



TERROIR

sunshine and stars

Terroir is king in Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur and, in recent decades, the region has matured from the simplicity for which it became famous into a veritable feast of sophistication, with a host of innovative and Michelin-starred chefs adding their own twist on tradition. **Jennifer Ladonne** checks out the menu... ▶

IMAGE © FOTOLIA

Kick off your gourmet tour with a steaming dish of *bouillabaisse* laden with soft morsels of fish and heaps of glorious seafood



Clockwise: The perched village of Crestet in Vaucluse; *girolle* mushrooms; the juicy *figue de Solliès* pairs well with a glass of Côtes de Provence; the region boasts some of the finest sun-kissed produce in France; you'll be spoilt for choice at Les Halles d'Avignon; chef Jon Chiri

At 9am on a Tuesday morning, Les Halles, Avignon's impossibly picturesque covered market, is in full swing as we wander past its eye-popping stalls with American chef Jon Chiri. We're gathering - and nibbling - local delicacies for the lunch we're about to prepare: wild *girolle* mushrooms, fist-sized purple-tinted artichokes, golden mirabelle plums, salty Picholine olives and several examples of the local goat's cheese.

Chiri, who is clearly a favourite fixture here, judging from the hearty greetings he receives from every corner of the market, landed in Avignon by chance in late 2002 and has never looked back. On a train headed to Barcelona, a cooking buddy from New Orleans he was chatting with on the phone mentioned that a mutual friend was working in a town called Avignon. Ten minutes later, he heard the conductor announce a stop in this very city and made a split-second decision to hop off. A vacancy at the illustrious Michelin-starred restaurant La Mirande, where his friend was earning his crust, gave Chiri his Provençal passage after years working in kitchens around the US and Europe. In Provence, Chiri has done everything from heading local restaurants to organising cycling tours. But in 2017, when a restaurant stall tucked in a corner of Les Halles opened up, he grabbed it. Now, he serves a gourmet lunch at his stand five days a week and teaches cooking classes for small groups to explore the largesse of Provençal food and wine.

"For me, the most important thing is the product," he says, "the simplicity of the local ingredients - the garlic, tomatoes, goat's cheese, herbs, lamb, pigeon - and the fact that I can go to the market and find five amazing varieties of plums and 11 kinds of strawberries that all ripen at different times, so I can have fresh berries most of the summer." In Provence, ingredients are sovereign, he goes on. "People around here are really proud of their

ingredients. They come back to basics. And more and more good chefs are finding ways to create relationships with the growers. When I took over my first post as chef in a château in a tiny village [Crestet, in the Vaucluse], there was nothing but vineyards and farmers. It was not like Avignon, where I can find all these incredible products in one place. I had to develop relationships with the farmers. I had to go to the amazing chocolate guy in Crestet or the amazing cheese lady in Vaison-la-Romaine. If I wanted good fish and meat I had to know where to go."

Meet the Locavores

France is all about terroir - literally, the soil - and, as any winemaker will tell you, the flavours imparted to produce grown on one parcel of land can be very different from produce grown on the parcel next door. Provençal cooks are hyper-aware of the difference between, say, a melon grown up north as opposed to one from nearby Cavailon, or cherries from Venasque, or tomatoes from the cook's own garden. Being the vegetable garden of France (a huge percentage of France's fruits and vegetables comes from the Vaucluse) it stands to reason.

Julie Mautner, an American food writer and editor who has lived between Provence and her native Milwaukee for 20 years and now organises local experiences for visitors



"THE NUMBER OF MICHELIN STARS HERE UNDERSCORES PROVENCE'S STATUS AS ONE OF THE MOST EXCITING PLACES TO EAT"



around food and wine, emphasises the connection. "The rules of Provençal cuisine are based on terroir, locality and the idea that if you know the person who grew it or made it or raised it, it's just inherently better," she laughs.

