

TRAVEL

# How A Re-Imagined Château Is Championing The Heritage Of The Languedoc

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**f** From **Château Capitoul**'s windows, the vineyards stretch out tidily as far as the eye can see. It's autumn and the grape harvest is in full flow; the low-buzz of the tractors in the distance is like **t** white-noise and is pleasing to the ear. Above, in the cobalt sky, swifts and storks, kites and kestrels have already begun to make their way south to Africa's savannah lands, stopping off at Roc de Conilhac – just out of sight from the Château, and past the Bages Lagoon – a pitstop for most birds flying south from Europe. **i**



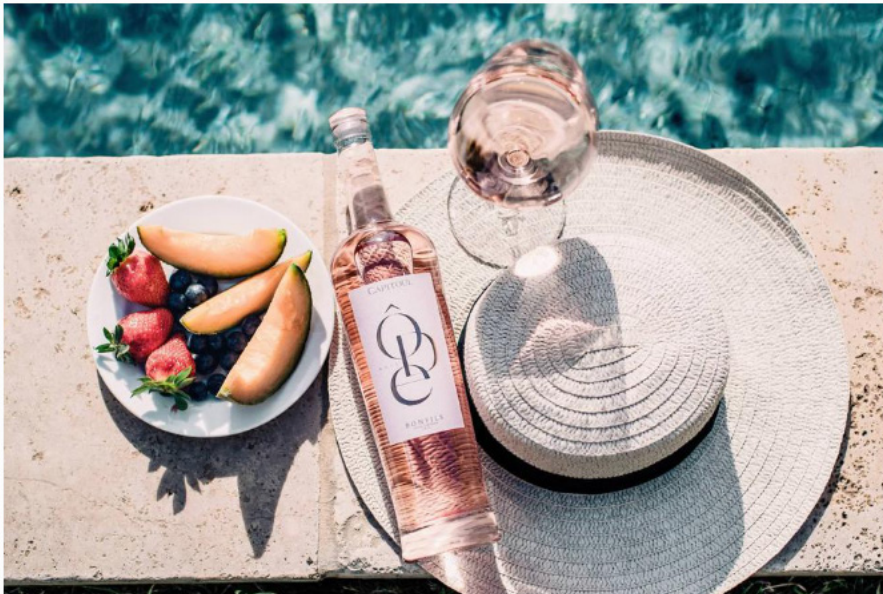
The Chateau peeking out of its idyllic setting. (CREDIT: CHATEAU CAPITOL)

Here, in the Languedoc region of southern France, close to the Roman town of Narbonne, winter is yet to descend and it is still sunny enough to enjoy a crisp rosé on the terrace. The rosé will, no doubt, come from the **Bonfils** label, made on the 240-acre estate that Château Capitoul is found in. You might have had a wine tasting already – if not, it's a must. You'll not only get to taste the fine wines, made from Syrah, Roussanne and Viognier grapes, among others, but you'll also discover the rich heritage of winemaking that is sewn into the soil.



The vineyards are at the heart of Château Capitoul. (CREDIT: SOUFIANE ZAIDI)

It is said that wine has been made here since the Roman times, with the surrounding area of La Clape the first region in the Languedoc to be granted coveted Grand Cru status. A centuries-old wine estate, Capitoul is iconic in the region and, since its reimagination to turn it into a hotel with a spa and villas in the grounds, it has also partnered with **Vignobles Bonfils**, one of France's most respected independent wine companies.



The Ôde Rosé from Vignobles Bonfils, made on the estate. (CREDIT: SOUFIANE ZAIDI)

Now part of the **Domaine & Demeure** hospitality brand, which was founded in 2008 by **Karl O'Hanlon** and **Anita Forte**, the Château falls in-line with the group's vision on authentic and sustainable tourism.

**Château les Carrasses** was the first project by the dynamic duo. It opened in 2011 in Béziers and has been widely recognised as the benchmark for sustainable development in the region. This was endorsed in 2012 when Domaine & Demeure announced an investment from Vignobles Bonfils, one of France’s most innovative, independent wine companies.

**Château St Pierre de Serjac** was next, opening in March 2016, and retaining the same formula of informal, laid-back luxury.



Preserving the local environment is key. (CREDIT: CHATEAU CAPITOL)

“We are merely temporary custodians of these amazing places,” Karl says about the historic enclaves he has revived. After a sensitive renovation to preserve its natural surroundings, and aristocratic heritage, **Château Capitoul** is the third property to ‘re-immerge’ butterfly-like, with “every aspect of the renewal carefully considered to preserve and enhance the natural environment and rich architectural and social heritage,” says Karl. “We are also intent on breathing new life into the estate.”





