

# Aix-traordinary Provence

FRANCE LOVES ITS BUTTER AND CREAM, AND SO DO WE, BUT THE SOUTHEASTERN REGION OF PROVENCE HAS A CULINARY TRADITION CLOSER TO GREECE AND SPAIN. WHERE SUN, SURF AND ALPINE FOOTHILLS RULE, SO DO FRESH VEGETABLES, OLIVE OIL AND HEALTHY GRAINS—PREPARED WITH TYPICAL FRENCH FLAIR, *BIEN SÛR*. THESE FIVE PROVENÇAL EXPERIENCES OFFER WELLNESS IN MORE WAYS THAN ONE.

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## A COOKING CLASS THAT STARTS IN THE GARDEN

The warm wind is flicking my hair out of the open car window. My hunt for healthy living in France is bringing me within reach of the Mediterranean, but far enough inland to be surrounded by farms, vines and genuine village life unfettered by beachside glam-and-glitz. The glimmering sun and country air are already taking care of my mental well-being—what's missing now is the food. In the driver's seat, Lisa, a chef in RICARDO's Test Kitchen, is mastering the curves of these country lanes. We soon turn onto a gravel path and spot today's corner of paradise: Maître René Bérard's kitchen garden at La Bastide des Saveurs. This morning, we're learning to cook a classic Provençal lunch from scratch.



Just at the foot of the hill from La Cadière d'Azur, the perched village-with-a-view where the Bérard family runs their hotel, La Bastide des Saveurs is not only a homestead but also a cooking school. The teaching never stops when the Maître is around—this chef has six decades of kitchen experience under his belt. At 80-odd years old, and now retired with the reins passed on to his son, he's still the picture of good health: ruddy-cheeked, strong and sharp as Roquefort, and tirelessly energetic.

The massive island in the heritage farmhouse's shaded kitchen clues us into the menu: It's overflowing with freshly picked zucchini, onions, bell peppers, eggplant, mushrooms, tomatoes, garlic, basil, rosemary and thyme by the bushel. The kitchen garden provides not only for the Bastide, but for the Hostellerie Bérard up the hill as well. For all the Michelin stars awarded to country restaurants around here, the feeling is totally down-to-earth—this is an approachable place.

You'd think a chef like the Maître (or anyone who goes by Maître, to be honest) would be guarded about the secrets of his trade, but he's an open book. He shows us how best to score the eggplant to



HERE, THE PRETENSE OF BIG-CITY LIFE SEEMS TO HAVE MELTED AWAY IN THE HEAT, AND THE CRAFTSMANSHIP OF FOOD PREP RESTS ON CENTURIES OF SHARING.

make the flavours of the green olive oil and herbs seep into the aubergine caviar. He teaches us that cooking the diced vegetables separately for the stuffed summer squash helps keep each flavour distinct. He shares an old chef's trick to prevent boiling veg from splashing (you top the pot with a circle of parchment paper) and explains that he likes to use a garlic paste made by simmering







**CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE:** Maître René Bérard, master of aubergine caviar; the Mas de Valériole family includes Grifou the dog; a truly garden-fresh salad at La Chassagnette; the view near Hostellerie Bérard is beyond picturesque. **OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP TO BOTTOM:** Hôtel Le Pignonnet's idyllic garden; squash flowers at La Bastide des Saveurs; our Test Kitchen chef Lisa gets to work in Gilles Conchy's kitchen. **OPENING PAGES, LEFT TO RIGHT:** Maison du Riz, a rice farm in the Camargue; chickpea cream at La Chassagnette.







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40 cloves at a time and pulsing them smooth, because it takes away all the bitterness. He's generous and warm, and that's an attitude we're seeing everywhere during our visit; in wineries, markets, cheese shops and chefs' kitchens.

Passing down knowledge is as Provençal as garden-fresh cooking, it turns out. Here, the pretense of big-city life seems to have melted away in the heat, and the craftsmanship of food prep rests on centuries of sharing.

### A MEAL THAT MAY JUST MAKE YOU A VEGETARIAN

Flanked by another blooming garden, this one overflowing with flowers, green beans, pumpkin plants and kumquats, La Chassagnette is a vegetarian restaurant within a nature reserve. It may be extraordinary in its Garden of Eden feel—our barn-wood table is literally shaded by flowering creepers—but it's symbolic of our experience so far. Everywhere we turn, we're surrounded by bountiful, edible nature.

