Bearing Fruit

ANDREW MORRIS

Long before I arrived in the Provençal village of Roussillon, I'd heard his name. If the word of my parents, (who lived here before me), was anything to go by, this was the man who could provide virtually anything from his little shop. I tried to put a face to the name in my imagination, to locate the "Cicada Grocery Store" on an imaginary street. Whenever I asked about how I would be able to get hold of this or that, I heard the mantra "Daniel will manage that for you". So this man, whoever he was, had a lot to live up to.

Fortunately, the reality proved more than up to the promise. Because when I arrived, I soon discovered that Daniel Saunier runs a veritable Aladdin's cave, in which can be found just about everything, all carefully stacked and beautifully presented. You could actually live inside his store and never go hungry for the rest of your life. It's the first shop you come across as you enter the village, and its proprietor is always ready with a jovial greeting. "Bonjour Andrew" he calls out as I cycle past each morning at 7.30. "Bonjour Daniel" I chant back, as if we've been doing this for half a century. It's amazing how quickly rituals can form in village life...

But this man doesn't merely sell food. Oh no, that would be far too pedestrian. He advises, recommends, offers cooking tips, promises to procure whatever you want that isn't actually found on his shelves. He is an expert on everything that passes through his hands. He knows the local farmers personally and tours their farms to pick up their produce. Don't buy a bottle of wine here if you're in a hurry, as the transaction needs time for him to caress the bottle, evoke its qualities, list the prizes it has won.

So ladies and gentlemen, we are talking here of a Food Artist. But more than that, a Food Activist. It was my initial intention in talking to him to concentrate on nothing more than good food, leaving politics entirely to one side for once. But the moment you begin to explore any subject in contemporary France, politics is never far beneath the surface. It's his personal mission to support the small producers who are continually squeezed by the barons of the massive supermarkets that dominate the agrofood industry here, to the point where the farmers can hardly even operate without making a loss. There's not much one man can do, or even several men, against the sheer power of the big cheeses, but it's important to try, preserving in the process not only livelihoods, but a whole traditional way of life built around growing quality fruit and veg, and bringing it to market.

Driven equally by a sense of duty to the village, (where he is the only grocer), life in this role is rewarding and satisfying. But it's not easy by any means. The mere arrival of a new grocery store in the village, and run by an "outsider" to boot, (anyone from more than 5km away earns this title), had the potential to upset locally-established entrepreneurial families who saw the patch as their own, and it's taken years to win the trust of the older and more conservative villagers.

Then there are the economic challenges. Despite the quality produce on the shelves, and the upmarket image, Daniel takes home a mere 600 Euros a month, in a country where the minimum wage is twice that at 1300 Euros (around 1.3 lakh taka), and the cost of living is continually rising. Luckily, his wife, who is a child minder, brings in a modest but respectable salary. At the shop, margins are tight, and in the fruit and veg business there is always the problem of having to jettison produce past its best, meaning he has to monitor his purchases constantly. On top of that, custom is highly seasonal, dying off virtually completely in winter as many residents, whether French or foreign, leave their second homes in the village and most of the shutters remain firmly closed till the sun comes out again the following Spring. He reckons 60% of his customers are foreigners, but as the infamous crisis bites just about everywhere in Europe, the stream of tourists threatens to slow to a trickle. So possibly no more crowds of Japanese and Chinese visitors, prodding vegetables and snapping photos in the shop, amused and intrigued by the very existence of such a small treasure trove, so unlike anything they can find back home. Still, undaunted by the economic stormclouds, he has expansive plans, including the opening of a mini-market just up the road, which will necessitate a sizeable bank loan, but could lead to a more prosperous future.

Looking at him operate in his shop, you'd think he was born with a dozen eggs and a kilo of asparagus in his cot: a natural. Indeed he describes himself as a born salesman, although the phrase in French, which translates as: "a salesman in my soul" is much more evocative. But the surprising thing is that his shop is a mere three years old. Before that, he was a travelling salesman for electrical equipment and repair systems with a major international company. Constantly on the road, away from wife and daughter, overnighting in anonymous hotels. But the market was already changing, orders dropping off, and customers more and more reluctant to invest in new equipment.