

Michele de La Pradelle, *Market Day in Provence*, translated by Amy Jacobs.

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.

Book review by Carol Price Spurling

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Francophiles, beware.

For us, few places in the world linger so insistently in the imagination as France, fueled by close-ups of our equivalent of porn: crusty baguettes in bicycle panniers, lemon tarts and madeleines in a patisserie window, sunlit vineyards, piles of taut berries and dirt-encrusted mushrooms at the market, bubbles rising in a Champagne flute, lavender fields forever.

That's great for romantics and culinary tourists. Great, too, for Susan Hermann Loomis, Patricia Wells, Peter Mayle, Joanne Harris, and Mireille Guiliano, to name a few who have made their living, to some degree, peddling these images.

But what about those who enjoy a dose of reality along with their fantasies? For them, a reality check is exactly what's on offer in *Market Day in Provence* by Michele de La Pradelle.

Readers anxious to understand the French might be able to read this myth-buster and come away unscathed - even, perhaps, enlightened. Others will probably react to this comprehensive analysis of a typical open-air market in Southern France with disbelief and disappointment. They won't be alone.

Karen Taylor, editor of *France Magazine*, a quarterly publication for upscale English-speaking Francophiles, reduced de La Pradelle's book to this:

“Based on investigative work she began in 1980, it deconstructs the Carpentras market in Provence, revealing it and other *marchés* to be theater and illusion for nostalgic modern shoppers in search of conviviality and ‘fresh’ food. In reality, she writes, the produce in many of these rustic stalls is industrially grown and sold by the same suppliers who stock large supermarkets.”

Taylor then questions its veracity, asking “Just how accurate is Pradelle’s book today?” and offers up two other newly published books – *Vegetables by 40 Great French Chefs* by Lyndsay and Patrick Mikanowski, and *The French Market: More Recipes from a French Kitchen* by Joanne Harris and Fran Warde- to prove *Market Day in Provence* wrong.

The title and enticing cover photograph of *Market Day in Provence* might indeed lead you to believe you’d found another daydream-inducing coffeetable book, but the jacket blurbs and absence of color graphics inside quickly dispel that misconception. Comparing a scholarly tome like *Market Day in Provence* – over a decade in the making - to collections of mouth-watering photographs interspersed with recipes is unfair, at best. At worst, it completely misses the point of a well-written, engaging, accessible, and relevant work of scholarship. Note that *Market Day in Provence* won the *Prix Louis Castex de l’Académie Française* upon its publication in France. Furthermore, it was hailed as “detailed,” “rigorous,” and “brilliant” in the French publications *Liber*, *Etude*, and *Le Nouvel Observateur*. Obviously, de La Pradelle had hit upon something important to the French, something that shouldn’t be lightly set aside.

The idealized version of France is of a nation somehow modern (nuclear energy, the Concorde, TGV trains, the Pompidou Center) yet at the same time old-fashioned in its

agricultural practices (small family farms with happy cows, produce lovingly tended by hand, weekly markets where you can buy jams, honey, eggs, and apples reeking of the local *terroir*).

But how realistic is it to expect that France hasn't experienced decades of consolidation and industrialization in the agricultural sector? To expect that every person selling leeks and strawberries at the Friday market actually grew them herself, even with the majority of France's historical rural population sold out and moved to town?

The French thaw frozen convenience meals out in their microwaves, and buy most of their weekly groceries at supermarkets, just like Americans. The average French person buys mediocre canned foie gras, just as the average American buys canned pork and beans. So why shouldn't the majority of the produce sold at French street markets be from the same wholesalers that stock Geant and Monoprix?

Efficiency, modernization, and industrialization are exactly what the country's 30 glorious years after World War II were all about, and if de La Pradelle's work is outdated as suggested by *France Magazine*, it is only becoming so very slowly and in minute degrees, as a small portion of French farmers return to more traditional, small-scale methods of production.

In that light, it seems almost miraculous that many French street markets, some dating back to medieval times, survived the *trente glorieuses*, even while their foundations shifted beneath them. Anthropologist Michele de la Pradelle arrived in Carpentras in 1980, paid by the French government to conduct a study of an itinerant stallholder street market, to answer exactly that question: why does this seemingly anachronistic institution persist in modern French society?

Carpentras, by the way, was an arbitrary choice, she explains, meant to serve as an example. “If the hypothesis of this work is on the mark, it should be verifiable everywhere.” But she’s not afraid to admit her human weaknesses, noting that her choice was influenced by “a few swiftly dispelled illusions about the mildness of the Provençal climate.” This glimpse of her sense of humor and her self-awareness, coming early in the book’s introduction, bodes well for the reader. Readers are suddenly ready to place themselves in her hands for the duration.

In 1996, de La Pradelle’s book was published in its original French. It was translated into English and prepared for publication by the University of Chicago in 2005, and released in 2006. The foreword to the American edition offers no explanation for the long gap between the French and American editions, but does inform us that, sadly, de La Pradelle died of cancer at the end of 2004.

De La Pradelle begins with a physical description of the Carpentras market and its environs, as well as the other two markets and a nearby shopping center – the wholesale produce market, the truffle market, and “Auchan” - that are as important to her study as the stallholder market itself. She sets the stage, so to speak, for the in-depth analysis of the human interactions that will play out in these public spaces.

The chapter titles are frequently actual quotes that illustrate her main points about the willing collusion between the buyers and the sellers that perpetuates the market’s existence: “I sell Provence.” “Pumpkins are rounder at the market.” Or, “Do you still make those little *caillettes* of yours?” Stallholders make endearing small talk with their so-called regular customers (even if they don’t know their names and haven’t seen them since the previous summer) and outright lie about the source of their goods, while regular

customers make sure to mention something that will mark them as regulars, someone “from here.”

Day after day, week after week, month after month, de La Pradelle listened, watched, recorded, noted, and interviewed. Her conclusion is that the French market, inconvenient and inefficient, constructed anew every Friday, offers a lot more than just food, but something even more precious to the French: a public identity where individuals are equal participants in civic life, and rooted to a particular geographical place. The French market is a classic example of the all-important “third place,” to use a term that de La Pradelle does not use; she discusses it in terms of the Greek *agora*. Shopping at the grocery store just doesn’t offer the same effect.

It’s true that most of the food at the Carpentras market studied by Michele de La Pradelle comes from elsewhere, not from a field just down the road: “In fact, as I was able to confirm in interviews, most of the fruits and vegetables available on the market, either at stallholders’ or in sedentary shops, were purchased from the MIN in Avignon, a major wholesale market featuring an extremely broad range of produce from a great variety of sources.”

But to understand the deeper reasons for the market takes the sting out of this revelation; shopping for food, as it turns out, is not really the point of the weekly market ritual in France, any more than quenching one’s thirst is the point of visiting a favorite bar or coffeehouse, anywhere in the world.

The truth of *Market Day in Provence* hurts those of us whose image of Frenchness depends on the surface appearance of things, but in the long run perhaps we’ll

find the plain, unretouched black and white photos in de La Pradelle's book more
captivating than any photoshopped color glossy.

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