

The View from Vaupillon OR Tacchi's Tittle-Tattle

Week 3

Monday April 27 to Sunday May 3

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Two weeks down and two weeks to go before President Macron tells us what the next step is, let us hope it will be good news. The Prime Minister (Edouard Philippe) will present plans to parliament tomorrow as to the government's exit strategy. Hopefully on Wednesday I can have a positive report.

As of today I am placing the daily entry directly into the archive as I know some people find the pdf easier to read on their devices. This page will continue to have the latest three days.

On initially starting this entry I was writing about various inactions taken by the government when I started a sentence with 'Teresa May might have...' whereupon my grammar checker signalled a problem. I was more than slightly surprised to see that my software had developed political leanings until I stopped and realised that 'May' can also be a verb and 'might' a noun. However remembering an earlier promise about rants I desisted from continuing that line of reportage.

Yesterday I undertook to investigate 'My Shelf' in the pantry, this resulted in a magnificent reorganisation, e.g. chilli sauces are now in order of strength. Also there was sadness as several items went to the great compost heap in the sky, though as aforementioned not a fan of Use By Dates I think I was probably correct in disposing of the Mustard Oil with a date in 2007. Another upshot is that I now have a box full of stuff that needs to be used up in the immediate future. I am currently seeking a recipe using corned beef, fermented black bean paste and foie gras - as yet no success, though I am contemplating inventing a dish called Chinese Corned Beef Hash Rossini.

Over the weekend I watched a recording of the latest edition of Gogglebox wherein a gentleman from Hull created a mask from an old sock, so in the spirit of useful research I decided to try and copy this feat (unintended sock pun) of derring do. It had several useful spin-offs including yet another reorganisation, this time of the sock drawer, and the chance of a minor sock rant - I will allow myself the occasional non-political rant. The construction was childishly

simple and worked, I am not suggesting it is the perfect solution to a surgical mask but as a barrier to help inhibit one passing on the virus it is certainly better than the disposable mask given out at the supermarket. It also has the benefit of being reuseable after being washed. So why a rant about socks? Well the majority of socks that are sold seem to be designed so that the band at the top of the sock is so tight that it inhibits all blood flow to the foot thus ensuring its eventual demise. Not only is this slightly irritating it also seems bad business practice as customers without feet will no longer buy socks.



My first effort at sock mask production. Not a perfect execution but will definitely be improved upon as I obviously have another sock available.

Tuesday April 28

Since yesterday early evening the weather has taken a turn for the worse and wind accompanied by much needed rain are now the order of the day for most of this week along with diminished temperatures.

As I look out onto Mrs. T.'s garden I see that the blackbirds have had their first clutch, they normally have about three each breeding season. The parents are running around the garden pursued by their offspring. It appears that the children are being instructed as to how to find food and from time to time when the parents finds a particularly juicy invertebrate it is passed beak to beak to the youngster. The blackbird is not the favourite of Mrs. T. as they have the habit of rooting around and disturbing the top soil or the much in their incessant search for grubs and the like.

Another view from my window is the garden gazebo and I have just replaced the covering as the previous one died of old age. Unfortunately when the new one arrived its method of fastening was not compatible with the existing frame and so a new manner of attachment had to be devised. As usual Mr. Amazon came to the rescue and appropriate bits and pieces were procured and the cover was securely fastened. Today is the first real test that canopy and frame will remain together when the wind blows. I can report that currently all is well and there appears to be no need for concern. The gazebo is in the corner of the garden where I have my outside kitchen. Adjacent to it is my gas fired plancha, wood fired pizza oven and my two chambered barbecue (which also acts as my smoker). There is also an outdoor electrical point where I can power up my induction hob and other electrical devices. It is adjacent to one of the outbuildings which houses anything and everything useful for providing outside sustenance. That ranges from several corkscrews to a complete porcelain service, from a temperature controlled wine store to a large refrigerator and almost anything else you might need.

Wednesday April 29

This morning's first walk was taken briskly under leaden skies with one eye continually cast heavenwards. The other eye looked on sadly as in the verges the wild orchids were finished. There is no more yellow from the cowslips and dandelions and the same with the fields of colza (oilseed rape) but the buttercups are staging a staunch rearguard action at keeping colour in the hedgerows.

Obviously the Frog Association has been reading these pearls of wisdom and have decided to prove me wrong. Yesterday for the first time ever very small quantities of frog spawn were detected in the pond by Mrs. T. We are anxiously watching them as we expect the fish to find these rather tasty but we are travelling in hope - further news will be forthcoming.

My subsequent attempts at sock-based masks were extremely successful, especially at looking like a prat, according to Mrs. T. but that is a small price to pay to protect the whole of France from any potential virus with which I might be infected.

