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Crossroads

Voices & views of island life

CARIBBEAN CURRENTS

Chez Félicien

Firefly gets ready to set sail again, but there's time for one more meal.

By Poupette Smith


Phillip Dvorak

There's a message from my father in France," Leo calls out.

Leo is doing our last E-mail check. It's Friday, and we have walked up to our friend Maurice's to bid a final good-bye before sailing away from Martinique.

"Apparently Dad has a design apprentice named Christelle, whose father lives here on the island, up in the mountains near St.-Pierre," Leo continues. "She's added a little note to Dad's message, with bus instructions on how to get to his restaurant. It's called Chez Félicien."

"I'll take you," Maurice says eagerly. "You'll love the area. How about anytime after Thursday?"

"Thanks," says Leo. "But we can't. We've already been here for well over a month, and it really is time to move on."

Back aboard *Firefly*, Leo and I make ready for sea: We take down the wind generator and store our dishes, books, computer, and loose trinkets – a collection of shells and seedpods, plus our little Martiniquan hardwood frog, which, when we rub the carved ridges of its back with its accompanying stick, so cleverly reproduces the *tap tap* sound of the island's night frogs. I draw columns in *Firefly*'s logbook (time, course, wind, seas, speed, and so on), adding the comment *"Partir c'est mourir un peu"* – a French expression meaning "To leave is to die a little." Then I go up on deck to help Leo hoist the dinghy. As we prepare the lines, we hear the sound of rumbling chain. It is our friends on Cap d'Or, anchoring just behind us.

"Shouldn't we at least go over to say good-bye?" I suggest, ever hopeful of delaying our departure.

"Any excuse," says Leo, consenting somewhat reluctantly.

We row over. Roger waves hello from the cockpit.

"Leaving?" he says. "Shame you'll miss Sunday's *yole ronde* regatta."

And just like that, Leo and I return to shore, call Maurice, and ask if he will join us for Sunday's festivities.

"No, thank you," he says. "I've watched many races in my lifetime. But since you're staying anyway, how about driving up to Chez Félicien next Friday?"

"Ah," says Leo, giving in, "What's a few more days? That'd be great, Maurice."

At ten A.M. the following Friday we are awaiting Maurice in front of the ocher-colored 18th-century stone church in the town of Ste.-Anne. Sharing our bench is a local woman who is wearing a traditional madras headpiece that is predominantly yellow, and folded so that three points stick upward in front. (The points are a kind of code: One point signifies "My heart is available"; two points means "My heart's already taken"; three announces "I'm married"; and four signifies "My heart's already taken, but there's still some room left.") When Maurice arrives, Leo and I climb into his jalopy and offer him one of the fresh croissants we've picked up at our favorite patisserie.

"Think I'll bypass Fort-de-France," says Maurice. "It's bound to be congested, and I know you don't like cities. We'll go north along the west coast to the restaurant, then, after lunch, cut across the rain forest and come back the longer way."

The French invest a lot of money in Martinique, and the benefits include excellent roads that are generally devoid of potholes. Driving along at Maurice's usual breakneck speed, we reach the outskirts of St.-Pierre – some 55 winding miles from Ste.-Anne, at the extreme opposite end of the island – an hour later.

Zipping by a beautiful little red-roofed building smothered in greenery, Maurice says, "That's the Gauguin Museum. Have you visited? People mainly associate him with Tahiti, but he also lived here."

We decide to have a quick peek (only to discover that none of Gauguin's original oils are displayed – just some reproductions and mementos) before continuing through St.-Pierre, the site of a devastating volcanic eruption that occurred in 1902 and left only one person in the town alive. There's no time for exploring ruins now, so Leo promises we can return later aboard *Firefly*, as a last stop before sailing for Dominica.

Gauguin on Martinique

Everyone knows about the beautiful, groundbreaking "primitivist" paintings Paul Gauguin produced during the years he spent in the South Seas; fewer people know about the 12 works he completed during the 6 months he spent on Martinique in 1887. Yet, according to Gauguin biographer David Sweetman (*Paul Gauguin: A Life*, Simon & Schuster, 1995), the artist's stay on the isle was pivotal, for it was there – while occupying an abandoned slave hut with fellow painter Charles Laval, that Gauguin broke with the Impressionists and began to develop the style that would define him as a painter. Shortly after arriving on Martinique, he wrote to a friend: "What I find so bewitching are the figures, and every day here there is a continual coming and going of black women decked out in all their colorful finery, with their endless variety of graceful movements... carrying their loads on their heads." Inspired by the people and the setting, Gauguin produced such paintings as *Tropical Landscape* and *Among the Mangoes*, precursors of his later tropical masterpieces.

From St.-Pierre we head inland, where the scenery turns lush with breadfruit, bamboo, tree ferns, figs, palms, vines, and bromeliads, all interspersed with dashes of bright color from fuchsia, red ginger, anthurium, and heliconia. Up, up, and around we climb, until we reach a summit that has a

striking view of the shimmering valleys below.