One of the elegant, revamped suites in the Château. (CREDIT: PATRICK BRUNET)

You can feel this sentiment firstly in the restored Château itself, which dates back to 1896. An elegant curvy staircase runs up its centre, leading you to eight suites. Art Nouveau chandeliers, stand-alone bateau baths and reclaimed mirrors take you back to its roots, while sumptuous velvet pouffes, sofas and padded stools come in shades of inky-blue, sea-green and dove-grey. Blue-veined marble bathrooms give the wow-factor and are stocked with thick towels and Cinq Mondes products. Botanical prints, framed pressed leaves and black-and-white photography of flowers give poetic nods to the nature outside.



One of the villas, available to buy or rent. (CREDIT: PATRICK BRUNET)

For longer stays, or holidays 'en famille', there are 44 villas within the grounds, which are privately-owned but let to holidaymakers. These have all been designed with the same French-chic aesthetic to give a nod to typical fisherman's huts. Terracotta roof tiles, traditional wooden shutters and oak beams are mixed with antique finds (both Karl and Anita have sourced many items themselves from rural antique markets and fairs). The villas are also made cosy with elegant new pieces of furniture and accessories (think: hand-crafted ceramics, woven throws and linen-covered furniture). In fact, Karl and Anita were asked so often about where they had found various items, that they have now launched an online furniture and antiques store, **Domaine Life**, for guests to replicate the look at home.



The scented, dry gardens have been designed to be hardy and to have minimal effect on the ...  
[+] (CREDIT: PATRICK BRUNET)



With a strong commitment to the environment and to lessen the footprint of the estate, when it came to the landscaping the couple enlisted the talents of garden designer and four times Chelsea Flower Show Gold Medal Winner **James Basson**, who worked with renowned botanist **Olivier Filippi**. The result is a wild-feeling, free-flowing ‘dry’ garden, created with a rich palette of Mediterranean plants which are capable of prospering without fertilisers or herbicides and, critically, without drawing on the precious resource of water. Resident Holm Oaks and Aleppo Pines have been under-planted with naturalistic Judas Trees, soft grasses, euphorbia, lavender and rosemary. The feel is part Arizona desert and part Mediterranean herb garden.



In Mediterraneo, you can expect a twist on haute cuisine. (CREDIT: PATRICK BRUNET)

In a region multi-layered with wine and food heritage, dining here is, as you’d expect, impressive. Méditerranéo is led by chef **Valère Diochet**, who, with his exacting, modern take on haute cuisine, could be soon in line for a Michelin Star. The restaurant is carved out of the Château’s original dining room and the finely-executed dishes arrive to surprise and delight – from the inventive amuse bouche (a green olive on a spoon is in fact a chick pea and cumin mousse described as a ‘trompe l’oeil’ ) to the decadent dessert of candied kumquats with Piedmont hazelnuts and chocolate and salted caramel ice cream.



Asado offers a more-relaxed, bistro-style experience. (CREDIT: PATRICK BRUNET)

Asado, meanwhile, is overseen by new chef **Yann Tedone**. The Spanish-influenced, bistro-type restaurant sees local fish and regionally-sourced meats cooked over huge wood-fired grills in an open-kitchen. From mussels or charcuterie to start to veal flank steak or herb-encrusted entrecote as your main – dishes come to share and dip into ‘for the table’. A series of home-made sauces – such as the Catalane romesco and confit garlic aioli – lift each dish to new heights, while flame-grilled baguettes arrive warm and crusty, perfect to dip into the Fabi olive oil and Gruissan sea salt.



Dive into the Med at Château Capitoul. (CREDIT: PATRICK BRUNET)



You can spend your days here, taking dips in the outdoor infinity pool, which is scenically surrounded by olive trees, or playing tennis and boules. The petite spa offers relaxing treatments by Cinq Mondes, ideal if you've overdone it on the courts.

But there's so much to discover on your doorstep that it's a must to get out and explore. To roam around the cliffs of La Clape, to cycle around the lagoon and L'Ile Saint-Martin, you can hire an e-bike, with the hotel organising a guide and a picnic so you can make a day of it.



Narbonne's history reaches back to the Roman times. (CREDIT: AVC)



Narbonne is also worth a visit. The old Roman town is sliced prettily in two by the Canal de la Robine, and still has preserved remnants of the original Roman road with its huge cobbles. Check out the new **Narbo Via Museum** ([narbovia.fr](http://narbovia.fr)) which delves more into the town's Roman past. Foodies will be in heaven with a trip to the covered Belle-Époque-era food market – where you can shop for endless epicurean delights or have lunch at one of the numerous stalls serving everything from regional cheeses to hand-made madeleines; artisan bread to girolles.



The incredible pink salt lake at Gruissan. (CREDIT: AVC)

Best of all you can cycle to the fishing village of Gruissan, famous for its salt flats and overlooked by an ancient tower which dates back to the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Head to the rustic restaurant, **La Cambuse du Saunier**, which has views over a pink-hued lake where the famous Gruissan salt is harvested. Head to a bare-scrubbed table and tuck into just-caught gambas, oysters and clams, which arrive still sizzling in their pans. As the light changes, you'll notice the water morphing from the faintest blush to an incredible fuchsia. It's a painterly vision, much like Château Capitol itself.

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