Introduction

I was given the opportunity to intern at the sheep and grain farm of Bernard and Corinne Mandaroux from July 18th-August 27th, 2014, in Vaunaveys-la-Rochette, France as part of a CALS exchange program between Cornell and ISARA University in Lyon, France. The Mandarouxs produce a variety of agricultural products that are sold throughout the Rhone Alpes region. I lived on the farm with Bernard and Corinne, and their two children, Arnaud and Marie.

Vaunaveys-la-Rochette is a small village in the Rhone-Alpes region just south of Valence with a regional population of 500. Many houses in the surrounding area date back to the late 1600s, including the house that I lived in which was built in 1691. The region is made up of wide valleys, large hills, and some larger mountains and rock cliffs as you move further east towards the Alps. Regular rainfall irrigates the fields of the many local farmers who grow a number of crops such as corn, soy, wheat, alfalfa, sunflowers, chickpeas, and quinoa.

I worked approximately 9 hours a day, 5-6 days of the week. My duties on the farm varied from day to day. Each morning at 8am I went to help with the morning feeding which included cleaning the hay mangers, and distributing grain and hay to the sheep in the barn. We then went to give grain and dog food to the animals in the pastures and if necessary expanded their pasture space. Once the sheep had exhausted the supply of grass in a pasture I would help move them to another by herding the sheep down the road using trained dogs (border collies) to keep them collected. I often was recruited to set up new pastures or take down fence in a pasture where the sheep had already been. Other times I assisted with the grain production by ploughing a field with a tractor, removing the weeds from a field by hand, or by running the grain sorter-a large machine that sorts the main grain (be it linseed, chick peas, radish seeds, etc.) from the other weeds and stalks that are taken in when the grain is harvested. It is important that the grain and meat be packaged in clean and safe environments so I often helped clean the storage and processing facilities. I accompanied Bernard in the transport of their harvested grain to the cooperative they are a member of for it to be weighed and sold. I also went on the weekly meat drop offs to the stores where the Mandaroux sell their products, and on the trips to deliver the week’s sheep to slaughter. One of these stores requires its producers to help at the store twice a month, and so I assisted in the store by stocking items, cleaning the store, and even working at the cash register for a short period of time. The Mandaroux family also has a small catering side-business where they prepare meat and scalloped potatoes.
for gatherings of around 100 people and on occasion I would help with the preparation of those meals in their commercial sized kitchen.

Mandaroux farm operates just outside of Vaunaveys-la-Rochette. The operation has ample land on which to function. The following products are produced on the farm: lamb, mutton, corn, alfalfa, forage, wheat, barley, sorghum, triticale, quinoa, radish seeds, sunflower seeds, linseed, and chickpeas. All of their products are registered as organic. They use 60 hectares of land, most of which is rented or leased, to plant crops. Much of the corn, alfalfa, and small amounts of the other grains are produced solely for sheep consumption. The majority of the chick peas, linseed, wheat, and other grains are prepared and packaged on site for sale.

A total of 90 hectares of land is used as pasture for the sheep. About 200 sheep are kept in a large barn while 200 are released on pasture. The sheep on pasture are protected by large dogs that are trained to warn off predators such as wolves. To ensure that the sheep always have sufficient food, but not more than can be eaten in one day, the pastures are moved on a daily basis. The fences are made out of a light weight wire and twine and are broken up into short sections allowing easy set-up and dismantling. The pasture lands are spread out across the village region, the furthest of which being 4 km away from the main barn. Most weeks around six or seven sheep are sent to the butcher where they are processed and packaged. The finished products are distributed each week to approximately seven different regional stores that champion locally produced organic products. Each store is within a one hour driving distance from Vaunaveys-la-Rochette.

Anytime one ventures outside their country and comfort zone they will encounter differences in any number of areas, including language, food, etiquette, and music. My experience was no exception. Some changes were welcome, such as having two whole hours to eat lunch instead of the standard 45 minutes in the United States and the exponential increase in percentage of cheese and wine included in my diet. Others took some getting used to, such as my limited independence due to my inability to drive stick-shift (most cars are automatic in the United States), eating dinner at 9pm instead of 7pm, and even the small things like drinking my morning tea out of a bowl instead of a mug and kissing new acquaintances on the cheek instead of shaking their hand.

One of the biggest differences I encountered was that of the agricultural system as a whole. As mentioned earlier, food that is local and organic is highly valued in France. The fact that an area in a one hour radius from Vaunaveys-la-Rochette was able to sustain more than seven organic grocery stores was remarkable to me. Even though much of their population still relies on commercially imported produce, there is a seemingly large recognition or market for local, and sometimes organic, goods. In contrast, the
supply and demand regarding local and organic products is unsteady, and often a risky business to enter. While more and more farmers are going organic in the United States due to a newfound interest in promoting environmentally sustainable agricultural practices, often these products are still too expensive to be realistic options for the majority of the population, especially the middle and lower classes. However, I hope that in both countries as agricultural producers in both continue to work on making fresh produce an affordable option for more citizens, they will also work to educate citizens on sustainable agriculture and the importance of buying local.

Another striking difference I noted at the Mandaroux farm was the number of crops they were able to produce. Just driving through the countryside I saw even more products—sunflowers, vegetables, and fruits of all kinds. The area I am from in the United States centers around dairy production, and therefore the vast majority of fields are dedicated to pasture, hay or corn production—both for cow consumption. Other crops such as lettuce, squash, strawberries, sweet corn, are also produced in my area, but at much smaller quantities. One reason for this center on corn and hay is because it is generally cheaper for farmers, including the Mandaroux, to produce their own feedstock for their livestock rather than buy it from an outside producer. The dairy farms in my region can have anywhere from 150 to 1000 cows each, and cows consume much more hay and grain than sheep do, so it is no wonder the farms cannot produce such a range of products. This being said, it is still a difference that I noticed more than once.

Conclusion

Having the opportunity to stay one month with the Mandaroux family and work on their farm was a fantastic experience I will never forget. Not only did I make vast improvements in my French, but I was able to learn about agricultural practices and management while getting acquainted with the French countryside. Meeting new people from different walks of life is always, for me, the best part of traveling, and at my internship I was able to meet and talk to different people every day. This internship was a great way to challenge myself and expand my cultural and agricultural horizons. I hope that as I continue to learn about different cultures and different ways of improving agricultural sustainability that I have experiences just as fulfilling as my time with the Mandaroux family.
Appendix:

Goliat the sheep dog and I

Corinne, Goliat, and their four-legged charges
The Mandaroux home

Vaunaveys-la-Rochette