

# **A Year in Provence Study Guide**

## **A Year in Provence by Peter Mayle**

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# Plot Summary

Peter Mayle, the author, and his wife purchase a 200-year-old farmhouse in the remote countryside of Provence, France. They are familiar with the area, having traveled to Provence annually from their previous home in England to spend a few weeks each year vacationing in this sunny land of southern France. They, along with their two dogs, move into their new home in time to celebrate the New Year.

The first surprise the new residents to the area are met with is the cold wind, known as the Mistral, which blows through the Luberon valley each winter for stretches of two weeks at a time. The author and his wife have thought the wind to be merely a rumor, but it proves true. The Mistral is the catalyst for a meeting between the Mayles and the first contractor of many they will hire during their first year in Provence. When the cold freezes their pipes, they call upon the plumber, Monsieur Menicucci.

The book proceeds through each month of that first year they live in Provence, describing the neighbors and other residents they meet, the customs of the locals and how they differ from other parts of France, and most of all, the gastronomic fanfare which highlights each day. Eating is revered in this part of the world with a love so deep that the author takes pains to describe each unique meal down to the last drops of fresh pressed olive oil.

It is often a painful transition from tourist to full time resident, and Peter is blunt in his portrayals of this in-between state he and his wife live in. They struggle to learn the language well enough to enjoy the company of their new neighbors at dinner parties, and to fend off the guests who come in droves to settle around their pool and drink up their wine. Guests are not only friends from England, but mere acquaintances with whom the Mayles must put up with. As they try to settle into their new life as best they can, the renovations taking place on their home and the onslaught of guests are ongoing and haphazard.

Throughout the book, Peter takes us on a journey through the learning curve he and his wife experience. By the end, Peter's wife comes up with a plan to get the builders to finish all the work on their house before Christmas. She sends invitations to each of them and their wives to a party to view the work. She knows that the men will not want to lose face in front of their wives. The bait works, and they have their party once the work is complete, before Christmas, but not before one more catastrophe takes place.

At the end of the book, the Mayles enjoy their newly renovated house in the peace and quiet that comes of being together. After a year of guests and renovations, they find themselves alone to enjoy the solitude of a finished house and no guests, in the place they now call home.

# January

## January Summary and Analysis

Peter Mayle, the author, and his wife purchase a 200-year-old farmhouse in the remote countryside of Provence, France. They are familiar with the area, having traveled to Provence annually from their previous home in England to spend a few weeks each year vacationing in this sunny land of southern France. They, along with their two dogs, move into their new home in time to celebrate the New Year.

The author and his wife, Monsieur and Madame Mayle, begin their year in Provence on New Year's Eve. The opening scene is appropriate for the entire novel because it concerns food - the greatest passion of the French. They go to the village of Lacoste, drawn by the news of a six-course meal being served at a restaurant called Le Simiane.

The Mayles have found and purchased - rather impulsively - a home in the Lubyron valley on six acres of land. They had been to Provence as tourists, hungry for the heat and bright sunshine, which was not to be found in their home back in England. The charms of the countryside lull them into a sense of bliss, and the problems with the purchase don't surface until they have already made up their minds to go ahead and move there. The home, in an area called the Vaucluse, is situated between the two villages of Menerbes and Bonnieux, and is surrounded by cherry trees and grape vines. Directly behind the house lie the Lubyron Mountains, below which is a forest where animals hide from hunters during the fall hunting season.

The first conflict in the novel is their encounter with the Mistral, the winds they have surmised were a myth, but in fact are not only dangerous but also dampening to the spirit. As they dream of lounging in their bleached white pool under the Provençal sunshine, the Mistral gains momentum and whips an open window off its hinges, and the below-freezing temperatures ice up and burst the pipes in their 200-year-old farmhouse. They call upon Monsieur Menicucci, the plumber. His first comment, which the Mayles will hear him utter several times during the year, is, "*Oh la la*". Menicucci relays his theory about how the winters in Provence are becoming progressively colder. The reason for this, says Menicucci, is that the winds come from Russia, and due to a change in the earth's surface, which is flattening between Siberia and Mynerbes, the winds now have a more direct route south to hit the area of Provence with more force than ever before.

However, nothing can truly dampen the spirits of this curious couple, and they begin to make friends with their neighbors, experience some of the more exceptional menus of the locals, and learn to live with the bureaucracy of the country. Peter describes how important neighbors are when living in the country-so different from living in the city, where you can be ten feet away from your neighbor and not know the first thing about him. He also reiterates certain charms of their new home, like the fact that it is far from the often ghastly property developments in places like the town of Apt, boxy buildings



made of a bright pink cement that stand out horribly against the otherwise beautiful landscape.

The purchase of the house comes with certain unforeseen obstacles, the biggest of which are the paper gathering. The Mayles must prove repeatedly who they are and where they come from. A driver's license is insufficient, and old electricity bills must be produced. Buying a car is not easier. They do acquire a standard Citroën, but only after going through a similar bureaucratic scenario with the salesman. All of this means the Mayles carry their files with them wherever they go for several weeks, to avoid further purchasing hassles.

The neighbors, with whom the Mayles will get to know the best throughout the book, are the ones who harvest the grapes on their property. Faustin and Henriette are at first concerned that the arrangement they had in place with the previous owners would now be in jeopardy. The Mayles, however, have no problem with the traditional system, and so agree to continue to pay the capital costs of new fertilizer and vine stock, while the farmers, Henriette and Faustin, do the work of maintaining and harvesting the land. At the end of the season, the Mayles keep one-third of the profits, and the farmers, two-thirds. The Mayles choose to receive their profits in wine, and so look forward to stocking their *cave* (wine cellar) with approximately 1,000 liters of good red and pink bottles of wine at the end of the year.

