

# PROVENCE ON A PLATE

**Jon Bryant** maps out an indulgent itinerary inland through France's deep south and reveals a land filled with culinary delights

ILLUSTRATION LIANNE HARRISON



Provence is a land where vineyards merge into olive groves, and fields of melons, cherries and figs give way to orchards of plums and apricots. This bounteous kingdom is perfect for a gourmet drive, as my partner and I discover as we cross plains and wind around back roads to seek out truffle hunters, beekeepers, colourful picnic spots and luscious local markets on a drive from Marseille to Nice.

## DAY ONE

After leaving behind Marseille's seafood and pastis, our first stop is Arles which has one of France's best food markets. Twice a week, stalls run along the outside of the Roman walls and it's a great place to sample the products of the Provençal terroir, from tiny green tomatoes to bright orange gourds.

Later we visit Sabine and Alain Ginoux who opened Le Jardin de Manon when their daughter was a baby. Manon is now 23 and some of the restaurant's recipes have been prepared every day since her birth. It's a calm haven away from the queues and group photos of Arles' Roman amphitheatre and serves such delights as guinea fowl supreme with aubergine caviar, roast fillet of duck with figs, and saddle of rabbit stuffed with black olive tapenade and rosemary.

It's a short drive to Domaine de Manville, which opened last June. It took seven years to convert the former farmhouse, hay barns and grain stores into a luxury hotel complex with pool, spa, solarium, cinema and 18-hole

golf course. The rooms surround the restaurant and a stone fountain lends a feel of an old Provençal village square. It's just as the Saut family owners wanted: 'a rural palace'. Honey comes from the hotel's own beehives and olive oil from the Castelas mill, an easy ride away on the Domaine's electric bicycles.

The owner of Castelas, Jean-Benoît Hugues, used to cycle around the olive groves when he was a boy and his Fruité Noir olive oil, drizzled over a fresh baguette, is about as Provençal as eating can get.

## DAY TWO

After breakfast in Manville's majestic winter garden conservatory, we are off to sample an ambrosial hot chocolate from master chocolatier Joël Durand in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence. His specialities include an alphabet of chocolate squares. I have an 'H' with clove and lemon and a 'W' with thyme. In summer, he makes cubed ice lollies of chocolate, cardamom, liquorice and rose petals.

We continue to Cavaillon for lunch which, despite some excellent Roman ▷



ruins, means only one thing: melon. The Cavaillon melon fits perfectly into your hand, like a large boule. ‘It’s all in the weight,’ says Jean-Jacques Prévôt, owner of Restaurant Prévôt and melon connoisseur extraordinaire. At Prévôt, you can enjoy an eight-course lunch, every dish comprising variations of the melon. To start, it’s cod marinated in liquorice with melon, rocket and iced courgette flower; for the main course, a lobster bouillabaisse baked inside a melon case. It is a wonderful restaurant with a great ambiance and is always packed.

We spend the afternoon wandering the pastel-shuttered villages of the Luberon. Gordes, Ansois and Roussillon are some of the *plus beaux villages de France* and also have some of the best restaurants. We call in at the Musée du Tire-Bouchon at Domaine de la Citadelle in Ménerbes, which has more than 1,200 corkscrews on show, before spending early evening in the garden at nearby Maison de la Truffe et du Vin du Luberon which stocks wines from 50 local vineyards.

Supper is a fabulously rustic meal at the family-run hotel Le Mas des Grès. There’s only ever one option on the menu but it’s invariably delicious. Owner Thierry Crovara visits the market each morning, sees what looks good and brings it back for supper.

### DAY THREE

Following France’s melon capital, today’s first stop is Apt, world capital of crystallised fruit. Seventeenth-century French aristocrat Madame de Sévigné called Apt a ‘cauldron of jams’ and it’s still stacked with casks of shiny, syrup-drenched fruit. Today is picnic day, so three candied pears and a jar of cherry confit are tucked away for an outdoor lunch.

The drive across the Luberon plateau transects vineyards and lavender fields. We are heading to Banon, for the famous goats’ milk cheese wrapped in chestnut

leaves, by way of picnic provisions supplier La Brindille Melchio. This emporium in the centre of Banon sells long cured sausages called *brindilles* which hang from the ceiling like spindly stalactites and are sold in poster tubes. We buy chestnut spread, apricot juice, golden Banon biscuits and the local sparkling wine, Frizzant de Muscat.

On the drive back towards Aix-en-Provence are the giant ochre quarries of the Colorado Provençal, where the hills of bright crimson, rust and amber make it the closest we will ever get to a picnic on Mars. It’s a great choice for lunch – though cream trousers are not such a good idea.

Supper is at Le Saint Estève, gazing at another iconic Provençal landscape through a panoramic window. This time it’s Mont Sainte-Victoire – the mountain which separates the Mediterranean from inland Provence that so obsessed artist Paul Cézanne. Next door, the luxury hotel Les Lodges Sainte-Victoire has magnificent views as well as a pool and spa.

