

***Life of an ethanol trader
Interview with Jean-Francois Simonnet.***

After years of travelling the world, Jean-François has found a “haven of bustling activity” at Ethimex – the ideal place, he says, for an “old dog” to pursue his career. A Frenchman born in Casablanca, Morocco, he spent most of his working life with SOFECIA, a subsidiary of the Louis Dreyfus Group.

- How did you come to join Ethimex?

After more than 35 years in the ethanol business, I was not exactly overjoyed to find myself expected to spend the last two years of my career in a routine office job, before compulsory retirement. Then I was offered the opportunity to join a small team at Ethimex, just like the one at SOFECIA. It was a new adventure, and I was enthusiastic about the challenge – to build Ethimex into a respected trading company.

- What are some of your most vivid memories from your long career?

Beside the trading part of the job, just being there for a loading in some exotic country. I remember the first alcohol export from North Brazil, and from Bolivia... I remember the loadings in Somalia, Pakistan and India. I remember an unloading in Rotterdam in the middle of the night, and the coffee I shared with the crew in the small hours, exchanging stories... and the satisfaction you get when the job is done well. This is what makes me a happy man!

- You started working in this business when you were quite young, and then never gave it up. How did this happen?

I got my Baccalaureate in 1967. I was studying maths in 1968, and May arrived [the student and worker riots], a 'vintage year' for the youth of France. We were romantic, we wanted a new life of freedom...I didn't pass my exams so my father asked me to do my military service – it was 16 months at that time. As an act of rebellion I signed up for five years instead... But I quickly realized I had made a very big mistake... fortunately I managed to change my contract from five to three years. I made the most of these years in the army by getting a degree in chemistry, studying at night and at weekends.

In 1972, the technical manager of SOFECIA hired me, a young guy, to be in charge of the company's alcohol around the world. It meant checking the quality and quantities of the loadings/unloadings of the vessels or deliveries from the various distilleries. Quite often I had to deal with first-time exports from countries like Brazil, Bolivia, Pakistan, etc... I started the job in the morning of 15th July 1972, and in the evening that very day I was on the plane. In 1986, after 14 years of travelling, the technical aspects of the job had become a bit of a routine, so I asked to become a trader.

- What is it like to be a veteran French alcohol trader in a fairly recently founded English company? Any differences in the working methods?

To be a veteran is the chance to impart the knowledge of one's experience to younger people; and Ethimex is the opportunity for me to be part of a team which is building something new!

There are no real differences in the working methods, only variations which can be coordinated.

- Any other particular anecdote you wish to share with us?

There was an Indian sleeping at the end of a loading at Pirpau Jetty in Bombay. I asked him how he'd know the "pig" had reached the end of the line.

"Don't worry Sir, you see this can on the line? When the shore line shakes, the can will fall down, meaning the "pig" has arrived!" he said.

"You can sleep", I answered.

NB: The "pig" (used in storage) is a kind of cap pushed by air in order to empty the line.

- Among all the countries you've visited on business trips, which one has left the strongest memories?

Definitely Calcutta, India. That was the only country I didn't take pictures of because it was so poor. I felt like a voyeur. Or maybe I wasn't brave enough – I was only 25 years old at that time - to come face to face with such misery.

Of South Africa I retain an impression of great professionalism and efficiency.

- You've had a long and complete overview of the market around the world for many years. What major changes have you noticed? Is the evolution of the business positive or negative?

Well, of course, the telex era is way behind us. Communication is much faster. With the Internet, everyone working in this business, anywhere in the world, can have the same information...In the seventies the trade was more confidential.

The major changes are the modernization of production, higher performances, bigger investments, and intensified competition. The end users and the consumers benefit from these changes.

Overall it's positive but the business is harder, and traders need more imagination... In fact, in the seventies, the trade in commodities triggered the globalization of the world.

- How do you see the future of the business? Can you share your personal forecast?

I can tell it is going to get harder and harder. But a priori, if you're an enthusiastic hard worker, if you don't miss opportunities when they turn up, if you know the market well and are willing to lend a sympathetic ear to suppliers and customers, then credibility should bring success...