Yesterday Prime Minister Edouard Phillipe spoke at length about the plan to ease the lockdown, his main thrust was about children returning to school though there other important topics covered. There would be a grading of departements (roughly equivalent of a county) into red and green. This would depend on the virus's virulence in that area. The starting date for the 'deconfinement' (easing of lockdown) is May 11. Primary schools would restart on a voluntary basis with junior schools starting a week later. Severe conditions on social distancing would be enforced. The other relaxations include opening of most shops, excluding bars and restaurants, also the reopening of libraries and small museums, though religious institutions have been asked to await the beginning of June. Public transport will, in the main part, reopen but masks will be mandatory and every other seat is to be left vacant. The requirement to have a form for leaving your house will also be lifted in twelve days time but authorisation will be needed for travel more than 100 kilometres from your home. The good news as far as I am concerned is that small social gatherings of up to ten persons will be allowed so I am hoping that Eure-et-Loir will be designated 'Green'. There will be a further review at the end of May to decide if and when the hospitality trade can recommence and whether summer holidays can go ahead.

There is also a plan to have 700,000 tests a week by the time the easing commences and then trace and test all those who have come into close contact with a confirmed case. Masks should be available for the majority of the population by the same date and their use will be mandatory in such places as public transport and schools, though not for the very young pupils. I am expecting that the local council will be supplying them to us as we fall into the vulnerable category. I am hopeful I have understood correctly and I will spend a fair amount of time today researching and ensuring that I have not made any egregious errors.

Tomorrow I hope to solve the problem of getting the word *metagrobologist* into my dissertation.

Thursday April 30

Happy Birthday to Captain Tom, 100 years old today. Is it not a joy to see someone in these troubled times caring about and doing something about Britain's NHS.

As an aside someone told me about a new expression that is entering the English language. It refers to the situation when an important promise or prediction fails to materialise, it is now known as 'Hancock Up'.

The bathroom scales this morning unkindly seemed to notice that yesterday evening I had a second portion of Mrs. T.'s home-grown rhubarb crumble. I put this down to the fact that the weather was so miserable yesterday that I only managed two thirds of my normal walking exercise. Mrs. T. also kindly suggested that with all the exercise I am taking at the moment that I have substantially increased my muscle mass and as everyone knows muscle is heavier than fat. Whilst I would like to believe this is true I suspect reality to be slightly different.

There is one thing that is more terrifying to me than COVID-19, that is the failure of the internet. Currently my average download speed is between 10 and 25% slower than normal and this is aggravated by frequent dropping of the service altogether. Every time it stops I have a small palpitation that it might not come back. Isolation I can just about manage but no internet would be a step too far.

I am continuing having English conversation with the young lad who is currently residing just around the corner. He is improving his comprehension and has learnt one very important lesson. That is the difference in the meaning of time between the French and the English. I explained that if I said we talk at 15.20 then we start talking at 15.20 not 15.29 when he actually called me. The French have a much more elastic view of time, I confess I find difficult to grasp. Why should it be that when one says 12.30 it means somewhere around 12.45? I just do not understand the use of Humpty Dumpty time.

Friday May 1

Happy 'Fête du Travail', the first of May in France is very much a holiday. It is the one day where workers have a day off. Even during these times people will not go to work. The doctor who lives round the corner is not at her surgery today. There is a tradition that on 'mai 1' one gives a spray of Lily of the Valley for good luck. A surprising idea as the flower is highly poisonous and the French word 'muguet' also means thrush, the medical condition, not the bird. My somewhat limited research says that this tradition dates back to 1561 when King Charles IX offered the flowers to the ladies in his court. The tradition is now so well entrenched that charities have the right to sell the flowers on the street tax free and as one wag put it: 'if it gets an exemption from tax in France then it certainly can be considered lucky'.

Weather continues to be disappointing, I have been forced to recommence wearing my ganzy (my spell checker failed to recognise that word). Indeed my first walk this morning was not particularly pleasant as at the apogee of my exercise the rains descended causing me to scurry back to the shelter of my office.

Yesterday evening apropos nothing Mrs. T. and I decided to have Margaritas and some crisps to start our evening watch of television as opposed to our normal routine of coffee and either cake or chocolate. I am not known for blowing my own trumpet, probably because I do not own a trumpet, but I must say that the Margaritas were particularly fine and caused a pleasant glow for the rest of the evening.

