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What I've Found at the Market (and Other Places, Too)

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It is hard to resist buying cheese at the market, especially when the merchant gives you a sample. This was my situation recently. I really didn't have much money-- just five euros. But after a moment of reflection I decided there wasn't much of a better way to spend it than on a lovely old hunk of hard cheese. The man cut and weighed a piece for me (yay!), but it was 6.40 (shoot!). I insisted I only had five, but he gave me the hunk anyway! I love the market. I love the cheese and the eggs and the vegetables and fruit and the people who live by growing food.

Scavenging is also one of my favorite things about the market. It is a lovely phenomenon that happens at one o'clock every day as the merchants are packing up their goods. All the things that are no longer sellable (apples with little bruises, slightly squished tomatoes, melons that are perfectly ripe today, but won't be tomorrow) are left on the ground in the plaza. There are stacks of fruit crates and tumbled produce littered under the sycamore trees. I have made it a point to make my way down there every couple days to profit from the abundance. It is always fun to figure out how to use what you find. The other day we got a bunch of eggplants and some fabulous pears. The whole adventure has a robin-hood, gypsy, hippie feeling to it that I adore.

Another story from the market: I enjoy using euros because they are often in coin form, and that is foreign and fun for me. The downside is that they are easily spilled from wallets. I had just bought some beautiful apples from a singing apple farmer and was dropping my change into my wallet when it slipped (because my hands were so full of goodies). The contents of my over-full change pocket spilled all over the ground in a 5-foot radius around me. Laughing at the ridiculous situation, I began to pick them up. Before I knew it, the people around me started helping me. I hardly had a chance to stand back up when at least four people deposited the coins they'd collected into my hands. I was filled with joy at their kindness and walked with a bounce in my step all the way back to school.

And the niceness does not end with the market. I have had numerous other experiences of unfounded mercy. Like the time I only had 2.50 when the bus was 3.40 and the driver let me ride anyway. Or, when I took the wrong train and went to Marseille instead of Avignon and after explaining my situation to the conductor he wrote some undecipherable note on my ticket and told me to take the next train to Avignon.

There is a rumor that circulates the US and parts of Europe that says French people are not nice. My experience speaks otherwise. And I haven't even mentioned yet that I have a host family who has generously welcomed me into their home, and that I have language partners who are becoming good friends. So, to counter all stereotypes that would tell something else, I would to make a grand note here, that I am continually amazed at the kindness of French people.

Joy Nelson
27, October 2009