



Beginning French: Lessons from a Stone Farmhouse

Les Américains

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First they took French. Then they took leave of their senses. They bought a 400-year-old cottage in rural France from an ad on the Internet. Their “completely restored” farmhouse certainly looked charming, but the pool leaked, the walls cracked, and the electricity fizzled whenever they switched on the kettle.

This is the wry and witty memoir of les Américains, Eileen and Marty, joined by their chef-daughter Sara. Their dream of being French leads them into uncharted territory where “oh la la” takes on a whole different meaning.

Before they can even move in, a freak accident destroys the interior of the house. An ancient wisteria threatens to uproot the kitchen floor. The wildlife continually tries to take up residence, and the pool becomes a watery hole that swallows up euros. And then there’s Jacqueline.

The only way Les Américains can salvage their sanity is by adopting a simple, time-tested mantra: “Have a setback, have a drink.” Soon they’re buying rosé by the case.

Whether you’re a traveler, foodie, Francophile, or home-improvement veteran, Beginning French will enchant you with its vivid portrayal of part-time life in southwest France. Home chefs will enjoy the 12 Dordogne-inspired recipes, and English speakers will appreciate the interactive glossary of French terms.

Beginning French: Lessons from a Stone Farmhouse Details

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From Reader Review Beginning French: Lessons from a Stone Farmhouse for online ebook

Pam says

I am an admitted Francophile, while never actually setting foot in the country. I read anything and everything I can about it, it's people and it's culture. So, I didn't hesitate to read Beginning French by les Americains.

This was a quick, light, easy read. The Americains are a couple who bought a 400 year old cottage in rural France. They are still living in America, but get over to France whenever they can to work on the cottage. And, it does need a lot of work.

Like any old house, especially one 400 years old, there is a lot of work to be done. Boilers break, electricity seems to work on it's own schedule, and walls may be leaning a bit!

The stories are charming with glimpses into the French culture. The food is lovingly described and there are even a few recipes in the book. I will definitely be making the Fresh Sgroppini - a champagne and sorbet drink that sounds wonderful.

A nice fun read, especially if you love to travel, love France, or just like reading about people's adventures with old homes and different cultures.

I received an ARC copy of this book.

Patti Wilson says

Fun read

I enjoyed reading how les Americains found a stone house in France, dealt with its issues with humor, met some new friends, and enjoyed having their daughter cook authentic French cuisine. Recipes included.

Alina says

****Note: I received a copy curtesy of Netgalley and the authors (Les Américains) in exchange for an honest review.*

A few years ago, I read Peter Mayle's "A Year in Provence" - simply loved it! Unfortunately, the present work couldn't even get near that (for me, of course, I don't speak for others).

Dislikes :

- I couldn't connect with the authors at all
- the pronunciation advices: if you don't know french, try to refrain from teaching others

Issigeac (pronounced IS-he-Jack)

Leclerc. The name is pronounced Look-CLARE, as in "Look, Clare, fourteen brands of pale blue deodorant!"

- making fun of French people's pronunciation, when you cannot utter a word in their language..

"Wiss wiffy?" he asked. "Wiffy? I don't understand." "Do you want to connect wissout, um..." He made a pulling-apart gesture with his two hands, fingers pinched together. "A wire? Oh, wi-fi! Oui."

- the 'not being rich' part being repeated over and over, though their constant transcontinental flights, buying habbits and especially the attitude kind of say otherwise (I don't mind people being rich, but I mind when they pretend - with no reason whatsoever - that they are not)

"Who's going to clean the place while we're there? Who'll do the dishes? Vacuum the floors? Make the beds? 'International Laundry Consultant' isn't a title I want on my résumé."

- the jealousy / infidelity (?) parts were strange and the reactions blown out of proportion
- they seem to do the laundry a few times a day...??

Likes :

- the stories actually made me want to visit some of the mentioned places (I've already been to Provence twice but there's still **so much more** to be seen there)
- some rather smart phrases, like this one:

[...] the Brits have a historic claim on the place. They lost it in the Hundred Years' War. And now, six hundred years later, it's as if they're quietly buying it back, bit by bit, hoping no one will notice.

