

Fifty-Two of My Closest Friends

Grañon is a small village on the Camino *francés* with one pilgrim hostel that is run on donations. The *hospitaleros* there provide meals free of charge to any and all pilgrims who spend the night within its stone walls. The kitchen and dining room of the albergue at Grañon are located on the third floor of what used to be the priests' quarters of the village's 700 year-old church. Pilgrims sleep in a large room on the second floor, or in a loft located at the base of the bell tower.

Two days earlier I had taken over the duties of *hospitalero* from three Germans. I didn't have an assistant and felt very alone. I was scared that I wouldn't make it through the next two weeks. How could I clean the albergue, shop for food, cook for pilgrims, help the priest with evening prayers, and find any time to sleep? I needn't have worried though, for soon enough the spirit of the Camino stepped forward to provide me with all the help I would need.

My first night in charge there were fifty-two pilgrims in the albergue. I'd shopped earlier in the day for potatoes, cheese, local chorizo, lettuce, tomatoes, delicious white asparagus, olives and melon. I'd bought a bottle of 'cooking wine', by which I mean something to drink as I cooked. I hoped that if I shared some of it as I went about chopping, grating, boiling and shredding, others would pitch in to help prepare the evening meal.

I began my preparations around five o'clock. In between chopping potatoes and grating cheese I greeted the arriving pilgrims, showed them where to shower, hang out their laundry, roll out their sleeping bags, and of course answered their many questions. It was with growing apprehension that I told them their evening meal would be at eight p.m. and that I was cooking it for them.

By six p.m. most pilgrims had arrived and gone through their afternoon routines. Some napped or sat quietly writing in their journals; others sat in the sun outside the albergue door. A few were looking for something to do and asked, "Can I provide anything? What can I do to help?" Ah, salvation! Soon I was directing a small group of freshly scrubbed pilgrims who, chatting happily, made salad, grated cheese, mashed the potatoes, set out tables and plates, cups and cutlery. Someone had gone around the corner to purchase a few more bottles of 'cooking wine.' We opened two for the kitchen volunteers and saved the rest to share at dinner. Naturally this brought in more offers to volunteer. "There's really nothing more that needs to be done right now", I heard myself saying. "Well then, I'll clean up after dinner" came several quick replies.

The meal went off without a hitch. Everyone ate their fill and there was even enough for three pilgrims who arrived tired and hungry as we all sat down to eat. I hadn't had to do much but pour wine and direct the willing volunteers. There was animated conversation in six languages that night; everyone had a splendid time.

I was up early the next morning heating milk, making coffee, setting out bread, cheese, butter, jam and fruit. One by one, sleepy pilgrims arrived in the kitchen. As I handed them a hot cup of coffee or tea they greeted me as if we'd known each other for years. And when they left for another day's walk toward Santiago, they hugged and thanked me. I wanted nothing more than to shoulder my own pack and join them. With hardly any effort I'd made fifty-two new friends, and tonight there would be more!

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