One night in January the Mayles are invited to a dinner party. They arrive to find many other guests already assembled, drinks in hands, and a table set for ten. This is a memorable meal for the Mayles because it is larger and longer than any they have experienced before. Beginning with three kinds of pizza, it continues through a course of *pwtys* (rabbit, boar and thrush), a pork-based terrine laced with *marc*, sausage, more meat in a dark gravy served with wild mushrooms, a casserole of rabbit, salad and bread, goat's cheese, and a cake the daughter of the house had made.

This first month is when the Mayles experience their steepest learning curve all year, about how to fit in to Provençal life. It does not take them long to fall in love with the food - they had started to do so already prior to moving here, which is one reason they made the move so spontaneously in the first place - but they also learn to appreciate how food is bought and sold in their new home. When they go to a butcher in Apt and tell him they want veal for the Provençal stew called *pebronata*, they are met with expert instructions on how to prepare the dish, and the type of wine to serve with the meal. This happens ubiquitously, from the bakery to the markets, and the Mayles soon learn that everywhere they turn they will meet another gourmet cook, or food connoisseur. Even their floor cleaner, Monsieur Bagnols, is an expert on fine food.

The cold weather leaves the land and the people of Provence unusually quiet. The Mayles and their dogs explore during their walks, and it is on one of these strolls when Peter discovers his neighbor, Antoine Massot. The man lives all alone in a house that rests in a deep bowl in the land, permanently in shadow from the trees that surround it. Two large, vicious-looking Alsatian dogs and a mutt are chained up outside. Massot

introduces himself to Peter the way he does, apparently, to everyone he meets - with a story about how to cook a fox, and a plea to find someone to purchase his house.



# February

## February Summary and Analysis

The overriding feature of the Mayles' first February in the Lubyrn is the snow. The couple relishes in the quiet of the valley during the day, taking walks and enjoying large lunches, and drinking hearty wines to keep warm. At night, however, the cold seeps through the stone floors of their old home, and they decide some form of heating will have to be installed.

Enter Monsieur Menicucci, yet again. In this chapter, the reader gets a more descriptive view of the plumber, who plays the clarinet and has other cultural eccentricities to share. He invites Peter to his house to view his wide array of heating devices (oil, gas, electric, and more), and to meet Madame Menicucci. It is during this visit that Peter gets to know more about this philosopher-plumber, dressed for frigid temperatures and full of information about how to heat the Provençal home in winter. Peter returns home to ponder his heating options.

In the back of the house they have purchased is an enclosed courtyard, and the Mayles decide that to get through the cold nights of winter, they will begin to make plans for warmer weather. They map out the place in the courtyard where they will place a large, square, stone table. They learn that stone in Provence is as affordable as linoleum in England. They are referred to a man named Pierrot in Lacoste, who helps them refine their sketch and agrees to deliver the stone table. The only problem is that once the table is delivered, it still needs to be moved through the entrance to the courtyard. Pierrot assures the Mayles that, as a last resort, he could refer them to the rugby team in Carcassonne to get the job done.

In the meantime, the Mayles are also getting educated in French building terminology such as *coffres* and *rehausses* and *faux-plafonds* (p. 33). They hire masons to gut and refinish the kitchen, a job that will begin in this chapter and continue throughout the book. The team of builder/masons includes Didier and his cocker spaniel, Eric, and Claude. They work hard, long hours, but then disappear for weeks. Joining this team is Christian the architect, Ramon the plasterer, Mastorino the painter, Trufelli the tile-layer, Zanchi the carpenter, and of course, M. Menicucci with *jeune*. The work begins, and then it halts, as delays caused by the weather, holidays, accidents, and other various things take place. Peter states that, "Our architect, an expatriate Parisian, had warned us that building in Provence was very similar to trench warfare, with long periods of boredom interrupted by bursts of violent and noisy activity" (p. 34). Once Didier and his crew begin work on the kitchen the Mayles find themselves using a temporary kitchen, which consists of a barbecue fireplace and a fridge, a sink and two gas rings. It has basic essentials, except for walls. The Mayles rely on red wine to keep them warm.

February is the month when the Mayles begin to get their first phone calls from people in England who wish to make plans to visit them in their warm, sunny holiday home. In



addition, while all this deconstruction and reconstruction is going on, the Mayles become very personally acquainted with their Gault-Millau guide to restaurants. They respect this guide for the information it provides that is beyond what is offered in the Michelin. The Gault-Millau informs the hungry tourist where the chef was trained, the atmosphere of the place, a full description of the surroundings, and a detailed account of the food and the wine list. One Sunday in February, the Mayles try a restaurant in Lambesc with an eighty-year-old female chef. They are pleased with the food and the wine, and the service from the husband of the chef.





# March

## March Summary and Analysis

March arrives with blossoms on the cherry trees, changes at the markets, and cafe tables and chairs spilling out from the indoors onto the pavement under clear skies. The Mayles learn to rethink their previous notions of time, for it has less meaning in Provence than in other bustling parts of the world. The builders disappear, and without firm dates on when they will return, the homeowners decide to make the best of the situation and so begin to move their life outdoors. As they enjoy the time they spend around their pool, they continue to interact with and observe the neighbors.

Faustin decides to remove the melons in the field to replace them with more vines, after convincing the Mayles that this would be more profitable than putting up with the damage done to the melons by wild boars, which cut into profits. Massot decides to discourage Germans from camping in the National Park across from his property with threatening signs. He tells Peter a story about a peasant who coveted his neighbor's house, but the neighbor accepted a high purchase price from a Parisian for his home. The Parisian moves in. He and his guests party late into the night, and are wakened at four in the morning by Charlemagne, the peasant's loud cockerel, who crows for two hours. After a court case in which the peasant was favored, the Parisian puts the house up for sale and the peasant, with the help of a friend, purchases it, then turns Charlemagne into a delicious meal.

Bernard the pool man comes to clean the green fuzz from the pool; or rather, to have his assistant, Gaston, clean the green fuzz from the pool. Bernard says he knows someone who could help with the problem of getting the large stone table into the courtyard. He contacts the owner of *le bob*, which never happens. Instead, Didier and his gang come to the rescue. Seven men, including Peter, haul the massive table, and then compare wounds afterwards over beers and lunch.

