then onward through a narrower road that began to snake and wind to the hamlet near their farmhouse. “It’s a very old place,” said Petrus as we coasted through, passing a beautiful little Romanesque church and five houses huddled around it. “All around us are Gallo-Roman ruins, Merovingian tombs, and even dinosaur fossils.”

The hamlet’s name actually came from a variant of an archaic Latin word for “ancient” that ended with the suffix “-ac.” This tacked on yet another and older ancestry. This suffix, a holdover from the Gallic language that made its way into the local Latin, meant “place of.” Many locales in France, most concentrated in the south, have the suffix “-ac” that identifies it directly to places inhabited by the Gauls who lived there before the Romans, such as Bergerac and Carsac, and Carnac up north. But as ancient as the Gauls are, my mind reeled further back to the most ancient inhabitants.

“Dinosaur fossils?” I asked, sitting up straight and looking out the window, as if that would help me see them better.

“You’ll see. One day we’ll make a walk and I’ll show them to you.”

Saint Sacerdos’ spiral pillar pattern rushed up my spine.

We next turned off the narrow road onto a narrower one. Through oak and pine forest we went, passing a pigeon tower with medieval Romanesque faces carved under the lintels

that looked like school children who pressed their noses onto the window and made faces at passersby. We made a final turn into a long driveway leading to a twelfth-century ruin next to a restored fifteenth-century one. Beyond the stone buildings was a kitchen and flower garden and then elegant sweeps of rolling hills extending beyond them. A horse nearby was grazing in one of the fields. She looked up at us and neighed, then went back to the serious business of eating winter grass.

“Welcome to our home,” cheered Petrus.

The twelfth-century ruin was the original farmhouse. Petrus and Jean’s oldest son was rehabilitating it stone by stone.

“We found that the fifteenth-century central portion was the most habitable, so we camped there as we fixed it up, rebuilt the stone walls, restored the floor, replaced the decayed roof . . .”

“You just camped here?” I asked as Petrus opened the front door to the central space.

“Sure,” she smiled that engaging Kermit-Swan Lake mix. “It was fun but not easy. The place was covered in brambles and had plenty of snakes.”

I felt a different sort of chill go up my spine, no spiral, just a straight, freezing shot up.

“Look at the fireplace,” she went on, “who needs any other room?”

I walked to it and my head cleared the stone overhang without needing to duck. Inside, chains and a hook waited for a black kettle pot filled with stew. Leaning against the back stone wall were various iron and copper cooking pots, pans, and implements. Petrus did almost all her cooking in this great fireplace. She even had a specialized iron for burning the sugar on crème brûlée, giving it that final candy caramel cap.

As I stood inside the fireplace and pondered all the culinary possibilities, Petrus told me the meal plan for the day. “I think I’ll roast a leg of lamb for dinner, along with grilled leeks and

artichokes, but do you mind roasted duck with an endive salad for lunch? It’s just a simple little meal.”

A simple little meal? I was speechless. I nodded two enthusiastic yeses, and my eyes fell upon an inlaid mosaic floor. I had been so drawn to the walk-in fireplace that I’d neglected to look at the splendor beneath my feet. There in the center of that great room lay a large circle in stone filled with concentric patterns forming a Maltese cross. The whole thing was the size of a decent throw rug. The overall pattern gave a rippling effect of a stone plunked into the center of a still pond. Petrus saw where my eyes had fixated.

“Can you believe we didn’t know the floor was there? It was covered under centuries of dirt. When Jean cleared it, he saw the pattern. Then, patiently and painstakingly, he removed the stones and reset them, filling in the bald spots.”

Jean walked in from his adjoining workshop at that moment, from the wall behind the fireplace, smiling proudly. “The stones are oblong river rock, four to five inches long.” He indicated that the mosaic showed the small tip of the stones, that beneath our feet were vertical river rocks standing at attention, making the inlaid work several inches strong and deep. Nothing would alter that floor for centuries. In that moment, from floor to fireplace, I understood the self-sufficient and enduring satisfaction of existing in a place that had known centuries and millennia of constancy, even if through wars and pestilence, of which the Dordogne had plenty. . .

We worked together in the kitchen making lunch and prepping dinner. The kitchen was at one corner of the great big room with the fireplace, and all along the old stone walls hung copper pots, ceramic vessels, and cooking utensils originating from around the world. A broad wooden counter framed the kitchen’s view out onto the fireplace and allowed visitors to sit on bar stools on the

other side and participate in the culinary madness therein. I sat on just such a bar stool and noticed that every imaginable tool was there all around us and, upon saying so, learned how much Petrus loved to cook, having grown up with a mother who did the same, with a good deal of adventure, skill, and intense enthusiasm.

