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France

Oysters and infinity pools in Languedoc

As well as great food and wine, this unsung region in southern France is gaining a reputation for some seriously chic places to stay, says **Julia Brookes**



I've just slurped the best oysters in France. Don't take my word for it: triple Michelin-starred chefs such as Alain Ducasse, Guy Savoy and Yannick Alléno all rate Tarbouriech oysters as the king of bivalves. Succulent, sweet, meaty, almost crunchy, their flavour is a revelation, a stupendously fresh kick of iodine and ozone.

What gives them the edge is the ingenious — and patented — way that they are cultivated in the Étang de Thau, a vast, nutrient-rich saltwater lagoon in eastern Languedoc; they spend more than two years gently dipping in and out of the lagoon, thanks to a solar-powered system that gives them some muscle by mimicking tidal action.

From next month through to September, they'll be served by the platterful at the waterfront restaurant Le St Barth, all beach-shack chic with its oyster-box lampshades and rowing boat suspended over the bar. With a lip-smacking, sea salt-tanged glass of local Picpoul de Pinet, a stunning view towards the port town of Sète, and the wonderful sight of pink flamingos pottering nearby, I'm hooked. This feels like laid-back luxury at its finest and

most affordable (in Paris, these oysters cost four times as much), and it epitomises the appeal of this relatively undiscovered corner of southern France.

Overshadowed for so long by neighbouring Provence and the Riviera up the coast that it was nicknamed the Cinderella of the South, the equally sun-baked Languedoc is having a moment. This is partly down to the transformation of its wine scene, which no longer produces plonk for hoi polloi but is concentrating on making smaller quantities of quality wines. While it may lack the cachet of Bordeaux and Burgundy, it has attracted innovative winemakers who have bought and replanted vineyards with new varieties — and wines such as Mas de Daumas Gassac and Grange des Pères are easily a match for their illustrious rivals, even though they are humble *vins de pays*.

There are also some fabulously chic places to stay, many of which are restored wine châteaux dating from the late 19th century, the last time the region's wines

Château St Pierre de Serjac



The port town of Sète



enjoyed a boom. Karl O'Hanlon, a Dubliner who left a career in banking to move to the Languedoc with his family in 2006, cut his teeth on the development of boutique properties. He started with Couvent d'Hérépian and Port Rive Gauche in Marseillan, and then in 2011, with his wife Anita, opened Château Les Carrasses, a turreted beauty on a wine estate near the Canal du Midi, which is run in partnership with one of the top Languedoc winemakers, Vignobles Bonfils. It combines the best aspects of a hotel with the advantages of self-catering, offering 28 smart, family-friendly suites, apartments and villas, as well as relaxed, top-notch food, a superb children's club, an infinity pool, tennis courts and wine-tastings. Now Karl has repeated the formula at his latest venture, St Pierre de Serjac, in Puissalicon, north of Béziers. It ticks all the boxes: a sweeping drive through the vineyards leads to the elegant château hotel and winery, with houses dotted about the grounds, all with gardens, some with pools. The views over the countryside, a tapestry of avenues of plane trees and vineyards, are so heart-stoppingly beautiful that Fiat is launching its 124 Spider roadster here next month.

I love my huge château bedroom with its high ceiling, slightly decadent decor, insanely comfortable bed, tiled floor and fashionably grey palette. It's filled with some great objets d'art and an ornate chandelier — it's no surprise to find that Karl is a passionate antiques hunter. There are choice finds everywhere, including Avignon art deco street lamps — which now light parts of the *caveau*, the winery where tastings will start in June (and where production of the first wines will begin in September) — and beautiful old gold mirrors.

The bar, with its parquet floor, velvet armchairs and open fire, is already a winner thanks to a demon cocktail barman. His signature concoction, the potent Serjac, is the essence of a country garden,

made with gin, elderflower liqueur, basil and peppercorns. It's just the place for a sharpener before dinner in the impeccably decorated restaurant, where I enjoy a taste of Les Carrasses' unoaked chardonnay, which makes me wish I'd brought the car and could load up a few cases (at about £7 a bottle, it's a steal). The intimate spa, in an outbuilding next to the infinity pool, is equally hedonistic, offering chilled rosé alongside the tea, and herbal juices and a square of dark chocolate post-treatment.

