

GOURMET GETAWAY



Second helpings

Dominic Bliss lived in the Var during his student years, subsisting on shamefully cheap food and wine. Decades later, he returns to redeem himself with the finest culinary and oenological delights this bountiful Provençal department has to offer

My relationship with the Var goes all the way back to my teenage years. In the late 1980s my parents – inspired, like many Britons, by Peter Mayle's *A Year in Provence* – bought themselves a holiday house in this lovely Provençal department. Very old, very big and very much in need of renovation, it stood on a hill overlooking a tiny village in the north of the department called Aups. With only the most basic amenities, we spent three summer holidays camping in the crumbling building, waiting for my father to find the vast amounts of cash he needed to engage the local builder. He never did. Nevertheless, those blissfully hot summer days allowed my

brother and me to sample the local food and drink. We were hardly what you'd call epicureans, though, subsisting mainly on baguettes, Camembert, tinned haricots verts, Kronenbourg 1664 and cheap rosé my dad would procure from the local wine cooperative in an old plastic jerry can.

In my 20s, I returned to the region to spend a year as an English assistant in a French middle school. While my language skills improved meteorically, my diet remained embarrassingly poor: lots of *pommes frites*, steak *haché* and supermarket celeriac in plastic boxes. Looking back now, it seems criminal I never availed myself of the culinary and oenological delights this part of Provence



CLOCKWISE FROM THIS IMAGE:
FOLLOW THE COASTAL PATH
FOR STRIKING VIEWS, DRINKS
AND OLIVES AT THE CAFÉ DU
HIDI IN BAUQUEN; WINES
CALDRE CAN BE FOUND AT THE
MAISON DES VINS COTEAUX
VAROIS IN LA CÈLE



"The Var is renowned for figs, truffles, saffron, chestnuts, honey and seafood"



has to offer. So, 35 years later, when I was given the chance to spend a week in the Var sampling the very best food and wine available, I leapt at the chance. Perhaps I could now redeem myself for all those years lost in the gastronomic wilderness.

The second most-forested department in France, the Var stretches from the Côte d'Azur to its northern border at the Gorges du Verdon. It is renowned for producing figs, olive oil, truffles, saffron, chestnuts, honey and plenty of seafood. And for anyone wishing to taste the best of these local ingredients, the Var boasts a dozen or so Michelin-starred restaurants, two of them holding the maximum three stars.

Star-studded viticulture

Then, of course, there is the wine; rosé, to be precise. The Var is the world's leading producer of AOP rosé, with hundreds of winemakers dotted around the region. So renowned is viticulture here that multiple foreign celebrities, including Brad Pitt, George Clooney, George Lucas and Kylie Minogue,

have invested in the industry, lending their world-famous names to various ranges of the pink stuff in particular.

And it was with wine that my return to the Var commenced. A few kilometres inland on the Saint-Tropez peninsula, I was invited to a wine-blending workshop at Domaine Rinaudo (www.domainerinaudo.com), a 15-hectare organic vineyard owned by brothers Guillaume and Damien Rinaudo.

Here I was tasked with assembling three varieties of wine. The first was made from Cinsault grapes, with an acidic, grapefruit taste to it; the second from Grenache – fruitier, rounder and less acidic; the third from Tibouren, with red fruits, grapefruit and a slight tannic bitterness. Despite guidance from an expert, my efforts at blending were pretty dire. I was far more successful in corking my wine and sealing it with wax, using the domaine's old-fashioned bottling machine. It was all very different from the cheap rosé my father had purchased in his jerry can decades before. For lunch I was invited to one of the Var's most famous beach restaurants, Le



"The dish that keeps everyone coming back is bouillabaisse"



