



Supping at the bistros of Southern France

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Paris has cornered the market as the pinnacle of fine dining, but French cuisine – the great, hearty, fresh, seasonally inspired stuff – isn't all about the City of Lights.

Some of the most memorably dreamy degustation happens in off-the-beaten path, often humble, little spots where the ingredients are fetched from less than a mile from where you sit. And tradition? Well, it runs as thick as a crock of cassoulet.

In the land of D'Artignan, where horses roam in open fields and endless swathes of *garrigue* (the heady, aromatic, wild growing herbs that sprout from the most impossibly rocky terrain) tickle your nose, you will find some of the most authentic, utterly enchanting dishes in France. It is here in the mid-southern spot known as *Languedoc* -- rimmed to the south by the Mediterranean, and the northwest by the hulking Pyrenees Mountains where you will find sleepy, cinematic bistros dotting the rocky, rambling countryside. These have the most memorable meals and outstanding, reasonably priced wine to go with (much of which is available in the U.S.) a feast of locally-minded meals are here for the taking:



Restaurant L'Auberge de L'Ecole (34360 Saint Jean de Minervois)

– Cassoulet lovers, pay attention: You will not go wrong with this classic concoction at the hands of the delightful Brigitte Grau, who owns this hole-in-the-wall eatery, anchored by a lovely wood-burning fireplace and dotted with famed, old black-and-white iconic Gallic photos. But the thing that will truly capture your attention is her slowly simmered, rustic, cant-stop-eating-it cassoulet, rife with white beans (grown down the road), duck legs confit, thick ribs of bacon, tomato paste, and a smattering of bread crumbs. Le sigh.

WINE: The small-production producer, Clos Gravillas, sits just across the street from L'Auberge de L'Ecole, and that's a lucky thing – but it's more than proximity that brings these complex, gorgeous wines to the table. Made by husband-wife team Nicole and John Bojanowski (the latter, a Kentucky ex-pat who went to France and fell in love), you cannot go wrong with a bottle of their 100 percent Carignan, the 2011 Clos du Gravillas "Lo Vièlh" –

a testament to the stand-alone beauty of this oft-blended grape, at once rustic and elegant, with notes of zippy black pepper and bodacious plum and blackberry, but with an incredible freshness to the fruit and the body that makes the bottle disappear very fast indeed.

Jardins de la Mer (34140 Avenue Louis Tudesq). At this airy, sand-in-your-sneakers-casual, fish-centric eatery in Bouzigue, you can actually see them bringing the catch o' the day in from the Mediterranean Sea that is merely steps from your waterside table. And if there is one word you need to know here in this seaside town, it's *huîtres* – oysters. And lots of 'em!



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WINE: The AOC Picpoul de Pinet is home to incredibly refreshing white wines that are inexpensive and, really, should just automatically come with every plate of oysters served in town. Check out the 2011 Cave de Pomerols “Hugues de Beauvignac” Picpoul de Pinet, with its aromas of delicate pear and grapefruit and burst of mineral and citrus on the palate.

Petit Jardin (20 rue J-Jacques Rousseau). Romance in the garden is what you'll get at this adorable yet chic modern eatery in the lovely city of Montpellier. Be sure to take a cue from the name and nab a seat in winsome garden out back and order some dreamy langoustine risotto or tender, braised lamb shoulder with garlicky aioli.

WINE: The 2010 Mas de Lunes spends just enough time in new French oak (6 months) to give a grippy, earthy edge to the bright black cherry and blackberry fruit flavors of this blend of Syrah and Grenache, that leaves lingering notes of clove and licorice.

La Table d'Aurore (34150 Saint Guilhem le Désert). Located in the adorable inn, Le Guilhome d'Orange, this 14-table little gem in the Medieval town of St. Guilheme le Desert is the place to embrace your love of garlic with a plate of steamed, aioli-piled crayfish (forget the fork and knife and let your fingers to the cracking) and impossibly tender, local duck breast topped with crunchy purple bean sprouts, fingerling potatoes, and grilled squash.

WINE: The organically farmed wines of Mas de la Seranne are those of passionate winemaker/owner Jean Pierre Venture. Like many winemakers here in Languedoc's Terrasses du Larzac, Jean Pierre had no family history in the wine business – in fact, he was a monk at a frozen cake company. But by 40, he yearned to trade the manufactured world for the natural one, and good thing he did. The 2009 Mas de la Serrane “Le Clos des Immortelles” (a name that means “the shadow of the fig tree”) is 50 percent Syrah and 30 percent Mourvedre, with the rest divided between Carignan and Grenache. Loaded with aromas of fresh, wild herbs and black cherries, it's got enough tannic oomph and acidity to cut through the tender, rustic duck like a knife.

Restaurant L'Hospitalet (Route De Narbonne Plage 1). Once a sort of caretaking station for ill and weary travelers, this 1,000 hectare estate in Narbonne is now a stylish, rambling hotel lush with wine grape vines, peonies, and roses, and dotted with ever-changing sculptures and paintings (both indoors and out). Owned by the innovative Girard Bertrand (the handsome famed rugby player-turned-winemaker and third largest *vin* producer in Languedoc), there's a real focus on sustainable living here, and in the elegant restaurant, farm and fashion find a meeting of the minds in dishes like roasted loup de mer in a broth of pea shoots and local asparagus and locally-raised, impossibly tender lamb loin.



WINE: You can't go make a misstep with grapes from right out the door – order a bottle of the 2010 L'Hospitalet, a heady blend of half Syrah with 30 percent Grenache, 10 percent Mourvedre, and 10 percent Carignan, with its pretty nose of black cherries, and savory notes of fresh herbs and black olives.

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