

France's pecking order is a complex matter

By Catherine Field



Segolene Royal kisses President Francois Hollande, her former partner. She was this week given a key Cabinet position. Photo / AP

A peck on the cheek? Yes, please! In France, everyone does it. It's a nationwide ritual, a salutation that connects friends and family, spanning all ages and physiques and unembarrassed by gender. Girls swap pecks with their girlfriends and men may do it with men too if they are close relatives.

But even though it is universal, "la bise" (pronounced "bees") is rather more complicated than it looks.

The complexity starts with the "how to" part. You lean in slightly, but not too much. You turn your head a little to the left but, again, not too much. You close your lips enough so that your teeth don't show and give an ever so discreet kiss near the other person's right cheek. You do the same on their left cheek. You make little or no flesh contact. No puckering. No slobbering. No lipstick marks.

Once you've mastered that, you then have to think: Should I give this person one double-peck, or two double-pecks? Or should I stop halfway, and do three?

That depends pretty much where you happen to be. Sociologists have discovered that nearly two-thirds of countries have the tradition of one double-peck. In about a tenth, mostly in the sun-kissed south, locals exchange three pecks. In the remaining quarter - in the regions of the Champagne, Normandy and Vendee - it is customary to do two doubles. If you are going on a trip, you may even wish to consult a specialist website, *Combien de bises?* (How many kisses) combiendebises.free.fr to avoid a faux-pas.

Local traditions of the "bise" are ardently defended. In the rugged coastal departement of Finistere in western France, there is a very rare thing - a single, austere, Anglo-Saxon-style peck. Only one other departement in the entire country does this. But, horror of horrors, people in the city of Brest have started dishing giving two and sometimes three pecks.

To counter this, an initiative has been launched to remind locals that giving one peck is part of the region's heritage and its independence from the cultural tentacles of Paris.

"In the last two to three years I've noticed more people have been doing double pecks," Mathuren (a pseudonym), the spokesman of the *Groupement de Rehabilitation de l'Usage de la Bise* (Grubub), told the Herald. "So for partly serious and for humorous reasons, I set up an initiative to rehabilitate the single bise. The way we are doing it is to promote it as a bit of fun, as an artistic act, but it also reminds people of their roots."

Grubub has set up a Facebook page, which has drawn hundreds of comments, some of them barbed, and will hold a public meeting in Brest next week. "Around 95 per cent of people we've talked to about giving a single peck are positive, in fact they are quite proud of it," notes Mathuren.

The bise has known ups and downs. The Black Death, rather understandably, did much to dent its popularity, and in revolutionary times the sight of the nobility giving one another a peck on the cheek was viewed suspiciously as sign of anti-republican leanings.

The gesture enjoyed something of a revival as social barriers started falling away after World War I. Now it's about knowing the etiquette.

- NZ Herald