As I savour my first spoonful of a sinfully creamy chickpea purée topped with cilantro-infused oil and a clear tomato broth bursting with sweet, tangy flavour, I immediately understand why La Chassagnette is Michelin-starred. I also get why chef Armand Arnal left the stressful New York food scene for the absolute peace of Parc naturel régional de Camargue. The closer you are to nature, the sweeter its fruits.

"My parents were vegetable sellers at the market in Montpellier, so *cuisine du marché* is in my blood," he explains, passing by our table to say hi.

And when your own garden is your market, the kitchen becomes a playground. Every bite is an inventively expressed love letter to the produce of Provence. The beet carpaccio—barely cooked—lights up my senses with the bitter contrast of black shiso leaves and the sweet pop of raspberries and red currants still warm from the sun. The potato lasagna, made from mandolined spuds stuffed with silky squash paste spiked with lemon confit, is served with an emerald pool of mint, oregano and arugula sauce. In this meal alone, my five-veg-a-day has become 15.

### A MARKET VISIT TURNED BOUILLABAISSE PARTY

From the Bérards to the Arnals, passing traditional skills down through generations is a serious thing in this region. It starts with the natural



**ABOVE AND RIGHT:** Bouillabaisse authority Gilles Conchy from Provence Gourmet has what it takes; preparing the rouille with pestle and mortar. **OPPOSITE PAGE:** Perfectly authentic ratatouille at La Bastide des Saveurs is made with *amour*.








**ABOVE AND LEFT:** Al fresco dining in true Provençal fashion at La Chassagnette; the Pignonnet hotel's RinQuinQuin-based aperitif, a peachy Provençal liqueur that inspired our recipe (see p. 113). **OPPOSITE PAGE:** Happy market vibes at Place Richelme, in Aix-en-Provence.

environment, where there's always something in bloom. The results are artisanal delights (rosé wine, tapenades, ratatouille, bouillabaisse and *calissons d'Aix*—small sweets made from almond paste, candied melon, orange zest and icing sugar) crafted with care following the same methods that have been used for centuries. After all, why mess with a good thing? On this trip we're encountering cheesemakers, rice growers, winemakers, *pâtisseries*, fishmongers, home cooks and master chefs, and I'm finding that they all have one thing in common: strong family traditions.

Today, we have left the car at the hotel in Aix-en-Provence to meet Gilles Conchy from Provence Gourmet at the farmers' market on Place Richelme. The cook, tour guide and general fun guy knows everyone here, from the Vasserot family, which runs a vegetable stand, to the La Cabrouno cheesemongers who specialize in goat's milk products, including the ricotta-style Brousse. We're stocking up before heading out into the countryside to Conchy's home, where in his outdoor teaching kitchen we'll learn to make the family bouillabaisse recipe handed down from his gran to his mom to him. And both of those ladies tend to make regular appearances in his cooking classes.

Of all the heavenly settings we've seen so far (every half-hour brings a new one), this may be my favourite: Conchy and his wife built their own modernist stucco house among rolling hills owned by her family. Our workstation is his backyard, near the hammock with a view on vines, and our kitchen assistant is Mina, the tabby. Her nose has led her to the fish. We start by boiling a pound of *poissons de roche*, a mix of species the size of sardines that are too small and bony to eat, but that make the most flavourful broth. Lucky Mina gets to eat some of the paste that's left over after Lisa has ground the boiled fish.

As we follow the recipe, we sip some wine—a 2015 Terre Promise by the Henri Bonnaud winery, an easy walk from here. Conchy regales us with stories from his childhood in Marseille and days spent sitting in his mother's kitchen, interspersed with instructions, of course. The Conchys like their rouille (a mayonnaise-like spread served alongside bouillabaisse) very garlicky and thick, made with a mortar and pestle. Gilles slices his potatoes a little over a centimetre thick, so they stay firm for the final product. Every decision is informed by generations before him, and today we're part of the family. 













**ABOVE AND RIGHT:** Chef Grégory Brousse of the hotel Le Mas de Peint in Arles; no meal in Provence is complete without local wine, fresh seafood, oysters and market vegetables. **OPPOSITE PAGE:** View from the Château Henri Bonnaud winery in Le Tholonet.









