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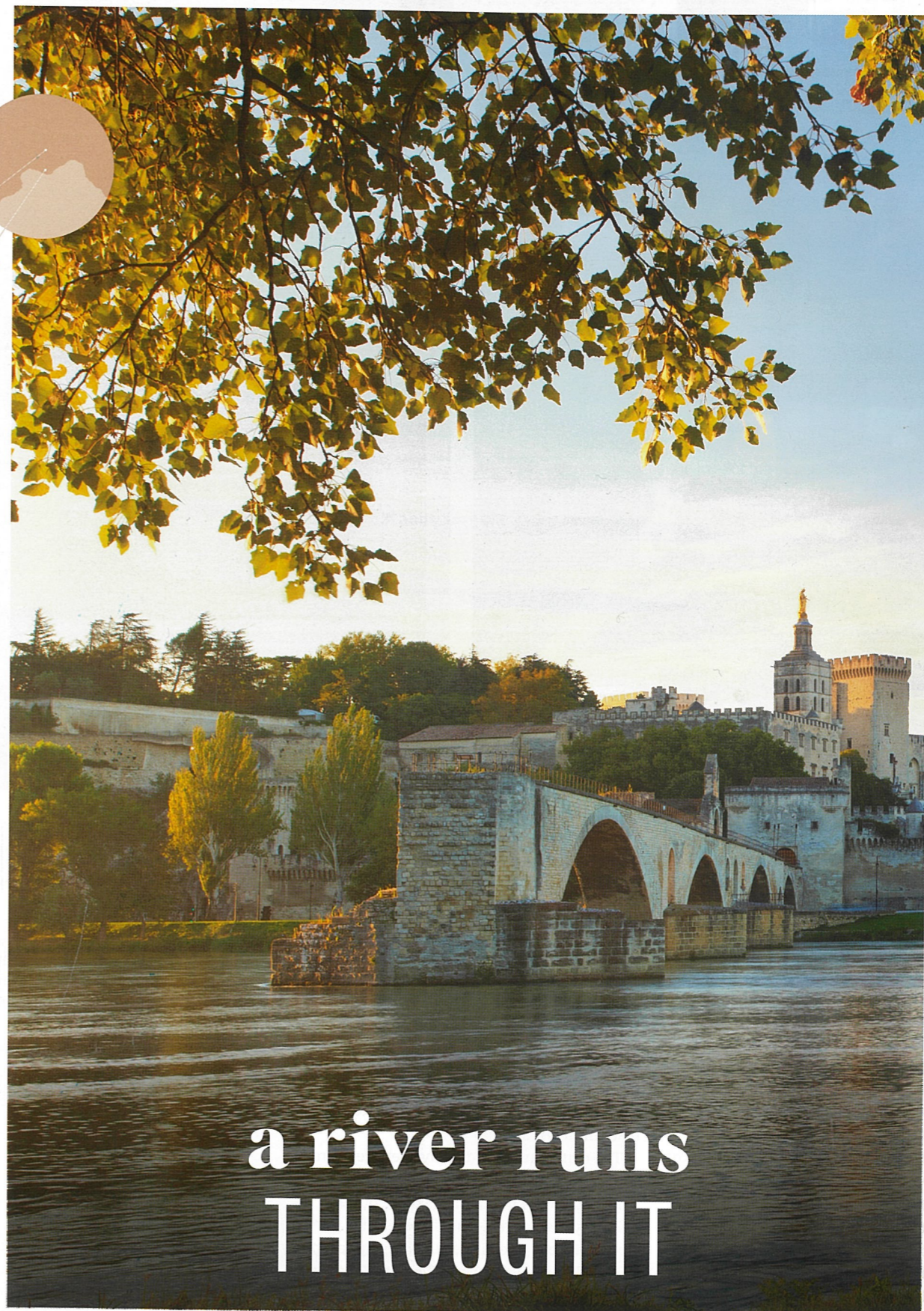
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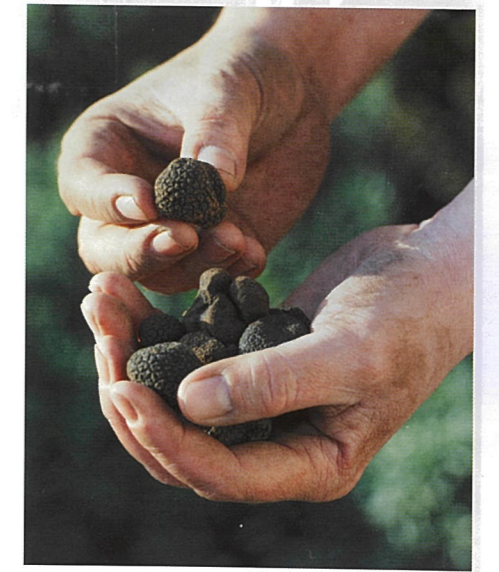
LYON  
AVIGNON



## a river runs THROUGH IT

Truffles, wine, chocolate and cheese – the gourmet wonderments of Lyon, Avignon, Arles and southern Burgundy are best devoured while idylling down the tranquil waters of the Rhône and Saône.

Story — CATHERINE MCGREGOR



“mmmmmyyyy!” The call rings out among the rows of wizened white and green oak trees. Emy, a chalk-coloured teddy-bear of a dog, looks back at her owner, hesitates for a moment, then scampers on. It's an important business, hunting for truffles, the “black diamonds” from this part of Europe’s 32 truffle varieties, the “black diamonds” from this part of Europe’s 32 truffle varieties, bubbly spheres – known variously as black truffles, *tuber melanosporum* or, in local Provençal dialect, *rabasse* – are sold only to the rare white Alba truffle in France, scarcity and price.