IMAGES © VARTOURISME

DINING EN PLEIN AIR AT THE DOMAINE DU RAYOL

Club 55 (www.club55.fr). Named after the year it was founded, this celebrity hotspot on La Plage de Pampelonne, not far from Ramatuelle, started life as a humble holiday shack, without water or electricity. In 1955, during the filming of Brigitte Bardot's famous movie *Et Dieu... créa la femme* (*And God Created Woman*), the overworked film crew were eager for sustenance and asked the shack owners, Bernard and Geneviève de Colmont, if they would feed them all during the film production. The Colmonts duly obliged, thereby establishing their culinary reputation. Soon afterwards they built a proper restaurant and it wasn't long before celebrities from all over the world were flocking there for lunch. On a busy summer's day, the current boss, Bernard and Geneviève's granddaughter, Camille, serves up to 900

covers. She told me her more famous clients appreciate the rusticity of the restaurant and the fact they are rarely hassled by other guests. The restaurant's motto is: *"Ici le client n'est pas le roi... parce qu'il est un ami."* ("Here, the customer isn't king... because he's a friend.")

Given its reputation, the food at Le Club 55 is actually fairly simple. As the owners themselves admit: "Guests do not come here for a gastronomic menu or to be blown over by over-elaborate presentation." The al fresco dining area is a labyrinth of chairs and tables, spread out across half an acre or so, all shaded by a roof of wood and bamboo. Waiters flit in and out between diners at speed, somehow managing not to spill their overloaded trays. I enjoyed a delicious lunch of organic vegetables – grown at the restaurant's own farm – and huge tiger prawns.

But I found myself craving something more typically Provençal. The following day I had lunch at a restaurant on the port at Saint-Tropez called Le Girelier (www.legirelier.fr). With its white tablecloths, polished glasses and soft furnishings, it couldn't have been more different from Le Club 55 and the kind of food I'd survived on when I'd lived in the Var all those years ago. I chose John Dory in a bouillabaisse sauce with saffron potatoes, mussels and parsley. Once it arrived at my table I added the croutons, the *rouille* (a mayonnaise with olive oil, garlic and cayenne pepper) and the grated Emmental. There are two chefs at Le Girelier - David Didelot, from the Vosges, and Laurent Simon, from Alsace. By alternating shifts, they ensure there's always a maestro present in the kitchen.

The theatre of dining

My most memorable culinary experience of all, however, was at a bistro overlooking the bay in Rayol-Canadel-sur-Mer called Maurin des Maures. In charge here is the inimitable André Del Monte, who took over the restaurant in 1985. And the dish that keeps everyone coming back for more is his famous bouillabaisse. André's version is a smorgasbord of cuttlefish, scorpionfish, John Dory, gurnard, weever fish, crab, mussels and either conger or moray eel, all cooked with potatoes, onions, garlic, tomatoes, saffron, olive oil and herbes de Provence. As I watched in awe, André and his waiter emerged from the kitchen with a vast bouillabaisse laid out on a massive cork platter. Immediately, like two surgeons at

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: THREE DISHES TYPICAL OF THE FINE DINING YOU CAN EXPECT IN THE VAR'S MANY EXCELLENT RESTAURANTS; DINE BENEATH THE TREES AT LA PLAGE DE L'ÎLE D'OR IN SAINT-RAPHAËL AND ENJOY THE VIEW ACROSS THE SEA TO THE ÎLE D'OR; ANDRÉ DEL MONTE PROVIDES THE THEATRE AT MAURIN DES MAURES



THE FAMOUS BOUILLABAISSE AT MAURIN DES MAURES

THE FINEST MICHELIN DINING

To experience Var cuisine at its finest, you could do worse than visit one of its two restaurants which have been awarded the maximum three Michelin stars. **La Table du Castellet** is run by Fabien Ferré, at the Hôtel & Spa du Castellet (www.hotelducastellet.net), in the foothills between Marseille and Toulon.

On the menu you'll find mullet, John Dory, prawns, squid and, more surprisingly, hare. Unmissable is the cheese cellar, adjacent to the main dining room, where there are well over 50 different cheeses, depending on the season. The Michelin Guide says Ferré's "minimalist, virtuoso cuisine elevates the natural flavour of the ingredients, bolstered by memorable full-bodied sauces", adding it is worth the trip for that cheese cellar alone.