- Sara's recipes helped win an extra star (my mouth still waters when I'm thinking of figues rôties au chèvre et pancetta)
-

Melissa says

This is a really charming book about an American couple who buys a rustic farmhouse in France. There is French sprinkled throughout their conversations in the book, but nothing too complicated- plus in the e-book version all French words and phrases are linked to a dictionary in the back of the book.

I enjoyed reading about their experiences, which no matter how problematic (walls falling, electricity failing) were always written in a fun "c'est la vie" way and never in a whining, poor us way. I'd recommend this for any Francophiles or fans of Under the Tuscan Sun.

Pia Vidal says

The books that I enjoy the most are travel books and cookbooks. This book is a combination of both.

I thought I was going to love it...but I didn't. It is an ok book. I wouldn't tell you not to read it but I wouldn't recommend it either. I was not able to connect with the author.

He keeps talking about not being rich but certainly not acting that way. Not that is bad being wealthy, but the

contradictions on what he says and what he does...I guess they annoyed me a bit.
I guess I was expecting something like Peter Mayle's "A Year in Provence". I was a little disappointed.

Ren says

I received a copy from Netgalley and the publisher in exchange for an honest review.

This book is adorable. I started reading having given myself permission to bail if it got obnoxious, self-important, or eye-rollingingly insufferable (like rich people soul-searching and eating things abroad while gawking at local customs). I've started without finishing countless memoirs about the expat experience for these reasons, so I set my expectations low. Unnecessarily, as it turns out, because this was a lovely, charming story. Actually, a collection of them: it's a book of connected anecdotes about the experience of an American couple managing life, culture shock and unexpected home renovations in an old farmhouse in a medieval village in the Aquitaine region.

It appealed to me as an expat and, although I don't live there currently, I've lived in France too, including a stint in the countryside similar to theirs. So with a somewhat similar background as perspective, I was interested in others' experience. They perfectly encapsulated what it's like to be an outsider in the French countryside, without painting themselves as insensitive, blundering Americans (a reputation we really do have to fight in Europe). Instead, they tell stories as thoughtful commentary on their experiences and perceptions with context and a lot of self-awareness.

Their descriptions were beautifully vivid; nostalgic for those who've been there and enticing for those who haven't: you could taste every bite from the farmer's markets, smell every sprig of lavender, see every star in the same sky that inspired Van Gogh's *Starry Night*. It's a sweet, lighthearted glimpse of the lifestyle, in a kind of warts-and-all way: a friend of theirs relates a story of meeting a neighbor who's in the middle of wringing a chicken's neck, and without missing a beat enthusiastically greets her new neighbors. It's not all pastoral romance and scenery that looks like a background frame in *Beauty and the Beast*.

I liked their sense of humor, and that they mentioned what they'd done to get where they are, so they didn't come across as entitled and sick of the rat race that had made them more money than they knew what to do with, hence running away and using it to build a new life of dreamy vacationing. They're down to earth and relatable. Anyone who reads this will want to attend one of their boozy summer dinner parties. The writing is great too, even with a bit of corniness near the end. I know it's a memoir, so it's probably in some way truthful, but some of the tension felt manufactured for the sake of a story arc and detracted from the overall tone.

And (I admit it's maybe an unfair criticism on my part, as I'm totally jealous of their ability to live in both worlds) - their French house is for vacations. They stay a few months in summer and return to the U.S. Ultimately this isn't an expat, uprooted life - trading in the security of one world for the unfamiliarity and possibility of another one. They get to keep a foot in each place. And their problems in the old farmhouse were mostly covered by the insurance company, despite the immense hassle, so even those issues weren't quite so massive or impossible to overcome. The all's well that ends well tone was strangely comforting though. For comparison, read some of the frequent reporting the *Daily Mail*'s done on expats (mostly British - there's such a cute joke in the book about this!) who sell everything and haul over the Channel to France only to be completely disillusioned by the farming work, screwed over by contractors, and drained of savings. Maybe we should all take a page from this book instead and when possible, have a little of the best

of both worlds.

Thanks for the opportunity to read and review it!

