

TONY DAVIS BACKYARD PASSPORT



Illustration: Rocco Fazzari

French polishing

It takes only a healthy imagination to feel at home in France.

"IT IS the only sport I can think of," Serge Taravel says with a thick accent and a shrugging demeanour that is almost too French to be true, "that you can play with one hand on a drink and the other on the ball."

Serge holds up his glass of red wine, looks across the petanque piste and smiles. I start grinning too and reflect how wonderful it is to be in France. Except of course, I'm not in France.

Newspaper expense accounts are not what they once were and neither is the Australian dollar. So I'm in Sydney imagining I'm there. It's surprisingly easy to do and the savings are huge.

It all started with breakfast: croissant, espresso and an unfiltered Gauloises cigarette. OK, I skipped the last-mentioned – and famously pungent – course, and went for a second coffee. Sometimes you can be too authentic.

My reading material was the *Le Courier Australien*, now in its 116th year and claimed as the oldest foreign-language newspaper in Australia.

Conveniently, some sections are in English. No such luck with SBS's French news, which is, frankly, woeful in its cricket coverage.

Jean-Jacques Garnier, Sydney's French Embassy cultural attache, points out that as well as the obvious – fine food, wine and fashions – Sydneysiders can usually choose between three French movies at the cinema, several good French-trained actors on stage and a Bizet opera or Debussy concert on offer somewhere.

Right now, there's the terrific *Monet And The Impressionists* exhibition at the Art Gallery of NSW. Or, if on a tight budget, go to the nearby Botanic Gardens, look at a pond and squint.

I lunched on a baguette jambon fromage in the cafe at the Alliance Francaise, sited temporarily above Wynyard station while its Clarence Street headquarters are remodelled. It's a good place to be surrounded by people speaking French, even if some of them are practising that eternal question: "What time does the train leave for Marseille?"

The alliance's jovial director, Herve Devoulon, says the French

community is small and doesn't really stick together in Sydney. He says even at Maroubra, home to the International French School of Sydney, the nearby shops don't boast a French restaurant.

But enough of that. It's time for petanque, or traditional French boules.

There are 1200 registered players in Australia, many of them from France or Mauritius. I'm at Canterbury with the delightfully named Boules Artistes (boulesartistes.org.au) and discovering a kind of aerial lawn bowls that is quite addictive.

Despite his droll comments about holding a glass while playing, club member Taravel, from Lyon, takes it seriously and admits you need "a bit of skill and finesse". He's not wrong. The tactics can be intricate too.

Club member Sue Begley represented Australia in the Asian championships last November. Strike an opponent's ball just right, she says, and it makes a "lovely cracking sound" as it zips away.

"I call it dancing the ball... when it comes out of your hand it looks perfect, the flight of it is perfect and if it hits the right way, it's just a little moment of perfection," she says.

Begley says petanque is meditative too. "It can be like a game of chess and you can get lost in it."

As well as the festive season, 'tis the season of beaujolais nouveau, released each year on the third Thursday of November. It's a light and fruity red that you drink more because it is nouveau than beaujolais. Nonetheless, each vintage is sent around the world with great fanfare. I choose to consume my Georges Duboeuf 2008 with friends as Jacques Brel sings to us from the stereo.

Any wine connoisseur will tell you that beaujolais nouveau must be consumed promptly. We are very much on top of the job. I pour second glasses and slice more roquefort cheese as Brel sings of drunken sailors, jilted lovers and the coming of war. It's great to be in France. Even when you're not.

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