

The French Connection

Whistler's second language

by Dorothy Raffo



Growing up in the U.K., we all learn French in school, go on camping holidays in France and head out on the obligatory French exchange program. The memories that the latter evokes are more about the crispy baguettes, hot chocolate and wine rather than the language.

When I arrived in Whistler I heard French accents that were very different from what I was used to in Europe. Some I could understand, while others left me completely lost. In the last few months I met a new Francophone friend who has brought me a new understanding of what it means to speak both English and French.

Before this encounter I had no idea what the Saint-Jean-Baptiste was about, but the 'joie de vivre' of this group left me intrigued. Saint-Jean Day celebrates the Francophone culture and is held every June, this year on Thursday, June 24. This time I intend to raise my own glass and get better acquainted with our Sea to Sky

Francophones and what they contribute to our eclectic Whistler lifestyle.

French as a Mother Tongue

The Francophone community in Canada comes from a tiny French-speaking population of about 2,500 settlers, whose descendants have now grown to around eight million people. Although the majority of these speakers reside in Quebec, French-speaking Canadians are found coast to coast.

My first question was how many Francophones are there in the Sea to Sky Corridor? I realized that it wasn't an easy question to answer since many of the Québécois, coming only for the winter months, were gone by the time the census came around in May 2006. But according to Statistics Canada, there were just over nine hundred people who indicated that their mother tongue was French, which would represent 3.5 per cent of the region compared with 1.3 per cent for the

province. The highest Francophone population is in Whistler with 5.3 per cent of its population speaking French as a mother tongue. This is almost a full percentage point higher than Banff, which is also an important ski destination for Francophone speakers – especially as it is in a National Park that requires many of its employees to be bilingual.

A look at the number of students studying in the three French schools of the corridor is also a good way to track the Francophones in the community. At present there are 193 students spread between Squamish, Whistler and Pemberton.

Speaking both official languages

It's interesting when we look at the other statistics that give us an idea of the number of people who learned French as a second language. Again, our area surpasses the rest of the province with 12.8 per cent of our residents speaking both official languages. This number jumps to 17.7 per cent in Whistler, which is more than double the B.C. bilingual population of 7.2 per cent. From my research I found that this was the highest percentage of the two official languages in B.C.

Even our politicians are bilingual. Mayor, Ken Melamed was very busy throughout the Games giving interviews in French. John Weston, our local MP, is fluent French (and Chinese), which helps when serving on the Official Languages Committee. The Liberal candidate Dan Vaniez is a Francophone from Montreal. Within our local RCMP, one out of seven officers on average are Francophones.

So Where Do They Come From?

European French – The second obvious question after getting to know how many Francophones are in the community was to inquire where they came from. Speaking with pioneers such as Marcel Richoz, a ski instructor from French Switzerland, or Pascal Tiphine, owner of Le Gros and a restaurant owner in the community for the past 20 years, both recall that a greater portion of French speakers came from Europe when Whistler was new. There were even French Quarters in Alpine, where four properties were owned by the European-French. Even now, after 30 years, the French Quarter is still very Francophone but with a greater variety. Some still come here

from France and Switzerland, they are joined by visitors from Québec and Ontario.

The late Joel Thibeault, for whom a golf tournament was held at the beginning of this month, played an important role in promoting the French culture in the community. Along with his friend Pascal Tiphine, they introduced the tradition of celebrating Bastille Day, which is a French holiday celebrated on July 14 to mark the beginning of the French revolution. Today the Sea to Sky residents and visitors can still participate in this celebration at Le Gros Restaurant with their annual Pernod & Petanque competition that traditionally goes on into the early hours. People can have great French cuisine, win prizes and have a chance to have their name on the famous trophy that sits pride of place in the restaurant.

A second wave of European French arrived in the area a little later, a group that included Laurence and Michel Gagnon. They opened their French creperie 'Crepe Montagne' in 1997.

Laurence comes from Le Croisic, a small resort on the Atlantic coast near the Loire valley. After travelling across Canada in the '80s to discover the country and learn English, she met Michel in Quebec. They decided to settle in Whistler, to be in the mountains and yet close to the coast – the perfect combination for both of them. Since the age of 14 Laurence loved to make crêpes, so she figured why not do what you love?

She says that, without meaning to, they cultivated an almost all French-speaking restaurant staff, with most of their resumes coming from Quebec. Their saving grace is that they have two Japanese girls working for them so they both have to speak English to communicate!

"We say 'bonjour,' and 'Bon appetit,' we speak French between each other. Our clients like it, they feel like they are in Paris – they often answer back in the little French they know. It's cute!"

Then there's Marcel Mathieu from France. Marcel was recruited from the French team and is now the head coach for the national snowboardcross team. The team had incredible success in the 2010 Games with Whistler's Maëlle Ricker taking the gold and Mike Robertson the silver. It was interesting to hear Marcel talk about Maëlle's impeccable French, which is a product of the French immersion program in the corridor. Marcel also said that he

always talks to Maëlle in French as it's easier for him to be more precise with his words.

Les Québécois!

Whether you are walking down the village stroll, sitting at a restaurant or working on a construction site, you can hear the famous accent of the Québécois. The main motivation for them to come to this region is for the love of the great outdoors, and like most people here they enjoy playing hard as well as working hard. Many are also interested in improving or perfecting their English.

Québécois are also known for their entrepreneurial spirit and the corridor has some really good examples of that.

