

POTAGER PATRIMONY

By Christopher Betts

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I moved to France from England in September 1975. The property I acquired along the Route de Breil in the Quartier Les Plans, just at the edge of the village of Sospel in the Alpes Maritimes, came with a caretaker, a Mlle Angele ROYAL, known to all as “Fifine”. This short essay is in memory of her, and something about her life and times.



Figure 1: A view of Sospel with the Pont Vieux and River Bévéra, looking east from upstream.



Figure 2: Our villa with Fifine's apartment in the foreground surrounded by vines, looking west.

Fifine, as I shall refer to her, lived in a “*dépendance*”, a separate accommodation on the site which was in a very dilapidated state and without even a bathroom, a situation I rectified at the first opportunity. Over the years, my wife Cecilia and I have rebuilt the villa and provided new quarters for Fifine in converted outbuildings next door.



Figure 3: Fifine Royal (photo taken about 1990).

Fifine was born in what is now our villa, which we have renamed “Villa Royal” after her, on Thursday 3rd March 1927 and, when she grew up, served the former owner, a Maître Fossati, of what was then a much larger estate, I believe originally in the ownership of the Maulandi family, the family name of Maître Fossati’s mother. On our arrival in Sospel in September 1975, Fifine was there to greet *les anglais* and, although she had no security of tenure under French law at that time, it was Maître Fossati’s wish that I should keep her on, and I was pleased to do so as our caretaker or “*gardienne*”. She was then 48, had never married and was living alone. Her parents were deceased, although her brother, who tragically died in a road accident in August 1984, was a regular visitor, as were several other members of her large family, villagers and others.

The duties of *gardienne* involved a multitude of responsibilities beyond generally seeing to the safety and security of the property. The visitors’ gate onto the road had to be answered (there is an intercom), post collected and distributed, our villa and offices cared for when we were absent, paths swept, and a hundred-and-one other jobs. There were, rabbits, poultry, various dogs, cats and other pets to look after. Fifine loved nature and plants, and her pride and joy was her garden, loosely called the potager, although there were usually more flowers than vegetables.



Figure 4: One of the potager terraces.

The many crops included:

- Wonderfully flavoured, very large tomatoes, originally of the variety Marmande, I think, although Fifine probably saved seed over many years;
- *Cichorium endivia* frisée (and the broader “Batavian) salad;
- Blette (chard), used in tarts and several other dishes;
- Bintje potatoes, a delicious variety, originally bred in the Netherlands in 1904;

- Courgettes and the Courge Longue de Nice with firm orange flesh, excellent baked or steamed.



Figure 5: Edible squash or gourd, the courge longue de Nice: plant on the left, fruit on right. Fifine gathered male flowers – there is one just visible on the plant to the left – making a delicious baked stuffed savoury of them (les fleurs de courgettes farcies) for which her recipe for the farci contained a little salt bacon, an onion, basil leaves, rice, grated parmesan, egg, breadcrumbs, olive oil, salt and pepper.



Other crops in Fifine’s potager were leeks, onions, garlic, French beans, green peppers, aubergines, melons and many herbs (basil, chives, parsley, thyme, sage, bay, rosemary and mint. – fennel was wild in our grounds, too). Jerusalem artichokes *Helianthus tuberosus*, called *topinambur* by Fifine, with their pretty yellow flowers, grow wild below our field along the river banks, but Fifine was made to eat their tubers during the war and hated them, so would not prepare them, though we love them.

Figure 6: Jerusalem artichoke in flower.

There were and still are several fruit trees including yellow, purple and mirabelle plums, cherries, a small, dark, deliciously perfumed grape, possibly Fumin or a relative of that variety, apples, pears, figs, quinces, persimmons (known as kakis), peaches and medlars. Later, Cecilia and I planted olives and pomegranates. The only citrus fruit that withstood the cold, clear winter nights was the kumquat, but I have recently planted new varieties of orange and lemon which are supposed to be hardy in the region. They have not fruited yet. Fifine made pies and jam, and of course there was always the deep freeze for any surplus fruit. We tried strawberries, raspberries and rhubarb but they were not successful. We had a “hedge” of prickly pear cacti and I tried eating the fruit but preparing them without getting the tiny irritating spines from the glochids in one’s fingers, even with gloves, was a trial and the fruits, sweet though they are, are full of gritty seeds.



Figure 7: Mirabelle plums.



Figure 8: Prickly pear cactus *Opuntia ficus-indica* s.l. in the Villa Royal garden laden with ripening fruit.

Flowers of all kinds were a great passion of Fifine. She particularly loved, and always grew, cosmos, zinnias, roses, dahlias, and irises, as well as having areas for wild flowers such as sweet violets and field larkspur.



Figure 9: Field larkspur *Consolida regalis* in Fifine's garden.



Figure 10: Fifine's apartment terrace – always packed with plants and bric-a-brac.

In the early days, Fifine kept rabbits, guinea fowl, chickens, ducks and pigeons. The pigeonier is now a store for garden furniture, although we had camp beds in it for guests for a while when we were restoring the villa. The original animal pen area became my office, which it still is.