## A WINERY TOUR FOR THE WHOLE FAMILY (INCLUDING THE DOG)

Along the long, flat road through the region of Camargue, known for its black bulls, white horses, wineries and rice fields, it's easy to get lost. We lost ourselves to the moment just yesterday when we were husking our own rice grains at the fascinating Maison du Riz, a rice museum and store—and soon, country B&B—where the red rice beer is delicious and time seems to stop. Today, we manage to miss the discreet turnoff into the Mas de Valériole winery twice before finally finding the narrow lane.

I jump out into the plane-tree-shaded yard and pull out my phone in an effort to snap a quick pic of the regal Golden Lab—Grifou—as he lounges like a lion on the picnic table. We're here for a winery tour, and after traipsing through a fragment of the Michel family's 10 acres of vines and rice fields with the lady of the house, Hélène, we end up back at that very table. We share a quick-made tuna carpaccio dressed with coarse black pepper and olive oil from down the road, scrumptious when accompanied by tastings of the 2016 Grand Mar rosé (grapefruity and light), the 2016 Valcarès Chardonnay (buttery, well-mineraled and with almost a salty note) and a half-dozen more. If there's such a thing as healthy drinking, this is it.

THE MICHEL FAMILY IS DOING FOR WINES WHAT ORGANIC FARMERS HAVE DONE FOR FOOD.



**ABOVE AND LEFT:** Hélène Michel, the matriarch of Mas de Valériole, enjoys one of her family's vintages; yet another colourful course at the Michelin-starred La Chassagnette. **OPPOSITE PAGE:** Fennel flowers courtesy of Gilles Conchy from Provence Gourmet.

The Michel family, which regularly hosts winery tours and sells its bottles in the restored stone farm-building-showroom on-site, has been making wine and growing rice since the 1700s. But while past generations used to produce wine for mixing by other labels, Hélène's husband, Jean-Paul, began making Mas de Valériole wines proper. In one generation, he's turned it into an award-winning brand—their 2016 biodynamic Marselan Nature, for example, won the gold medal at last year's Concours général agricole in Paris. And yet where he's concerned, the best has yet to come. His blue-eyed son Maxime, tall and shy, is the first in the family to have officially studied viticulture and is conducting experiments in their *cuvier* (where the fermentation takes place) that have everyone excited. Following





completely chemical-free biodynamic growing principles, this 2017 natural cru of 100% Marselan is paving the path to progress. They're doing for wines what organic farmers have done for food.

## AN HAUTE-CUISINE FEAST AT THE FOOT OF A MOUNTAIN

I don't know whether to drink in the beauty of my plate or the view of Montagne Sainte-Victoire, painted hundreds of times by Paul Cézanne, sprawled mere kilometres beyond the pale tiles of the Saint-Estève terrace. Tonight is a celebration of a trip fully enjoyed, a week of learning kitchen skills and life skills, which instill a heartwarming wellness from the inside out. The plate wins, by the way—gazing down at chef Mathias Dandine's deconstruction of a *pan bagnat*, which in this case consists of a gloriously chubby shrimp flanked by a narrow rectangle of bread stacked with a rainbow of radish, yellow squash, cucumber, green onion, basil and a dense slice of *poutargue* (a local form of caviar), I think to myself: I know how to make that. Not the luscious dressing the bread is soaking up, nor the refined *je ne sais quoi* of this Michelin-starred chef's flavour combinations—I'm not that deluded—but the poutargue in particular.

The day before, we'd been on a lazy riverbank in Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer with another chef, Roger Merlin, at his cookery school called Le mas des Colverts. He came across some roe in one of the grey mullets we were preparing to dry-smoke—a golden find. This is the stuff that poutargue is made of: Chef Merlin instructed me to delicately finish halving the fish, making sure not to pierce the filament encasing the roe. I removed the pouch with kid gloves, encased it in fleur de sel and put it in his fridge. In six months, long after Lisa and I are back in our Canadian kitchens reliving this Provence experience in our own ways, he'll pull out the poutargue, cured, dense and salty, slice it paper-thin in the traditional manner and savour it in something as delectable as what I'm eating now.



The RICARDO team travelled with Air Canada Rouge, which offers three non-stop flights per week between Montreal and Marseille.