Faustin has enlisted the help of Monsieur Beauchier, who has forty years' worth of experience planting vines in the Lubyron. All the work of planting is done manually by Beauchier, Faustin and Henriette, and their daughter. Peter observes that conversations are conducted between two people standing the furthest away from each other, voices straining to be heard over the sound of the dogs and arguments about the straightness of the lines. The group enjoys a full meal at noon including wine, and Grandfather Andry joins them to inspect their work. They completed the work in one day. Peter offers to pay for the work, but Faustin tells him he'll give him 250 asparagus plants, which are planted the very next day, destroying the Mayles' theory that nothing happens quickly in Provence.

This is almost the end of the truffle season, and the Mayles get some tastes of the precious fungus, and some lessons in how to hunt them out of the ground. They observe the money exchange over truffles in the villages surrounding a place called



Carpentras. One of the reasons the price of the truffle continues to stay so high is that no one has yet been able to cultivate the truffle. It is Ramon, the plasterer, who explains his methods of finding the gems, methods that have been successful in the past. He says one may use a stick, a pig, or a trained hound (there are, of course, inherent problems with all three). At Chez Michel, the Mayles enjoy omelettes with truffles baked into them.

At the end of March, the Mayles receive a telephone call from Tony, an acquaintance who says he will show up "next week" to solicit help from them in purchasing his own home in Provence.

# April

## April Summary and Analysis

Tony from London works in advertising and loves to flaunt the difficulty of his work and his very full Filofax. He fits the generalization that the Mayles have devised for every Englishman abroad: he comes into their home, has a cup of coffee (or glass of wine), and makes a call to the homeland. Tony doesn't ask, but rather assumes the aid of the Mayles in finding a property of his own in Provence.

There are certain complications and rituals involved with buying a home in France (besides all the paperwork), which mainly involve avoiding paying the full amount of heavy taxes on the purchase. Therefore, part of the lawyer's job is to leave the room when the money for the full amount is being exchanged. Another complication has to do with multiple ownerships. French law states that the children inherit every property, each of whom has equal share should the property be sold. Each owner then must be consulted before a final sale can take place, which is difficult to do if the children are scattered across the globe. Often, property is passed down to larger and larger amounts of relatives who no longer trust or know each other. Tony says he is a businessman, not afraid of the French and their peculiarities, and that he will buy a property on this visit. He does find a place he wishes to purchase, and says he will hire Irish workmen to complete any required construction on the place.

The tourist season has also begun, bringing a car full of Swiss who expect to picnic on the Mayles' property (they finally leave after much convincing). Massot continues with his vendetta against campers, with signs not only stating that the very public parkland is private property, but also warning of vipers, very deadly snakes. With the weather becoming increasingly warm, they Mayles enjoy their Sunday trips to the market, where they observe more French oddities. The French housewife, for example, examines food to the point of mutilation, before she will decide on a single green bean, a slab of cheese, or a group of olives. The French, it seems, spend as much of their income on their stomachs as the "English do on their cars and stereo systems," (p. 72). The Mayles go to the Cafy du Progris at Easter. The look of the place is not pleasant, but the view over the villages and hills that lead to the Basses-Alpes is.

The Mayles encounter more "typical" French drivers, who are stubborn on the road. Peter just barely misses one accident, where a man in a Peugeot slides backwards into a telegraph pole and breaks it. The man, who is very drunk, solicits a ride from Peter and asks him not to reveal to anyone that it was he who broke the pole, saying he would then have to pay for it (which he has no intention of doing).

A friend from Paris visits the Mayles, and asks the same questions they have been asked before: Do you miss your friends? Do you miss English television? To which the Mayles reply in the negative. Living in Provence is never dull for the Mayles, what with visits from the postman who is angry over the removal of their post box, and another

visit from a couple selling Oriental carpets, and of course the visits from others which become more and more frequent the warmer the weather becomes.



# May

## May Summary and Analysis

The first of May is a national holiday in France and to celebrate, the Mayles mount the bicycles they purchased in Cavaillon and head out on the country roads. They enjoy the scenery, the scent of lavender, rosemary, and wild thyme, until they begin the climb to Bonnieux, which is very strenuous. Their muscles protest, until they arrive at the Cafy Clerici where they are handed beer and sit in soft chairs. They continue their bike ride up to the ruins of the Marquis de Sade's chateau and an older, wiry man passes them on his bicycle. He returns to ride with them into Lacoste, and then enjoys a refreshment with them at another cafy. When the Mayles return home, they dive into their pool, as welcoming as Heaven.

One day Faustin, in his round-about way, asks the Mayles if he may have some of the Lucerne, which grows rampantly around their home, for his rabbits, who love to eat it. The Mayles consent, as they had previously thought about getting rid of the stuff. Faustin repays the favor by bringing the Mayles a large bunch of fresh asparagus from his garden. It is tied with a ribbon with Faustin's name and address, because, as he explains, it is the law in France for the producer to be identified in this way.

Another day in May, Bernard the pool man brings a present for the Mayles, a gift which will get much use during the hot months of summer. It is a floating armchair for the pool, imported from Miami, Florida. He advises the Mayles to hide it at night, as there are thieves who might steal it. Following this conversation, the Mayles decide to finally purchase some insurance for their house. The insurance agent who visits them goes by the name of Thierry Fructus. He is dressed like a performer from Vegas, complete with blue suede shoes, a lime-green shirt, and turquoise socks. The Mayles are, however surprised by him, pleased with his professionalism.

Cherry-picking season has begun, and Faustin, Henriette, and several of their relatives are doing the work themselves rather than hiring expensive outside labor. Peter does offer a ride to two Australian students one day, and he is disappointed to hear how much they have disliked their time in Provence. Peter goes to Bernard's office, and hears a story that cheers him up: Christian, a friend of Bernard who is also the Mayles' architect, has been offered the job of redesigning a brothel in Cavaillon. He was going to turn it down, however, because the time frame to complete the job was much too tight and unrealistic. Peter has a good laugh over the image of his crew of workmen trying to get their jobs done amidst half-dressed beautiful women.