"Now where?" asks Maurice.

To our knowledge, we haven't passed any villages yet – let alone restaurants – but now we have come upon a small cluster of houses; among them stands a little outdoor café. Three men are sitting outside, peeling spring onions at a table that undoubtedly doubles as their domino-slamming board.

"Excuse me, please," Leo asks one of them. "Could you tell us how to get to Fonds-St.-Denis?"

"You are in Fonds-St.-Denis."

"Oh... Well then, can you please tell us if you know of a restaurant called Chez Félicien? We bring greetings from the owner's daughter."

"C'est ici. (It's here.) *Le Gros Blanc* (Big White) is in the kitchen. You can park anywhere."

We leave the car in the grass out front, and as we shyly enter the café, a tall, fair-skinned, attractive and imposing man emerges to greet us. He is wearing long, baggy blue jean shorts fitted with "tool loops" on the sides – a style popular with the young. He oozes energy and joie de vivre.

"Welcome!" he bellows. "I am Félicien. I have been expecting you."

He leads us to a round table made from a slab of *courbaril* wood that is very thick and about three feet in diameter; he sawed it years ago, he explains, from a centuries-old tree that had fallen. Spread out over the center of the table are all the ingredients for 'ti punch.

Maurice is in seventh heaven. He lapses into Creole and mixes 'ti punches to everyone's taste. For hors d'oeuvres, we dig into a plate of sardinelike fish that are still steaming from being deep-fried. Félicien serves himself a pastis, then goes to fetch photographs. We are shown a picture of his beautiful daughter, Christelle, who, unlike her father, is black and dainty; we see huge freshly caught river crayfish and get a glimpse of the annual Christmas pig slaughter.

Then Félicien offers to take us to his farm – about 100 yards away – so that we'll know, he says, "how well we eat here at the restaurant."

At the farm Félicien unties his dog, Freeman, from an allspice tree so that the pooch can accompany us on our walk.

"I keep the cattle at a lower elevation; these animals here, I feed with grain and bananas," says Félicien, pointing to separate enclosures housing chickens, ducks, pigs, geese, opossums (the Wednesday special), and goats. He utters encouragement as I stroke inquisitive snouts and muzzles, tickle the animal's ears, and pat the pigs and goats.

"They love the attention," he says. "Sometimes when I feel melancholic, I lie in the grass and look up at the sky while I talk to my pigs."

Lastly, we are shown the colorful fighting cocks – each one locked in its own rather small cage. I try to understand how a man who so clearly loves and respects his animals can so easily be their jailer and executioner, too.

After our tour, it's lunchtime, and back at our table a variety of enticing dishes are brought out. None of the ingredients has been purchased; everything has been grown on the farm or harvested in the wild. Félicien lets us savor our meal in peace, joining us for a moment whenever he can escape from the other clients, who are also vying for his attention.

"How is the food?" he asks, during one stop at our table.

The three of us mumble our answers: "Ummm! What's in this sauce?" and, "Ooh! This fish is

unbelievable!" and, "Ah! Incredibly flavorful goat!"

After introducing us to the fisherman who caught today's tuna, Félicien joins us for coffee. In a reflective mood, he talks about how country life is dying because the young want to work less and earn more money. When we suggest he share his knowledge and his love of the land with local schoolchildren, he says, "I do; sometimes I take them hunting or fishing with me. But alas, they change as adults."

"Even so, if you plant the seed, there's a good chance it'll take root," I say.

Félicien shakes his head. "I hope you're right. These days it seems to be every French person's dream to become a civil servant. After all, the benefits are irresistible."

By now the little café-restaurant is packed. Patrons stop by, shake hands, and say *bonsoir*. Many of them, Félicien says, have just finished work.

"What kind of job keeps them up all night?" I ask.

Félicien laughs. "No, no, no! They are civil servants. Everyone knows civil servants keep very short hours and get paid a lot for it."

Customers grumble at Félicien with good humor, imploring him to inform "the boss" just how long they've been waiting to be served.

"You know where everything is," he tells them. So, as always, they help themselves, walking into and out of the kitchen, making a note of what they consume. Félicien chuckles when Leo points to the board hanging above the kitchen door; it reads: Entry Forbidden.

By now we're so stuffed we can hardly move, but with a long drive ahead, it's time to think about leaving.

"People come here for lunch and stay till nightfall," says Félicien, reluctant to let us go.

Another coffee, and then, finally, we rise to bid farewell.

"I hope," says Félicien between bear hugs, "that you have felt totally welcome here – just as my daughter has, apprenticing in the home of Leo's father."

As we drive away, I look back and wave at a gesticulating Félicien, thinking how much harder it will be now to leave Martinique behind.

A licensed captain, Poupette Smith has contributed to Sail *and* Sailing*, and has lived aboard* Firefly *for 13 years.*