Figure 11: The restored pigeonier and its terrace. There were pigeons here when we arrived in Sospel, kept for food. Below the terrace is my office on the site of the original animal pens.



Figure 12: Restored terrace where the animal pens were below the pigeonier. My office is behind the door on the right.

Snails. Fifine would collect snails (*le petit gris* in French, *lu cantaréou* in niçois – *Cornu aspersum*, formerly named *Helix aspersa*) for us to eat – we did not put down slug bait! These were and are plentiful around the garden in spring and autumn. To prepare them, they were kept in a cool, shady place in a large mesh-covered box or trough and fed on bran for a fortnight, then mixed with salt and

the resulting liquid drained off several times; then the snails were washed until the water was clear. Finally, they were washed again in water to which salt and vinegar had been added. The snails were then gently simmered for about three hours in water with salt, pepper and herbs (garlic, parsley, bay leaf). When cooked, the snails were shelled and put into a pan of hot olive oil and stirred until the oil stopped sizzling. The niçois then cook them again in le saoussoun (a raw tomato sauce) before serving, although Fifine did not do that.



Figure 13: The wild petit gris snails *Cornu aspersum* of the kind Fifine prepared.

Champignons. People often ask about mushrooms and fungi as these are popularly collected wild in France. Though she used dried ones such as cèpes (ceps or penny buns *Boletus edulis*), the only occasion I recall Fifine offering us wild-collected mushrooms that she had been given, I was a little suspicious and put them aside. The next morning, Fifine called at the villa in something of a state, saying she had been ill all night and asking if we had eaten the mushrooms. Happily, we had not, to her relief, as clearly some were poisonous – not fatally so, thank goodness!

Sanglier. Wild boar are common around Sospel. They get into our villa's field, but the walls, gates and fences keep them out of the potager area which is just as well as they are very destructive: many a local resident has had their fruit and veg ravaged by them. They are hunted by the Sospelois but the male sangliers can be fierce and dangerous – there are stories of people having to shelter in a tree all night because of a boar chasing them and then waiting around! Fifine used to make a delicious daube from sanglier meat. Her recipe included onions, garlic, tomatoes, parsley, thyme, bay leaves, dried cèpes or mushrooms, red wine, grappa (marc liqueur), lard, salt and pepper.



Figure 14: A sanglier or wild boar attempting to get through our fence into the potager. Photo taken with an infra-red camera trap.

Domestic animals were also a constant feature of Fifine's life and she had several dogs and cats for whom she prepared little graves when they came to the end of their natural span. As I write this in 2021, only one pet remains, her cat, Caramel, who is kindly cared for by friends.



Figure 15: Fifine's cat Caramel and one of her dogs, Sonic.

Fifine's cuisine included, with many other dishes, pizzas, pastas (pâtes), ratatouille, a wonderful savoury olive and ham loaf or "cake", tomatoes, choux, courgettes and other vegetables stuffed (farces), braised chicory rolled in ham slices, tourte de blette and barbajuans, the last three often prepared for our journeys to the UK and offered with a glass of champagne and a chat the day before we left. Kindness was always in Fifine's nature. A favourite special dish was beignets de fleurs d'acacia. There are many false-acacia trees *Robinia pseudoacacia* around us in Sospel, which have clusters of sweet-smelling flowers in June. These Fifine would make into fritters by steeping them in syrup, then frying them in batter (milk, egg, flour sugar, olive oil, pinch of salt, perhaps a little rum). The scent of the flowers is wonderfully preserved.



Figure 16: Fifine in her kitchen.

Those items for her cuisine that she did not grow were purchased in the local Sospel markets – the main one every Thursday and a smaller one on Sunday mornings. At these could be found an impressive range of local produce, both from immediately around Sospel (olives and honey for example) and from the sub-tropical lower coastal gardens and orchards of Menton and Ventimiglia.



Figure 17: A stall in the local market in Sospel village.

Village life in Sospel was always enjoyed by Fifine¹. A few more pictures follow:

¹ I have written a short booklet entitled “*Why do people come to Sospel?*”. Please email me at christopherbetts@orange.fr if you would like a copy.



Figure 18: Sospel – a view from the south, looking north.



Figure 19: The famous Sospel cathedral.



Figure 20: La gare de Sospel (railway station).



Figure 21: A typical street of the old village.



Figure 22: The old wash house in the centre of the village, recently restored.



Figure 23: The Pont Vieux, probably the most visited village attraction. It was once a toll bridge on the ancient salt route.

Fifine died on Wednesday, 18th July 2018 at the age of 91 in the new Sospel hospital of a salivary gland cancer. Whether we shall find another caretaker, or indeed what any of the future may hold in these covid-and Brexit-restricted times, I do not know, but Fifine's great character, foibles, culinary and horticultural skills, and generous willingness to help us and chat with genuine interest about just about anything whenever the opportunity arose, often several times a day, will stay with us always as fond and valued memories.