

Southern Rhône

WHERE TO STAY, SHOP, EAT AND RELAX
Roman ruins, artisanal food, charming B&Bs and gourmet restaurants

HOTELS & RESTAURANTS

Auberge du Vin

Above: the seasonal truffle menus are famous at Restaurant Christian Etienne in Avignon

seventh generation at the Moure du Tendre estate. There are two guest rooms, each with a private terrace. www.closdesgrenadiers.fr

Restaurant Christian Etienne

Gang in the centre of Avignon by the Palais des Papes, Christian Etienne's culinary skill makes this a memorable place, famous for seasonal truffle and tomato menus. www.christian-etienne.fr

Le Grand Pré

Roaix may seem an unlikely spot for a Michelin-starred restaurant, but Raoul Reichardt cooks innovative food and his wife Flora is a wizard with wine. There's also a new bistro beside the main restaurant. www.legrandpre.com

Hotel Crillon Le Brave

A cluster of houses in a hilltop village near Mont Ventoux, Crillon is luxurious yet unpretentious, with unique views. Smart décor, excellent food and an inspiring wine list. www.crillonlebrave.com

Les Florets

After walking in the Dentelles, collapse afterwards into Les Florets, the Bernard family's attractive hotel-restaurant. Provençal food executed with panache. www.hotel-lesflorets.com

Le Clos des Grenadiers

Florence Faumel runs one of the loveliest B&Bs in Châteauneuf-du-Pape and also represents the



Above: these producers in (from top) Mormaison, Châteauneuf-du-Pape and Gigondas are worth visiting (see box, p99)

Left: the landscape around Domaine de Mourchon in Séguéret and in Gigondas (top left) makes the southern Rhône a paradise for photographers



'If any other part of France can offer a wider array of fresh produce, I'd like to hear about it'

over a much wider area than that occupied by the region's premier appellation. They are the southern Rhône's terroir trademarks, stamped on opulent, spicy, warming wines even if sand, clay and limestone also play their part.

It's not an all-red story, though. If limited in number, the whites are more impressive than ever – some made from a host of grapes; some focused on a single variety (koussanne especially); all marked by surprising freshness and minerality. There are more good rosés than you'd get through in half a lifetime of holidays – from serious, rather steeply priced Tavel down to simple charmers. Oh, and sweet wines, too – vins doux naturels like Muscat de Beaumes de Venise (try it with blue cheese as well as dessert) and karcrau (the sweet red version is heaven with dark chocolate).

Fresh and wild

Which brings us to food – perhaps the most powerful lure of all. If any other part of France can offer a wider array of fresh produce, I'd like to hear about it. Every market stall piled with strawberries, cherries, apricots, peaches, nectarines, melons, figs, almonds and olives, screams the message that this is the fruit bowl of France – and the vegetable rack too, moving from asparagus in spring to a dozen kinds of mushrooms in autumn, with aubergines, peppers, pink garlic and flavour-packed tomatoes of every shape, size and colour in between. (This is no

artisan producers. Tastings are held on Tuesdays. For groups, +33 (0)4 90 00 00 17

Jef Challier

Besides creating superb chocolates in 37 fascinating flavours, wine enthusiasts Jef Challier in Valréas matches different styles to local wines. He also makes extraordinary ice creams: black olive or truffie, anyone? +33 (0)4 90 35 05 22

Le Vin Devant Soi

A big addition to Avignon, Stéphane Gilbert and Laurent Herliet work with passionate producers and an Enomatic machine makes 32 wines available to taste for a small charge. www.levindavantsoi.fr

TOURIST TRAIL

Pont du Gard & other Roman masterpieces



The massive first-century aqueduct near Romans is the best-known of various awe-inspiring Roman ruins. Equally worthwhile: the amphitheatre and Maison Carrée in Nîmes; theatre and triumphal arch in Orange.

Palais des Papes

The fortress-like Avignon palace where the popes lived in the 14th century may be spartan inside but it's worth visiting to glimpse the power of the medieval papacy.

Dentelles de Montmirail

Whether a serious hiker or Sunday stroller, gaze upon vine-carpeted valleys from up in the craggy Dentelles. Above Gigondas, access is easy, with a choice of marked trails.

For more information, visit www.provenceguide.com and www.rhone-wines-tourism.com



Le Dolium

The Beaumes-de-Venise wine co-op houses this fab modern restaurant. Pascal and Claire Poullain give Provencal cooking an engaging twist. Prices aren't silly either. www.dolium-restaurant.com

SHOPS

Fromagerie du Comtat



Named best cheese specialist in France in 2009, Claudine Vigier at Fromagerie du Comtat sources her wares directly from



Above: old vines cling to steep terraces in Gigondas. Below: the fortress-like Palais des Papes in Avignon, where the popes lived in the 14th century



MARY DOWEY is a wine, food and travel writer who has a home in the southern Rhône. For more on hotels, restaurants, wine and food producers, shops and markets in the region, see her website www.provencefoodandwine.com

exaggeration: a Carpentras grower cultivates 50 varieties of the fruit)

Tasty Mediterranean cuisine, using superb olive oil – that's what to expect, with vegetables, fish, lamb and duck more prominent than pork or beef. Local specialities include unctuous black olive tapenade, the crispy savoury bread known as fougasse, delicious goat's cheeses to drizzle with lavender honey, almond-rich nougat and – riziest of all – black winter truffles.

Counting on to the fact that hunger may strike visitors at any time, some informal restaurants are now open all day – part of the slow embrace of wine tourism which sees more producers opening their doors and offering activities like vineyard cycle rides, walks and picnics. If only all the tourist offices would stay open longer too... especially now that they are packed with useful information, including details of 12 suggested wine routes. But then nothing's perfect. Although the southern Rhône certainly comes close... **D**