



QUINTESSENTIAL

Home Cooking in Provence

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The salty smell of seawater mingling with scents of freshly caught fish and boat motor oil waft across shallow blue tubs of still-flapping sea creatures on tables lining the dock at the Old Port of Marseille. Family fishermen and women who launched their small boats at dawn offer catches they brought to shore a few hours later

as browsing customers surround their stalls. Mullet, grouper, octopus, tuna, eel and other species may be offered, and it is here at the Old Port that restaurateurs often come in search of ingredients for bouillabaisse, the city's signature dish, and locals hunt for their evening dinners.

The bustling market is the first stop on our *Provence Gourmet* adventure, a cooking class that includes a walking tour of the city and stops at different local markets where we will meet farmers, producers and shopkeepers. The tasty ingredients we gather will later become a delicious lunch, and as we walk, our host Gilles Conchy shares stories about the history and culture of Marseille, the city where he grew up.

DIFFERENT SETTINGS

In addition to Marseille, Gilles offers the classes in Aix en Provence and the Alpilles, and each one culminates in a cooking session at the home of a different family member. Participants are greeted warmly and the experience offers an opportunity to get to interact with local residents in their personal environments, surely one of the best parts of travel.

We will end our own day at the tastefully decorated apartment of Gilles' mother. Cooking students in Aix en Provence will visit the local goat cheese farm and an area winery before arriving at Gilles' own home, a contemporary, ochre-colored house designed with the help of an architect friend to take advantage of summer shade and winter sun. Part of the 12-acre property is devoted to Gilles' organic vegetable garden.

In the Alpilles, the culinary journey ends near St. Remy de Provence in a beautifully renovated old barn set on 20 picturesque acres of French countryside, the home of Gilles' aunt. Classes are small—from two to eight students—and are conducted in English, French or both.



THE JOURNEY CONTINUES

After leaving the port, our next stop is a small farmers' market where stalls burst with fresh produce like bright peppers, plump, firm tomatoes, purple eggplants, crisp greens, and tender young artichokes. "I like to visit markets where my favorite producers lay out their produce," Gilles said. "When you visit a farmers' market on a regular basis, you start talking with the people there. Some even become friends."

Next, we stop at a small family butcher shop that Gilles has been frequenting for years. Cuts of beef, pork and lamb glisten in glass cases, and when Gilles points to what he wants, the friendly butcher weighs and cuts the selection by hand. It's a far cry from the plastic-wrapped meats and poultry at self-serve American supermarkets.

Unlike the Alpilles and Aix en Provence, there is no winery in Marseille, so we visit a local wine shop where bottles from Provence and other parts of France neatly line the shelves. After Gilles describes the recipes, the proprietor chooses three different vintages for us. It's Gilles' favorite wine shop: "I always go there, because I know I will find the perfect wines to pair with that day's meal," he said.

A LOVE AFFAIR WITH COOKING

"As a kid, I was always hanging out in the kitchen baking cakes, pastries and crepes with my mother, and she'd also ask me to help with dinners," Gilles said. "Both my grandmothers were good cooks, too, and I was always impressed with how they prepared large meals for family reunions. Food and cooking were definitely a big deal in my family."

His recipes now focus on local Provencal cuisine with added Mediterranean and Italian influences. "Most of all, I like to pre-

pare and eat fresh local produce from the farmers' market or the fishermen's boats that are just reaching the shore," he said.

A CITY GUIDE

Before starting his cooking classes, Gilles worked in the garment industry. Later he became a city tour guide, which provided an easy segue into his cooking school. His love for good food and cooking, his background in the States and the opportunity to host in beautiful homes made the new venture seem possible.

His favorite part? "I love meeting the people," he said. "Last year I met over 500 different 'students' from very different backgrounds and cultures. There's lots of curiosity and sharing during the Provence Gourmet sessions."

He usually chooses the day's recipes at the last minute. "I like to make up my mind on the menu the very morning of the class, depending on what is fresh and seasonal and available," he said.

A TASTY FINALE

When we have finished gathering our ingredients and learned a bit more about Provence and the Marseille, we climb the stairs to his mother's apartment with a décor she designed herself to recall mid-20th-century France. Then we begin cutting produce and meat, rolling pastry dough and preparing our creative menu of green olive tapenade, eggplant caviar, pissaladiere tart, grilled red peppers, artichokes barigoule and lemon meringue tartlets.

At last we gather at a table on the sunny patio bordered by potted green plants and flowers, uncork the wine and enjoy what we've cooked, what we've learned and the new friends we've made. Bon appétit. ●