

## Rachel Fryer's Senior Speech

### 2 Weeks in France: The Traditions of Cuisine in the Modern French Family

The time has finally come, and I stand before you all today, a soon to be high school graduate, an American fellow, and a person longing for purpose in life. High school is a time to engage in unique experiences that teach us about ourselves. I'm going to talk about an amazing experience that I had recently. //As a few of you know, in March of this year I had the opportunity to be an exchange student and conduct research for 2 weeks in France. I went on scholarship as a part of the Alliance Francaise Franco-Fellows Program, and as a part of my scholarship I did research on French culture. I thought, I'm in France, what better thing could there be to study than French food?! Easy enough. Although the trip proved to be much more stressful than I had pictured, my research brought me to thoughtful conclusions on a question I aimed to research. My trip proved to me, language *is* a tool that ties us together as humans, and as we uncover that language we can find universalities with people who were strangers but now are friends. What I hope you get out of this chapel talk is an appreciation for different cultures, and how much you can get out of taking a foreign language all years in high school.

//I came into this trip with the question, "Are traditions of cuisine changing in France? And, how are the traditions of food different in France versus the United States?" Mr. Pardue helped me create questions to investigate French stereotypes, but I honestly entered my trip with the mentality, I am here to experience and soak up as much French culture of food as I can, and draw conclusions from there. To divide my research, I will first start with what food in a French home is like.

//French mealtime is special. I had 2 host families and both had different approaches. In my first family, each meal was long and consisted of courses, first with appetizers and vegetables, then the main course typically made in the oven, then cheese and meat, then dessert,

which consisted of yogurt and pudding. //My second family's meal rituals were more similar to mine in Oklahoma, when we eat the main course and side dishes at the same time. In France this seems to come down to each family's preference, but it is most common to have long meals on Sundays and for special occasions like birthdays and holidays. We ate lots of carbohydrates, potatoes, lots of ham, salad with vinaigrette, everything was light and left you feeling full but good. That leads to a big theme and difference in French cuisine that I found, which is the idea of 'eating good.' //While interviewing my host mom, she said "When we eat good, we feel good. We can spend a little extra money to eat good food." Here in the US, we predominantly prefer the greasy taste of food rather than feeling good after we eat. After many conversations with my host families, I gathered that French families through the years have definitely experienced changes in their traditions. However, the spirit of French cooking, the "eating good," is what they pass down and what is here to stay.

//The second phase of my research consisted of what I'll call the workforce. Firstly, BREAD (the baguette!) has been and remains extremely important to the French. I had the opportunity to interview 2 bakers. Mr. Pardue helped me ask about a tradition of little kids coming into bakeries to buy baguettes and bread for the family. Bakers and my host families confirmed this tradition still exists. It's easy in the little villages. The bakers stressed, it's an important rite of passage for kids, as it is a learning experience for commerce. They go, ask "Excuse me ma'am, may I have a baguette please?" and hand them a couple euro coins, and they are proud of getting bread! //The baker also revealed to me what is a really interesting tradition that's changing, which is how bread is evolving. When we think of the french, white baguette, it is actually full of additives and is unhealthy. The French government has passed laws to bring back the traditional French baguette, which looks different and is made to be made healthier with

less sugar. You can see on the left is the white baguette we all know, and on the right is the traditional baguette. Also, in the past, being a baker was undesirable because you have to wake up at 3am to bake. Now refrigeration and new technologies make breakmaking not only easier, but better in quality. This goes along with the “eating good” theme: Health in food is very important to the french.

//The second workforce aspect I investigated was the chef. I had the opportunity to go to a French culinary school for a day and cook the courses for a dinner crowd, then plate them for customers. I also interviewed the chef of the kitchen at work. First, I want to provide you a picture of this setting. I'm one of 9 workers, these are final year students learning to be cooks. I'm an American girl, none of them speak English well at all. I stumbled my way around, with one fellow American, until I found a boy who basically apprenticed and taught me. //Picture us deboning a rabbit, him explaining everything to do and guiding my hand, ALL IN FRENCH, and I am trying my very best to keep up. Important note, I CAN'T COOK, so it is that much harder. He would say couteau. Couteau. What do these words mean? It means knife, and os means bone. I was learning the language in the field, on my feet. //Now, the chef was a tall, broad shouldered, gray haired, French man with poor eyesight so that his glasses made his eyes appear bigger. He wore the white chef hat. It got exciting in the kitchen when the food wasn't being prepared quickly enough, he started just shouting in French and the students scrambled. However, he was very kind to me and even let me have a full serving of the tiramisu and ice cream made from scratch. When I interviewed him, I asked what the difference was between a cook and a chef. He said, it comes down to humility. He says he knows several great cooks, but they're not chefs. Chefs have to know to do everything. And for the 8 students I was with, he says not all of them will go on to be great. Their final exam is that in 4 hours, they must make 3 courses consisting of

an appetizer, main course, and dessert, all while directing 1st year cooks. But what he said about humility most supports the spirit of French food. He said, traditions of food are always changing, due to immigration, demographic changes, and evolving tastes. But what remains is the desire to sit and enjoy meals together, and to do it with a purpose.

//To conclude: The baker, chef, and my family all agreed: Day to day customs with food are always changing. But some traditions will always stay, although their forms may change. From what I've gathered, the spirit of French food, "eating good," remaining humble, and preserving traditions are the key components constituting French cuisine and what makes it so outstanding. And sometimes changes in traditions are for the best.

//This trip circles back to my own curiosity for languages. It comes down to humility, which is connected to empathy. Having experienced both sides of a student foreign exchange, I can say that when you first meet a foreign exchange student, they're at a power disadvantage. It's hard to communicate, and culture shock is a real thing. But when you talk to someone in their native language, you live in their shoes, and you see their real personalities. Being able to connect with people on the most real level allowed for connections I could never have had if I wouldn't have studied French. It was amazing. My empathy and understanding for others now transcends languages.