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Chef's Apron

Contact Susan Nye at
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More information the web at
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Becoming an expatriate was exciting.* Being an expatriate was exciting, fascinating and fun. It was also challenging, frustrating and nerve-wracking. There is more than one kind of expatriate and not all are created equal. There are the backpacking will-work-for-food expatriates. They are on their own, left to their own wiles and devices to find a job, a roof and everything else. At the other end of the spectrum are the executives. Shipped overseas by their companies, they are gently guided on their journey. From finding a house to making a dinner reservation, every twist, turn and bump is smoothed out for them.

Lucky me, I more or less fell into a job so I was one up on the will-work-for-food types. My luck held and I found a studio apartment in a couple of hours; an almost unheard of feat in Lausanne. The decor was akin to a 1960's no-tell motel but the view was incredible. My good fortune lulled me into believing that living abroad would be a snap.

My first few days as a bona fide Swiss resident were full of fun and very romantic. Not lovey-dovey romantic but adventurous, wow this is so cool romantic. Sitting on my little balcony while the moon rose over Lausanne's 13th century Notre Dame Cathedral was like a dream come true. My walk to work took me by an equally ancient church. I drank white wine from funny little glasses while admiring the view of Lac Léman and the French Alps. I wandered through the old town and found the farmers' market, charming cafés and trendy boutiques. Life was a series of interesting discoveries.

My head didn't stay in the clouds forever. After a glorious week in la-la land, reality hit. I discovered that many simple facts of life had changed. In my new expatriate life, pizza was eaten with a knife and fork. I wore size thirty-seven shoes. The bus was never late. My building had at least thirty studios but only one washer and dryer. There was not a single laundromat in Lausanne. And the supermarket was always closed when I was free to shop! I discovered that je ne savais rien (I knew nothing). I was often confused. My new Swiss colleagues just shrugged and advised, "On fait comme ça en Suisse." (That's how we do it in Switzerland.)

I was plagued by silly little problems, ridiculous really. It took weeks to get a phone. It sounded simple. Go to the post office, fill out a form and hand it to the guy at the counter. He promised service in three to five days. After three days I got a postcard with my new number. I checked the phone; no dial tone. Five days; still no dial tone. Ten days. Three weeks. My colleagues shrugged. Eventually, someone mentioned something about a deposit. WHAT DEPOSIT!?! The form didn't ask for a deposit. The guy who took the form didn't ask for a deposit. Somehow I was just supposed to know that foreigners had to put down a deposit. Back to the post office, I plunked down 300 francs. Twenty-four hours later, voila! A dial tone! Then a new problem revealed itself; who to call? Except for work, I knew next to no one.

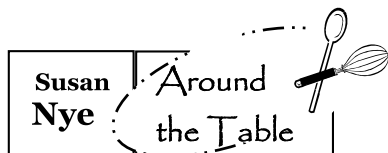
As could be expected, before long I received a bill or two and of course needed to pay them. I asked around. To my horror I discovered that bills were paid with cash at the post office. I began to think that the post office was the center of the Swiss universe. Anyway, off I went with a fistful of francs, stood forever in a glacially slow line and eventually handed over the invoices and money. Too many months later, I learn, purely by chance, that the bank would do it for me. By mail. No line.

...and of course there was more, how to open a bank account, how not get a credit card, buy health insurance, get a credit card, buy a car and on and on and on... it took more than a decade but I finally figured it all out. Just in time to move to California and learn how to do it all over again!

Bon appétit and enjoy!



*If you missed last week's story On Becoming an Expatriate, you can find it on my website at www.susannye.com.



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Filet de Perche Meunière

A Lac Léman specialty, Filet de Perche Meunière will always remind me of warm spring and summer evenings and long, lazy dinners with good friends under the stars. Enjoy!

Serves 6

1 cup all-purpose flour
1 teaspoon kosher salt
1/2 teaspoon freshly ground pepper
1 teaspoon paprika
2 pounds fresh lake perch, skinned and filleted
Olive oil
6 tablespoons butter, cut into small pieces
1/4 cup white wine
Juice of 1 lemon
2 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley
Lemon wedges

Mix the flour, salt, pepper and paprika together. Lightly dredge the perch filets in the flour, shake off any excess.

Heat a large sauté pan over medium-high heat; add a little olive oil to the pan. In batches, carefully place the fish fillets in the pan and cook a few minutes per side. Remove the fish from the pan and place on an oven proof platter; set the platter in a warm oven while you cook the remaining filets.

Make the Meunière Sauce: Reduce the heat to medium and melt the butter in the skillet. As soon as the butter starts to bubble, whisk in the white wine and lemon juice. Cook for about 1 minute, swirling the pan once or twice.

Remove the fish from the oven and pour the sauce over the fish, sprinkle with parsley and serve immediately with lemon wedges.