The guests who come to stay with the Mayles in May are quite pleasant rather than bothersome, except for the fact that their schedules are so different from that of their hosts. They are up until the wee hours of the morning, sleep in late, and Madame Mayle finds herself spending extraordinarily long hours in the kitchen, cooking and cleaning up for everyone. On Sundays, however, guests are wakened early to attend a market. In



May, the cafe of choice for breakfast one Sunday is one overlooking the river at Isle-sur-la-Sorgue. The market is in the main square, and they peruse the food, jewelry, clothing, and people. This is an antique dealer's town, and there are bargains to be found. Madame Mayle purchases a plaster bust of Delacroix.

They head for lunch in Buoux, a place so small it is barely populated until guests arrive to eat. Maurice the chef bases his success on being able to serve simple food, and stay in the valley with his horses - nothing more. One menu is offered for 110 francs, and begins with a variety of delights such as artichoke hearts, marinated mushrooms, sardines fried in batter, calamari, fresh crispy bread, and much more besides the abundant wine. The main course is lamb, followed by cheese from Banon, desserts, and a glass of *marc* from Gigondas. As Sunday is a day when feasting is most sacred to the French, the Mayles observe on the way home that this ritual even seems to have a calming effect on the French motorist, who is normally impatient and brutish on the road.

# June

## June Summary and Analysis

In June, a notice left on their windshield convinces the Mayles to donate blood to help a young boy in need of an operation and many blood transfusions. The hall where the collection is taking place is crowded with those who want to help. Another difference between the French and the English that strikes the Mayles at this event: in England, one donates blood and receives a biscuit and a cup of tea; in France, one donates blood, then heads to the tables where one can choose from not only sausage meats and breads, but mugs of wine as well. This is another example of how the French live life to the fullest through their taste buds and their stomachs.

A friend of the Mayles from London visits, and is aghast at the sight of men kissing. Peter, however, finds the custom of the kiss in France rather refreshing, especially compared with the reserved natures of the people from his home country. Peter has observed the intricacies of the greetings between French friends, family members and acquaintances, and both he and his wife stay alert to the customs of individuals from specific regions in France. In Paris, for example, one kisses twice, no more. In Provence, however, land of the country bumpkins, three kisses are required. The French also have certain required hand movements to accompany their speech, an act for which shopping baskets, bicycles, even drinks must be set aside in order to execute. From the hand waggle to the rigid index finger, these movements must be heeded every bit as much as what is being spoken from the mouth.

Observing the many different French rituals and customs keeps the Mayles busy enough to neglect to visit some of the more touristy places in Provence, a fact pointed out to them again and again by their numerous guests. The one place they do make the effort to visit is Aix. The way there is slow and scenic, and the architecture and placement of trees not to be missed. They enjoy the cafys of the Cours Mirabeau, in particular the Deux Garzons. Like most of the favorite haunts of the Mayles, this cafe is a family-run business, passed down through generations, with little changes having been made to the place in all those years. University students frequent the Deux Garzons, and they enact their own ritual entrance, which involves sunglasses and nonchalance.

Other points of interest for the Mayles in Aix are the cheeses on the rue des Marseillais, the shops in the narrow streets behind the Cours, the flower market, and finally, lunch at Chez Gu. For a three-course meal, they pay 80 francs, and drink wine served in jugs. On the way home, they stop at a junkyard to look for a stone bench, with no success. At home, the answering machine has messages for them, including one from Didier saying they will be by sometime to continue working on the Mayles' home, and another from an English couple, Ted and Susan, who show up at the house just as the Mayles are about to sit down to dinner. Ted and Susan spend the night, but awaken their hosts in the wee hours of the morning with the sounds of Susan being sick. She is not used to the rich

food of Provence, and the Mayles are thankful that their stomachs are strong enough to enjoy all that their new home has to offer.



# July

## July Summary and Analysis

Provence is actually an area that stretches all the way south to the Cotes d'Azur, along the Mediterranean Sea. One day Peter drives the two-hour distance, which takes him four hours due to all the traffic, to visit his friend in Ramatuelle, close to Saint-Tropez. This part of Provence is so different - with its crowded streets and touristy haunts - from the one he and his wife love, that it hardly seems right to call it by the same name.

Back at home, Peter meets Massot again during one of his early morning dog walks, and the man is angry because his signposts labeling the parkland private property have been ignored by what he assumes to be German tourists. Massot decides his signs will have to be even more threatening, and warn against miniature mines called *piiges a feu*. During another walk, Peter's dogs discover one of these campers, sleeping. Peter observes that this German camper has not made the mess that Massot complains about - leaving garbage all over the forest. Rather, it is the Frenchmen themselves - for Massot is not the only Frenchman who makes these complaints about tourists - who create the biggest messes.

Something that many tourists who come to France are not comfortable with is the *toilette a la Turque* (p. 121), which consists of a hole positioned between two footrests. Designed by a Turk, the French refined it by creating a high-pressure flushing device, which often catches tourists unaware. In a cafe one day, Peter notices an English couple and their son who have had a meeting with the Turkish toilet. The episode left them shocked and not a little disgusted. Peter discusses this with Menicucci, who is quick to defend the different French styles of washrooms. The Mayles order the simplest, white toilet they can find in Menicucci's catalogues for their own home. The one they initially choose has been discontinued, but the second choice suits their needs.

Through more discussions of demolition and rebuilding, the Mayles welcome into their home another guest whom they love very much, but who is so disaster-prone, they are glad he is coming during the renovations. His name is Bennett, and he has to call Peter to pick him up from the airport because, although he had rented a convertible car, he had flicked a cigar butt accidentally into the backseat, and set the car on fire. The car rental place had refused him another. The Mayles enjoyed his company for one week, and only a few things broke in his presence, and the Mayles hope he will come back one day to finish the several drinks he had left under his bed.

