

## Savour the best of Provence

Staying at a rustic gite a true and affordable taste of region & wine country

BY JOANNE SASVARI, POSTMEDIA NEWS NOVEMBER 10, 2011



Staying at a gite, a rustic sort of apartment such as the ones at Le Clos de Caveau winery, is a great and affordable way to experience Provence.

**Photograph by:** Joanne Sasvari, Calgary Herald

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Henri Bungener bends down and plucks a grape from the gnarled vine.

“You have to subject yourself to what the land produces,” says the owner of Le Clos de Caveau winery and gîtes, gazing at the small, purple Syrah berry.

“It’s quite a shock to be exposed to nature because you don’t know what you’re going to get.”

Nature, here in the Vaucluse region of western Provence, has a few shocks of its own. As we walk through the vineyards under a brilliant blue sky and blazing September sun, the mistral howls all around us, sending clouds of dust scurrying between the twisting vines and fluttering leaves.

This strong, cold Mediterranean wind can last for weeks, driving people so crazy, Bungener tells me, that the mistral is considered a legitimate defence should one be charged with murder while it is blowing.

Maddening winds aside, this is a land of startling beauty and fertility. The jagged peaks of the Dentelles de Montmirail soar just to the east. Fields of lavender and groves of olive trees stretch along the peacefully flowing Rhone River. All around us, picturesque hills are dotted with medieval villages, Roman ruins and rustic stone farmhouses, many of them gites like the ones at Le Clos de Caveau.

After all, this is the kind of place that once you've seen it, you'll want to stay a while. And then come back again. And again.

Just ask Paula Kane. The Calgary woman fell so in love with Provence when she first visited several years ago that she kept returning until, eventually, she moved her business here. Now she occasionally helps Bungener out in the winery, but mostly she leads local cooking classes and runs a website called A Table En Provence, which celebrates everything deliciously Provençal.

"Now, what do I love about here? Do you have an hour?" she says.

"This is truly a magical place, not just Clos de Caveau, which is peaceful and charming, but the whole region. The sweeping views are spectacular, the Dentelles are truly a unique spot in the world, the weather is practically perfect, the bike riding is heavenly, and the food and wine — it's unparalleled!"

Kane and I are wandering through the weekly market in nearby Vaison-la-Romaine, past the stalls of local lavender and Provençal linens, past the stands of souvenirs and past the vendors hawking paella steaming in giant pans. We are on a mission, searching for fresh wild mushrooms, savoury boar sausage, tangy local sheep's cheese and hearty bread for a feast back at the gite.

There is no better way to travel in Provence than to stay in one of these rustic, self-service rental accommodations like the ones Bungener offers at Le Clos de Caveau.

It's a practical and economical way to experience France, but it is also a terrific way to meet the locals.

Wake up, and you'll find a cluster of fat golden grapes or plump purple figs waiting on your doorstep. Spend the day lolling around the pool and someone is sure to insist you join them in a glass of wine. Come home from a day of sightseeing and you're likely to find an invitation to join your hosts for an anchoïade, a traditional local feast of bread and fresh veggies served with a pungent anchovy spread.

"The French obviously take their food very seriously and you can really tell by the quality of the products here," Kane says. "The food in the markets follows the seasons and it's local, so you know you are getting things when they are most ripe and nutritious."

Long before Kane made her first visit here, before Bungener's father bought this property in 1976 and before the author Peter Mayle spent his famous Year in Provence nearby, many others had discovered the riches of this land.

This was one of the earliest sites of human habitation anywhere in Europe.

In 181 BC, the Romans arrived in what they called Gallia Transalpina and stayed until the 4th century AD. Even today, Vaison-la-Romaine is as famous for its beautifully preserved Roman amphitheatre as

nearby Orange is for its remarkable Théâtre Antique and Arc de Triomphe.

In the Middle Ages, the counts of Provence established strongholds in the hilltop towns, many of which are remarkably unchanged. Then in the 14th century, the papacy relocated for various political reasons from Rome to nearby Avignon. For nearly 70 years, whole industries served the papal community, including local wineries such as those in Chateauneuf-du-Pape. You can still see the ruins of the popes' summer house towering above this village where visitors sample bold, complex and fragrant red blends in its many caves de degustation.

Even today, Chateauneuf-du-Pape is the most important of the Southern Rhone's wine appellations, but it is closely followed by the nearby villages of Gigondas and Vacqueyras. It is here that you will find Clos de Caveau.

Bungener waves an arm over his property, a 50-acre estate that ends where the Dentelles begin. Butterflies and dragonflies flit among the fragrant lavender and oleander. Silvery olive trees shimmer in the breeze.

Grapes bask in the sunlight waiting for the pickers to pluck them. Since Bungener switched to his more environmentally sensitive forms of wine production, his wines have begun winning prestigious awards.

"It makes you wonder: What does beautiful mean? What's beautiful also makes fine wine," he says. "We appreciate it and the vines appreciate it, too."

And so do those of us lucky enough to visit.

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