

Search

Plan Your Trip

Go

Select a Region or Country



EUROPE > FRANCE > PROVENCE AND THE FRENCH RIVIERA

CHOICE TABLES

Happily Lost in the Luberon



Ed Alcock for The New York Times

Diners at Les Délices de Charlotte in Ménerbes.

By LAURIE WINER
Published: May 2, 2010

WE walked down the middle of a street in L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue as if we'd wandered in from the set of "The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie." My five friends and I had come to this village in the Luberon, a collection of small hilltop towns in sun-baked northern [Provence](#), to roam through its famed antiques stores before dinner. But we soon realized — to paraphrase Peter Mayle, the author of "A Year in Provence" — that here you can find everything except a bargain. And so we were walking toward a restaurant instead. And not just any restaurant, but a place I had heard tell was the region's up-and-coming gem. The only problem? It was proving difficult to find.

Provence and the French Riviera Travel Guide

[Go to the Provence and the French Riviera Travel Guide »](#)

Multimedia



We trudged on with hope in our hearts: In the Luberon, there seems to be an agreement to eat only the best and freshest local food. You can find an itinerant farmers' market every day in one town or another. Even supermarkets are stocked with ingredients so good-looking they seem ready for a photo shoot. And everywhere there are people cooking as if lunch and dinner were the most important events of the day.

We were headed south from the town center, through some faceless suburban streets, gray and commercial in a way that is extremely rare for this part of the world. After

- SIGN IN TO E-MAIL
- PRINT
- REPRINTS
- SHARE

JustWright
MAY 14
[WATCH TRAILER](#)

thought. There is no poetry here.

And yet, there was the sign. We had arrived at **Le Vivier**. Could this be the Michelin-star restaurant that had both critics and food bloggers buzzing?

We rounded a corner to enter the building, and then, as our eyes adjusted to the room, sudden enchantment: a wonderland of dark brown and orange, with illuminated fish hanging whimsically from red chandeliers at the bar. The urban vibe felt like a jolt of electricity in placid Provence.

We had arrived 30 minutes before the restaurant was set to open. The young owners, Patrick and Céline Fischnaller, were still in their street clothes. “Come, sit, have a drink!” said Patrick, who took us out to a lovely balcony. He ran to get us some local rosé while simultaneously changing into his work clothes. He offered the women in our group [pumpkin](#)-colored mohair throws for our shoulders; it was just starting to get cool. We gazed at a winsome stretch of the river Sorgue below, where ducks went heedlessly about their business unaware that their brethren were on the menu.

When the restaurant finally opened, we moved inside to dine. We started with the pigeon pie, which the chef Arnaud Vaumerel constructed like a beef Wellington — the meat coated with foie gras and a duxelles of porcini mushrooms before it is wrapped in puff pastry and baked. The dish was intense and thrilling.

The menu was full of similarly intriguing combinations, like veal sweetbread with potatoes and, as described by the menu (in translation), “coffee flavors.” However, the single best knock-me-out dish was the purée accompanying a silky filet of John Dory. It provided a blast of artichoke, deep and rich and as smooth as baby food.

A few miles outside of Gordes-en-Provence is **Les Bories**, a tucked-away stone structure that also happens to be one of my personal culinary touchstones. There, in my early 20s, I first tasted aioli on white asparagus and wondered what else my parents and native culture had been keeping from me and why. I’ve been lucky enough to return four times since, always with a kind of vibrating anticipation. I have never been disappointed.

The restaurant, in an exclusive hotel, sits at the end of a long driveway lined by cypress trees. This is formal country dining — all linen, crystal and choreographed service — but the global food movement has crept into this bastion of tradition. The current chef is Pascal Ginoux, 35, who was raised nearby in Oppède, where his grandfather started the local olive mill. Mr. Ginoux says he applies “technique nouvelle” to local product. Take, for example, a dish called La Saint Jacques, his painterly disquisition on the scallop. On a rectangular plate of gray slate, he lines up one seared plump scallop topped with citrus foam, one disc of chilled, raw scallop, a bit of grapefruit pulp and an aromatic brussels sprout. It’s a dish that takes longer to think about than to eat, but it supplied an inspired succession of flavors, textures and temperatures.

Mr. Ginoux also showed off his technique ancienne in two less intellectual but equally compelling dishes: a burbot (an inexpensive freshwater fish) served with Jerusalem artichokes, chanterelles and a touch of crispy lardon; and a perfectly done rabbit with olive and rosemary ratatouille, specifically designed, the chef said, to go with the 2006 Château les Eydins, a velvety local red.

We visited a different village each day, ate what we found for lunch and were never unhappy. One of the simplest meals was in Ménerbes, the town that Mr. Mayle made famous. The cozy stone room at **Les Délices de Charlotte**, with its weathered-log ceiling beams and unframed paintings of vegetables and [cookies](#), called to us. At the table, salade verte was served with warm cheese puffs, and the hand-made pizza came with grilled eggplant and fennel sausage — all so fresh and charming I fully expected [Audrey Tautou](#) to pass by on a bicycle, sporting a beret.

For a more traditional lunch, try the **Restaurant César** at the Hôtel César in Bonnieux. Time seems to have stopped here in 1936, the year Marcel Pagnol made the film “César.” In actuality the hotel was built in 1717 and the restaurant opened in 1830

The room has the charm, clean feel of a Ladies Auxiliary, it features a stately grandfather clock, bright yellow tablecloths and a view of Mont Ventoux. Our cheerful but busy host ran in and out of the kitchen, bringing plates of soupe au pistou and boeuf bourguignon with parsley and carrots, just as his predecessors have done for decades. The food is simple country fare, but fresh and fortifying.

One of the best daily markets in the Luberon takes place on Friday in Lourmarin. For five hours each day the town center is packed with what seems like an endless caravan of bright spices, dried flowers, soaps, herbs, tablecloths, fish, meat, fruit and cheeses. The commerce starts to wind down at noon and is miraculously gone 30 minutes later.

After a morning of jostling and marveling at the market, you may want a bit of quiet, at which point the airy and light **Restaurant L'Antiquaire**, secreted away in an alley, will fit the bill. A glass of pale yellow local rosé and a plate of foie gras served with dense fig jam and bread is the best possible tonic. Afterward take a walk in the bucolic local graveyard — [Albert Camus](#) is buried there, despite President [Nicolas Sarkozy's](#) recent, rightly maligned attempt to [move him to Paris](#). I'm with Camus. After a lunch like this, I see no reason to go to [Paris](#).

IF YOU GO

All prices are for a meal for two, without beverages or tip.

Le Vivier, 800 Cours Fernande Peyre, L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue; (33-4) 90-38-52-80; [levivier-restaurant.com](#); dinner, 90 euros, or \$118, at \$1.31 to the euro.

Les Bories, Route de l'Abbaye de Sénanque, Gordes en Provence; (33-4) 90-72-00-51; [hotellesbories.com](#); dinner, 180 euros.

Les Délices de Charlotte, Rue Kleber Guendon, Ménerbes; (33-4) 32-50-20-53; lunch, 33 euros.

Restaurant César, Place de la Liberté, Bonnieux; (33-4) 90-75-96-35; [hotel-cesar.com](#); lunch for two, 50.

Restaurant L'Antiquaire, 9, rue du Grand Pré, Lourmarin; (33-4) 90-68-17-29; [restaurant-antiquaire.com](#); lunch, 50 euros.

[More Articles in Travel »](#)