She placed legs and thighs of already-cooked duck confit in a pan, set them over the fire, and directed me to rinse the endive salad, separating the leaves and arranging them in individual salad bowls in a sunflower pattern. Back on the other side of that thick wooden counter, Petrus next turned to tying the ankle end of a leg of lamb to a string that had a half lemon strung on it like a bead, the juicy cut side facing down toward the lamb. She pushed fresh rosemary and garlic into the meat all around its thick fatty surface, rubbed it with olive oil, salt, and pepper, and hung the leg by the string from the hook over the fire. Satisfactorily suspended in midair over the blazing flames, she gave it a spin and from there it took care of itself, dancing a waltz to the crackle of fire music, twirling this way, then that, thermodynamics and lamb in a synchronized swim. To one side of the pyro-dance, the duck continued to warm and crisp, making those little sizzling and popping sounds that make one’s mouth water while giving off a succulent almost nutty fragrance of dark meat, fat, and salt.

Now was when the cats made their appearance. Ferdinand was a feline after my own heart, with his tiger-striped gray and black fur and his take-charge-I own-you manner of alighting upon my lap and settling in after he established that I would tend to his ears and back. He spoke clear good French, and we spoke to each other as he sat in my lap and leaned his head against my shoulder so I would rub it. A bit cheeky. I was in love.

Minicat was more concerned with social etiquette and jumped up onto the empty bar stool



image info

to my right and stared at me with a litany of greeting meows. Soon both slipped away, their welcome greeting complete, and established themselves on the stone floor four feet from the fire as lamb and duck dripped and sizzled. Both sat firmly on their haunches, backs straight, tails swishing left then right, staring without blinking while licking their chops. They had their own synchronized meat-cooking song and dance.

In one bow to total modernity, on the counter sat a food processor, which I immediately learned Petrus employed in making dipping sauces with herbs, varieties of nuts, oils, and just the right splash of spices and vinegar or lemon. She made such a dip for the fresh endive by pulverizing almonds, adding paprika, sea salt, pepper, lemon, fresh aromatic

herbs plucked from her winter kitchen garden out front, and healthy splashes of walnut oil.

The duck was ready, and the lamb began to give off its agrarian herb-fed cooking smells. As if on cue, the cats moved a foot closer, still patiently but covetously waiting their turn, one mesmerized into a trance by the swinging-twirling pendulum of lamb leg over the fire.

Lunch and dinner bled into each other. Petrus explained that market days were like this, a late lunch followed by dinner. In between there was a punctuation mark of a small siesta, a mandatory practice allowing Petrus and Jean to recover from the demands of the market.

We ate our crispy roasted duck and our endive leaves dressed in the nutty dip. Jean

brought out a special rosé from Greece, one that had a slight resin from the Retsina but dry and full like a rosé from Provence. We contentedly ate and drank and, as our tummies filled, the eyelids of my two hosts grew heavier and heavier. After a long day of hard work and delayed eating, they took their siesta, and I set out on foot and took the narrow road in to the ancient hamlet half a mile away. I went right to the church at its center, pushed open the solid wooden door, and sat in the small chapel. I wanted to reflect and pray and feel its old stones, and to see if, as the locals told me, it would reveal its stories.

It felt old, older than its eleventh-century construction, a beautiful early Romanesque structure of local limestone. Just before I entered, I noticed a carved wolf over the entrance door that stood alone and was unusual in grin, posture, and form, almost certainly speaking of a local and lost legend from long ago that meant something to people here and nowhere else. I thought of the Lébéro. Could this be? The grin suggested, yes. The smile broadened. I blinked a few times but he held it firm. Not. Your. Imagination.

Inside, to the right side was a stone tomb, its lid off. I got up and wandered over to it. A plaque explained that it was one of the Merovingian tombs found when they dug in the village center to do public works and found numerous tombs, all undisturbed, all around and under the church. The tombs dated to the seventh century. Until then, residents had thought their village was as old as the eleventh-century church, but these sepulchers pushed the age back four hundred more years. Most stunningly, the human skeletons inside were whole and still dressed in their burial clothes and adornments. Several were taken to Bordeaux for study and preservation. The vast majority were still underfoot, a few feet under, everywhere in the central square of the village church, which was essentially the entire hamlet.

I walked out, gingerly, thinking of the inhabitants below and then walked back to the farmhouse to find the household waking up. It was time to launch into more serious bread breaking over conversations about Greece, Iran, Holland, France, America, and about poetry, mysticism, music, and painting.

The lamb leg was ready and the cats had behaved well. They had at last curled up and taken *une sieste* as they waited from their spot three feet away. Occasionally, Ferdinand opened one eye to check on the appendage. I'm sure he donned the occasional grin, like the wolf of the village church.

The cats' patience would be rewarded with scraps offered freely later, after we'd eaten our fill. This was why they behaved. They knew good form delivered good results. It seemed a scene not far off from the earliest of times when cats and dogs may have actually domesticated themselves, rather than with help from us, given our Paleolithic trash heaps and fire pits. They were content to cast their lot with us some 10,000 years ago. (Possibly even earlier, especially for dogs, whose connection to us humans is now thought to go back as many as 40,000 years.) In this way, they diminished the need for pure hunting for food with a steadier food source: us. Petrus and Jean's cats were walking in the ancestors' footsteps too.