Today in the spirit of not working I shall retire to my kitchen for a good part of the day, not for food for consumption today but preparations for hoped-for soirées after May 11. My tasks include preparing free-range pig cheeks for my take on Bath Chaps. This will involve the use of the pressure cooker, as will my second preparation - the basis of a demi-glace sauce. Yesterday I did my weekly shop as I would not have succeeded today as the supermarket will be closed for the bank holiday. I wanted some good veal bones to make a stock but there was not much available and they were expensive,

but I noticed some oxtail offcuts and after a bit of negotiating with the butcher (it always helps if one regularly drinks and eats with your butcher) I acquired a kilo of oxtail. This will make an excellent basis for my stock which will then have red wine and port added before being reduced to an unctuous sauce. My final effort will be to prepare my roast beef. Of course I could just go out and buy an expensive joint of beef which would take minimal input to make a glorious roast. I like to challenge myself by using cheaper cuts of meat. So yesterday I also acquired a two kilo slab of 'paleron' which is a cut from the shoulder of the beast, I believe in the USA they call it chuck roast, and sometimes just chuck steak. My cunning plan is to separate it into two parts (I am desperately looking for a French cut of meat that one would divide into three parts) and remove the large piece of gristle therein. A mild cure will then follow and after that I will seal it in hot beef dripping and then cook it sous vide at 55 Celsius with some additional flavourings for about 36 hours. This fully cooks the meat and dissolves the collagen (those chewy white bits) but leaves the joint still rare. When I am ready to create the final dish it will go back into the water bath for an hour or so to reheat. I will then remove it from its sealed bag and apply a coating of herbs and breadcrumbs and put it into a hot oven for quarter of an hour to form a tasty crust and I might even stuff the cavity with a mushroom duxelles just to show off a bit. One of the beauties of this technique is that you do need to leave the meat to rest - the long slow cooking obviates this as the juices are already well distributed throughout the meat.

A check of the frog spawn this morning showed it is still there, fingers crossed that one day we will have a report of tadpoles.

Saturday May 2

Morning exercise again troubled by a precipitation descending from the sky, and according to the local weather forecast it will continue as such for the whole day. The only redeeming feature is that the winds are expected to be light so already the temperature, whilst being no different, feels superior to that of yesterday.

Today will be a short entry as somehow I seem to have arranged to do many things. I have made promises, and I always like to keep my promises if at all possible.

Upon first inspection from my office window it appears as though the bluetits may have started to hatch, there is certainly a lot more activity taking place in their nest box, though the same cannot be said for the sparrows. I shall report further tomorrow if the sun is shining so that it allows me to get closer and discover exactly what is happening.

As you are probably aware by now I enjoy pottering in the kitchen (yesterday's exploits were very successful) and I discovered that a certain well known online retailer was having an event on machine readable books and amongst them were quite a few on the subject of cookery. I took advantage and so now have a dozen digital books on my tablet, all for less than twelve pounds. Unfortunately today I will not have a lot of time to access them.

After twenty days my black garlic is still not turning black. I now believe the problem is that my rice cooker on the warm setting is not hot enough. I shall have to undertake further research to see if the situation is redeemable. For the time being I am just going to let it carry on and maybe I will strike lucky.

Sunday May 3

The weather affects the demeanour of the Tacchi household: gloomy skies - gloomy disposition, sunny skies - sunny disposition. Currently we are in a gloomy phase.

There has been little to report of late on the flora and fauna in the neighbourhood but then suddenly like the fabled Clapham Omnibus three observations occur at the same time.

Firstly this morning I spotted for the first time this year large slugs attempting to dodge the traffic when crossing our road. With the lockdown the chances of them successfully completing the voyage is greatly increased as the volume of traffic passing the Tacchi estate is diminished by about 75% or even more. However should they

make the mistake of arriving in the garden of Mrs. T. then I suspect they are in for a grisly end. Mrs. T. does not take kindly to anything attacking the pride and joy of her plants, especially her vegetables.

Secondly I saw signs of deer having passed very adjacent to our house, unfortunately I did not make a confirmed sighting but the evidence was very strong both in terms of tracks and some physical droppings.

The final sight was that when I got to the river I startled a family of ducks. They were obviously taking shelter under the bridge where the road crosses the river. My approach evidently caused them to take flight - an act achieved by the parents but the ducklings not so as they are still very young, yet they moved at a surprisingly fast pace by frantically paddling and nearly matched their parents speed.

The river is the 'La Loupe' which is the same name as the town adjacent to our village. Using rivers as names for places is common. A lot of the French Departements are named after the main river that passes through them and if not bodies of water then other geographic properties such as mountains. La Loupe is one of those French words that often catches out people who think they know French. I often hear people suggest that I live in an area that was known for wolves, particularly female ones. I then have to inform them that a 'loupe' is a magnifying glass and that the French word for male and female wolves is 'le loup' and 'la louve' respectively.

In keeping with my idea of making Sunday special we are currently defrosting an Indian Meal Deal, from the 'posh' supermarket, brought back from England on our last trans-channel voyage in February.