Bernard the pool man has told the Mayles about a charming station cafe in Bonnieux. Under the impression that they could not live here and miss tasting the food at this particular place, and with the pressure of the patron threatening to retire, the Mayles go to the Cafe de la Gare. Madame cooks lunch for about 40 guests at precisely twelve noon, five days each week. On this day, the Mayles enjoy an appetizer of sausage,



gherkins, olives, grated carrots in a marinade, bread; salad, noodles in tomato sauce with roast loin of pork coated in an onion gravy; more wine with the cheese tray; and dessert of a lemon tart.

The Mayles end July with a game of *boules*, which they refer to as the most enjoyable game they've ever played. The rules include things like: disqualification for anyone playing without a drink; certain cheating is permitted; and nobody's word is final. The Mayles have set up their own court complete with uneven ground that only they are familiar with. Their opponents are friends who warn against the coming onslaught of August tourists. The Mayles, who know they have to listen to the concert of jackhammers and blowtorches during that month anyways, are not disturbed by the idea of more tourists.

# August

## August Summary and Analysis

The month of August brings many tourist jokes from the locals, like this one from Faustin: "What is it that changes from the color of a dead rat to the color of a dead lobster in three hours? *Les Anglais en vacances*... even a moonbeam makes them pink" (p. 134). Faustin also tells the story about a fire near Grasse, and how one of the Canadair airplanes, which scoop water to drop on the flames, had scooped a swimmer out of the water and dropped him on the fire. Peter never did find this tragedy mentioned in the newspaper, and learned later that these sorts of myths are plentiful during the most-touristy season of August.

The Mayles attend a party in Gordes. It is a very formal affair, not at all full of the rambunctiousness of the local Provençals. During the buffet, the Mistral begins to blow, and the dinner guests retreat inside. When the music begins, the Mayles are curious about the effect it will have on the very formal-looking guests, but they seem to let loose and dance the night away. The Mayles, however, leave early, because they have plans to attend a goat race the next morning. The race is entertaining, but they do not place the correct bets to win money.

In the meantime, the major work of Menicucci begins on their home. He shows up with his team, laying pipes and joints and all sorts of tools and equipment out on the lawn to begin installing the boiler and central-heating system. He and the crew of Didier spend time discussing how they will work together, and scheduling. Menicucci makes a big show about not being rushed in his work. The Mayles are anxious about this work, because it will take place all over the house, disrupting their privacy worse than ever. They stay in most nights, glad of the silence that darkness brings, but one evening head to Goult. The streets are so crowded, and so is every restaurant, they are afraid they won't get to eat after all. However, they eventually sit down with Monsieur Aude, an iron artist, who had done some work on the Mayles' house. Aude relays how busy he is with all the work coming his way, and how people always expect the work to be done on such short notice. They go home after midnight, and a storm hits the Luberon in the night, leaving ruts down their driveway and uprooted trees in their yard.



# September

## September Summary and Analysis

The tourists disappear, and the weather is most pleasant. Faustin, however, is skeptical about what still may come from the skies before he has the chance to harvest the grapes. He must pick the table grapes before the wine grapes, and does so once Henriette - his mechanic wife - has serviced the truck. Using scissors, they and their daughter set to work. At the end of the chapter, they pick the grapes that will be made into wine, with the help of a cousin named Raoul and Faustin's father. The Mayles accompany the pickers to the cooperative at Maubec, and there they are weighed and tested for alcoholic content, which is ranked at 12.32 percent.

Peter notices that all their neighbors have tales to share about the guests from August, and he comes up with a title for these: *The Sayings of August*. These include: "What do you mean, they don't take credit cards?" "You've run out of vodka." "There's a very peculiar smell in the bathroom." "I didn't realize you had to be so careful with a septic tank." "Do you think you could take care of this? I've only got a five hundred-franc note." "I feel terrible watching you slave away like that." "You've run out of whiskey", and so on (p. 151). The Mayles feel that, by comparison, they fared pretty well in August as far as damage done by guests is concerned.

Menicucci reminds Peter three times to order the oil for the central heating system, and insists on being present to supervise when the tank is filled. Menicucci, ever proud of his system, fires it up in the presence of the Mayles, explaining its simplicity (despite the fact that it appears to be extremely complicated, the boiler, burner and water tank standing together in what used to be a dormitory for donkeys, but is now filled with copper cords and painted pipes). He leaves the Mayles to cook in their own home, as the system must be left on for twenty-four hours.

Hunters are once again gearing up for the season, and Peter notices that they dress the part, but barely play the part. He sees them standing in groups, smoking, drinking, eating, with their hunting dogs excited to go. At the end of a day, sometimes the hunters return, well fed, no dogs in tow. They seem to be out there more for show than for wild meat.

Peter sets out to stock his wine cellar, which could potentially hold four hundred bottles. At one vineyard off a secluded road, he meets an Uncle Edward, who insists that Peter try every wine he has available. Hours later, Peter leaves with more cases than he had planned on buying.

# October

## October Summary and Analysis

October is gloriously comfortable: warm enough to swim during the day, and cool enough at night for great sleeping. October is also the beginning of mushroom season. Peter meets a man dressed in very strange gear, a rubber boot on one foot, a running shoe on the other, and he is wielding a stick. The man explains that the boot protects him from the dangerous snakes that live in the area. The mushrooms he is collecting look poisonous to Peter but are, in fact, edible. He also tells Peter that, on a daily basis, people bring their baskets of fungus into the pharmacy to get an educated answer on whether they are safe to eat or not.

The Mayles also learn more about bread than they ever before thought there was to know about, what in France, is as much as an accompaniment to a meal as is wine. They visit a renowned bakery in Cavaillon called Chez Auzet, where "the baking and eating of breads and pastries had been elevated to the status of a minor religion" (p. 168). Auzet has a bread menu for customers, which explains the breads available at this particular bakery, as well as the precise meal to eat each with. Peter leaves with a brown bread supposedly perfect to eat with calves' liver.

