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MIRANDE JOURNAL French Festival Is a Little Bit Country, a Little Bit Wine 'n' Cheese



Line dancing at the country music festival in Mirande, France. The annual event also attracts faux cowboys and John Wayne fans.

By MAÏA De La BAUME Published: August 5, 2009

MIRANDE, France — Alain Ribaut does not speak English, claims to hate American food and has few personal connections with the United States.



But whoa, pilgrim. Mirande is still more of a foie gras town.

But he thought Mirande, his sleepy hometown in southwestern France, needed a little something, perhaps even a glimpse of the American dream. So in 1992 he set out to organize the "festival de country music de Mirande," which has grown into an annual event that now attracts more than 160,000 people, 40 times the population of Mirande.

"People here are cut off from the outside world," Mr. Ribaut, the mayor's brother-in-law, said in an interview. "So for six days, I wanted to give them the impression that they were in America," or at least a strange version of Nashville, which bears, he insists, a great similarity to the landscape of this region, Gers.

For six days every July, Mirande, about 60 miles from Toulouse, plays host to a bizarre but happy parade of cowboys, bikers and an impressive number of French fans of John Wayne. The small central plaza of L'Astarac is transformed into a stage for line dancing and a country-style farm fair, where vendors sell cowboy paraphernalia alongside local goat cheeses like cabécou, with its striped rind.

Visitors decked out in sheriff outfits hammer on horns, not of their cows but of their motorcycles, sometimes drowning out the best country twang of the local French musicians. The Grand Café Glacier transforms itself into an Old West saloon. Families in matching western get-ups dine, however, not on beans and stringy beef but on foie gras and confit de canard.

Harley-Davidson motorcycles fill the parking lots, and speakers blare country music. Some people are transformed, too. Mr. Ribaut described how in this year's festival, a local doctor "didn't shave for four days so he could look like a real cowboy."

Guests, mostly local residents, are invited to shop, dance and stroll through a large stadium, near the town center, entirely devoted to "la culture country": 200 stands selling western regalia — everything from Stetson hats to leather-ornamented clothes said to be Sioux. There are two ballrooms, a large concert stage and 20 restaurants.

The French may sneer at what they call "American culture," but there is deep affection, even fascination here, for the American West. They still have a special place in their hearts for spaghetti westerns and American television shows.

Mr. Ribaut even invites the stars of classic American television series like "Walker, Texas Ranger" to sponsor the festival, and country singers from America — most of them unknown here — come to perform. One year, the actors who portrayed the Ewing family in "Dallas" came to Mirande for the event.

"It's just like in a western movie," said Gina Debinska, a homemaker born in Poland who comes here every year and dreams of owning a ranch in the United States, even though she has never been there. "But I also like it here, because the Gers is the center of gastronomy."

The Gers is an agricultural district that produces Armagnac and some of France's finest foie gras, and a place where traditions are deeply rooted.

So at the festival of Mirande, burgers and beers are often replaced by steaks and bottles of Pousse-Rapière, the local aperitif made from Armagnac and sparkling wine.

There is even a "pétanque cup" for those who would rather play boules, a form of lawn bowling, than watch truck and car shows.

But for many participants, line dancing is without a doubt the major attraction of the festival. Over the past 10 years, 31 line-dance clubs have sprung up.

Françoise Seube likes to come to Mirande to show off her latest moves. She started line-dancing courses 10 years ago.

"At first, I was an Elvis Presley fan who dreamed about driving across Route 66," Mrs. Seube said before hopping onto the dance stage. "Then I discovered line dancing, and I never stopped."

Mrs. Seube, a 55-year-old mother of two, wore jewel-encrusted cowboy boots, a dress made of a patchwork of American flags and her favorite sleeveless black T-shirt with "Born to Ride" written across the front.

Mrs. Seube and the others looked a little out of place here in Mirande, with its 15th-century church, aristocratic mansions and mid-19th-century city hall, a few miles away from Lupiac, the birthplace of d'Artagnan of the Three Musketeers.

Not surprisingly, the annual invasion of cowboys "à la française" is not always welcomed by all the natives. "Mirande needs this event; otherwise it would disappear," said Carmen Azam, 60, who was born here. "But it doesn't really fit this land. I'd prefer it if they revived the myth of d'Artagnan, our local hero."

Fabienne Lejeune, who rents out rooms in her house in Tillac, a small town nearby, says she benefits from the festival but never knows quite what to make of it. The people of Mirande "dressed up as cowboys and Indians is an object of astonishment, especially in a region filled with old houses and chateaus," she said.

But for the mayor, Pierre Beaudran, the festival changed the spirit of his town in a good way.

"We were close-minded; we were a little bourgeois here," he wrote in an article for the local newspaper, La Dépêche du Midi. "The festival woke up a sleepy little town. Even more, it took away our inhibitions."

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