



Gastronomic Provence

La cuisine du soleil, history and art in the South of France

31 March–7 April 2022 (M1 293)

8 days • £3,720

Lecturer: Marc Millon

Sample the most abundant, colourful and delicious larder in France.

The dining experience ranges from street food to the 2-Michelin-starred 'Flaveur' in Nice.

The wines are equally compelling, among them the simple Provençal *rosé* and prestigious Châteauneuf-du-Pape.

Journey from the Mediterranean coast to the Rhône valley; stay in Nice and Avignon.

Marc Millon, author of *The Food Lover's Companion to France*, leads the tour; art historian Mary Lynn Riley joins for a day, as does medievalist Dr Alexandra Gajewski.

Provence is the France of our imagination, where the sun always shines, the food tastes more vivid than anywhere else, and the wine is rich and plentiful. It is the landscape of a painting by Paul Cézanne or the words of a novel by Marcel Pagnol; it is that languid dreamy place where *pastis* is drunk in the shade of plane trees, where cypresses bend with the force of the *mistral*, and where the sun, that huge, throbbing yellow orb that Vincent van Gogh painted so intensely, shines some three hundred days of the year from a deep azure sky.

From the rugged uplands of Les Alpilles to the glistening sea of the Côte d'Azur; from the windswept Camargue to the stony wine hills of Châteauneuf-du-Pape; and from Nice to Avignon – our two bases for this tour – Provence is a region of great contrasts, artistically, historically and gastronomically. What unites it above all is a sense of warmth, generosity and abundance.

The gastronomy of Provence is truly cuisine of the sun. Stroll through markets in Nice, Aigues-Mortes or Avignon, and you are assaulted with colourful visions and scents: glossy, plump aubergines, piles of fine *haricots verts*, and at least a dozen types of lettuce laid out in the morning light.

Such seasonal abundance has traditionally required preserving methods for leaner times. Fish may be salted, pork transformed into *charcuterie*, milk from the goats that graze on the soft-leaved scrubland made into discs of cheese, sometimes covered in *finest herbes de Provence*. And the seasonal glut of fruits for which Provence is so famous is still, in a few



Avignon, cathedral, lithograph c. 1850.

traditional places only, transformed by slow poaching in sugar syrup into *fruits confits* that are virtually works of art in themselves.

Both land and sea yield so many good things and this is reflected in a generous cuisine that is rarely over-complicated. Fishing villages along the fabled Côte d'Azur are the source of an extraordinary Mediterranean catch, while typical inland dishes reflect the harsher terrain of Provence, where meat is scarce and everything must be utilised. *La gardiane* is a rich stew made from the meat of bulls raised on the Camargue and the *petits farcis* of Nice stretch out fresh vegetables with delicious morsels of ground meat.

A discovery of the wines of Provence is an equally important part of our pursuit. The pretty, pale *rosés* are a delightful theme, but there are also less frequently encountered vintages to slake the thirst; Cassis, a forceful white from vineyards above the eponymous fishing village, is the perfect accompaniment to the equally full-flavoured *bouillabaisse*. We dip into the Rhône's southern flanks at Châteauneuf-du-Pape, as well as for the lighter *vins de sable* produced from pre-phylloxera grapes planted in the sandy dunes of the Camargue.

For the Romans, this corner of France, the province of *Gallia Narbonensis*, was one of the most important and strategic in the Empire. The Aurelian Way leading from Rome to Arles left notable Roman remains including the ancient Glanum at St-Rémy and the triumphal theatre at Orange. However, perhaps the

greatest Roman legacy is found not in bricks and mortar, but in the values of Roman civilisation, which remained after the fall of the Empire and had a profound effect on present-day Provençal attitudes to food, wine, and easy good living.

Itinerary

Day 1: Nice. Fly at c.11.30am from London Heathrow to Nice (British Airways). An afternoon walk to a ruined citadel strategically positioned at the highest point of Old Nice with spectacular views of the city. An introductory lecture precedes dinner near the hotel. First of three nights in Nice.

Day 2: Nice. A guided food walk through Nice is an opportunity to sample local delicacies such as *socca*, chickpea batter baked in a ferociously hot oven, and *pissaladière*, a sort of Provençal pizza. In the urban appellation of Bellet, in the steep wine hills above the city, taste a rare wine produced in the tiniest quantities. Dinner is at two Michelin-starred Flaveur. The chefs, brothers Mickaël and Gaël Tourteaux, who earned their second star in 2018, create characterful, delicate dishes. Second of three nights in Nice.

