

## Don't Forget the ramoneur!

### A yearly obligation

The *ramoneur*, chimney sweep in English, is one of the local artisans that you cannot avoid, especially if you live in the countryside, and if, of course, you have a *cheminée* (fireplace) in your home. Even if some insurance companies don't mention it, you need to know that in France it is compulsory to have your chimney cleaned at least once a year. If you don't do so, your insurance company will not cover your loss in case of a fire.

In fact, the same obligation applies to all heating systems, except the *tout électrique* (all electric): every conduit of smoke, every *chaudière* (gas boiler) has to be inspected and cleaned by a professional once a year. These requirements are mandated by *arrêté préfectoral* (declaration by the *Préfet du département*) or an *arrêté municipal* by the local *maire* (mayor), which means that they may differ slightly from one department or one city to another, therefore it is wise to get all the details locally. However, in any case, it is compulsory everywhere.

Since one must have one's chimney swept once a year (sometimes it might be twice a year), the French usually call the *ramoneur* at the end of autumn, beginning of winter, just before you start using your heating system. But as the professionals are overloaded with work at this time of the year, it is wise not to wait too long before calling them. As regards the *entretien de chaudière* (gas boiler maintenance), it is even better to set up an annual maintenance contract with the appropriate company. If you rent your apartment or house, you might double check with your *propriétaire* (landlord), but usually taking care of such cleaning is the responsibility of the *locataire* (tenant).

Aside from being compulsory, it is also beneficial for your equipment, for your health (reduced risk of asphyxia because of the smoke) and it might save you some energy.

As regards chimneys only, the *ramoneurs* are part of French tradition, and there have been many stories written about them, especially when they used to work on top of the roof. Nowadays, they do their cleaning inside from the fireplace and push their brushes up through the chimney. By the way, when the *ramoneur* comes, it is recommended that you cover your furniture close to the fireplace as it may just be that it will be covered with *suie* (soot) when he leaves, as some of them aren't perfectly clean.

### *Le petit ramoneur savoyard*

It all started in the Alps region, mostly in the Savoie, as far back in time as the Middle Ages. It was then frequent that the *ramoneurs* were kids, starting at anywhere from 6 up to 12 years of age, from very poor families who, in order to earn some income, would travel all over France with their ladders and brushes, accompanied in small groups by the *maître ramoneur*. They would offer their services to all the houses they passed by and to apartments in big cities, such as Paris, where the *petits ramoneurs savoyards* were well-known. The *ramonage*

was not very well paid, but still, from the date of the Saint-Gras (7 September) until spring, they could bring home some badly needed cash. The tradition started in Savoie because in this part of France the snow and weather conditions prevented the inhabitants from engaging in any other kind of activity, especially agriculture. This was, of course, before the advent of skiing and the transformation of these alpine villages into ski resorts...

Of course, this was very hard work for these small kids. The maître ramoneur (usually an older ramoneur who was too big to get up on the roofs and inside the chimneys) was often very tough with the kids, making them work for 14 hours a day, every day of the week, and walking up to 40 to 50 km a day. They would sleep in a barn or a stable, or in the attic in cities. There were many stories about kids who died of cold or from a bad fall from a roof. Some would get respiratory diseases or became allergic or blind because of the soot. It was only in 1874, and in 1892, that laws were passed relating to the protection of children and making it illegal to employ kids younger than 12.

On a more positive side, many legends and tales grew out of this profession and the children who worked as chimney sweeps. As their role was to prevent fires, the kids were quite often thought to bring good luck. They were also resourceful and able to help with many other things around a house. Small figurines representing a *petit ramoneur savoyard* that people would keep as a *porte-bonheur* (lucky charm) soon became quite popular. The *ramoneur* also became the happy and mischievous emblem of Savoie and Haute-Savoie. They would often bring along a small *marmotte* (marmot), an animal native to the Alps, and would get it to dance in the streets to make extra money. And, of course, kids being kids, they couldn't resist the temptation to play a few tricks sometimes or to try and play with other children in the street – which was not always easy as the young girls especially could be frightened by these little people all covered with black soot.

*Annick Stevenson*

## A Role Play: Let's call the *ramoneur*

**Madame Dupuy** : Bonjour monsieur, vous êtes bien le ramoneur ?

**Le ramoneur** : Oui, bonjour madame, que puis-je pour votre service ?

**Madame Dupuy** : Ici Madame Dupuy. Pourriez-vous passer chez moi un de ces jours ? J'ai une cheminée que j'aimerais bien faire ramoner avant l'hiver.

