When my family lived in Cleveland, I ventured from our home on the east side to the West Side Market several times a year, returning each time with plentiful produce and the resolve to make that journey a weekly ritual. I love the idea of buying fresh, buying local, and planning meals according to the plenty of the season; more often, the necessities of producing dinner nightly for a young family lead me to the convenience of the local supermarket. So when my family relocated to Lyon, France, I was thrilled to find that the city’s main produce market took place six days a week along the banks of the Soane River, a mere block from our apartment. Walking through the market is a visual treat; apples overflowing the bins containing them, implying luscious abundance, or tiny green beans carefully arranged with stem ends perfectly aligned, connoting their delicacy and preciousness. I love looking at the market wares; shopping, however, is another challenge.

Relocating always involves for me a disorientation in the kitchen. Even with as simple a move as going on vacation, an empty larder causes a corresponding blank in my brain: what do we eat? What do I normally cook? Of course, in France one can't complain of a lack of things to cook or eat; if anything, one is overwhelmed with possible ingredients. But for me this array of foods, each sold in its own specific locale, requires a return to the most rudimentary rules of cookery. The purchase of one item necessitates the search for whatever partners it requires. If I buy a red pepper in the produce market along the river, I might pair it with any number of other ingredients, some of which I may find in the stalls further along in the market, some of which I may find in the little grocery on the way home, some of which I may never find - or more to the point, may never recognize. A further venture into the market may yield a ratatouille, a turn for home might result in a pasta sauce; generally I walk both ways and end up with some approximate compromise between the two. By the time I make dinner the pepper has become a tapenade, and tomorrow I will have to venture out again to find something to do with that aubergine I bought.

Thank goodness for vegetables and fruits, which in their whole form are wonderfully recognizable as themselves. Not so with many things. For weeks shopping was like a reconnaissance mission, locating recognizable items and filing the information about their location in my brain. Aha - the honey is next to the canned pears. Sugar is shelved in the aisle with coffee, flour is shelved four aisles away next to the soups and sauces - this is not a country of home bakers. I wonder if one could quantify how long it takes to establish a working knowledge of any given market, how long until one can stroll the aisles relying on those visual cues to remind one that we are low on olive oil and it might be good to use up those lasagna noodles this week.

My husband had a full dose of the grocery bewilderment when he helpfully went off to "do the shopping" at the nearby supermarket. Grasping at anything familiar, he returned home with a week's worth of incomplete menus. For instance, he was delighted to find tortillas, certainly a staple in our refrigerator at home, and they went into the basket with triumph. But tortillas imply beans and chilies and tomatoes and oregano, or at the very least a gratable cheese that isn't Emmenthal or Gruyere. The tortillas came home solo, with apologies. My attempt to approximate Mexican food was a real search and rescue mission. White beans mashed with some tomatoes stood in for refried beans; an orange cheese from Holland gave the visual effect of cheddar; a puree of jalapenos gave it a
serious kick, nicely cooled by fromage blanc. The jalapeno puree occasioned prolonged study of the label, whose ingredient list revealed only that it consisted of a green pepper, information that I didn’t find particularly revealing. Moreover, it took me quite a while to believe that this jar of puree, housed next to other purees such as pesto and harissa, was in fact a form of ingredient I had encountered before. It had never occurred to me to puree a jalapeno - roast, seed, slice, chop, stuff, dice, yes - but not render into a paste.

The French puree anything and everything. The less discernable texture, the better the puree. A consistency I associate only with baby food is manna to a gourmand’s tongue. We went to a party one night where the host played a joke on the guests by presenting a tray of bruschetta, some spread with black olive paste and some spread with Nutella (the chocolate-hazelnut European answer to peanutbutter), all topped with diced red pepper and chives; the olive was indistinguishable from the chocolate by either sight or texture. Trying to develop the children’s French palate, one night I served a puree of broccoli; it is one of the few vegetables they eat willingly, so they eat it often, and I thought a change of presentation would be refreshing. My four year old gagged and wretched if the substance so much as touched his tongue. The eight year old requested, next time, just broccoli please. The disjunction between taste and texture were for them - like the jalapeno puree for me - hard to swallow.

The importance of texture is most apparent in what is for me the most bewildering part of the supermarket, the dairy section. “Dairy products” is entirely too limiting a category to canvass the range of goods produced from the milk of cows (and a few goats and sheep). And among this vast display there is no milk - shelf stable for long conservation, the milk occupies an unimaginative shelf across from the toilet paper. Long study of labels has given me little insight into the subtle differences among yogurt, fromage blanc, fromage frais, crème fraiche, petit Suisse, mousse au lait, and many other vaguely identified spécialité laitière, most of which have three or four gradations of fat content. All these products aspire to a pinnacle of texture described by the French word "onctueuse." At first it was hard for me to buy a product that wanted me to relish its onctuousness. The word "unctuous," with its implications of slipperiness or smoothness by way of lubrication, has never been associated in my mind with something I want to put in my mouth. Try the pudding, dear, it's lovely and unctuous.

After three months I have gained my shopping bearings enough to produce some reasonable facsimiles of a few tastes of home. I can improvise pancakes that only occasionally lean toward crepes, I can make chocolate chip cookies whose only French tendency is good chocolate, I can even make a pale orange macaroni and cheese that pleases a four year old deprived of the bright orange Kraft variety. But probably most importantly for the kids, I can make endless pots of applesauce. A staple at home and a favorite comfort food, applesauce is a frequent request. Frankly, I look longingly at the jars of applesauce on the supermarket shelves - how much easier to reach for one of those than several kilos of apples that need peeling, coring, slicing, and stewing. But the stuff in the jars, like so many things, is a puree, and I have to agree the texture is all wrong. It's downright unctuous.