In a conversation with Massot, the neighbor mentions the year 1992 as the time when he would ideally sell his home. This is to be the year, Peter ponders, when most people think, like Massot, that foreign money will come streaming into the country due to the reality of the Common Market. Peter doesn't agree with this theory, seeing as there already is such a large foreign population, like himself, living in France.

Back home, another problem has arisen at the house. The meter reader from Electricity de France (EDF) has arrived, but cannot read the meter due to the ant colony that has made a nest there. The EDF man believes he could use a blowtorch to get them out, but Menicucci, who is also present, has a much better - and safer - idea. He asks for some lemons and a knife, and Peter, his wife and the EDF man watch as the lemon juice sends the ants scattering.

Another rainstorm destroys the driveway once again, and Peter calls on Menicucci. The plumber summons a man named Sanchez, who has the machinery for the job, and Menicucci calls him an "artist with the bulldozer" (p. 174). Sanchez orders the required gravel and returns, as promised, two days later to begin the work. His father, the "melon millionaire", as Menicucci described him (*ibid*), appears the next day with his wife. Monsieur Sanchez describes his view of life and happiness, which goes along with the reasons why he still engages in manual labor from time to time, despite being financially capable of retiring. The parents help the son finish the job of spreading the gravel. The Mayles are surprised by a gift from Monsieur Sanchez: his cap, full of wild mushrooms, complete with his favorite recipe for preparing them.



# November

## November Summary and Analysis

A friend is admitted to the Confrerie Saint-Vincent, the winegrowers of his village, and the Mayles attend the inauguration and dinner. They find that all the guests are farmers, used to shouting at one another across fields of vines, and the room is loud with their presence. Once they find their friend, they are surprised to see him looking ill at ease until they learn the reason: there is not a drop of alcohol in sight. Once the speeches are done, however, the wine bottles are uncorked and a sigh of relief seems to go through the crowd. Following a dinner which consists of quail, sea bass, a very alcoholic sorbet to cleanse the palate, beef, soufflys, and champagne, there is dancing which continues long after the Mayles say their goodbyes. This evening causes Peter, not for the first time, to reflect on the endurance of the people who live in Provence.

In this month, Peter discusses the use of olive oil, which he and his wife buy in five-liter containers and use for cooking, for marinating, and for storing truffles. The Mayles are advised about oil by Madame Soliva, the eighty-year-old chef they know whose *nom de cuisine* is tante Yvonne. She has sampled olive oils from all over France, and concludes that the best oil produced comes from Les Baux. She also suggests to the Mayles that they go to Le Paradou and have lunch at the cafe there, and to be there by noon. The cafe is so busy the patron must set up a new table for them, near the fire. Like other cafes they have attended this year, there is no choice but what is on the menu for that particular day, and they eat crisp, oily salad, sausages, snails and cod, cheese and tart. Then they go to the oil mill in Maussane, and leave with a few two-liter jugs of oil and soap made from the same substance.

Despite the dropping temperatures, guests continue to arrive, surprised to find the Mayles in sweaters and lighting fires at night. Faustin predicts the coldest winter yet, and advises the Mayles to have their chimney swept. Peter does have someone come to clean the chimney who informs him that no, Faustin has not hired him, because his wife, Henriette, does that job also.



# December

## December Summary and Analysis

Promises from the builders to have the work on the Mayles home completed before Christmas seem to grow stale, and the homeowners scheme until they come up with a plan to make sure it happens. Madame Mayle comes to the conclusion that the winter holiday is not enough of a deadline for the men, but if they were invited, with their wives, to a party at the house where the work should by now be finished, they would not want to lose face in front of each other or especially in front of their wives, and so would rush to complete the job before the soiree. The plan seems to work, for a mere few days after the invitations are sent out, the crew is back at the house, cement mixer in place, and the bustle of activity continues once again.

The Christmas season gears up in this part of the world with calendars. The postman arrives in a jolly mood one day, and enjoys a drink - or a few - with the Mayles before presenting the post office calendar, for which he receives a tip. Another day, two firemen arrive and present their calendar, in the same friendly, holiday manner. Then two men from the sanitation department arrive and also receive a tip from the very grateful Peter and his wife. The Mayles miss some of the more outward expressions of Christmas they had seen in England, such as decorations, office parties and carolers, but these are replaced, in their part of the world, by the struggling sounds of another neighbor, Monsieur Poncet, who is preparing his ass to be part of the living criche in the church in Mynerbes.

In search of some Christmas spirit, the Mayles go to Cavailon. There, they see a Santa Claus - smoking a Gauloise and wearing a Rolling Stones T-shirt - and the streets are decked out in lights. Farther on down the street, they find a wide variety of dead animals hanging, awaiting further slaughter, and pwtys, cheeses, cakes and pink champagne. As always, the priority of the French involves food more than any other material good.

As the carpet-layer, Jean-Pierre, is drilling the holes to screw in the batten for the last of the carpet that is to be laid, he goes through the hot-water pipe. Peter summons Menicucci once again to repair the pipe. In the meantime, there is a trench in the floor and an area of the carpet is soaked. The Mayles must muster every bit of Provençal relaxation they possess to ignore it, and go on with their party. At the party, Peter notices that, due to the habit of the French of supplementing speech with their hands, they continually put down glasses, forget which one was theirs, and require a new one.

Before the end of the book, the Mayles are met with one more surprise; only this time, it is a purely pleasant one. The workers have brought a present for the expatriate Brits: "an antique jardiniere, a massive circular tub that had been cut by hand from a single block of stone long before the days of cutting machines. It was thick sided, slightly irregular, a pale, weathered gray. It had been filled with earth and planted with primulas"

(p. 204). The Mayles are touched, and after they thank everyone, the formality of the event disappears, and the party draws to a close.

