

# ESCAPE

FIVE PAGES OF THE BEST TRAVEL IN THE WORLD



WHISKEY TOURS AND TASTINGS AWAIT IN ANTRIM

SET SAIL: Enjoy a boat trip on lake Étang de Thau



# Come wine with me

**Eugene Costello** was seduced by French fine dining and the authentic charm of Montagnac...



**T**HE problem is that our baby oysters are very tasty, both for fish and for seagulls, not to mention disease in these warm waters, so we lose as much as 40 per cent of them, which is a shame," says oyster farmer Laurent.

We are on a flat-bottomed boat in the Étang de Thau, a large lake-like saltwater inlet near Sète in the South of France on the Languedoc coast. The speaker is the lean and wiry

Laurent Arcella, 46, who is taking us out among many rows of oyster beds.

Lines of wooden poles, supporting tables just above the water, have clusters of young oysters clinging to them as they journey towards plump maturation – and the dinner plate.

"Of course, the fact that we don't buy them from La Vendée [on France's Atlantic coast] until they are two means 40 per cent is actually rather good," Laurent continues. "When people tried to grow them from birth here in Mediterranean

waters, the attrition rate was as high as 90 per cent."

All this oyster surveillance is surprisingly hungry work – it must be the blazing sunshine – so we head back to the jetty and the shucking shed that is the base of Laurent's firm, Atelier et Compagnie,

**DELICIOUS:** The oysters were tasty, and a bargain!

one of the best in the Bouzigues area (Bouzigues is the epicentre of oyster production on this stretch of coast).

Laurent is the third generation of his family to devote himself to the life of mollusc maintenance.

On a wooden veranda shaded from the lusty sun, we enjoy 'un dégustation d'huitres' (oyster tasting), with prices blissfully affordable. For a mere €15, we receive a platter filled →



with a hugely generous dozen of shell-on oysters, half a dozen local mussels and a glass of the wonderful, bone-dry and locally-produced Picpoul de Pinet. Heaven.

For an extra €5, you can have another six moules and have half your oyster haul cooked and served au gratin, with breadcrumbs and leeks. Delicious.

Now, as everyone knows – you snooze, you lose. So despite being tempted to find a deckchair and nod off in the balmy warmth, we had plans. We were heading for a village nearby called Montagnac and, luckily for me, my companion had drawn the short straw – she was driving.

It's the classic French village par excellence, all street-abutting houses with wooden shutters that, inexplicably, seem to be permanently shut, with leafy plane trees and an esplanade – that pedestrianised island you see in so many French villages and typically the site for the weekly market.

Behind one set of shutters stands our home for the night, La Belle Vigneronne (www.bellevigneronne.com). This place is a masterclass in boho-chic and cool elegance.

The mansion house was built in 1865 by a notable family who became wealthy through wine – I don't suppose they picked up shovels and spades themselves, but anyway they paid for the job, which is the next best thing.

The property's stone and mosaic tiling means the house is cool, even in the height of summer, and when you walk through to the back there is a charming courtyard and patio where you can enjoy a Ricard in the evening and breakfast in the morning.

The 'chambres d'hôtes' (guest

## “ La Belle Vigneronne is a masterclass in boho-chic and cool elegance ”

rooms) are run by couple Jérôme and Philippe, and the five bedrooms are all highly individual. Each suite is named after a different type of wine; we're in the heart of wine country here, after all.

I was given a suite on the top floor called Picpoul. The bedroom overlooks the street at the front, while the study has views of the garden, with the two rooms divided by a bathroom. It's lovely, and at €80 per night, won't break the bank. In fact, some rooms start at a very reasonable €60 per night.

La Belle Vigneronne advertises itself as a hotel for adults, so I'm guessing if you're planning to bring swarms of marauding teenagers, this won't be the place for you. But it is cool and cosmopolitan, and suitable for couples of all backgrounds.

After a welcome vodka and tonic, myself and my companion (on her first press trip, bless), saunter along the main drag to what turned out to be a superb find, and perhaps the reason I am sharing the hidden gem that is Montagnac with you.

Restaurant BK is a lovely neighbourhood bistro that appears to have been built into the ancient Roman to medieval walls of the village – the result is a cool, stone-vaulted room with brick arches and a really cool, curved bar that acts as a centrepiece to the room. Our hosts are German Bernd and his Russian wife, Annett, who is as vivacious as she is a supreme chef.

I make a joke about the Entente Cordiale that led to a Russian-German union, and she laughs freely, telling me that her parents were also a Russian-German alliance. Annett speaks of Montagnac with messianic zeal.

“We fell in love with the place and that is why we have chosen to make it our home,” she says smiling, while Bernd sees to the beer. “We're torn between wanting to keep it as our secret, and wanting to tell the world what we have here.”

Bernd is a real beer connoisseur and has a huge array of German and continental craft ales to



THIRSTY WORK: The area has several wineries



TASTE SENSATION: Sample local cuisine

### Getting there...

- Montagnac is a 45-minute drive from Montpellier Airport.
- Aer Lingus flies twice weekly to Montpellier in the summer. See [www.aerlingus.com](http://www.aerlingus.com).
- Ryanair offers flights to Béziers (30 minutes from Montagnac). See [www.ryanair.com/gb/en](http://www.ryanair.com/gb/en)

offer. But the food takes priority. For my entrée, I went with duck egg – from the couple's own ducks out back – with asparagus and Roquefort in an edible bowl made of puff pastry. It was the sort of starter that makes you wish you'd had it as a main, and finishing it was tinged with regret that it was over. But not to worry – the best was yet to come.

I sampled a dish that Annett calls 'sweet cheeks' – pig cheeks beautifully braised till flakily tender, marinated in Coca-Cola and served in a red wine jus with liquorice and fresh ginger, and seasonal vegetables.

I am still drooling at the memory now.

## “ It was the sort of starter that makes you wish you'd had it as a main ”

In fact, if you are planning to visit Restaurant BK, call to make sure it's on the menu. You'll thank me for it.

After dinner, Bernd and Annett pulled up some chairs to join us for a bottle – or three – of locally-produced St Joan wine. Our tragedy was that we would only be in Montagnac for one night before heading west, towards the Spanish border.

But Annett regaled us with descriptions of the jewels to be found locally, including medieval castle and winery Château St Martin de la Garrigue (www.stmartingarrigue.com/uk), explaining that it is one of the top 10 Renaissance castles in

Languedoc. Annett also urges me to visit another winery that has a superb restaurant (which I thought was very generously-minded of her), plus rooms and suites, called Côté Mas (www.cote-mas.fr), which is also based in Montagnac. Our host won't let me leave without taking note of her favourite B&B in the area, the Hôtel Jean de Rat (www.hoteljeanderat.com). A heritage building from the 17th century, the hotel offers self-catering suites and rooms on a B&B basis. It features stone vaults and courtyards, with a swimming pool and Jacuzzi.

It's worth pointing out that there are a huge range of self-catering properties in the area available for rent, which allows you to make Montagnac your base for exploring this corner of Languedoc. To my mind, this is the real south of France, a world away from the yawn-inducing yachts and beautiful people of Antibes, Cannes and Monaco.

I could go on... but like an MC gesturing an act to get off the stage because their time is up, my word count is flashing red lights at me. Which is a posh way of saying I am out of space.

The greatest compliment I can give to Montagnac is that, seduced in only one night, I shall be returning this summer for a whole week. And when a journalist is prepared to throw their own money at a destination, you know it must be something special. Just don't tell everyone; we don't want 'the others' ruining the place altogether on us now, do we? +



TRANQUIL: Chill out and enjoy the views