

## The French

by Dónal Thompson



**There are 365 types of cheese in France. They use 19 different grapes to produce their wines. Only the Japanese live longer.**

They say that an English man walks down a road as if he owns the road. A Frenchman, on the other hand, walks down a road as if he doesn't care who owns the road.

At University we had a lecture on French Films by a man called Jean-Claude Brideau. Halfway through the lecture he lit a Galois cigarette. One student pointed to the No Smoking sign. Jean-Claude looked at the sign, looked at the student, shrugged his shoulders and said "I'm French. He continued to smoke.

To be French is to be cool. Seriously cool. They are philosophers. They are mathematicians. They are pacifists; unless you are one of their aristocrats and then they cut off your head. They are very practical.

The French say "On n'a pas de pétrole, mais on a des idées!" (We may not have the petrol, but we do have the ideas!)

One of the most civilised French inventions in my opinion is the Hot Air Balloon created by Joseph and Etienne Montgolfier in 1783. What a marvellous idea it is to sit in a large picnic basket with a bottle of champagne (another Gallic gift) and drift through the skies. The practical French

were also prudent enough to invent the parachute too!

The French gave printing to the blind with the invention of Braille. Cinema's midwives were none other than the Lumière brothers; and let's not forget Emile Gagnan and Captain Jacques-Yves Cousteau who invented a self-contained underwater breathing apparatus (SCUBA) and helped mankind discover the oceans.

The difference between Anglo-Saxons and the Gauls can be appreciated if you look at what expressions have been borrowed by the English Language.

'WASPS' (White Anglo-Saxon Protestants) don't have the concept of **joie de vivre**. English food is generally so dire that when we talk of good food we use the word **cuisine**. Even when we're not sure what we're talking about we resort to **je ne sais quoi**.

Think of French artists. Chagal, Duchamp and Matisse. Composers? Berlioz, Debussy and Ravel. Bliss, Heaven and Nectar!

Okay. Okay. Their rugby team is dismal! But you can't be good at everything, can you?

One great gift the French have given us has been to remind us of Freedom. The Statue of Liberty is a French, not an American, work. Liberty, Equality and Brotherhood, the democratic tradition, were courageously defended during the French Revolution and inspired the world.

The French are, however, primarily thinkers. Georges Bernanos wrote "A thought which does not result in an action is nothing much, and an action which does not proceed from a thought is nothing at all". It was the French use of reason which brought millions to the planet's street in support of peace in Iraq. Blessed are the peacemakers

There is something about the French which is difficult to define. The very 'Frenchness' of them. In a recent poll for **L'Express** newspaper 95% of French people were happy to be French. Their reasons were the beauty of France, the art **de vivre** and French literature. But the number one reason for French contentment was their democracy.

This morning I asked Estelle, my French colleague, what was the best thing about being French.

"The food," she said, "Yes. The food"