In her years of cultivating relationships around food, Mautner has also observed the evolutions of Provençal cooking. "The traditions are still there. And that's one of the things I love so much about the people, the region and the food: they revere their culinary past. They don't want to throw out the traditional as they forge a more modern cuisine."

"Rustic refinement" is how Mautner characterises the cuisine exiting the kitchens of the younger generation of Provence chefs. Like Mathieu Desmarest at Pollen, a sleek new restaurant in Avignon that features the kind of simple, sophisticated and original dishes that merge a firm grounding in technique with a sensitivity to what's freshest in the market.

This generation of chefs seems freer, less interested in earning a Michelin star - which can mean a much more stressful existence - than a Bib Gourmand, a newer Michelin-designated category that commends *cuisiniers* making ambitious food at a reasonable price. Still, the number of Michelin stars here underscores Provence's status as one of the most exciting places to eat in France, with Marseille leading the way. ▶

A melting pot from its very origins, this vivid, exciting and unjustly maligned city is as Mediterranean as it is Provençal. A crossroads, its lively markets and diverse cuisine reflect “influences from southern Italy, North Africa, Spain and Corsica,” emphasises Lionel Levy, chef at Alcyone, the Michelin-starred gastronomic restaurant at Marseille’s spectacular InterContinental-Hôtel Dieu. A native of Toulouse, Levy worked with pre-eminent chefs Alain Ducasse and Éric Fréchet in Paris before striking out for Marseille. “My father is originally from Morocco and I always wanted to work in the Mediterranean to fully express myself,” he explains.

While Levy’s superb ‘bouillabaisse milkshake’ (a stalwart he says he’d just as soon retire) remains a benchmark, he’s constantly crafting new dishes that strive to “break the codes, call myself into question”.

Provençal cuisine is a reference for Levy, but for him what’s important is to “master all these traditional recipes and then be creative, make them your own. But it all starts with the mastery of tradition”.

Equally passionate about the city and the Mediterranean, Alexandre Mazzia, chef at AM, a rigorous, unpretentious Michelin-starred restaurant tucked away on a quiet side street, augments Provençal flavours with ingredients like galangal and tamarind. “My relationship to Marseille is essential and vital,” explains Mazzia. “The roots of the restaurant are the terroir. All the products I use



“IT’S MORE THAN A SEASONAL CUISINE; IT’S THE CUISINE OF THE MOMENT. I NEVER KNOW WHAT WE WILL RECEIVE...”

come from within a 50km radius, everything is local from small producers. It’s more than a seasonal cuisine; it’s the cuisine of the moment. I never know what we will receive.”

Though we’ve read the reviews, my dining companion and I are still not prepared for the succession of a dozen or so tiny dishes that arrive on rocks, a bed of moss, wood blocks or unique pieces of hand-thrown pottery. With flavours so precise and a presentation so exquisite, there is no sense left unravished. Inspired by “colour, light, a reverberation, a stone, something porous”, Mazzia falls somewhere between a master craftsman and a poet. The elegant dining room seats only 26, and though lunch is a revelation, Mazzia recommends dinner to really get what it’s all about.

Innovation vs Tradition

But some long-time lovers of Provence still yearn for experiences that harken back to a time when cooks like Julia Child, M.F.K. Fisher, James Beard, Richard Olney and, a bit later, Alice Waters, lived and cooked here.

Their delight in the simple, rustic, seasonal traditions and sun-kissed wines they discovered in Provence transformed the way an entire generation prepared and thought about food. They also inspired the first culinary tourism in the region...

“We’ve been coming to Provence for more than 40 years and know the area intimately,” explains an elegant ▶



Top and bottom: Alexandre Mazzia’s Michelin-starred fare at AM in Marseille falls somewhere between art and poetry; every mouthful at AM is a feast for the senses

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gentleman with whom I've struck up a conversation at the Château de Fonscolombe, a stunner of a hotel and wine estate in the countryside 12 miles north of Aix-en-Provence. My ears perk up when he mentions L'Oustau de Baumanière, where I've just spent the night, as a benchmark for the kind of Provence experience he and his wife were nostalgic for.