### DAY FOUR

Early morning is spent in Aix’s market, where lavender-infused honey, garlic, nougat and bundled asparagus fill the city’s cobbled squares and where locals squeeze every avocado and pear in search of the perfect plumpness. ▷



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT A view of Gordes. Colourful Luberon villages (top). Mont Sainte-Victoire (below). Vineyards near Gordes. Breakfast and the courtyard at Domaine de Manville. Corkscrews on display in Ménerbes

Cézanne probably did the same when looking for apples for his still lifes. His studio is a 10-minute walk up a steep hill.

We stumble across the excellent L'Épicerie grocery in the shady Place des Trois Ormeaux, where shelves are crammed with preserved lemons, herbes de Provence, bottles of squid ink and tiny canisters of vinaigrette. Lunch is a rack of lamb with tarragon gnocchi at stylish Lavault followed by a coffee at Les Deux Garçons. It's served with a Calisson d'Aix, a lozenge-shaped sweet made from almond paste and melon confit.

Our final night is spent in L'Hostellerie de l'Abbaye de la Celle, an Alain Ducasse-run inn. The former abbey is one of the oldest in Provence and became known for its wealthy 'naughty' nuns. Today, from its situation in the heart of the Var, head chef Benoît Witz has boundless fresh produce at his fingertips: plums from Brignoles, figs from Solliès-Pont and chickpeas from Rougiers. Benoît says he takes 'more pleasure in creating something with simple ingredients than with the more noble foods'. The marinated *bonite* (skipjack tuna) and blue lobster salad are unforgettable, as is wandering through the hotel gardens to see the vineyard of rare vines and 25 types of basil.

## DAY FIVE

Truffles, the 'black diamonds' of Provence, are usually hard to trace but at Chez Bruno in Lorgues you can smell them from the entrance. Clément Bruno, the self-styled emperor of truffles, has created a kingdom where you can eat 'more truffles in one lunchtime than you would in the rest of your life'. Two giant truffle sculptures sit atop his gate posts. The kitchen is now run by Clément's son, Benjamin, and the setting is a magical wonderland with pergolas, sculptures and trickling fountains. The baked potato with truffle is as sensuous a food experience as I have ever had.

The road trip finishes with Villeneuve-Loubet and the Escoffier museum. Auguste Escoffier, arguably France's most famous chef, was born in the house, and the museum has become a centre of culinary art and cooking demonstrations. Downstairs is all copper pots and toques and upstairs are some of his old recipes which, of course, no one has dared change for more than 100 years □



LEFT Country vegetables à la barigoule with crayfish tail and rabbit rilette. BELOW LEFT The gardens. Both at L'Hostellerie de l'Abbaye de la Celle

## Provence address book

### Where to sleep

#### DOMAINE DE MANVILLE

Newly opened rural hideaway with pool, spa and golf course. Doubles from €235, room only. *Route des Baux, 13520 Les Baux de Provence; 00-33-4 90 54 40 20; www.domainedemanville.fr*

#### LE MAS DES GRES

Family-run guest house in the heart of the Luberon. Doubles from €250, half board. *1651 route d'Apt, 84800 Lagnes; 00-33-4 90 20 32 85; www.masdesgres.com*

#### LES LODGES SAINTE-VICTOIRE

Spa hotel with scenic mountain views and Michelin-starred Le Saint Estève restaurant next door. Doubles from €225, room only. *2250 route de Cézanne, 13100 Le Tholonet; 00-33-4 42 24 80 40; www.leslodgessainte victoire.com*

#### L'HOTELLERIE DE L'ABBAYE DE LA CELLE

Restful, impeccable country hotel in a former monastery with excellent food. Doubles from €250, room only. *10 place du Général de Gaulle, 83170 La Celle en Provence; 00-33-4 84 49 05 24; www.abbaye-celle.com*

### Where to eat

#### LE JARDIN DE MANON

Stylish, Provençal cuisine with a shady terrace. *14 avenue des Alyscamps, 13200 Arles; 00-33-4 90 93 38 68*

#### RESTAURANT PREVOT

The only choice for melon lovers. *353 avenue de Verdun, 84300 Cavailon; 00-33-4 90 71 32 43; www.restaurant-prevot.com*

#### CHEZ BRUNO

Elegant dining in magnificent, truffle-infused surroundings. *2350 route des Arcs, 83510 Lorgues; 00-33-4 94 85 93 93; www.restaurantbruno.com*

### Don't miss

#### MUSEE DU TIRE-BOUCHON

*Domaine de la Citadelle, 84560 Ménerbes; 00-33-4 90 72 41 58; www.domaine-citadelle.com*

#### MOULIN CASTELAS

*Mas de l'Olivier, 13520 Les Baux de Provence; 00-33-4 90 54 50 86; www.castelas.com*

#### JOEL DURAND CHOCOLATIER

*3 boulevard Victor Hugo, 13210 Saint-Rémy-de-Provence; 00-33-4 90 92 38 25; www.joeldurand-chocolatier.fr*

#### MUSEE ESCOFFIER DE L'ART CULINAIRE

*3 rue Auguste Escoffier, 06270 Villeneuve-Loubet; 00-33-4 93 20 80 51; www.fondation-escoffier.org*

### Planning

#### PROVENCE, ALPS & COTE D'AZUR TOURIST BOARD

Resource for planning your holiday. *www.tourismepaca.fr*