### WHERE TO GO

#### LA CHASSAGNETTE

Chemin du Sambuc, Arles  
+33 (0)4 90 97 26 96  
[chassagnette.fr](http://chassagnette.fr)

#### LA MAISON DU RIZ

Mas de la Vigne, Albaron  
+33 (0)6 31 03 40 11  
[maisonduriz.com](http://maisonduriz.com)

#### LE MAS DES COLVERTS

Avenue d'Arles, Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer  
+33 (0)4 90 97 83 73  
[masdescolverts.com](http://masdescolverts.com)

#### LE SAINT-ESTÈVE

2250, route Cézanne,  
Le Tholonet  
+33 (0)4 42 27 10 14  
[leslodgessainteivictoire.com](http://leslodgessainteivictoire.com)

#### MOULIN DE LA ROQUE

1, route des Sources,  
Le Castellet  
+33 (0)7 79 07 20 02  
[la-roque-bardol.fr](http://la-roque-bardol.fr)

#### PROVENCE GOURMET

Office de tourisme  
d'Aix-en-Provence  
300, avenue Giuseppe Verdi,  
Aix-en-Provence  
+33 (0)6 09 60 60 84  
[provence-gourmet.fr](http://provence-gourmet.fr)

### WHERE TO STAY

#### HOSTELLERIE BÉRARD

6, rue Gabriel Péri,  
La Cadière-d'Azur  
+33 (0)4 94 90 11 43  
[hotel-berard.com](http://hotel-berard.com)

#### HÔTEL LE MAS DE PEINT

Le Sambuc, Route de Salin-  
de-Giraud, Arles  
+33 (0)4 90 97 20 62  
[masdepeint.com](http://masdepeint.com)

#### HÔTEL LE PIGONNET

5, avenue du Pignonnet,  
Aix-en-Provence  
+33 (0)4 42 59 02 90  
[hotelpignonnet.com](http://hotelpignonnet.com)



## ratatouille with garlic purée

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**PREPARATION** 40 minutes

**COOKING** 45 minutes

**SERVINGS** 4

### *Garlic Purée*

6 to 8 peeled garlic cloves (depending on their size)

2 tbsp (30 ml) olive oil

### *Ratatouille*

1/2 cup (125 ml) olive oil

2 zucchini, diced

2 bell peppers (1 red, 1 yellow), seeded and diced

1 large onion, chopped

1 large eggplant, unpeeled and diced

Thyme leaves, to taste

### *Garlic Purée*

**1** Place the garlic cloves in a small pot, cover with water and add salt to taste. Bring to a boil and let simmer for 10 minutes or until the garlic is tender. Reserve 2 tbsp (30 ml) of the cooking liquid, then drain. Using a blender, purée the garlic with the reserved cooking liquid. Add the olive oil. Season with salt and set aside.

### *Ratatouille*

**2** In a large non-stick skillet over medium-high heat, cook the vegetables one at a time, using 2 tbsp (30 ml) of the oil for each vegetable and stirring frequently, until they are tender and golden, about 5 to 10 minutes depending on the vegetable. Transfer the cooked vegetables to a serving platter as they are done.

**3** Using a spatula, add the garlic purée to the vegetables, then sprinkle with the thyme. Season with salt and pepper to taste.

## peach and lemon balm kir

**PREPARATION** 15 minutes

**COOKING** 5 minutes

**CHILLING** 1 hour

**SERVINGS** 4

### *Peach Syrup*

1 peach, pitted and quartered, or 2/3 cup (95 g) frozen peaches, thawed

1/4 cup (55 g) sugar

1/4 cup (60 ml) water

### *Kir*

2 cups (500 ml) sparkling white wine or Champagne

4 small sprigs lemon balm or verbena

### *Peach Syrup*

**1** In a small pot, bring all the ingredients to a boil. Reduce the heat and simmer for 5 minutes. Transfer to a bowl. Let cool, then refrigerate for 1 hour or until completely chilled.

**2** Strain through a fine sieve, but don't press down to keep the liquid as clear as possible. The peach syrup will keep in an airtight container in the refrigerator for 10 days.

### *Kir*

**3** Fill four Champagne flutes with the sparkling wine. Add 1 to 2 tbsp (15 to 30 ml) of the peach syrup. Garnish each glass with a sprig of lemon balm.

**[NOTE]** This recipe was inspired by RinQuinQuin à la Pêche, a liqueur made locally in Provence that blends peaches, white wine, alcohol and cane sugar. A Kir Royale is a French aperitif that combines Champagne with crème de cassis. Our kir cocktail is a happy marriage of these two French specialties.