"From 1972, we made yearly pilgrimages to L'Oustau. But you can't eat food like that anymore. It's like comparing Beethoven to some minimalist 21st-century music. The great Provençal dishes, *agneau en croute*, *pieds et paquets*, they just don't make them anymore." When I protest that I've just dined royally there, and that the restaurant retains two Michelin stars, along with one of the finest wine cellars in France, he relents. "I did hear that Charial's protégé will make the old recipes if you ask in advance."

Chef Jean-André Charial, the owner and chef of L'Oustau de Baumanière, was born in 1945, the year his grandfather, chef Raymond Thuillier, opened the restaurant in an ancient shepherd's house at the foot of Les Baux-de-



"DESPITE ITS ELEVATION TO A LUXURY DESTINATION, PROVENCE IS STILL ABOUT THE SIMPLE PLEASURES: SIPPING A GLASS OF ROSÉ, THE MARKETS..."

Provence, far from the Côte d'Azur, which was the only place at that time where one could find gastronomic fare.

There being no lodging in the tiny medieval village of Les Baux (population 22), perched high on top of a jagged rock-strewn moonscape famous for its extraordinary light and exceptional olive trees, Thuillier founded an inn so people could relax and enjoy themselves in this remote, beautiful region.

By 1954, he had earned three Michelin stars in quick succession (which he kept for 34 years) and the *auberge* grew into one of Provence's first destination hotels and restaurants, visited by such far-flung personages as Pablo Picasso, Queen Elizabeth II, Clark Gable, Jean Cocteau and President Truman.

Charial, who cooked with his grandfather for 25 years, absorbing the recipes before taking the helm himself, is still regarded as an elder statesman of Provençal cooking. Though he brought on the exceptional young Breton chef, Glenn Viel, to cook at both the two-star Oustau and La Cabro d'Or bistro, Charial is still active in the kitchen and the hotel's many activities around food and wine.

"Glenn brings something new to the old recipes we work on together," he insists. For instance: "We still do our *mousse de rouget*, a recipe from my grandfather; the mousse is the same, but the way it appears in front of you is completely different".

Baumanière has also evolved with regard to the experience it offers. Besides everything you'd expect in a luxury property - pool, spa, tennis - guests can rest under



ancient trees and on hidden terraces, stroll acres of gardens, take cooking classes with Jean-André or Glenn in the kitchen gardens (which provide 30 per cent of the restaurants' produce) and participate in the many food and wine events.

Luxury Experience

These days, the Baumanière is far from the only destination hotel in the region, which has seen an explosion in the number of high-end retreats catering to well-heeled guests seeking the full Provençal experience, including food and wine and extending to everything from concerts and food trucks to outdoor cinema, contemporary art and architecture.

I arrive at Château La Coste, an hour north of Aix-en-Provence at the base of the Luberon National Park, just as a private helicopter is lifting off - a clear indication of the type of clientele drawn by the wine estate's ultra-luxurious villas opened in 2017. And it's no wonder.

The sprawling complex boasts five restaurants; chief among them a sleek gastronomic table overseen by Gérard Passadat, one of Provence's most celebrated chefs, and a chic bistro helmed by Argentine chef Francis Mallmann, who applies his native grilling techniques to the local fruits, vegetables and meats. It features a contemporary arts centre with A-list site-specific works by the likes of Louise Bourgeois, Andy Goldsworthy, Richard Serra, Hiroshi Sugimoto and

IMAGES © JENNIFER LAOONNE, TOURISME PACA

Ai Weiwei as well as buildings by Frank Gehry, Jean Nouvelle and Tadao Ando. And the estate produces organic wines, including a stellar rosé. Though the secluded villas are out of reach for most mortals, the château grounds, restaurants, art gallery, concert series and wine events are open to the public.

