

Drink in the views

Château Capitoul is a stunning hotel and spa with 44 luxury self-catering villas in a vineyard, writes **Marie-Claire Digby**

There is something very dreamy about waking up in a beautifully appointed bedroom in a fairytale castle, complete with turret, and pulling open the heavy drapes at the window to discover that you're smack in the middle of a vineyard. The low drone breaking the early morning silence is a little blue tractor, hard at work in the vines that stretch as far as the eye can see.

A late-night arrival had withheld the true majesty of the landscape surrounding Château Capitoul, a hotel and spa with 44 luxury self-catering villas, on a 240-acre vineyard and winery near Narbonne in the Languedoc. But with the gentle autumn sun warming the vines, recently relieved of their fruit, and the Pyrenees, misty blue in the morning light, just visible on the horizon, this was a wake-up call for the senses.

Set in the natural park of the Massif de la Clape, Château Capitoul is a joint venture between Irish couple Karl O'Hanlon and Anita Forte's property development company *Domaine & Demeure*, and family-owned wine business *Vignobles Bonfils*. It is the third property in the locality renovated by O'Hanlon and Forte, who moved to France from Dublin with their three children in 2006, following their redevelopment of Château Les Carrasses in 2011 and Château St Pierre de Serjac in 2016.

The blueprint is the same for all three resorts: a small number of luxurious bedrooms in the main chateau, set in a working vineyard, with high-end new build self-catering villas discreetly dotted around the grounds. The villas are privately owned by investors, mainly from Britain and the US, and managed by the hotel operators. Originally scheduled to open in 2020, the launch of Château Capitoul was delayed until last summer by the pandemic.



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Now fully operational, the estate offers eight glorious bedrooms, a Cinq Mondes spa with swimming pool and steam room, and restaurant Méditerranéo, in the postcard pretty neo-Gothic main chateau. Across the courtyard, the original winery has been transformed into a reception area, events space and a more casual brasserie restaurant, Asado, with wood-fired grills and expansive terraces overlooking the vines and the Bages lagoon beyond.

Méditerranéo is set in the chateau's original dining room, a calm, bright space with six bay windows from which to drink in the views. Here, chef Valère Diochet offers a modern Mediterranean menu of five courses

of locally sourced ingredients for €70, or seven courses for €90. Wine pairings incorporate and also travel far beyond the Bonfils portfolio, with interesting Greek, Croatian and Spanish offerings included the night I dined.

Wine tourism is a significant part of the estate's draw. In the lavishly appointed tasting room, you can sip your way through the Bonfils portfolio. But I recommend you get out into the vines, where you can join a tutored walk before returning to the tasting room with a deeper understanding of what you are drinking. Take a detour to the new winery, too, where you'll be welcome to observe, and can even join in the harvest, if so

inclined. Happily the grapes were all gathered in by the time of my visit.

An aperitif, perhaps a glass of pale rosé, on the expansive terrace at Asado, is the perfect way to toast the golden hour, when the hotel guests, villa holidaymakers and locals in from Narbonne for a look at the renovations, gather to watch the sun set over the vineyard.

Dinner (or lunch) might start with oysters, mussels, charcuterie, or a salad of Mediterranean vegetables from the kitchen garden. And with the distinctive aromas of meat and fish being grilled over olive wood trimmings drifting out from the kitchen, it's hard to resist an entrecôte seasoned with thyme and rosemary, or a whole turbot to share.

If you're staying in one of the self-catering villas, you can take "self" out of the equation by ordering dinner from Asado delivered to your door. But with top-of-the-range kitchens in situ, and planchas for outdoor grilling, you might be more tempted to fill your holiday home's fridge with local market purchases and cook up a feast. If you'd rather not leave your personal plunge pool, or the enormous communal infinity pool, the hotel can have barbecue packs delivered to your villa.

There are two-, three- and four-bedroom villas dotted about the estate, built into the hillside and inspired by local architecture. All have outdoor gardens and some have their own pool.

Anita Forte, having restored the gardens at Les Carrasses and St Pierre de Serjac, enlisted James Basson, four times Chelsea Flower Show gold medal winner, and botanist Olivier Filippi, to design and landscape the gardens, using plants that can survive in the dry, rocky landscape in a sustainable manner.

The property owners had the option of choosing their preferred fitout from a selection of classic looks in neutral tone palettes, and the villas are furnished to a luxurious standard, with just enough individuality to keep them on the right side of bland.

The furniture and fittings, both in the villas and the bedrooms in the château, have proved to be so popular with guests that O'Hanlon and Forte set up an online shopping site, domainelife.ie, where you can purchase the bed you enjoyed such a great night's sleep in, or the outdoor dining table where you ate that memorable lunch in the sunshine, and have it delivered.

I haven't succumbed to buying my own little piece of Château Capitoul, but I have discovered a way of transporting myself right back to that sunny terrace. Dunnes Stores stock some of the Bonfils wines, and



HOW TO GET THERE

Château Capitoul is within a 90-minute drive from six airports (Béziers, Perpignan, Carcassonne, Montpellier, Toulouse and Girona).

HOW MUCH DOES IT COST?

Double rooms in the château this summer are from €220 a night, including breakfast. A two-bedroom self-catering villa costs from €600 a night in high season.

WHAT ELSE CAN I DO THERE?

The city of Narbonne, with its promenades along the Canal de la Robine, is just 10km away. The coastal village of Gruissan, with its salt pans and seafood restaurants, is a short cycle (bikes are available) or walk from the château.

for the princely sum of €10, I can pour a glass of their la Bastide Neuve rosé, close my eyes and imagine I can smell the wild thyme in the air, and the feel the gentle sun on my face.

Marie-Claire Digby was a guest of Château Capitoul, chateaucapitoul.com.

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