

More Small Pleasures of Languedoc

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written by MARY JANE GRANT | photography courtesy of MARY JANE GRANT and J. MILLER



You know there's something special about a place when you find yourself returning again and again. That's the case with me and the Languedoc, a large swath of southern France stretching from the Mediterranean to the Pyrenees. There's something unapologetically authentic about this traditionally French world with its working villages, local markets, long beaches, and incredible landscapes dominated by vineyards.

On my most recent trip to Languedoc, home base was Chateau St. Pierre de Serjac – an authentic 19th century winery and chateau sitting amidst 200 acres of vines and scenic countryside. The property includes a hotel, restaurant, spa and self-catering units that range from two-bedroom flats to three and four-bedroom townhouses, many with private pools.

From the moment we arrived, my friend and I were warmly welcomed into an elegant yet relaxed country club atmosphere. We were shown to our apartment – a two-bedroom flat on the second floor of the converted, original winery. We entered an open concept great room with exposed beams, cathedral ceiling, and contemporary décor in soothing shades of dove grey, pale blue and soft sand. This spacious room contained the living and dining areas as well as a brand new, fully equipped kitchen. Beyond were two large bedrooms, each with a king-sized bed and ensuite bathroom. One bathroom had a walk-in shower and the other had a long, deep bath tub with shower. We exhaled and settled easily into our comfortable surroundings.

A few hours later, we strolled over to the main chateau for dinner. The elegant, original 19th century dining room looked out across a beautiful terrace and an infinity pool to vineyards and mountains. Under the helpful guidance of the sommelier, we opted for a local Domaine Bassac red blend made of Languedoc grenache and syrah grapes, balanced with cabernet franc. The wine delivered deep red berry fruit with a lingering sensation of roasted flavors. It was a perfect complement to our well-crafted meals: one a rare beef entrecote with roasted red pepper coulis, gratin potatoes, tiny artichokes and a homemade 'ketchup' reduction, and the other a slow-braised beef estouffade nestled against a colorful array of baby vegetables. I learned that 'estouffade' is a traditional French stew where the meat is marinated in wine before being browned and slowly cooked in a tightly covered pan. For dessert, we shared the decadently delicious 'autour de la fraise,' a delicate chocolate dome filled with saffron cream and local, fresh strawberries.



The next day, refreshed by an amazing sleep in the superb comfort of the luxurious beds and linens, we were ready to explore. In mere minutes by car, we found ourselves in the village of Magalas – a working, wine-making town evidenced by the 'vignerons' or grape growers we passed as they made their way around the vicinity on their tractors. At the heart of town, we explored the medieval village featuring the remains of ramparts and porches as well as an 11th century church. The old streets of Magalas reflected a beautiful, unselfconscious decay. It felt like a timeless place where life today blends seamlessly with life through the ages.

On returning to Chateau St. Pierre de Serjac, we headed for the 30m outdoor infinity pool. Wide chaise lounges beckoned, making an afternoon nap in the afternoon Languedoc sun utterly irresistible. After, we walked the property to discover both tennis courts and boules courts, as well as bikes and trails for cycling and walking. We ended the afternoon with a visit to the Cinq Mondes Spa, where we entered into an even deeper state of relaxation enjoying the steam room, sauna, pool and hot tub inside an open pavilion overlooking the vineyards.

Next day's outing went a little further afield, to the beach town of Bouzigues, a mecca for lovers of fresh seafood. In essence, Languedoc offers two coastlines – one on the Mediterranean itself and another further inland along the shores of the area's many inland salt water lagoons also known as 'etangs.' A center for oyster and mussel production as far back as the Greeks, Bouzigues offers a wide range of cafes, bars and restaurants along its beachfront on the famous Etang de Thau. I prefer the casual spots and we found a table at 'Chez Francine.' Under the shade of a large awning, we scarfed raw oysters with lemon and hunks of crusty fresh bread, washing it all down with local Picpoul de Pinet wine. Sitting back satisfied and relaxed, we looked out over the oyster beds where our lunch had originated earlier that same day. Not a place in the world could match this experience for fresh, local fare in an authentic setting!

Later, I took a stroll around the Chateau St. Pierre de Serjac property with my host Kerry. She brought me to a delightful little cottage in a secluded, wooded corner.

"It's a perfect choice for romantic getaways," said Kerry. This two-bedroom 'Gardener's Cottage' has a ground floor living and kitchen area with a separate TV lounge overlooking the private garden, pool and Jacuzzi.

On the way back we looked into several of the elegant houses and villas, ranging in size from two-bedroom to four-bedroom and each having a distinctive layout. All the houses and villas are virtually new, with high-end furnishings and fixtures. Most have private gardens and pools and exceptional views of the surrounding vineyards.

“Couples, families, friends and even business groups come from all over the world to stay here,” Kerry said. “There really is something for everyone.”

The main chateau building has eight hotel rooms. On the top floor, in a unique room called ‘La Chappelle,’ the hand painted wallpapers and friezes of the original Art Nouveau chapel have been fully restored. This whimsically beautiful room is furnished with a king-sized bed and features a large bateaux bath as well as a separate shower room.

Our tour ended in the space that is being renovated as the new state-of-the-art winery. From long established and newly cultivated vineyards, the in-house winery will bottle its first vintage in 2016. Meanwhile the gorgeous vat room, barrel store and tasting room are being readied and used as event spaces.

On our final evening at Chateau St. Pierre de Serjac, my friend and I sat on the terrace and sipped on outstanding cocktails concocted with exceptional enthusiasm by the creative bartender. Of special note was the signature house drink, the “Serjac.” Made with Hendrick’s Gin, St. Germain elderflower liqueur, amaretto, basil, lime, pink peppercorns and juniper berries, the Serjac balanced bright citrus flavours with a lingering, warm glow.

For my friend, who asked for ‘anything but vermouth,’ the bartender whipped up a vodka martini made of Bison Grass Vodka, elderflower liqueur, Lillet Blanc (which is a distinctive fortified wine not quite considered a traditional vermouth) and freshly-pressed cucumber juice. The result was astoundingly fresh and aromatic.

As the sun set on our visit to this exquisite property, I found myself reflecting on the trip. I could literally feel the memories. From the sweet-salty taste of fresh oysters to the fruit-forward bouquet of local wines, from the cool-crisp quality of the French bed linens to the glorious views from every vantage point, the trip had been a veritable feast for the senses. It’s no wonder I heard myself say, “So, when we come back...”



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