Randal White says

"Beginning French" is a truly lovely gem of a story. The authors, along with their adult daughter, purchase a "home" in a tiny medieval village named Issageac, in the Dordogne area of France.

I know what you're thinking; you have heard this story before, right? I, too, have read many books with the same premise. However, in this case, the authors have created a different atmosphere, not all is sunshine and wine, nor gloom and doom. Their approach is one of honesty, whereby they lay bare their souls in describing their journey to try to "become French" (albeit with a good dose of humor).

Whether it's describing a local "night market", toads in the swimming pool, the Lascaux caves (fascinating descriptions), or an overly-amorous carpet salesperson, you will feel like you are standing next to the authors as they have their experiences.

They have some great insights into life also. That money doesn't equate with wealth. Wealth comes from investing in things that matter. Things like family, experiences, learning about other people and cultures.

I became emotionally invested in this book. So much so that at one point, I found myself genuinely concerned about their future (no spoiler allowed). That's a rarity for me these days, and it was a nice feeling.

And if the story isn't enough to pique your interest, there are numerous wonderful recipes in the book, created by their daughter, a chef.

Do yourself a favor and check this book out. You will not be disappointed!

Christopher Roden says

Owning a holiday home in the Dordogne seems to be a very British occupation. It's somewhat of a refreshing change, therefore, to find Les Américains (Eileen McKenna, Marty Neumeier, and their chef daughter Sara pursuing 'the British dream'. La Rêve is the name of their property (or Le Rêve, as Marty is corrected by a helpful villager just as he has finished painting the name on the outside wall). Situated in the Dordogne, just south of Bergerac, Le Rêve is to become their home away from home, their true dream. Of course, dreams have a habit of becoming reality, in their case exploding boilers, earthen floors, rotten floorboards, and the like, all of which is to be expected in a 400-year old property. Les Américains remain undaunted.

BEGINNING FRENCH is something of a love letter to the Dordogne: from the food (and the book is enhanced by a number of Sara's delicious recipes), the wines, the first experience of boules, to the fascinating sounding marché nocturnes (night markets where one can dine cheaper than eating at home). It is truly a dream.

Written in a very readable style, and conjuring for this reader many happy memories, BEGINNING FRENCH is highly recommended. Les Américains - je vous envie!

Emily says

Beginning French was such a treat to read. My husband and I lived in France for six months, so much of

what they talk about I definitely remember and understand! Their writing is wonderful because it's clear and concise - and often witty, my favorite kind. I snorted when Marty said he had the same ear for French numbers as a German Shepherd did for Shakespeare sonnets, because IT'S SO TRUE. French numbers are the worst, and I had the same problem.

They also do what is surprisingly difficult for travel writers to do - they have a good balance. They are honest about their struggles, but they also recognize and understand the blessing they have in living in such a beautiful foreign country. Too many people lean toward either endless complaining about differences, or such lavish adoration that I wonder if they're lying. Marty and Eileen were hilarious and truthful and optimistic and honest, and I loved the book because of it.

I appreciated the recipes they included in the book as well, because they sounded delicious. My only complaint is that I didn't want this to end!

Eva says

The thought of owning a house in France just sounds so wonderful. To experience what Eileen and Marty are with their purchase of a house known as Le Reve, the dream, is exactly that a dream with some nightmares along the way.

The two together write about their life before France and their life in France, the trials, tribulations, laughs and loves. I enjoy reading about even the small mundane things like a VCR to the excitement of town festival. Their friends are ones that I would love to sit around a picnic table enjoying a glass of wine with a discussing the news.

The writing is fluid and the story is wonderful, escaping into this book was a vicarious escape of the best kind.

Thank you to netgalley and the publisher for the copy in exchange for my honest review.

Yodamom says

3.5 stars

Have you ever dreamed of just buying a house in the French countryside ? Imagine living in the beauty of the country surrounded by bounty that is France. This couple did just that, they bought an old farmhouse in the middle of the country, know little French, and little about the ins and outs of living there. They jumped, and had an adventure few of us could even dream of living.

They purchase an old home with all the charm and hidden issues of a old structure. Things go wrong, very wrong, but the beauty and the peace the place offer makes them push on. It does get hard the strain puts a strain on their relationship.