**Le ramoneur** : Bien sûr, je vais regarder ça. Mais on ne se connaît pas. Vous habitez où ?

**Madame Dupuy** : Non, vous n'êtes jamais venu. En fait, ça fait juste quelques mois que j'habite dans le village. Mais je crois que le ramonage est obligatoire ?

**Le ramoneur** : Absolument ! C'est essentiel. Bon, je vais venir. Mais j'ai pas mal à faire en ce moment.

**Madame Dupuy** : Oui, je comprends, merci. Vous pourriez venir la semaine prochaine, de préférence vendredi ?

**Le ramoneur** : Oh la la, sûrement pas ! Vous vous y prenez tous au dernier moment, et j'ai des dizaines de maisons à visiter, moi ! Attendez... Vous habitez où, vous dites ?

**Madame Dupuy** : Dans le quartier des Granges, vous savez, près de l'école...

**Le ramoneur** : Ah je vois ! Vous êtes voisine de Madame Lejeune ? Je vais chez elle mardi en quinze, vers 16h, je peux passer chez vous juste après.

**Madame Dupuy** : Eh bien ça pourrait aller, je m'arrangerai pour être là. Vous avez raison, ma maison est juste à côté de la sienne.

**Le ramoneur** : Alors je vois laquelle c'est. C'était les Gaillard qui étaient là avant. Je connais la cheminée. Alors on fait comme ça ! A mardi 30 en fin d'après-midi. Au revoir madame.

**Madame Dupuy** : Merci beaucoup, au revoir monsieur !

**Madame Dupuy**: Good morning sir, is this the *ramoneur*?

**The ramoneur**: Yes. Good morning madam, what can I do for you?

**Madame Dupuy**: This is Madame Dupuy. Could you come to my place one of these days? I have a fireplace that I would like to get cleaned before winter.

**The ramoneur**: Sure, I'll see if I can do that. But we don't know each other. Where do you live?

**Madame Dupuy**: No, you have never come before. In fact, I moved to the village only a few months ago. But I think it is compulsory to clean one's fireplace?

**The ramoneur**: Absolutely! Well, I'll come. But I have a lot to do these days.

**Madame Dupuy**: Yes, I understand, thank you. Could you come next week, preferably on Friday?

**The ramoneur**: Wow, definitely not! You all think of it at the last minute, and I have dozens of houses to visit!... Wait... Where did you say you live?

**Madame Dupuy**: In the *quartier des Granges*, you know, close to the school...

**The ramoneur**: I see! You are a neighbour of Madame Lejeune? I'll go to her place two weeks from Tuesday, around 4 pm. I could come to your home right after.

**Madame Dupuy**: That would work, I'll make arrangements to be here. You are right, my house is right next to her's.

**The ramoneur**: Oh, I see which one it is. The Gaillards lived there before. I know their fireplace. So, we'll do it like that! See you on Tuesday the 30<sup>th</sup>, late afternoon. Goodbye madam.

**Madame Dupuy**: Thank you very much, goodbye sir!

# Tips & Traps

## Time for more taxes

Apart from income taxes, two other unavoidable taxes are blowing some grey clouds across the blue sky of autumn: the *taxe d'habitation* (housing tax), payable by almost everybody, renters and owners alike, and the *taxe foncière* (property tax), only for owners of a housing property. These two taxes, together with the *taxe professionnelle* (professional tax), which benefit the municipality where you live, represent 45% of the budget of cities and villages. Details:

### *La taxe d'habitation*

This one is paid by almost everybody. The only condition to be on the list of the *personnes imposables* (taxable persons) is to own or rent a house or apartment which has furniture in it, which means that if you have two houses in two different places, or if you own one and live in another, you pay twice. You also have to pay taxes for any other building which is part of the same property and located less than one kilometre from the main residence, whether they are furnished or not. The tax does not apply to professional buildings, as their owners must pay the *taxe professionnelle*.

If you are the owner of the house or apartment in which you live, you have to pay.

For rental housing, the tax is paid by the tenant, as the principle is that it is the person who lives in it who must pay. The amount of the tax is established according to where you lived on 1<sup>st</sup> January. Which means that if you moved at any time during the year, you still have to pay it for your previous apartment if you were living there on January 1<sup>st</sup>. And the previous tenant of your new home will have to pay the taxes for that year on your new residence. As you can imagine, this is not always easy to organise, and the landlord sometimes helps in serving as an intermediary between the previous and the present tenant.

**Note:** All owners of rental properties must inform the *Service des impôts* (tax service) no later than one month after a tenant leaves the apartment or house. If they don't do so, they may have to pay the tax themselves.

The amount of the tax is calculated according to the number of square metres, and it varies from one city to the next as the amounts are determined locally (on the basis of housing costs in the region). You may be able to take advantage of *abattements* (deductions) depending on the size of your family, and on your income. The amount you pay may easily reach 800 to 900 € or more.