The irony of the end of the year for the Mayles is that, after a year of activity, which included work on the house combined with constant guests, they find themselves alone on Christmas Day. They awake in the morning to discover they have no power, and therefore, no way to cook their lamb. They manage to find a table in a restaurant. The Mayles reflect on their first year in Provence, a year of frustrations, successes, and full of new experiences.





# Characters

**Peter Mayle**

**Madame Mayle**

**Faustin**

**Henriette**

**Grandfather (P**

**Antoine Massot**

**Monsieur Menicucci**

**Didier**

**Ramon**

**Bernard**

**Christian**

**Tony**

**Bennett**

**Ted and Susan**



## Objects/Places

### The Mistral

The Mistral is the wind that comes from Russia, and blows menacingly across the south of France. It wreaks havoc on the dispositions of all who live in the area, forcing them indoors and out of its path.

### The Luberon Mountains/ Luberon valley

This area known as the Vaucluse encompasses several villages. The Luberon Mountains reach an altitude of 3,500 feet and run for forty miles to the west and east. This is where the Mayles' home is located. Many grapes are harvested here, as well as melons and other fruits and vegetables, herbs and mushrooms. This is also an area where the fall hunting season takes place.

### Language

The language spoken in Provence is French, but the accent is different from other parts of France. Peter describes it as "a rich, soupy patois, emanating from somewhere at the back of the throat and passing through a scrambling process in the nasal passages before coming out as speech... *demain* became *demang*, *vin* became *ving*" (p. 6).

### The grape vines

These are an integral part of the landscape of Provence, and of the Mayles lives. As Peter describes: "We loved the vines - the ordered regularity of them against the sprawl of the mountain, the way they changed from bright green to darker green to yellow and red as spring and summer turned to autumn, the blue smoke in the pruning season as the clippings were burned, the pruned stumps studding the bare fields in the winter - they were meant to be here" (p. 7-8).

### Markets

These are as common in France as grocery stores in North America. At the market, one may shop for any kind of food, all completely fresh. From meat to olive oil, the food at the markets is also local, and the Mayles attend several different markets a short drive from their home, every Sunday.



## Cafys and restaurants

Peter states that, "I have liked almost every cafy that I have ever been to in France, even the ratty little ones in tiny villages where the flies are more plentiful than the customers" (p. 105). Using their Gault-Millau guide to restaurants, the Mayles seek out and find the most popular as well as the best-kept secret eating holes within an hour or so drive from their home, and they find pleasure in all of them. The cafys and restaurants serve food that is typical of Provence, rich and earthy, accompanied by succulent bread and wine that is high in its alcohol content. The Mayles visit at least one different cafy or restaurant each month.

## Aix

This is the Mayles favorite place to visit in Provence. The drive there is slow and scenic, and the architecture and placement of trees is something the Mayles enjoy looking at. They visit the cafys of the Cours Mirabeau, in particular the Deux Garzons, their favorite. Like most of the preferred haunts of the Mayles, this cafy is a family-run business, passed down through generations with little changes having being made to the place in all those years.

## Toilette a la Turque

This toilet is a rather primitive way, from an outsider's perspective (and Peter's), to eliminate waste. The *toilette* consists of a hole positioned between two footrests. One must stand on the footrests, and aim one's waste into the hole. A Turk designed it, but the French added to the design by creating a high-pressure flushing device, which, if one is not careful, will soak one's pants and shoes when executed.

## Boules

This is a game enjoyed by the people of Provence. The rules include things like: disqualification for anyone playing without a drink; certain cheating is permitted; and, nobody's word is final. The Mayles have set up their own court in their yard.

## The cement mixer

This item belongs to Didier and is used by him and the other workers, but becomes almost a permanent fixture in front of the Mayles' house for the entire year. In fact, when it is not there, the Mayles worry, because this means that the unfinished work could remain that way for some time.



# Themes

## Man versus Nature

The weather has a huge affect on the people of the Lubyrton valley in Provence. The weather, dominated by the Mistral winds in winter, changes the entire atmosphere of the place. People remain indoors, almost as though they are hibernating, and a quiet settles over the landscape. This terrible, dangerous wind also depresses the local residents, and there are often suicides and deaths during the winter season.

This contrasts to the hustle of the markets on Sundays when the weather is warm, and the speed and stubbornness with which the French drive on the roads. The sunshine, of which Provence is famous for, brings people outdoors to eat, play, and work in the fields.

Then there are the rains, which wash away roads and driveways - including that of the Mayles - and seem equally as dangerous as the Mistral. All these extremes in the weather have a shocking effect on the system of people living or visiting the area, and the Mayles, who seem to be able to handle the weather by drinking wine by their fire, notice that most of the English people who come to visit are very sensitive to these immense forces of nature. Their guest, Susan, for example, cannot be out in the sunshine for more than twenty minutes without blistering. The Mayles are satisfied that they can handle the cold, the rain, and the glorious sunshine of Provence.

## Man Versus Man

The bureaucracy in France pits man against man in an effort to get things accomplished. From buying a home to buying a vehicle, the Mayles run into this bureaucracy at every stage of their settling-in process.

First, there is all of the paper gathering that must take place to purchase their home and their vehicle. The Mayles overcome this by carrying with them every piece of paper they could possibly need for any future purchases; documents such as their birth certificates, drivers' licenses, and electricity bills.

Then, there is the question of ownership on any home being sold, and the issue of every owner - cousins, aunts, uncles, extended family who may have also inherited a property - needing to agree to any given sale. Peter attempts to explain this to Tony when this acquaintance is buying a home in Provence.

The theme of man versus man also comes up in the novel between the locals and the tourists; in particular, Massot and the Germans who he believes camp on the park property close to his house. Massot's way of dealing with these tourists, who he wishes to discourage from camping there, is to erect threatening signs. When these don't work, he decides to put up even more threatening signs, warning of land mines in the area.



Like Massot, other locals complain about the tourists. The irony is that the tourists supply the area with a great amount of economic benefits, and for this reason, the locals must cater to them.