Trips through the countryside, to small villages are wonderful to read. The meals are delightful, a celebration of good food and company. Recipes are included !

I really enjoyed most of this trip with them. It was slow paced relaxed and peaceful even when walls fell and floors went wonky. There was one part of the story that I did not enjoy and it was towards the end. Their was an issue with jealousy, that seemed so trivial compared to everything else I'm not sure how it even got put in

the book. The way it was handled was treated in my humble opinion like there was an infidelity. I thought one of them acted extremely selfish and childish basically. It just didn't fit in with how they treated each other the whole story. This part really bothered me, it was a thorn on a rose petal, it didn't belong.

Lolly K Dandeneau says

This isn't just for those of you in the throes of Francophilia... Though there is a certain charm about all those foreign countries, with both sides of my family from Hungary I understand all the charm European countries have for Americans. Just as much as any foreign place, I had my own daydreams about Japan before we moved there. What is lovely about this memoir is the honesty. What looks like a dream from afar may be crumbling within. Hey, part of a home's charm is all the leaks and cracks... maybe more of a nightmare than a dream on your pocketbook but it's the lessons your learn on the way that is the sweetest fruit. That fruit may be fermented and taste like a glass of wine... but whatever keeps you going!

Just because you take French doesn't mean you are French, but moving there may get you a lot closer. There is something so comforting about other's foolishness, isn't there? The electric issue... when my family and I lived in England we had a problem in our house, I kept getting shocked when I leaned my hip on the oven... didn't know some moron had drilled into the wiring when he put cabinets in prior to us moving in... so I can relate to the serious problems. I remember the shock (pun fully intended) on the handyman's face and his mad rush to seal off the area. "You could have been electrocuted"... well.. but it's soooo charming!!!!

They are "les Americains"- of course they are. We wear our Americanness like a skin, whether we realize it or not. The presence of other Americans doesn't change things, they can still spot us miles away. But when you're the only Americans for miles... well congratulations, you are the biggest show! But there is something fun in the bumbling and fumbling and newness of trying to acclimate to a different life. Yanks or not... eventually you blend in, of course you humiliate yourself with your mispronunciations that come off as insults as you grin like an oblivious fool but you suddenly understand what immigrants feel like. So what if you have no clue how to restore or remodel, surely you can learn? Oui? Non?

My husband's family is French, my daughter has been learning it for years so I certainly understand how complicated it can be and how someone like her makes it seem so easy... no, it's not! Take heart, those of us who sputter French foolishly in our attempts to speak it give laughter to many.

This book was a lot of fun, I think of all the little projects through the years we have taken on and how out of hand things get. I also remember all the British DIY horror stories we read about when we lived in the UK, so I relate to these French/restoration wannabes :) Culture shock with DIY dust, what could possibly go wrong? What could go right?

Eileen Hall says

"Have a set back, have a drink".

A useful phrase for all kinds of trauma and dilemmas you will come across during a move to another country.

This memoir will have you packing your belongings and selling up even before you reach the end of the book!

Great read!

I was given a digital copy of this book by the publisher Les Americains via Netgalley in return for an honest unbiased review.

Lori says

Oh, how I'd love to meet (or be just like) Marty and Eileen! They buy a 400 year old cottage in France for their second home. This is the utterly charming and witty memoir of their journey to "be French." There are some unexpected events, language problems and renovations along the way, as there always are, and these are related with great humor and ease. There's just enough of the French language sprinkled in to make it fun. I loved hearing about a part of France not usually seen, especially the village life. And the recipes from their daughter, Sara the chef, look delicious! A quick read, I actually would have liked more! I am looking forward to checking out their website for more stories and recipes. Highly Recommend! 4.5 stars at least! Many thanks to NetGalley and the publisher for allowing me read this. A pure delight!

The Suburban Eclectic says

Meet Eileen and Marty. They just bought a money pit in rural France; they speak just enough French to get into trouble, and I want to be like them when I grow up.

The breezy, light-hearted tone never takes itself too seriously yet still inspires deep envy from anyone that ever yearns to live abroad. Beginning French is the next best thing to being in France and if this is the closest I get to a vacation this year I'll take it.
