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Flirting with a flourish

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FLIRTING WITH A FLOURISH

Who else can get the world to lap up 'food' like snails and pay the earth for a mere label?

DR MANOJ THULASIDAS

SOPHISTICATION is a French invention. The French are masters when it comes to nurturing, and more importantly, selling sophistication. Think of some expensive (and therefore classy) brands.

Chances are that more than half of the ones that spring to mind would be French. And the other half would be distinctly French-sounding wannabes.

This world domination in sophistication is impressive for a small country of the size and population of Thailand.

How do you take a handbag manufactured in Indonesia, slap on a name that only a handful of its buyers can pronounce, and sell it with a profit margin of 1,000 per cent?

You do it by championing sophistication; by being an icon that others can only aspire to be, but never ever attain. You know, kind of like perfection.

No wonder Descartes said something that sounded suspiciously like: "I think in French, therefore I am!" Or was it: "I think, therefore I am French"?

I am amazed by the way the French manage to have the rest of the world eat things that smell and taste like feet. And I stand in awe of the French when the world eagerly parts with hard-earned dough to gobble up such monstrosities as fattened goose liver, fermented dairy produce, pig intestines



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filled with blood, snails, veal entrails and whatnot.

The French manage this feat, not by explaining the benefits and selling points of these, er, products, but by perfecting a supremely-cool display of incredulity at anyone who does not know their value.

In other words, not by advertising their products but by embarrassing you. Although not known for their physical stature, the French do an admirable job of looking down on you when needed.

I got a taste of this recently.

I confessed to a friend that I never could develop a taste for caviar — the quintessential icon of sophistication. My friend looked askance at me, said I must have eaten it wrongly, and explained how to enjoy this Russian delicacy. It was my fault. How could anybody not like fish eggs? She would know; she is a classy SIA girl.

This brings to mind another time when I said to another friend (not as classy as the SIA girl) that I did not quite care

for Pink Floyd.

He gasped and told me never to say anything like that; one always loved Pink Floyd.

I must admit I, too, have flirted with bouts of sophistication. My most satisfying moments came when I somehow managed to work a French word or expression into my conversation or writing.

In a recent column, I managed to slip in the expression "tête-à-tête", although the unsophisticated printer threw away the accents. Accents add

a flourish to the level of sophistication because they confuse the heck out of the reader.

The sneaking suspicion that the French may have been pulling a fast one on us crept up on me when I read something written by Scott Adams (of Dilbert fame). He wondered what this ISO 9000 fad was all about.

Those who secure the ISO certification proudly flaunt it, while everybody else seems to covet it. But does anyone know what it is? Adams conjectured that it was probably a practical joke a bunch of inebriated youngsters devised in a bar. "ISO" sounded very much like "Iz zat ma beer?" in some eastern European language, he said.

Could this sophistication fad also be a practical joke? A French conspiracy? If it is, hats off to them!

Do not get me wrong, I'm no Francophobe. Some of my best friends are French.

It is not their fault if others want to imitate them, follow their gastronomical habits and attempt (usually in vain) to speak their tongue.

I do it, too — I swear in French whenever I miss an easy shot in badminton. After all, why waste an opportunity to sound sophisticated, *n'est-ce pas?*

The writer, a scientist from the European Organisation for Nuclear Research (Cern), works as senior quantitative developer at Standard Chartered Bank here. His internationally-acclaimed book, The Unreal Universe, is available at bookshops and on www.TheUnrealUniverse.com.