



## Secrets of Food and Wine in the Languedoc Region of the South of France

The Languedoc is a vast area stretching from the Camargue in the east to the borders of Catalan Spain in the South and in the North to Toulouse and Albi; it covers a great diversity of food and cooking types, all with one common feature – excellent local ingredients - fruit, vegetables, wines and cheeses, all of which express the taste of the sun and the region. Searching for the secrets of *le sud profond* has taken us to many secret corners of the area and on a remarkable journey across the region. We have seen some of the most beautiful countryside in the south of France, Mediterranean scenery scorched by summer sun, full of pines, rosemary, thyme, wild garlic, wild leeks, bay and olive trees and a vast acreage of vines, for this is the largest wine region in the world. Here you will find all conceivable types of wine to suit every palate and pocket; from soft supple aged reds, young fruity reds, port-like wines, sweet Muscat, excellent sparkling wines, to fruity or oaked whites and rosés bursting with summer fruit and sun. You will be simply amazed at the sophistication and value for money of today's Languedoc wines, a very far cry from the 'plonk' of the past.

Unlike its well-trodden neighbour Provence, the Languedoc has kept its secrets jealously guarded, preferring to keep them to those in the know. We find that the best local recipes use the delicious local ingredients in a simple manner, emphasising their character without overlaying too many fussy flavours. This is the traditional food of the region, making use of ingredients in an economical but inspirational manner. Here we share with you some of these secrets which we are delighted to serve to our guests at Le Domaine aux Quat'Saisons.

Summer days and evenings in the Languedoc are always enjoyed out of doors and what best to serve for dessert but summer fruit. The flavour of local ripened peaches and nectarines is truly astonishing and we favour the white ones for their heady combination of juiciness and taste. Puréed the flesh needs no embellishment to make the most gorgeous white peach Bellini; two tablespoons of this in a glass of sparkling wine is divine. In northern climates, the fruit will need sugar to bring out the flavour, lost in transport and in under-ripe picking, but not here.

*Garriguettes* strawberries retain the full flavour of days gone by and make the most gorgeous dessert when served with a little of their own *coulis* and a home-made vanilla ice cream. This desert offers the most beautiful colours, flavours and textures, of pink purée and slightly soft pale red fruit against white ice cream – yes this variety of strawberry is not the lipstick red of those toughies that supermarkets seem to enjoy. Local melons are at their best served with a little chilled Muscat wine from St-ean de Minervois inside them and perhaps a little air dried ham from the *Montagne Noir* as a great summer starter. Local figs, apricots and cherries are all simply delicious and we like to poach them in Muscat wine and serve them chilled on warm evenings for another refreshing desert.

Local sourced vegetables bought freshly that day at the market from small growers also benefit from the sunshine and the flavour of tomatoes, peppers, aubergines and courgettes are particularly wonderful as

all these vegetables are sun worshippers, light years away from their northern relatives grown in glass houses. The Languedoc uses these vegetables to make wonderful alternatives to *ratatouille*, the well known dish from Provence. Our own local dishes are called *cichoumeille* (from Montpellier) and *samfaina* (from Catalonia) and each consists of a preparation of aubergines, tomatoes, peppers, courgettes and onions cooked in olive oil. You will rarely if ever see these dishes in restaurants, only in private homes.

The region has always been a favourite with fish lovers and the production of oysters, mussels and clams from the vast *étangs* of the coast provide locals with excellent seafood at great prices. This has brought famous fish restaranteurs like Rick Stein to the area. What better than a platter of *huîtres de Bouzigues* enjoyed with a bottle of *Picpoul de Pinet* (the regions' excellent seafood wine, crisp and very fruity, much more enjoyable than Muscadet in our opinion) at one of the restaurants along the coast. When talking of *le sud intense*, one must never forget that most Languedocien of preparations, *brandade de morue*. An unlikely sounding unctuous but light puree of salt cod, milk and olive oil, flavoured often with a little garlic it makes a great starter, and the leftovers are just irresistible as a filling for jacket potatoes or spread on toast. It is rather tricky to make though and the pureeing of the cod with the milk and oil takes a little practice. Another of our guests' favourite fish dishes is *loup au beurre du Montpellier*, poached sea bass with a green herb butter sauce flavoured with anchovy and capers.

The venerable *Roquefort* cheese is still produced in the northern hills of the Languedoc in the village of Roquefort-sur-Soulzon as it has been for centuries. The cheese is made entirely from ewe's milk and its flavour and creamy texture is due to the ageing in caves and the *pencillum glaucum roqueforti* mould which is unique to the cheese. Across the region, goats' cheeses are widely produced from *frais* (fresh curds in a mould) to *sec* (air dried and aged for 9-12 months). The majority of our goats' cheese is sourced from small farms situated within 10 kms of Le Domaine in the Montagne Noir. These are delicious and the *frais* variety especially so when served with a little mountain honey, a Languedoc speciality. We love them too with fresh figs from the garden served warm from the sun that ripened them; great for breakfast on the terrace.

Across the region, *pelardon* cheeses are wrapped in *poitrine*, (thin slices of bacon-like ham) and grilled, served with a little salad of mildly bitter leaves such as chicory or endive (or dandelions) and with an olive or nut oil dressing. Walnuts can be added too, if you like, but we prefer the simpler version, just make sure that the cheese is not cooked too long or it will lose its shape.

Another lovely cheese dish is made by mixing *faisnelles* of goats' cheese with a little finely chopped fresh mint, serving them with a salad of thinly sliced oranges marinated in mint syrup. A cool, fresh dish for when the days are hot and appetites' flag.

Weather in the winter can be cold, although bright and sunny; what better to warm the spirit than a traditional *daube de boeuf*. Shin of beef is marinated in red wine, spices (cloves, juniper berries and nutmeg), a little orange peel, herbs, onions, plenty of garlic and a little oil and vinegar and then cooked for hours until meltingly tender. Served with macaroni it makes an excellent dish for cooler weather and one we enjoy preparing immensely. All the flavours of the region seem to be concentrated in this dish.

*Cassoulet* is another winter dish (or perhaps feast) enjoyed by many French people. To enjoy it at its best, go to Castelnaudary, its spiritual home, and enjoy it over a long lunch with a good bottle of local red. The preparation of beans, cooked with meats, tomatoes, garlic, wine and *confit* of duck or goose and *saucissons de Toulouse* makes a hearty dish and if well made it is truly magnificent.

**We hope that you will enjoy some of these specialities when you visit us at:**

**Hotel Le Domaine aux Quat'Saisons**

<http://www.southoffrancehotel.com>

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