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Raclette, “We Will Rock You”, and Other Universal Languages

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The six small, triangular pans sizzled on top of the quaint heating apparatus as raclette cheese gradually began to melt. There were six of us – my host brother, his fiancée, their two friends, Emma, and myself – and we were each responsible for manning one of the pans. We sat around the homely dining table, being careful not to let the cheese in our respective pans become charred, as slices of meat and freshly cut potatoes were passed around. My host brother explained to us that raclette is a staple of French cuisine, particularly among skiers in the Rhone-Alpes region where Lyon is situated. As we filled our bellies with the obligatory glasses of wine and cheese-covered potatoes and meat slices, our four French companions excitedly played us their favorite French songs on their portable speaker. I quickly came to understand that French rap was the preferred genre for much of France’s youth. As our stomachs all reached full capacity, the introduction to raclette was concluded, my life forever enriched by the delicious French dish. We moved to the living room where Emma and I were introduced to a popular drinking game called “Pyramide”, which consists of playing cards and listing items that fall under categories associated with each card. As Emma and I pushed our French knowledge to the limit trying to play the game, our companions began to express their interest in learning more about American culture. Before long, my phone was connected to the speaker and I had the opportunity to share some of our favorite American songs. Although I was originally unsure how they would react, our French companions immediately took a liking to the American rap songs Emma and I thought we should play for them. Throughout the boisterous and merry night, we traversed various genres of American music, eventually getting to American rock – at which point the game had to be put on hold for a prolonged dance break.

This experience was particularly memorable for me because I felt like I grew to know my host brother so much better that night. Spending a night hanging out with young French professionals, indulging in a staple of French dining while enjoying French wine, playing French drinking games, speaking in French, and listening to French music was an invaluable experience. I was able to test my ability to communicate with young French adults to hear about their views on anything from politics to music. I think that night really stood out to me, because it was one of the few nights during my term abroad when I was not just the student, but also the teacher. During my ten weeks in Lyon, we spent nearly all of our time learning about France and French culture, and it was always expected that we, as the American students, would be the ones asking questions. The night of the raclette dinner was one of the few times when we were able to demonstrate pride for our own culture, and it was very interesting to see how young French people around our age would receive what we could share of our American experience. Dancing to “We Will Rock You” with my host
brother, his fiancée, and their friends was so much fun, and that night was the perfect environment for me to genuinely introduce myself to and bond with my host brother, Cyprien.

I think the main takeaway from that night was that exchanges of culture can be extremely agreeable when the participants are open-minded and curious about the unfamiliar. I learned that people are much more willing to learn about other cultures than one may initially think. Moreover, people are often very eager to share their culture with “outsiders”, though it is the responsibility of all participants to ensure a non-judgmental environment.