Petrus stepped back into the kitchen and set to work on the artichokes. As she trimmed and scooped them out and rubbed generous amounts of garlic into the hearts, I was put in charge of trimming and cleaning the leeks. As we worked side by side, inedible leek and artichoke leaves flying into the compost, I asked Petrus about what I'd overheard from Vincent the bookseller about those copper wires. "What was that all about?" I asked.

Very matter-of-factly she explained that the earth has electromagnetic energy, and it is patterned; it forms a grid. "You can even map it, like with the device Vincent described. It's a really

good idea in your home because you don't want to sleep or sit on an intersection in the energy axes."

We briefly interrupted the conversation to arrange the artichokes and leeks on a grill over the fire. The grill was two-layered and had a hinge that allowed it to open so food could be placed between bars, leaving enticing grill marks on both sides. Also, with one flip of the attached handle, the device could be easily turned. Petrus gave the lamb another twirl because it had slowed in its rotations.

She then went on to explain that you could almost always tell where these energy lines are simply by watching dogs and cats. "Cats love to sit on the intersections of the energy grid." She glanced at Ferdinand and Minicat who hadn't budged even when she went past them to place

the artichokes and leeks. "But for humans and dogs, that feels like negative energy, and we don't want to be in it. If you can't sleep well, you might discover that you've placed your bed on one of the negative energy spots. So, just move it a couple feet in any direction and see if your sleep improves. Get it off the intersection. You'll also notice that cats will love that spot, but dogs will never lie there. Avoid as a rule where the cat is sitting, but put your chair or bed where you find the dog."

I didn't know what the science of all this was, but I knew exactly what she meant about cats and dogs. Sometimes cats seem to sit in the most sinister of places, and dogs will have nothing to do with those spots. Petrus went further.

"Cats are also energy clearers of negative energy. Often they'll be sitting in a place with dark energy

and quietly clearing it. It's a wonderful thing that they do." She laughed. "When you see a cat sitting, looking wickedly busy without moving a whisker, he's likely working very hard at clearing energy. Maybe it feeds him in some way."

You have to admit, cats are wiggly creatures compared to dogs, who are terribly vulnerable and transparent. I was glad to have such a clear explanation because the fact was I had heard more people than Vincent speak of these energy grids. They were woven into the cultural lore of the region and whether one partook or not of this lore, it was important to people here and spoke of their intimate relationship with their earth. It offered one reason among several as to why they were more respectful of the Earth and its health than many people are elsewhere.

Jean came out from his rest. As Petrus put finishing touches to dinner and the lamb reached perfection, he selected and uncorked a bottle of robust earth-red Bordeaux and invited me to sit by the fire. Ferdinand took his cue and leaped into my lap. As the striped cat spoke French to me, demanding ear caresses, Jean and I talked in English about Greece and Iran, wine and food, his history, my history, our families' histories, and arts and crafts.

I learned that Jean was a master craftsman and worked in wood and stone and restored historic houses in the region, a lyrical move for an engineer with a passion for the past. He spoke about the stones and wood he worked with as incarnated with spirit. He took his time. He respected the soul. He didn't take on any work for which he didn't feel a spirited connection. He was also sensitive to the energy of places and the energy that flowed in those grids. It's a form of consciousness in construction that is missing today in building our homes. What if, whether one believed in these energy grids or not, we built with awareness, with respect and presence?

Would it not change the energy of our abodes and how we lived in them?

This conversation continued through lamb, grilled artichokes, grilled leeks dipped into another nutty-spicy dip, garden plucked salad, a cheese plate, and digestive lemon verbena herbal tea.

Before I knew it, it was late at night and time for Petrus to take me back to Sarlat. She had offered for me to sleep over, a new toothbrush and a freshly made bed at the ready just for me, but I had left the shutters open at Le Chardon and remembered Nadiya's admonitions about the care and feeding of medieval stone buildings. I had not anticipated my lunch to last so delightfully long. I had to get back.

We drove through dark forest and a sky so black I could see the Milky Way. The only movement outside of ourselves was the occasional flitting of a deer or the possible distant shuffle of wild boar. Back home, as I began to close my shutters, I looked out from my third-story windows onto the Place du Peyrou as a group of German tourists gathered beneath and around Étienne de La Boétie's sixteenth-century home. It was lit up by theatrical lights mounted on the square's rooftops. The Germans craned their heads up to take in its romantic carved designs of cherub faces, hearts, ropes, and geometric forms, temporarily turning their backs to the medieval cathedral.

Every day so far, I had watched new sets of just-arriving visitors get their first view of the medieval magic of this place. I loved the expression of awe on their faces as they took in for the first time the unfolding beauty of the well-preserved medieval town, slowly peeling its petals back for fuller revelation the deeper they walked in. Sometimes the tour group was Japanese or English, American, Spanish, Dutch, or French. Rarely did they look up and see me, making my perch both a bird's-eye view and a fly on the wall. It had to be one of the best seats in town. ❖



image info