The other three-starred restaurant is **La Vague d'Or** at Le Cheval Blanc hotel in Saint-Tropez (www.chevalblanc.com). Here chef Arnaud Donckele will surprise both your taste buds and your bank manager. Menus start at €480 per person.

"The chef's strong suit is undeniably sauces, referred to as 'ephemeral' or 'velvety' and which are both big boned and delicate," says the Michelin Guide. "His turf recipes are equally high flying and embody a constant quest for the perfect tomato, pepper or courgette to underscore pigeon, lamb or sweetbread. An exceptional experience every time."



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: MARKET DAY IN LORGUES IS A TREAT FOR THE SENSES; CHEESES FROM THE FERME DE LA PASTOURELLE; COLOURFUL FRUIT AND VEGETABLES ARE A STAPLE IN THESE PARTS; A TARTE TROPÉZIENNE



the operating table, they attacked their creation, carving it up with spoons and doling it out to the boggle-eyed diners before it could cool down. At €84, it's not cheap and must be ordered at least 24 hours in advance – but then one is paying for both the gorgeous fish and the theatre of its presentation.

"Whoever says there's a secret to making bouillabaisse is a massive liar," André tells me through his bushy grey moustache. "It's not complicated. It's a rustic cuisine." Rustic or not, it's a dish that earns André a faithful clientele. Now aged 72, over the years he has welcomed such luminaries as former French president Jacques Chirac, pop stars Bob Geldof and Roger Taylor, actors Omar Sharif, Olivia Newton-John and Charlotte Rampling, and model Jerry Hall.

Room for dessert

My final culinary treat was a true Var classic: *tarte tropézienne*. Known throughout the world, this dessert pastry was first made famous in 1955 by Polish pâtisserie owner Alexandre Micka who moved to Saint-Tropez during the Second World War, bringing his grandmother's recipe with him. And it was Brigitte Bardot, again during the filming of *And God Created Woman*, who championed Micka's tart, giving it its name and cementing its global reputation.

Seventy years on, Micka's creation is as successful as ever, doing a roaring trade at multiple cafés and shops across the Riviera

and beyond. There are even plans to expand abroad. The current owner of the business is Albert Dufrière.

"First comes the brioche, its surface firm and smooth like the skin of a peach, generously sprinkled with sugar granules that melt on the tongue at first contact," is how he describes his famous dessert. "Then, inside, is its soul. Full, unctuous and delicious, it's the result of the delicate blending of both pastry cream and butter icing."

As I munched on one of these famous pastries, I thought back on all the amazing food and wine I had tasted over the past few days. It was almost 50 years since I'd first come to the Var and only now was I enjoying its true gastronomic delights. As I happily discovered, redemption comes in many forms – eating and drinking perhaps the most enjoyable of all. **ToF**

www.visitvar.com

WINES OF THE VAR

You won't want for rosé in this part of France. The department claims to be the world's largest producer of the pink stuff. Four areas of the Var have been granted *appellation d'origine contrôlée* status.

BANDOL

Dominated by the Mourvèdre grape variety, Bandol produces vast quantities of rosé. Every first Sunday in December the local wine-growers present their vintages at the Fête des Vins de Bandol at the town's port.

www.fete-des-vinsdebandol.fr

CÔTEAUX D'AIX-EN-PROVENCE

On a tiny section of this designation extends into the Var – in Rians, in the northwest of the department.

CÔTEAUX VAROIS EN PROVENCE

Focused mainly on rosé, this wine is well showcased at the Maison des Vins Côteaux Varois en Provence in the Abbaye de la Celle.

www.coteauxvaroisenprovence.com

CÔTES DE PROVENCE

This designation spreads beyond the Var. For a great introduction, head to the Maison des Vins in Les Arcs-sur-Argens maison-des-vins.fr