Back in Provence and the vivid flavours of the Mediterranean summer come to mind: sun-ripened olives, peppery basil, sun-ripened tomatoes. But the pungent, musky truffle, the taste of deepest mid-winter, is just as characteristic of southern France.

Usually, months before the harvesting begins. Still Emy and Serge, her owner, get together to demonstrate how it's done with the help of a handful of pre-hidden truffles. Despite Emy's best efforts, it's not bearish Serge who steals the show, but the intricacies of truffle

cultivation via a stream of rapid French, some expansive hand gestures and the odd eyebrow wiggle. “I’ve been bringing tourists here for more than a decade. He always assures me he’ll learn some English, but never does,” says our translator, Frances, shaking her head in affectionate despair. After a while she gives up, but no matter. Some sentiments – like what he thinks of the cheaper but almost entirely flavourless Chinese black truffle, an increasing threat to the French industry – don’t need translation. His expression of wholly Gallic disdain says it all.

The truffle hunting display over, we retire to the on-site store to devour slices of baguette smothered with homemade truffle butter, drink icy rosé, and discuss how feasible it would be, really, to give everything up for the bucolic life of a French *trufficulteur*. Then we board our coaches and head home through fields tinged olive, lavender and fiery yellow – the colours of Provence.

“Home” for us is Uniworld’s SS *Catherine*, on a week-long idyll down the Rhône and Saône rivers. I’m lucky to be joining a Connoisseur Collection sailing, featuring extra food-inspired excursions on top of the

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core itinerary including Avignon, Arles and southern Burgundy.

We’d started the trip by exploring Lyon, France’s second city and its undisputed gastronomic capital. Here, in this urban temple to French food, there is but one high priest: the legendary 91-year-old chef and father of nouvelle cuisine, Paul Bocuse. His name is everywhere in Lyon – over the entranceway to the famed giant gourmet food market, Les Halles de Paul Bocuse; on his four brasseries and one fine-dining restaurant (awarded three



CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT: The “best strawberries in France” are sold at the markets of Les Halles in Avignon, along with a spectacular array of local specialties; Tain-l’Hermitage is a small village at the base of a revered wine appellation; Perigord truffles are highly prized and second only to the rare white Alba truffle in quality, scarcity and price; Lyon is widely known as France’s gastronomic capital.

Michelin stars every year since 1965); and on the logo of his own culinary institute, where I join a group of SS *Catherine* passengers to learn to make crêpes suzette, the so-uncool-it’s-cool-again French dessert classic. By the end of the lesson I’d put paid to two of my biggest cooking phobias: the pancake toss (be warned: you’ll be laughed out of a French kitchen if you try to flip a crêpe with a fish slice), and the art of the flambé. It turns out that ending your meal by setting fire to a small lake of high-proof alcohol isn’t as scary as I thought. Just don’t get too sozzled during the main course, our chef-tutor tells us, and you’ll be fine.

The next day we dock at Tain-l’Hermitage, a small village at the base of the revered wine-growing Hermitage *appellation*. As we hike a trail through the vines, our guide tells us this unremarkable hillside, scorching hot in summer and with a gradient so steep that pulleys are often used to move equipment, is the most expensive real estate in France.

We’re on land belonging to winemaker Michel Chapoutier, whose techniques hew closely to those practised by his 19th century ancestors: no irrigation, no mechanised hoes (they still use horses or mules), and definitely no fertiliser. A fierce proponent of biodynamic viticulture, Chapoutier believes fertiliser destroys the unique properties of the soil, thus preventing the resulting wine from being a true expression of its terroir.

At the top of the hillside, overlooking Tain-l’Hermitage and its sister town, Tournon, on the river’s opposite bank, we reward ourselves with glasses of his 20-year-old vintage syrah, accompanied by gooey wedges of local goat milk chèvre. It may just be the altitude talking, but we assure ourselves we can definitely taste the terroir.

Remarkably, world-renowned wine isn’t Tain-l’Hermitage’s only claim to fame. Later that afternoon, I wander down the road to visit La Cité du Chocolat, a museum, factory store and “multi-sensory interactive chocolate



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**CLOCKWISE, FROM LEFT:** The pretty cobble streets of Lyon; a trip to the markets in France yields many treats, including an abundance of lush fruit and as many varieties of cheese as anyone could ever hope for – white, orange, blue, soft, hard, cow, sheep, goat.

up a spectacular array of local specialities. Everything you'd expect from a really good French market is here: bread, pastries, 250 varieties of cheese (or so the sign boasts), vegetables, meat, charcuterie and seafood. It being as near as dammit to noon, I stock up on a grab-bag of picnic items – half a juicy rotisserie chicken, a local Picodon de Chevre cheese, a couple of perfectly ripe peaches and a still-warm baguette – in preparation for a riverfront lunch. This is also an ideal place to pick up souvenirs like salt-infused with dried lavender: tnenade and its anchovy-based

for my own lunch – especially not when the onboard chef draws so heavily from the cuisine of Provence for his daily menus. Local specialities feature heavily: prawns flambé with Pastis (the aperitif of choice in this part of France); Provençal pistou soup; veal tenderloin with truffle-infused sauce financière. Plus bread – “the best I’ve ever had” I hear a passenger say – more wine, and so much more cheese: white, orange, blue, soft, hard, cow, sheep, goat. On the final night one of the crew teaches me the expression “an faire tout un fromage” Instead of finishing