An hour north, in Gordes, a breathtakingly perched village at the heart of the Luberon, it's plain to see why the Bastide de Gordes, totally refurbished and reopened in 2016, has been designated a palace hotel, France's highest distinction. Though its rustic elegance is about as far from bling as it gets, the hotel's extraordinary setting, with ten levels hanging off a cliffside, and equally impressive service - not to mention the views - make it a standout. With an excellent bistro and a gastronomic restaurant overseen by Paris-based chef Pierre Gagnaire, voted best chef in the world in 2016, the Bastide is vying for a culinary stature equal to or better than the best in Provence.

Despite its elevation to a luxury destination, Provence is still about the simple pleasures: sipping a glass of rosé on a terrace under ancient plane trees, the markets, fields of lavender...

"When you live here and you look around you every day, what makes the difference is the olive trees and the quality of the light, which is very special... and the sky," says chef Charial. "When you live here you can't cook like you would in Paris or in London, of course not!"

Clockwise: Olives as far the eye can see at Aix-en-Provence market; a favourite with jet setters, the Bastide de Gordes hotel boasts two of the finest, most indulgent restaurants in Provence; while fragrant lavender is more commonly found bedecking window sills or freshening up wardrobes, it makes an appearance in many local dishes and pastries too



Chez Tata Simone's delicious locally-sourced dishes in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence hearken back to the hearty home-cooked fare of old Provence

For more places to eat visit www.francetoday.com or tourismepaca.fr

WHERE TO EAT AND DRINK

The best restaurants in the region, from Michelin-starred eateries to top bistros

AM PAR ALEXANDRE MAZZIA

An experience for every sense, AM in Marseille takes haute cuisine to a new level. Both lunch and dinner are an extraordinary voyage through imaginative, meticulously paired flavours and textures of dishes that are gorgeous to behold. Intimate 26-cover dining room. One Michelin star.

www.alexandremazzia.com



Haute cuisine meets terroir at AM in sun-scorched Marseille

hearken back to the hearty home-cooked dishes of old Provence. Well worth a slight jaunt outside the city.

tatasimoneprovence@gmail.com

POLLEN

Young chef Mathieu Desmarest opened this airy bistro in Avignon in summer 2018 and has already received accolades for his sensitive approach to seasonal Provençal products. Beautifully presented dishes both delight and surprise – a dusting of spirulina over a tender fish or tart tomato confit in a luscious lemon tart.

www.pollen-restaurant.fr



Pollen in Avignon has received plaudits for its seasonal bistro fare

LA BASTIDE DE GORDES

One of the most spectacular hotels in Provence, it has it all: exemplary service with every imaginable luxury, magical views over the Luberon mountain range and two eateries, La Citadelle gastronomic restaurant, and the Michelin-starred Pèir, with a menu by Pierre Gagnaire. You don't have to be a guest of the hotel to dine here, but lucky you if you are! labastidedegordes.airellescollection.com

BAUMANIÈRE

This resort hotel in the shadow of beautiful Les Baux-de-Provence is one for the bucket list. It boasts acres of gardens, pools, a Sisley spa, lovely rooms – with either a traditional elegant look or a new, contemporary decor – and, to top it all off, a Michelin two-star restaurant and a charming bistro. There are also tons of experiences around wine and food to enjoy on the premises.

www.baumaniere.com

ALCYONE INTERCONTINENTAL MARSEILLE - HOTÊL DIEU

Chef Lionel Levy uses the best of the local produce in his Mediterranean-inflected cuisine that is among the finest in Marseille. Cook and dine in the hotel potager (kitchen garden) with the chef.

marseille.intercontinental.com

MOLÈNE DE MICKAËL FÉVAL

Make a beeline for this tiny restaurant tucked in a side street in the heart of Aix. Here you will dine on the perfectly cooked catch of the day with vegetables

from the market. Though there is no terrace, a drawback in Aix, you won't miss it when the food arrives.

www.restaurantmolene.com

CHEZ TATA SIMONE

Set in the chef's grandmother's 18th-century house in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, you'd think the restaurant had been here since Tata Simone's time.

