

Short Story - CNF

French for Pinecone



Catherine Salcito | catherine.c.writes@gmail.com

This is my retelling of a close friend's humorous experience in France.

Owning an apartment in France was a long-held dream for us. David and I hugged each other after signing the contract on a charming flat in the Basque village of Ciboure. We ignored the three-flight climb to our new place and focused instead on the views overlooking a lively harbor and the picturesque village of Saint-Jean-de-Luz just beyond. Our 18th century apartment building mirrored the surrounding Basque architecture – stark white stucco walls with oxblood-colored timbers and overhanging red-tiled roofs. Shutters in deep red and green flanked orderly rows of windows. The sea of red roofs lent a crimson glow to the scene outside.

Although plumbing and heating had been updated, along with some floor plan modifications, the original essence of the space remained. The warm luster and patina of the polished wood floors could only be acquired over centuries. Particularly enchanting was the original stone hearth and wood-burning fireplace centered in the front room. The previous owners had left behind a splendid time-worn copper pot piled with giant eggplant-sized pine cones. Each morning we used a couple and built a small fire to address the morning chill.

French for Pinecone | Catherine Salcito

I applied my typical dogged resolve to learning French. Every free moment – groggily applying make-up in the morning, plugged in during commutes, drying evening dishes – found me dutifully repeating phrases from Pimsleur language CDs. I aced the quizzes in my immersion French class while Madame pivoted about the classroom in her stilettos. David, in contrast, spoke like a Frenchman, having minored in it in addition to living and working in Nantes for two years.

Slowly, my usable French began to emerge, like a tortoise lumbering out of the sea. At the Sunday market, I could inquire, “I’d like eight of the meaty short ribs, please,” or “Do you still have the big white juicy asparagus?” Metric conversions were tricky. I asked for 22 pounds of a spicy pepper once instead of two teaspoons. A bungled request at the meat counter launched the insulted butcher into a tirade about carving a leg of lamb, not a butterfly.

The mild sun-saturated fall days turned chilly almost overnight. Early morning frost dusted the fishing boats huddled at the docks, and mist, like ghostly apparitions, rose from the harbor waters. Fisherman donned heavy rubberized “impermeables” in vivid blues and yellows, and reminded me of an armada of Paddington Bears. Locals hurried to their coffee shops in smart wool coats. We welcomed the cozy warmth from our fireplace. Our pine cone supply, though, had dwindled. I resolved to find some more before we left for our Colorado home the following month.

The following Saturday broke bright and crisp. We set off on a day excursion to the nearby towns of Bayonne and Biarritz, and to look for pine cones along the roadside. A pleasant drive and a satisfying afternoon included lunch at Chez Albert for paella and a quick stop into a favorite cheese shop. No pinecones, unfortunately. The following day, however, making my way down a street in neighboring Saint-Jean-de-Luz, I spotted a fuel store. These are common in France and sell propane, butane, matches and the like. Perhaps they would sell pine cones as well.

The proprietor, lean and dark-haired in a navy V-neck sweater, greeted me. “Bonjour, Madame, est-ce que je peux vous aider?”

I flinched, realizing I hadn’t practiced my request ahead of time. Quickly sifting through my French vocabulary, unable to recall the word for cone, I landed on *balle* (ball) instead. Pine was fairly simple; the French translation being “pin.” I would augment my request with gestures along with a charming smile. “Monsieur,” I beamed, and asked for the pine cones, placing my hands around the imaginary over-sized pine cone, nice and large, like an acorn squash, perhaps, or a small balloon.

His eyes widened. A smile twitched at the corners of his mouth. “Excusez moi, Madame?!”

I straightened up and repeated, a bit louder this time, gesturing again with my hands around the imaginary round item. “Est ce que vous avez des grosses balles de pin?”

“Andre!” the man’s hand had flown to cover his mouth as he called toward a doorway behind him. “Andre, viens, viens ici!” An older man with white hair emerged, wiping his hands on a stained red towel. The younger man addressed the older and I believe I caught a wink.

“Madame,” repeated the first man in the navy sweater, now smiling broadly. “s’il vous plait, repetez-vous...?”

Exasperated now, I repeated my request for the third time. This time both men burst into laughter – torrents. Tears spilled down their faces. Neither could catch a breath.

French for Pinecone | Catherine Salcito

As the two men were writhing in hysterics, David came in, having finished his errand across the street. He looked from the gurgling men to me, and tucked his head to mine. "What's going on?" he asked.

"I have no idea. I've asked three times now if they have the big pinecones."

"What in the hell did you say?" he whispered. I told him.

David's eyes and mouth flew open. "Catherine!" he erupted. "That's not the vowel! You basically asked if they had large penis balls!" I nearly died.

I don't recall which of the men asked me, after he had recovered enough to speak, "Madame, pourquoi vous nous avez pose cette question?"

I replied en francais, "because I want to start a fire..."