



# How Wine Brought Me In From the Outside

On a trip to recover her native language, a student discovers her life's work



By Regine T Rousseau | June 16, 2021



Illustration by Nicole Jarecz.

I became an “other” at the age of eight. It was the summer of 1980, when my brother and I left Haiti to live in Chicago. My brother, born in Haiti, had been left behind to be raised by other family members. I was born in Chicago, but like so many immigrant children, had been sent back to the extended family. I’ve asked my parents why they decided we should be raised in Haiti. My father said it was for the preservation of culture. “I wanted my children to speak Creole and French and know where you come from,” he answered with pride and

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certainty. When I posed the same question to my mother, she was silent, agitated. Tears coated both of our cheeks.

The relocation to my birthplace Chicago, should have been an open-armed homecoming. But instead of a “Welcome Home” sign, I was stamped with the label “foreigner.” I became an other. At the age of eight, I had to learn how to navigate in spaces where I was unwanted. This would later become my superpower.

Leaving Haiti for Chicago meant replacing land for skyscrapers, fresh mangos for Lemonhead candy, the smell of drying corn and hot charcoal for grilled onions, and French for English. Navigating two languages required me to be alert, to pay attention to every word and pronunciation. One mistake, one slip of the tongue, one unnecessary “s,” an overemphasis on a “ka” sound, would give the bullies and anti-others ammunition to ridicule and further isolate me.

When you are an adolescent, acceptance drives your every decision. For my next 12 years, I chose “American me” over “Haitian me.” Like a nail to a tire, my individuality seeped out so slowly that I didn’t notice until I was half empty. I can’t recall one incident that alerted me to this flatness. I imagine it was being teased by my Haiti-born, fluent-in-all-things-Haitian cousin. I recall many conversations where my tongue felt heavy as it struggled to dig up buried French or Creole words and phrases. She rolled her eyes, laughed, and said, “you forgot your language,” or worse, “you’re not a real Haitian.” In the outside world, being American was the prize, but at home, it was the connection to culture that gave you status. I spoke French well enough to hold a casual conversation, but not so well that I could keep up with family members.

In 1994, during my senior year of Knox College, I was finally old enough and confident enough to become me again. I was a theater major and elected to study abroad in Besançon, France, so I could reconnect with my first language.

But while I went to France to find my identity, I found belonging instead.

**That chill confirms, for me,  
“you’ve found your thing.” I knew**

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then that wine would be a part of my life, but I had no clue, then, how far it would take me.

In the first month, I was invited to dinner at the home of Alex's host family. Alex was one of the other students, and I am not sure why she invited me, as we were not particularly close. But, I thought, "What better way to learn French?"

I have been fortunate to live in and be invited into many beautiful homes, but this is still my most cherished. I remember open spaces, bleached wood, white accessories, windows for walls, and a comforting freshness. I would reproduce versions of this home for the next 28 years. The room that made the most impression is the only one I have never been able to replicate – the dining room. I remember a ten-foot-long wooden table. It was midweek elegant, laden with the china you would choose when your boss is invited to dinner. Formal, but not Thanksgiving formal.

There was a row of wine bottles standing at the head of the table. I was accustomed to seeing a single bottle of wine at dinner, but here I recall six, eight. It may have been four, but it felt like a dozen. I smiled, remembering the two or three occasions when my mom had Manischewitz wine with our Sunday dinners. I had moved on up in the world.

We sat, and my French host began with the story of the wines. They were **Bordeaux**. Perhaps he shared the winery's history, perhaps he mentioned where the vineyards are located. I'm sure he shared why these wines were so special to him. But that's not what I remember.

It was when he reached for the bottle closest to me. His port de bras, how he moved his arm, was marvelous. His hand slid down the back of the bottle, fingers wrapped around the corkscrew, separating the foil and cork with ease and poise. His pour was rhythmic; he looked seriously into the wine, swirled it, inhaled it, then took it into his mouth, uniting with it.

He poured some wine into another glass, handed it to me, and said, "Allez!" "Go!"

My swirl was probably more like a shake. The glass was most likely six inches from my nose when I smelled the wine. When I brought the wine to my lips and tasted it, I certainly remember smiling. I remember he said, “Very good.” He was a kind teacher.

I don’t remember what we ate that night, but the first sip of Bordeaux wine is forever etched in my mind. The wine felt like expensive Italian shoes – comfortable, luxurious, a sign of a better life to come. A friend described a rosé from Mendocino that I poured for her recently as being “out of her league.” The wine opened her up to new possibilities. The Bordeaux that night had the same impact on me. It was out of my league and sent a chill down my spine. At 20, I had experienced that chill four other times: when I recited my first original poem in front of my fourth grade class; when I first read Toni Morrison’s “The Bluest Eye;” when I visited an art gallery for the first time; and when I met my first love. That chill confirms, for me, “you’ve found your thing.” I knew then that wine would be a part of my life, but I had no clue, then, how far it would take me.

I shared many glasses of wine with new French friends. With each glass and conversation, I came into a stronger knowing of myself. Each conversation loosened my tongue, excavated a buried language. Eventually the words flowed.

When I’ve shared this story in the past, I’ve said that I fell in love with the ceremony of wine; the storytelling, the care the host took, the conversations. Today I realize that what really drew me was the invitation to a world that was not designed for me. Every culture has its currency – a thing it values above all else. In wine, cultural exclusivity has been the currency for decades. Because of this, so many have been made to feel like an “other.” The way that wine was introduced to me made me believe that I belonged in this world and it belonged to me. My host asked, “Shall we wine?” And I answered “Yes.” I have been inviting others to wine for the past 28 years. Join me.

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