## Man Versus Himself

In every year, man must challenge himself to overcome any outside obstacles he might encounter. For Peter and his wife, these challenges include, how to deal with the flexible schedule their builders happen to be on? To deal with this, the Mayles attempt to live life the way the people of Provence do, to relax more, enjoy life more, and worry less. Peter concedes to thinking of time in seasons rather than days. In this way, he seems to take a deep breath and cease some of the worrying over when the renovations will be complete.

Massot must, every day, face himself and his desire to move out of the house he adores so much. He talks endlessly about getting a place in town, but that would be a place where he could not bring his three ferocious dogs. He says he would have to shoot them.



# Style

## Perspective

The author, Peter Mayle, claims to have always loved Provence. He has been to Provence as a tourist, and then as a local after purchasing a house where he moves with his wife and his two dogs.

Because he has spent time in this area that he is writing about as both a tourist and as a local, he has a deep understanding of the place. As an outsider, he notices things that a local wouldn't; for example, how the French are the ones who litter on their own land, not the tourists about whom the French complain.

Peter Mayle wrote the book as a guidebook for those who wish to visit Provence, or perhaps those who, like himself, wish to purchase a home there. He has included in the book many details which are useful to anyone hoping to one day move there.

## Tone

In keeping with his British nature, Peter Mayle's tone in this novel is light and humorous. He writes in the first person, but in a very objective way, and the effect on the reader is that it is an excellent companion for anyone traveling to Provence.

## Structure

Since the book is non-fiction, there is not much of a story line. It is designed as a running commentary on the Mayles time in Provence, during the first year they live there.

This format has the benefit of acting as a guidebook for anyone who wishes to visit Provence or follow in the Mayles footsteps and purchase a home there. The downside is that it does not have an exciting plot, and some readers may find it a little dry and uneventful to read. It is also jarring at times, going from one topic to another, all topics within the subject of the daily lives of the Mayles, without any particular feature to connect all these events.

Because he is writing a non-fiction novel, Peter reveals a certain amount of himself in the book, but also maintains a personal distance from the reader. He does this in many ways: by leaving out his wife's name (and, for that matter, the names of his dogs). It's all very objective, and not completely personal.



## Quotes

"Our architect, an expatriate Parisian, had warned us that building in Provence was very similar to trench warfare, with long periods of boredom interrupted by bursts of violent and noisy activity," February, p. 34

"[The French] spend as much of their income on their stomachs as the English do on their cars and stereo systems," April, p. 72

"What is it that changes from the color of a dead rat to the color of a dead lobster in three hours? *Les Anglais en vacances...* even a moonbeam makes them pink," August, p. 134

"What do you mean, they don't take credit cards?" "You've run out of vodka." "There's a very peculiar smell in the bathroom." "I didn't realize you had to be so careful with a septic tank." "Do you think you could take care of this? I've only got a five hundred-franc note." "I feel terrible watching you slave away like that." "You've run out of whiskey," and so on," September, p. 151

[Chez Auzet, where] "the baking and eating of breads and pastries had been elevated to the status of a minor religion," October, p. 168

[Menicucci calls Sanchez an] "artist with the bulldozer," October, p. 174

"an antique jardiniere, a massive circular tub that had been cut by hand from a single block of stone long before the days of cutting machines. It was thick sided, slightly irregular, a pale, weathered gray. It had been filled with earth and planted with primulas" December, p. 204

"Aix is a university town, and there is clearly something in the curriculum that attracts pretty students. The terrace of the Deux Garçons is always full of them, and it is my theory that they are there for education rather than refreshment. They are taking a degree course in café department, with a syllabus divided into four parts..." June, p. 106

"To begin with, we made a conscious effort to become more philosophical in our attitude towards time, to treat days and weeks of delays in the Provençal fashion - that is, to enjoy the sunshine and to stop thinking like city people... It worked well enough for a week or two, and then we noticed that the building materials at the back of the house were turning green with the first growth of spring weeds," March, p. 45

[Most hunters are] "miserable namby-pambies who didn't want to get their boots dirty in the forest, and who hoped that birds would somehow fly into their buckshot," October, p. 171

[Peter refers to Massot as,] "a brutal, greedy, and mendacious old scoundrel. I was becoming quite fond of him," (ibid)



"But what would happen, I asked him, if the certificate had been burned with the house? He hadn't thought of that, and I think he was grateful to me for suggesting another disastrous possibility. A connoisseur of woe needs fresh worries from time to time, or he will become complacent," November, p. 193

"Henriette was a brown, pretty woman with a permanent smile and a sprinter's enthusiasm for reaching the finish line of each sentence in record time" January, p. 6-7

[Peter calls Didier] "a human machine of destruction" December, p. 201

[The French spoken in Provence is] "a rich, soupy patois, emanating from somewhere at the back of the throat and passing through a scrambling process in the nasal passages before coming out as speech... *demain* became *demang*, *vin* became *ving*," January, p. 6

"We loved the vines - the ordered regularity of them against the sprawl of the mountain, the way they changed from bright green to darker green to yellow and red as spring and summer turned to autumn, the blue smoke in the pruning season as the clippings were burned, the pruned stumps studding the bare fields in the winter - they were meant to be here," January, pp. 7-8

"I have liked almost every cafe that I have ever been to in France, even the ratty little ones in tiny villages where the flies are more plentiful than the customers," June, p. 105





## Topics for Discussion

What was Peter Mayle's purpose in writing this book? Who is his audience?

Why does the author never once in the text mention his wife's name? What is his wife's name?

What is so special - or different - about French food compared with the food in England?

Why would some English people, like Ted and Susan, be sensitive to the rich food and sunshine of Provence?

What is the biggest obstacle for the Mayles when they try to purchase a house in Provence?

What do the Mayles feel about their builders and laymen? Do they respect them?

Why do people in Provence believe that the winters are getting progressively colder?

Who is Peter's favorite neighbor, and why?

What keeps the Mayles busy on a daily basis throughout the year?