Alas, it opened in summer 2018, but the scrumptious, locally-sourced dishes from this laudable kitchen (which makes everything, including bread warm from the oven)

IMAGES © JENNIFER LADONNE, BENJAMIN BECHET-AM, POLLEN

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MARKETS AND FOOD HALLS

The freshest produce – and treats – are only a stall away



Aix-en-Provence's bountiful market stretches along the Place des Prêcheurs

MARSEILLE

Marseille has several markets, but the Marché de Noailles is as vibrant and colourful as the city itself. Winding downhill past a fragrant panoply of butchers, fishmongers, fresh fruits and veggies, it's reminiscent of a North African bazaar. An unusual all-day market, from 8am to 7pm.

VAISON-LA-ROMAINE

Held every Tuesday (8am to 1pm), this is one of the region's most famous markets, where you'll find a mind-boggling array of seasonal delicacies and Provençal specialties.

AIX-EN-PROVENCE

One of Provence's most

picturesque markets, it stretches lazily from the Place des Prêcheurs to the Palais de Justice. The flower market is on the same days at the Hôtel de Ville (city hall). Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays.

ARLES

An absolute must-see, Arles market is held every Sunday along the leafy boulevards des Lices, Georges-Clemenceau and Émile-Combes, with 450 vendors and tons of local products – plus a large organic market in front of the tourist office.

APT

The largest in the Luberon, Apt's Sunday morning market – and Tuesday farmers' market limited to local farmers – winds through the old town's sinuous lanes to the Cours Lauze de Perret. Look for local cheeses and homemade *tapenade*.

CARPENTRAS

Provence's oldest market – and one of its largest, split into two major segments – this lively *marché* inhabits lanes that date back to Roman times and winds past the city's 13th-century synagogue and other landmarks.

SANARY-SUR-MER

Now this is a truly charming market in one of Provence's most picturesque port towns. Stroll between sorbet-hued buildings and the glittering port. The local, flower and fish markets are held every day from 8am to 1pm.

FORCALQUIER

The famous Monday market reflects the creative spirit of the region's many artists and artisans. You'll find all the local products plus essential oils, herbal infusions and countless other irresistible delights.

LES HALLES D'AVIGNON

Do not miss Serge Olives's amazing *tapenade*, *anchoïade* and *crème d'ail* (garlic cream) and Maison Violette's insanely delicious breads and pastries.

www.avignon-et-provence.com



Marseille's fish market is quite the whiffy affair but it's the best around

CHÂTEAU ROMANIN

Made on a stunning setting near Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, complete with ruins of the 13th-century *château* of the Knights Templar, the highly-regarded wines of the Château Romanin date back to 1988, and have been produced using biodynamic methods since 2006. A tour of the extraordinary new wine cave is a must (by appointment).

www.chateauromanin.com

CHÂTEAU REVELETTE

These all-organic wines, made in the shadow of the Mont Sainte-Victoire, near Aix, are famous among aficionados. The reds, whites, and rosés range from delicate, fruity and fresh to complex and powerful. Tastings weekdays from 2pm to 6pm; Saturdays from 10am to 12pm and 2pm to 6pm.

www.revelette.fr

DOMAINE LA DONA TIGANA

Jean Tigana has been making Cassis whites here since 1997. This is your chance to sample the delicate whites and rosés of this small AOC appellation, made by only 12 winemakers in Cassis, and hard to find even around France.

www.domaineladonatigana.com



Distillerie Manguin has been producing eau de vie since 1940

remarkable sites in the Vallée des Baux-de-Provence. And be sure to try the domaine's AOP olive oil.