Day 3: St-Paul-de-Vence. Mary Lynn Riley, MRT lecturer, resident of the Côte d'Azur and specialist in modern art joins the tour today. Drive first to the Maeght Foundation, renowned for its collections

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(Picasso, Hepworth, Miró, Arp, Giacometti, but not all works are shown at once) and for its architecture and setting. Lunch is at La Colombe d'Or in St-Paul-de-Vence, long famous for the artistic crowd that it attracts as well as its fresh regional cuisine. In the afternoon visit the Chapelle du Rosaire, a Dominican chapel designed by Matisse. Final night in Nice.

Day 4: Cassis, Avignon. An early departure from Nice for the pretty port of Cassis. Accessible only by boat, visit the hidden bays of the *calanques* that are home to the bony rock fish traditionally thrown into the fisherman's pot. Afterwards, overlooking the water, feast on that amazing festival of the sea, *la bouillabaisse*. An evening wine tasting at the hotel in Avignon (situated in a former 16th-century residence) celebrates the wines of the Rhône, a mighty river of wine since the times of the Greeks and Romans. First of four nights in Avignon.

Day 5: Avignon, Orange, Châteauneuf-du-Pape. A morning guided tour of Palais des Papes, principal monument of the Avignon papacy, one-time site of the papal curia and the most significant 14th-century building to survive in southern France. Drive to Orange, site of the greatest of all Roman theatres to survive in the West, before continuing to Châteauneuf-du-Pape for a tour and tasting at a respected family-run vineyard. Return to Avignon for dinner.

Day 6: Les Baux, St-Rémy-de-Provence. In the morning drive to an olive oil producer in the heart of the Alpilles. The mill, dating to the 12th century, has been run by the same family for ten generations. Continue to a wine-tasting at a vineyard immortalised by Van Gogh in 1889. We are joined for the afternoon by MRT lecturer, Dr Alexandra Gajewski, specialist in medieval architecture, for a visit to St-Rémy, Glanum of old, and proud possessor of one of the truly great funerary memorials of the Roman world. Return to Avignon for dinner at Restaurant Sevin (formerly Christian Étienne). Chef Guilhem Sevin, who worked with Étienne for nearly two decades before taking over the restaurant in 2016, creates modern menus in a striking historical setting in the shadow of the Palais des Papes.

Day 7: Aigues-Mortes, Avignon. Drive through the Camargue, a windswept landscape home to wild horses, and where salt has been harvested from the flats for thousands of years. Lunch is within the mediaeval city walls of Aigues-

Mortes. Return to Avignon for some free time before a final dinner at one-Michelin-starred La Vieille Fontaine within the hotel. Chef Pascal Auger creates refined, beautiful dishes paying particular attention to seasonality.

Day 8: Avignon. An early departure from Avignon for Marseille airport. Fly to London Heathrow arriving c. 12.00 noon.

Lecturer

Marc Millon. Wine, food and travel writer. Born in Mexico, he was raised in the USA before studying English Literature at the University of Exeter. Together with his wife, he has pioneered a series of illustrated wine-food-travel books including *The Wine and Food of Europe*, *The Wine Roads of France* and *The Food Lover's Companion to France*. He also has his own wine company, importing Italian wines from small family estates.

Practicalities

Price, per person. Two sharing, superior garden view room in Nice: £3,720 or £3,580 without flights. **Two sharing, superior sea view room in Nice:** £3,795 or £3,655 without flights. **Single occupancy, classic room in Nice:** £4,170 or £4,030 without flights. **Single occupancy, superior sea view room in Nice:** £4,320 or £4,180 without flights.

Included: flights (Euro Traveller) with British Airways (Airbus 319 & 320); travel by private coach for airport transfers and excursions; boat travel as indicated in the itinerary; hotel accommodation; breakfasts, 5 lunches (including 1 picnic) and 4 dinners with wine, water and coffee; all wine and food tastings; all admissions; all tips; all taxes; the services of the lecturer and tour manager.

Accommodation. Hotel La Pérouse, Nice (hotel-la-perouse.com): 4-star hotel partially built into the cliff and overlooking the Promenade des Anglais. Rooms are furnished in modern Provençal style. **Hôtel d'Europe, Avignon** (heurope.com): central 5-star hotel in a former 16th-century residence close to the river Rhône with a pleasant courtyard. Rooms are classic rooms both for two sharing and for single occupancy.

How strenuous? There is a lot of walking and standing on this tour (some of it over uneven ground), and it would not be suitable

for anyone who has difficulties with everyday walking or stair-climbing. One day involves a lot of driving. Average distance by coach per day: 57 miles.

Group size: between 10 and 22 participants.

Combine this tour with: *Classical Turkey*, 21–30 March 2022 or *The Art of Florence*, 21–27 March 2022.