André Saint-Jacques from the Bearfoot Bistro moved here from Quebec City and has been in Whistler for the last 16 years. Bringing his passion and charming accent to the restaurant industry has led to an award winning business whose reputation for being the place to party certainly precedes it. About 25 per cent of their staff speak French, which André says is a huge asset. They actively look for people who can speak a wide range of languages to better serve customers. He estimates that he speaks French about 50 per cent of the time due to the strong French speaking community here in Whistler.

Putting Whistler on the map for health and wellness is the Scandinave Spa's mission. This is one of four spas that Quebec-based spa specialists have opened since 1999. Amongst their partners are NHL hockey stars (and Francophones) Vincent Damphousse and Eric Desjardins, along with an impressive board of marketing and communication moguls.

Annique Aird moved west to open Scandinave after working for Intrawest in Mont Tremblant. Her list of qualifications and experience is impressive, but why move across to Whistler?

She explains that she was in awe of the place on her first visit when she was just 14, so when the opportunity came up to open a spa here she leapt at the chance. Her family were behind her, too, and with a 100 per cent French speaking school, ...cole La Passerelle, for their children to attend they were happy to follow. It was easy to slip into the laid back Whistler lifestyle.

Entrepreneurial spirit among French

speakers is not just limited to European French and the Québécois. Isabelle Ranger, the herbologist from the Ottawa region who developed the successful Namasthé Tea Company, moved to Whistler after visiting a friend and falling in love with the place. In her first year here she found that there were only a handful of Francophone snowboarders and skaters, but as word got around that this was a place of powder the Quebec skiers and riders poured in. They gained a reputation for being talented riders, battles tested riding east coast concrete, and along with Isabelle many of them turned their passion into a profession. Later, wanting to provide for her family and community, Isabelle worked hard to develop a family-based company that incorporates wellness and healing as its main building blocks.

Nicole Guertin moved to the region from Northern Ontario when the arrival of the Games finally motivated her to live her dream. Her motive now is not just to be a ski bum but to share her knowledge of reaching new markets by reaching them in their own language. She is the owner of LOKL.com, a multilingual website in 10 languages that helps businesses attract new clientele by having a profile in many languages.

After only a few months LOKL is already getting more than 3,000 visitors per day. She is also the catalyst behind the Saint-Jean-Baptiste Day celebrations in Squamish.

Work to Play

It is obvious that people in the Sea to Sky corridor work to play, and it's no different in the Francophone community. For some, working and playing are one in the same.

The Ragin' Cajuns are the epitome of this lifestyle. This group consists of three "almost brothers" - Mathieu (Matty) Richard, Kris Cormier and Dominic Melanson. Originally from Moncton, New Brunswick (a city of Acadian French settlers) the usual ski resorts for these easterners would have been Banff and Canmore, but they travelled a little further.

They came to Whistler in Grade 11 to take part in the Camp of Champions and as they drove back down the highway they knew this wasn't the last time they would be coming here. They were hooked. Being sponsored by Rossignol and Nordica gave them the opportunity to travel across the world

to compete in the Free Ride World Tour in Russia, Chile, Switzerland, Argentina and France, just to name a few destinations. Congrats go to Matty who came in second on the freeskiing tour.

Now, after 10 years in Whistler these Ragin' Cajuns continue to be proud of their Acadian French culture but their love of skiing is their ultimate bond – and the reason they're still here today.

Felix–Antoine Savard and Marie–Claude Rochette moved to Whistler back in 2006, making the three day drive from Neuville – a small town located 20 minutes west of Quebec City. Initially they planned on spending nine months here to learn English, but like many people they just couldn't leave. Four years later Felix's passion for power sports and mechanical skills has led to a successful business in Function Junction repairing snowmobiles and dirt bikes. Marie–Claude took over the marketing and accounting side for Revolution, and now they're at home.

St–Jean–Baptiste Celebrations

Vancouver celebrated its 21st annual Francophone Summer Festival from June 19 to 24. It's been party time with Francophone artists from all over Canada bringing their music to the "Festival d'été" on Granville and 7th Avenue in front of the Vancouver Cultural Center.

Squamish is having its own celebration on June 24, and inviting people to join in with the music, culture, food and storytelling from 5 p.m. to 11 p.m. on

Cleveland Avenue, in front of the Zephyr and Gelato Carina. Look out for Francophone musicians Hugo Paquin and Mikael Aubin, Annie Roy and Mathieu Jolicoeur. You can also participate in the Francophone Lyric Scavenger Hunt involving over 30 businesses – match the French song to the right store window and you could win an electric bike, compliments of Renegade Recreational Products.

In Whistler, ...cole la Passerelle is organizing Thursday's WORCA Toonie Ride to celebrate. Registration is at 5:30 p.m. at Creekside, with the post–race feed taking place at Creekbread. Last year over 350 riders took part in the activities, organized mostly by staff from the three French schools in the region. There will be prizes, food and drinks, and participants will find Fleur de Lys around the trail to help orient themselves. Afterwards, the party moves to Dusty's, with French musicians taking the stage.

Some locals have found a new way to celebrate St–Jean with the 'halfway party'. This celebrates the coming together of the Anglophone and Francophone cultures by having a celebration in between St–Jean and Canada Day.

All in all these celebrations are about the sharing of cultures, inclusion and understanding. Everyone can join in, the more the merrier, come and check it out!