Touring the estate, it's not hard to predict which of the self-catering houses will prove most popular. I'd go for any of those with infinity pools looking out over the vineyard; No 36, the old gardener's cottage, a secluded Hansel and Gretel-style delight, tucked away down a path next to the vines; or No 23, which has a nifty shower in a turret and a chicken house converted into a loggia. All the houses are generously sized, with high-spec Italian kitchens, wi-fi, flat-screen TVs, sound docks and Nespresso machines.

There will be biking and hiking trails, and parents who fancy a tour of local vineyards — Faugères, La Clape and Minervois are within an hour's drive —

Need to know

Julia Brookes was a guest of St Pierre de Serjac (0345 6866505, serjac.com). Double rooms in the château start at about £175. A seven-night stay during peak summer season in a large three-bedroom house with pool, terrace and garden starts at about £4,300.

How to get there

EasyJet flies to Montpellier (an hour away); Ryanair flies to Béziers (30 minutes away); and British Airways flies to Toulouse (a two-hour drive).



Carcassonne, Languedoc



can sign up their brood for the summer camp-style kids' club in July and August. It's more about den-building than stringing beads, and — how cool is this? — there will also be a mock archaeological dig where children can unearth pieces of Roman pottery, dug up during the château's restoration, and take them home.

There's lots to see locally. Serjac is within an easy drive of Carcassonne and its fairytale castle, the second most popular tourist spot in France after Paris. Near by is Béziers, with its fortified Romanesque cathedral, but I've decided to follow in Karl's footsteps and go antiques hunting in Pézenas. One of the medieval glories of southern France, this little village is full of winding alleys and *hôtels particuliers* (old mansions), with wrought-iron balconies and ornate doorways. Its main street, Avenue de Verdun, is known as La Route des Antiquaires because it is lined with antique and bric-a-brac warehouses.

I find plenty of pretty vintage linen among the rusty motorbikes, old maps, lamps, china and porcelain, but few bargains, and the buzzing Saturday food market turns out to be much more tempting. It's impossible to resist some local roquefort and Pélardon goat's cheese — followed by a bottle of local craft beer, La Gorge Fraîche, and meze in the sunshine outside Le Vintage Bar & Tapas.

There's time for one more treat: Sunday lunch at La Perle Marine, one of the best — and cheapest — of the restaurants lining the Bouzigues waterfront. All of them are packed with locals wolfing down seafood platters and white wine by the *pichet*. This is Languedoc and the living is easy.

Languedoc's other vineyard resorts

Château Les Carrasses

St Pierre de Serjac's big sister is the same blend of château hotel, villa resort and winery, with apartments and villas in old outbuildings, many with private sun terraces and pools, and decorated in light, white tones with stone floors. There's a heated infinity pool, barbecue area, clay tennis courts, *boules* pitch and hammocks. New for this summer is a Saturday morning boot camp, plus

Details Doubles cost from £155 a night (lescarrasses.com)

Château de Raissac

This restored 14th-century château just outside Béziers — surrounded by a working vineyard, bamboo forest and gorgeous gardens — is owned by two artists and is filled with surrealist paintings and a world-class collection of ceramics. There are six bedrooms and a three-room suite; renting the lot would give you space for 16. Cooking, painting and ceramics lessons can be arranged, along with wine-tastings.

Details Doubles cost from £128 (raissac.com)

Château Castigno

Flamboyant and ever-so-slightly surreal, Castigno and its vineyards are owned by a couple of rich-list Belgians who have opened an "exploded" hotel, with rooms dotted about the place and decorated in vivid shades of pink, red and purple. There are also shops and restaurants, including La Table Castigno, which gets rave reviews for its £40 three-course set dinner menu including wine. Activities range from scooter and old 2CV jaunts to helicopter tours and grape-picking in the organic vineyards.

Details Doubles cost from £119 (chateaucastigno.com)

Domaine de Verchant

On the outskirts of Montpellier, Verchant offers slick design and comfort combined with 16th-century chic. There are nine rooms in the château, plus 14 in outbuildings and a villa in the old forge. It has a spa with views of the vineyards (you can sample its wines in the restaurant), as well as a glam bar, restaurant with open kitchen and an infinity pool.

Details Doubles cost from £247 (domaineverchant.com)