For the last few years, the government has found it more convenient to add what is called the *redevance audiovisuelle* (television tax), to the statement for the *taxe d'habitation*. The TV tax is 116 € for everybody in France who owns a TV, no matter how many you have. Everywhere in France these two taxes have to be paid by mid-November.

### *La taxe foncière*

You have probably paid it already by the time you receive this issue of the magazine, as the deadline is mid-October. This tax is due only to owners of a house or an apartment (who,

consequently, must pay both the *taxe d'habitation* and *foncière*). And, as is the case with the *taxe d'habitation*, it is calculated for 1<sup>st</sup> January and its amount differs according to the city where you live. The taxation base is the equivalent of 59% of the rental value in the region where you live. There are also possible deductions. The amount is also difficult to predict, but it could be as high as 1,000 €

**More details concerning both taxes are available on the website of the French Administration (in French only):**

[www.service-public.fr](http://www.service-public.fr)

## **AOC Wines: major reform needed**

Last month, a French consumer organization, *UFC-Que Choisir*, dared to take aim at a long-standing icon and symbol of guaranteed quality in France: the AOC Label. According to a very specific enquiry on French wines, it had the audacity to report that it had become meaningless!

The AOC label (*Appellation d'origine contrôlée*), which means “term of controlled origin,” is the French certification granted to some French geographical indications for wines, cheeses, butters and other agricultural products under the auspices of the government bureau called *Institut national des appellations d'origine* (INAO). The AOC seal was created and mandated by French laws in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, and in 1992 it extended beyond France to other European countries. The number of AOC wines in France now numbers 462.

Over the past few months, *UFC-Que Choisir*, with the help of 75 wine professionals, conducted a study that revealed that about 98 per cent of all AOC wines were perfunctorily waved through by the organizations that are supposed to verify their quality, and that producers of AOC wines themselves are members of the certifying juries in those organizations. That means that one in three bottles of AOC wine produced in France is sub-standard. According to the consumer organization, “there has been a steady decline in the quality of many AOC wines for years,” which has undermined the confidence of consumers. Indeed, increasing numbers of complaints are published about these wines. Having the AOC label means increased sales for a particular wine, but one can find many other non-AOC wines which are actually better. And everybody recognized that the system had become more and more lax: in 2005, 99% of the wines proposed for the label were accepted! Confronted with such criticism, enhanced by this recent enquiry, the Government had some time ago decided that it was time to revise the system with regard to wines (if some complaints do exist about other AOC products such as cheese, all other products seem to be more in compliance with their respective criteria for quality). Discussions concerning a major reform of the AOC labels are under way and, according to the President of the Wine Committee of INAO, new regulations should be in place before the 2008 grape harvest.

According to the law putting the reform action into place, which was adopted in January 2006, the INAO is required to review and discuss the whole system with the various wine growers' organizations of support and management – with the participation of *UFC-Que Choisir*. Already a few ideas have been approved, with more controls involved and, more importantly, the creation of a totally independent organization that will replace the present jury system.

More info on: [www.quechoisir.org](http://www.quechoisir.org)

## **B&B under stricter control**

Shortly after our article published in the June-July issue of *French Accent* about Bed and Breakfasts in France and the great centralized systems of *Gîtes de France*, a decree published last August imposes a new regulation that has met with a strong critical reaction from the people who have opened a B&B or intend to do so soon. Applicable immediately, this new decree limits the number of rental units that any B&B owner can rent to a maximum of 5 bedrooms and 15 clients at a time. This decision was taken to try and limit somewhat the huge expansion of this system of tourist accommodations. Indeed, more than 1,000 *chambres d'hôte* are opened every year in France, out of a total of 30,000.

## **Radars and false license plates**

To avoid being photographed, or “flashed”, by one of the many automatic radars that are becoming increasingly numerous on the roads in France, some car owners have resorted to a rather devious deception: putting false license plates on their cars. The problem is that when these plates bear the same number as that for another car, it is the innocent and unsuspecting owner who receives the ticket in the mail. This has happened several times over the last few months, and it is not always easy for these victims to prove their innocence. In spite of the fact that the *Direction de la sécurité et de la circulation routières*, (French Direction of Security and Traffic) claims that such problems are very quickly solved, several people have found it very difficult to settle the matter, and one individual has been fighting to clear his name for over a year. What can be recommended in such a case is to request a copy of the photo of the vehicle that has been flashed (This is not done automatically), as this usually helps a lot. And if the authorities refuse to admit their error, to seek the advise of a consumer organization such as *UFC-Que Choisir* (see above).