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Lamorinda's French Community

By Sophie Braccini



Francophiles gather at the pétanque field in Lafayette to celebrate Bastille Day. Photo Sophie Braccini

East often gather and socialize informally, and every time they do, they discover new people who join this expanding Lamorinda French community.

One of Lafayette's iconic French figures, Jolivet first came to the U.S. as an exchange student for a year in her teens. Once she was finished with French high school, she packed her bags and came back. She became a credentialed teacher and started her own school, French For Fun, 38 years ago. She moved the successful foreign language immersion program to Lafayette 20 years ago, and has students as young as 6 months old. Now an American citizen, she recently revived the Langeac society, a nonprofit incorporated in 1981 around the sister city agreement between Lafayette and the French town of Langeac, where the Marquis de Lafayette was born. She and Lifson are planning a Francophile party for the Marquis' birthday on Sept. 6 in the downtown Lafayette Plaza.

Jolivet found some of her volunteers for the society's revival at Café Lamorinda meetings, informal gatherings of 50-plus French-speaking individuals from France, Québec, Belgium, Lebanon, and the U.S. The members are loosely organized and meet for coffee or lunch at La Boulange (founded by a San Francisco French family, the Rigos). The group has a Facebook page called Cafe Lamorinda, and they sometimes attend local events in San Francisco or Berkeley, such as a play in French, or concerts featuring one of their French idols like Charles Aznavour, Julien Clerc, Stromae, or Johnny Hallyday (yes, he is a French singer!). The group also has a serious hiking club, led by energetic Québécoise Diane Rivest, and a more relaxed walking group organized by local French tutor Virginie Pelpel.

Some of the people you will meet at gatherings include the Barendsons, a French couple with three kids who moved to Orinda a year ago, the Gourlins, a Moraga French couple and their three children, the Du Saults from Québec, Zeina Hissen from Lebanon and owner of Powell's Sweet Shoppe, Lafayette real estate agent Julie Barlier, who married a Frenchman and lived in Paris for years, or Moraga's Irlene VanArdenne, born in the U.S. to a French mother. The newcomers share their surprises about coming to the country and seek advice on where to find the best food; those who have been here long just want to speak French and be themselves, more carefree than in a more politically correct Anglo-Saxon crowd.

The French are not known for being gregarious, and in fact, they pride themselves on their individualism. In a Lamorinda crowd they remain inconspicuous and often seek their new American community, but after a while, they can become homesick and seek their compatriots. While one of the smallest sub-groups east of the tunnel - the French Consulate in San Francisco estimates there are 50,000 French citizens in the Bay Area - local residents have found ways to reach out to each other.

In Lafayette, two institutions tend to attract the French: the Langeac Society, recently revived thanks to volunteers like Catherine Jolivet, Stephenie Teichman, or Lafayette Chamber of Commerce executive director Jay Lifson; and the Lamorinda Pétanque Society where they play the beloved French boules game. Tens of French, French/American, Québécois, Americans of French origin, French speakers from Europe or the Middle-

One of the community's favorite outings is at the pétanque field in Lafayette. A group met there July 13 to celebrate Bastille Day (July 14 was a working day here), playing the French ball game, sharing a potluck picnic with nice cheeses and quiches, and singing songs with professional local French singer Isabelle Magidson (Duo Gadjo).

The Lamorinda pétanque society was formed thanks to the energy of some local French residents, such as Orinda's Pascal Gravier and Lafayette's Gilbert Sonet, and their American friends Mary Albright and Greg Arthur. A large contingent of players, some of them competitors at the national level, are not French speakers, much like how the bocce ball players don't all speak Italian.

"The Marquis' birthday party on September 6 will be for everybody who likes France," concludes Jolivet. "There will be French food, music, entertainment for kids. It will be a multigenerational event where businesses that have ties with France will be present, where the history of Lafayette will be honored and celebrated. We expect many people to come and have fun, en français or in English!"

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Reach the reporter at: sophie@lamorindaweekly.com

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