

# They Eat Horses Don't They? The Truth About the F by Piu Marie Eatwell

**French people always kiss when they greet you**

**The social kiss is an exchange of insincerity between two combatants on the field of social advancement. It places hygiene before affection and condescension before all else.**

*london sunday correspondent*

**How do I kiss thee? Let me count the ways...**

In his celebrated 1,040-page treatise on the art of snogging, *Opus Polyhistoricum de Osculis*, the seventeenth-century German philosopher Martin von Kempe identified no fewer than twenty kinds of kiss. They included the reconciliatory kiss, the kiss that marked social distinctions, the contagious kiss, the lusty or adulterous kiss, the hypocritical kiss, and the kiss bestowed on the Pope's foot. 7 But what about the art of the French social kiss? Alas, there the

great polymath was silent. Which is a pity, as the mysteries of French social kissing – or *faire la bise*, as the French term it – remain in dire need of elucidation.

So, to kiss, or not to kiss? That is the question. And if the answer is the affirmative, how many kisses? Starting which side? And what sort of kiss is expected – a light peck, an enthusiastic smack, a graze, caress, scrape, tickle, or flick of lips to cheek? Whose lips to whose cheek?

The good news for foreigners is that the answers to these questions are far from clear, even to native French people. Kissing as a form of greeting outside one's circle of close friends or immediate family was not widespread in France until the social revolution of May 1968. Just as *les événements* led to an increase in the use of the informal *tu* rather than the more formal *vous*, so they also resulted in an explosion in the exchanging of affectionate *bises* – and perhaps more intimate displays of friendship –

between young people who had only just met for the first time. Since those halcyon days, it is fair to say that things have calmed down a bit. Contrary to popular foreign belief, it is never obligatory in France to kiss a person whom you haven't met before. Social kissing is still mainly reserved for relaxed occasions with family and friends of the same age, although it is gradually becoming more common between work colleagues who know each other well, as is the case in other European countries. Most disconcertingly for uptight heterosexual Anglo-Saxon males, it is perfectly acceptable – even commonplace – in France for straight men who are good friends or relatives to kiss each other. This causes acute consternation for some stiff-upper-lipped men of Northern Europe and America, who balk at brushing beards with the same sex. As one Lieutenant Colonel D. M. C. Rose complained in a letter to the *Spectator* in 2003:

'Sir: I was horrified to see our Prime

Minister kissing the President of Russia. Can you imagine Neville Chamberlain kissing Hitler, or Churchill kissing Stalin? Anglo-Saxon men have never gone in for this kissing performance. Sometimes they shake hands, but never the double two-handed shake or clasp of the arm. Only the Gallic race and the Arabs go in for hugging and kissing. No British general would even think of giving or accepting a kiss from another man, surely?'<sup>8</sup>

Aside from the question of whether to kiss at all, how many kisses to give – and which side to start with – is at least as prickly an issue. Every region of France has a different customary number of kisses and a different starting side, with the result that kissing collisions are an everyday occurrence, as even the French don't know half the time when to turn the other cheek. In most regions of France, especially the cities, one exchanges two kisses, starting on the right cheek; but in parts of

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is even more obscure, with voters divided between two, three, and four or more kisses. In general, Parisians will limit themselves to two, starting on the right cheek; just one kiss gives a dangerous suggestion of secret intimacy, and more than two runs the risk of one being regarded as a provincial bumpkin (or, as they would disparagingly say, *un plouc*). Generally, the urban bourgeoisie limit themselves to fewer kisses than effusive provincials.\* (\* If these French kissing conventions seem complicated, they are as nothing compared with Belgium, where one kiss is the norm for someone the same age as oneself, but three a mark of respect for someone at least ten years older. A social minefield, especially when it comes to women *d'un certain âge*.)<sup>9</sup>

So much for the number of kisses; but what type of kiss are we talking about? The ancient Romans, after all, distinguished between the friendly peck on the cheek (*osculum*), the passion-ate meeting of mouths (*basia*), and the kiss involving the use of tongues (*suavia*). The French bise or 'social kiss' is none of these. In fact, it is barely a kiss at all. If done correctly, it involves merely the lightest brushing of cheek to cheek; but at the moment of brushing, one is expected to make a loud and explosive sound of the lips, as if to imitate a good 'mwah'. It is here that some Anglo-Saxons can get it wrong, with a sloppy lip-to-cheek (or worse, lip-to-lip) contact that has the average Gaul cringing with disgust. To the extent that several Frenchmen abroad have remarked that they would prefer to shake hands, or even par-take of a good, old-fashioned American-style hug, than wipe off saliva juices from a bearish foreigner.<sup>10</sup>

Which brings us to the time-honoured alternative to the bise, the handshake. Surely a safe retreat from the hazardous minefield of the social kiss? Not quite. It should not be forgotten that the French expression for 'shake a person's hand' is *serrer la main*, in other words, a hand squeeze and not a handshake. In France, it is not customary to grasp the hand and energetically pump it up and down, as Anglo-Saxon practice dictates. France – like Japan and China – is a country of limp handshakes. This is especially true if you are a woman, as it is considered the height of rudeness energetically to grasp or pump a woman's hand. So if your zealous piston meets a limp-wristed response, don't take it personally. Nor should you make the faux pas

of proffering a hand to someone older or more senior than yourself. French bourgeois etiquette – always concerned with establishing boundaries and limits – dictates that the older or more senior person, or a woman, proffers their hand first.

Social minefield as it may be, those who would love to kiss goodbye to the French bise will be disappointed. Despite a brief period of panic during the bird flu epidemic of 2009, when the official advice was to avoid social kissing (some schools installed 'kissing boxes' in classrooms for pupils to post 'kiss-notes' to their friends rather than swapping possibly contagious pecks on the cheek), the bise has fought back with a vengeance. Social snogging is now pretty much *de rigueur* in France between friends – as it increasingly is among the chattering classes of Britain and the United States.

Die-hard enemies of the social kiss can, however, take comfort in the fact that in some parts of the world, including many parts of Asia and Africa,

kissing is looked upon with repugnance. In China, for example, kissing was for many years considered a revolting allusion to cannibalism, and in southern Africa the native tribes people recoiled at the European habit of 'sucking each other's saliva and dirt'.<sup>11</sup> So if you really can't cope with friends and colleagues slobbering over you, there are places to escape to. But if you come to France, you have no real option other than to dive in and have a go at the kissing game; but if you botch it, be prepared to take it on the chin.

Myth Evaluation: True. The French kiss when they greet you most of the time, certainly between family and friends, but there is huge variation in the number of kisses and with which cheek to start. The safest bet is to give two kisses and start with the right-hand side.

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eastern France one exchanges two kisses, starting on the left. In Finistère, at the furthest tip of Brittany, it is customary to give just one kiss; but in whole swathes of the South including the départements of Cantal, Aveyron and the Drôme, one exchanges three. And across the départements of northern France, the affectionate locals share as many as four bises on average.

To guide the uninitiated through the labyrinthine landscape of French kissing, in 2007 a Frenchman named Gilles Debunne produced a wonderfully helpful kissing map of France, *combiende bises.free.fr*, an interactive site where over 69,000 French people have registered their kissing preferences by region. But even here, there is confusion within regions. In Pas-de-Calais, for example, roughly 50 per cent of respondents say they kiss twice as a greeting, while the other 50 per cent declare that they kiss four times. In the Charente, in southwestern France, the situation

