



Joie de Vivre

Ange Seddon swapped a Cheshire heatwave for the sun drenched South of France

My first trip abroad was with my family, ages 15, to the South of France. We travelled by coach to the Languedoc staying near the town of Béziers. We lived on baguettes, cheese and Orangina; it was blissful. Many, many years later I got the chance to re-visit this unsung hero of a region to stay at two châteaux set within working wine estates. I tripped over my own feet running to get my passport. With a hop, skip and an EasyJet jump, I landed in the sunshine of Montpellier.

Languedoc

Reaching from the Côte d'Azur all the way to the Spanish border, this beautiful region hugs the Mediterranean, filled with glorious beaches, endless vineyards, and traditional fishing villages. The landscape is punctuated by the odd medieval castle and gorgeous market towns. I was excited to try local cuisine with local wines - always a wonderful way to learn about any part of the world, in my book.

In 2008 Domaine & Demure was founded by Karl O'Hanlon, who set about the restoration of these 'sleeping giants', their wine estates and historic buildings, creating exceptional properties with working vineyards, luxury boutique hotels, and holiday villas within the grounds. These places had been abandoned for years, but with incredible vision, these properties are now stunning destinations. All the while being respectful of their locality, becoming an integral

part of the community not only as an employer but as a guardian of the legacy these places hold. Locals and visitors are welcome along with guests, and having that mix of visitors is key. With huge investment in the winery and redesign of the vineyards, the Bonfils family oversaw the rebirth of a profitable, working estate.

Château St Pierre de Serjac

I arrived at the estate through a road lined with cypress trees, instantly making this place feel special, which was only further enhanced when I turned the corner and was greeted by the sight of Château St Pierre de Serjac. I felt like I was on a film set.

We had a tour of the grounds, and it was clear they had thought of everything here; a pool, a spa, tennis and padel courts, a mini farm (with the cutest animals), a vegetable garden, as well as surrounding vineyards where you can follow paths for cycling, running, or just a meander. Also tucked into the impeccable grounds are villas of varying sizes, many with private pools.

Even though it had not been →





→ an arduous journey, we had reached the time where a cocktail on the terrace was calling. After a quick refresh in my luxurious room (a far cry from a cramped tent in Bezier, that's for sure) we sat on the terrace and perused the cocktail and wine list filled with many local wines.

But first, I chose a cocktail made with local wine; a French 75 which had gin, lemon juice and Crémant de Limoux (Languedoc's traditional method sparkling wine that predates Champagne itself). Compliments were made in abundance to our mixologist Percy, especially as I made everyone try it. It was such a hit we placed an order for us all to have one the following night.

For the evening meal I was treated to many delights. Foie gras on brioche toast with blackcurrant cream, herb crusted rack of lamb with chateau grown vegetable tatin and lemon tart with a gorgeous puckering yuzu gel. Flavours that will remain long in the memory, especially as each course was paired with a great local wine which increased the enjoyment. I love it when a chef is confident enough with their produce and wine list to pull this off so well.

After what was a refreshing night's sleep in the most comfortable bed, waking to the sound of birdsong, I enjoyed a sumptuous breakfast before heading out to the nearby market town of Pézenas. The French have a word to describe the act of strolling aimlessly, wandering curiously through a place, purely to experience the sights, sounds and atmosphere without being rushed. That word is *flâner*. This perfectly encapsulates the experience of the French market in Pézenas. It is a place you don't want to miss if you visit here. Especially for the fresh oysters, perfectly packed on ice to be enjoyed at your leisure with a glass of wine in the sunshine.

Back at the chateau we had a fascinating wine walk through some of the vineyards, followed by a tasting of three of their wines. Each one was quite different, yet in every glass was the

story of the land and the talent of the winemaker. They all were fitting examples of what the Languedoc can offer.

Next, I took advantage of the on-site spa and had a rejuvenating facial. I was so relaxed I nearly fell asleep at several points. To wake myself up a little I took a dip in the chateau's infinity pool. Swimming with views of the vineyards, what's not to love?

That evening, we ordered our French 75s from Percy and sat on the terrace to enjoy our cocktails as the sun went down.

Another culinary adventure filled with ambrosial delights appeared (no, not the rice pudding!). My main course of roasted cod loin with a spianata crust, sweet potato purée, lemon beurre blanc with braised lettuce was an absolute triumph of taste. I opted for a selection of local cheeses for my dessert and sat back replete and happy.

Château Capitoul

The next day I travelled to Château Capitoul, a sister property near Narbonne. It was an exceptional place, exuding a gentle, elegant luxury. Again, there has been no compromise as the facilities are excellent. There were two restaurants on site, open to locals as well as residents as well as a spa, pool, tennis and boules courts, a kids club, wine cellar and shop, all surrounded by vineyards. A selection of luxury villas, each in beautiful, landscaped grounds using drought proof planting. In both estates you can easily tailor your holiday to exactly what you want. Privacy of an excellently equipped villa with the option to use all the facilities and restaurants as and when you want. Or to be pampered staying in the chateau itself.

In the afternoon we visited the beautiful Fontfroide Abbey, a former Cistercian monastery just the other side of Narbonne from the chateau. It has great architectural interest, breathtaking stained glass, and a fascinating history. It had a small working farm, a bookstore and an excellent restaurant. The weather was beautiful and we enjoyed a



gorgeous three course lunch filled with beautiful fresh vegetables, fish and fruit; you could almost taste the sunshine. We enjoyed a rosé from the abbey, which complimented each course so well (never underestimate a good rosé), then it was back to the chateau to make the most of the sunshine. The eye shaped pool was so inviting; I could not resist another swim.

My room was beautiful, a freestanding bath with a view and a fabulous bathroom with huge marble tiles reminding me of a rock pool all shimmering blues and browns.

The evening started with drinks on the terrace - I am sensing a theme here, and it is a theme I like! I was looking forward to this evening's meal in the restaurant Asado, named after the wood-fired grills and ovens it uses where 'fire, flame and atmosphere come together in effortless harmony'. I was here to see if the hype was true. The answer was a resounding yes! The room itself felt very grand with its lofty ceilings and vast windows, but once seated it felt less daunting and more comforting. The philosophy of the head chef Vito Alessi is of sustainability, seasonality, and locality. Not just buzzwords, but genuine practice. The menu has a lovely map on the back pinpointing where the produce is from, local suppliers that the restaurant loves to champion as well as their own kitchen gardens and foraged ingredients from the estate.

Their aged meats, fish caught in the Mediterranean, along with the vegetables are expertly cooked over charcoal and vine wood. Once again, bringing the character of the land to the plate. With unlimited sauces and vegetables this really was a feast. Despite this sounding carnivorous, the vegetarian and vegan in our party were very well looked after. Once again local wines featured prominently. There's truth in the saying, "What grows together, goes together" and, in my opinion, these wines are criminally underrated. We ate like kings with good company, while watching the sun go down.

Concluding Thoughts

I came to check out this unspoilt region in the South of France, but I got so much more than I was expecting. The wines of the Languedoc are often blends of several grapes, each bringing a different characteristic to the finished wine. In the hands of a skilful winemaker, true beauty can be found.

These two chateau have, in the skilful hands of an incredible team, combined many aspects to create an exquisite holiday destination. All under the umbrella of outstanding, yet understated luxury.

And thrown in for free are those amazing sunsets that I may have mentioned once or twice. True 'joie de vivre.'

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