www.estoublon.com

LE MAS DE LA DAME

Anne Poniatowski and Caroline Missoffe took the reins of their

WINE AND LIQUEURS

Zhuzh up your apéro game with Provence's famous tipples

DISTILLERIE MANGUIN

Among the orchards of Avignon's beautiful Île de la Barthelasse, this small artisanal distillery has been making fine eau de vie from the local fruit since 1940. Discover how this delicious fruit-based spirit is made, from pears – some with the 'prisoner' pear in the bottle – apricots, peaches, raspberries, apples, and even olives with the most rigorously pure methods. Then taste at the boutique and café!

www.manguin.com

CHÂTEAU D'ESTOUBLON

Discover this elegant 18th-century estate and its equally elegant wines, on one of the most



Learn how to cook like a native with chef Jon Chiri at his stand, Cuisine Centr'Halles, in Avignon's Les Halles

TOURS AND TASTINGS

From wine to sweets, your scoffing – and quaffing – spree starts here

PROVENCE POST TRAVEL

Julie Mautner designs "highly personalised" tours in Provence around food and wine, including tastings and classes, as well as such diverse and unique activities as pétanque lessons, private wine tours, horseback riding or helicopter sightseeing.

www.provenceposttravel.com

JON CHIRI

Californian chef Jon Chiri cooks and teaches at his stand Cuisine Centr'Halles in Avignon's colourful Les Halles market and designs luxury cycling tours around food and wine in Provence. He also creates unique culinary events and provides chef-at-home services.

www.jonathanchiri.com

CARRÉ DU PALAIS, AVIGNON

A bistro, wine bar and wine school, the Carré du Palais in Avignon celebrates Rhône Valley wines. Treat yourself to a tasting or short class.

www.carredupalais.fr

EXPERIENCE PROVENCE

Provence native Marlène Boyer

offers private chauffeured excursions and unique insider opportunities with an emphasis on cultural tourism and gastronomy.

www.experience-provence.fr

MOULIN CASTELAS

Head to Les Baux-de-Provence to find out how Moulin Castelas's award-winning olive oils are produced. Then have a taste!

www.castelas.com

ROMAIN GOUVERNET

Romain Gouvernet offers customised wine and food tours

through the Côtes du Rhône and Luberon wine villages. Cruises and helicopter tours can also be arranged.

www.provenceandwine.com

CONFISERIE LÉONARD PARLI

Calissons d'Aix, the elegant marquise-shaped iced confections made from sweet Provence almonds and succulent Cavailon melons, are whipped up here in the traditional way.

www.leonard-parli.com

CONFISERIE LILAMAND

Mosey on over to this 150-year-

old enterprise in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence and sample its succulent traditional *fruits confits*, deliciously preserved in sugar syrup. What will it be? Cherries, apricots, lemons, clementines or strawberries? How about a pumpkin? If these don't float your boat, try the confiserie's *calissons* and jams.

www.confiserie-lilamand.com

NOUGATS SILVAIN

In the charming village of Saint-Didier, this family-run artisan nougat-maker creates delicacies with local honey and almonds from the Comtat Venaissin, in the shadow of Mont Ventoux. Free guided visits are available on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays. Check the website for a schedule of guided tours off-season.

nougats-silvain.fr

ÉPICERIE L'IDÉAL

A chic little gourmet grocer and



Gorge on Lilamand's succulent *fruits confits* in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence

lunch spot in Marseille's colourful Noailles market, which features dishes prepared with fresh, seasonal ingredients and the best produce from around Provence and *la Belle France*.

www.epicerielideal.com

ALINE GÉHANT CHOCOLATIER

Chocolatier par excellence, Aline Géhant's famously creamy ganaches and luscious tablettes are some of the finest in the region. Don't miss her adorable boutique in the heart of Avignon's old town.

aline-gehant-chocolatier.com



Avignon's Carré du Palais showcases the best vintages the region has to offer