

In Quarantined France

APRIL 21, 2020: PAU, FRANCE

They closed the nonessential businesses, first. Then, President Macron announced le confinement: we could not leave our houses without a signed document explaining our motives. A few days after that, they closed les halles, the open market downtown where I'd spent so many Saturdays picking through *cèpe* mushrooms and Arcachon oysters. The State Department sent emails in bold, urging Americans to come home while we still could.

And so la vie quotidienne I worked so hard to carve out here, in this country an ocean away from my own, has disappeared in the space of a few short weeks.

One thing has remained constant from my first day in the neighborhood, through the long days of quarantine. Every morning, my boyfriend and I eat a baguette tradition from the boulangerie around the corner, Le Pain Pascal. It's always 1.15 euros, and it's always delicious. We eat it slathered in good butter from Brittany, topped with soft-boiled eggs and salt and pepper. Some days, we treat ourselves to a mound of chocolaines and croissants au beurre. We brew our coffee as many French households do—strong, from a stovetop Bialetti—and dip in torn bits of viennoiserie.

Boulangeries, along with tobacco sellers and newspaper vendors, were labeled essential businesses from the beginning. It's easy to see why. Along with cigarettes and *Le Figaro*, few things are as central to French daily life as good bread.

I asked Pascal Flechoux, the owner of Le Pain Pascal, if he'd noticed more people coming in to buy comfort food since the lockdown. He smiled and set me straight. "En France, 'comfort food' c'est 'every time.'" He explained that though business was down 50 percent due to the virus, loyal customers from the neighborhood still come for their daily bread. He recognized the faces, like mine, who walked by every day.

I was surprised he recognized me. "I guess I am tall and blonde and American." "And pretty," he added, flirting shamelessly as only an older French man can.

The fact is, Pascal would recognize nearly anyone on the block. As a boulanger, he's an integral part of our daily lives. Before the virus, he was there when we got up for breakfast, there when we dipped in for an afterwork snack, there when we needed good bread for a picnic, and there when we needed to bring home something special for our lovers. In a crisis, he's still there, selling good bread and pastries, when everything else has changed. 