

Redefining the LANGUEDOC

James Lawrence experiences a Gallic food and wine break in a class of its own



The Languedoc is France's oldest wine region, a sleepy and still unspoiled part of France that ironically now boasts its most unique and avant-garde rural destination – Château les Carrasses. Since opening its gates to the world in August 2011, les Carrasses has successfully redefined the concept of an upmarket Gallic retreat: offering superlative gastronomy, amenities and accommodation without the stiff formality and pretense that so often plagues Château hotels in France. However, as owner Karl O'Hanlon is eager to point out, his venture is not a hotel; neither is it simply luxury self-catering accommodation or a winery with rooms. It's a glamorous amalgamation of all three.

This is a far cry from the picture 27 years ago, when the winery was abandoned by its former owners and the Château left to slowly decay. Les Carrasses was originally built in 1866, on the foundations of a site that was an important pit stop on the Santiago de Compostela pilgrimage route. Its heyday nicely coincided with the Languedoc's rise to ascension in the 1870s; after the newly installed railways reached this corner of France, large quantities of cheap and cheerful jug wine were shipped to the recently industrialised north. Unfortunately, the market collapsed in the 1980s for the once ubiquitous Vin de Table cheap category and properties such as les Carrasses suffered.

Then, as fortune would dictate, former city trader and Dubliner O'Hanlon immigrated to the region and decided to embark on a restoration project like no other. "We wanted to prove to visitors that self-catering can also mean luxury," enthuses O'Hanlon. "France is full of grand yet starchy Château hotels and indifferent self-catering venues, but no one had successfully combined the two, until now," he continues.

Arriving at the Château for a long weekend, it soon became apparent that it boasts an unparalleled

Château les Carrasses is easily accessible from both Beziers (25 minutes) and Montpellier airports (1 hour). Ryan Air has daily flights in the summer season to Beziers from London Stansted, Easy Jet flies to Montpellier from London Gatwick. I travelled to London Gatwick via Reading, with First Great Western, firstgreatwestern.co.uk



② location. Based near the charming canal-side village of Capestang in south-west France, guests who care to dine alfresco enjoy sweeping panoramic views that take in Narbonne's 13th-century cathedral, endless vineyards and, on a clear day, the Pyrenees outline. And if that wasn't enough, the fortified city of Carcassonne, a World Heritage Site, is 70 minutes away and Beziers, with its 13th-century cathedral and notable Musée des Beaux Arts, is a 30 minute drive.

But first things first – a drink on the Château's enticing terrace. We are offered a recent vintage of their Chardonnay, a refreshingly light and un-oaked example, perfect for those who detest typically unctuous, over-ripe Californian incarnations. Les Carrasses, with the help of a neighbours' winery, produces a range of excellent value wines and even the rosé hits the right notes. It also boasts an impressive list of amenities; heated infinity pool, barbecue area, indoor and outdoor dining, table tennis, boules pitch, free bike hire and hammocks for the weary.

It's not an easy proposition, but do attempt to drag yourself away from all the hotel's creature comforts. The Languedoc is a veritable food and drink paradise. A revolution has been sweeping this vast region in recent years, as intense competition from countries like Chile and Argentina continues to focus the efforts of the area's vigneronns – some truly great wine is now made across the board and plonk is rapidly being replaced with premium. This is, with some notable exceptions, red wine country; generally blends of Syrah, Grenache, Mourvedre and Carignan.

With the help of Wendy Gedney, who runs a wine tourism firm Vin en Vacances, we visit Château Capitoul in the La Clape sub-region near Narbonne. Gedney offers guests at les Carrasses tailored wine tours to suit their needs, ours is a typical offering with a winery tour, overview of the property/region's history, winemaking facts and, of course, a tasting.

Lunch was provided for at Chez Bebelles in Narbonne's famous Les Halles market. A must visit for lovers of theatre as much as great steaks, it's run by a former rugby-star and heartthrob, according to his waitresses who seemed to perk up considerably whenever he approached, particularly when his wife was absent. Orders are taken, the host then grabs a megaphone and demands your dinner package from nearby butchers; voila steaks fly through the air and



apparently he is yet to drop the ball.

An afternoon strolling around the old town of Pezenas helped our group work up an appetite for dinner. A quintessential Languedoc town, Pezenas is quaint but not tourist ridden; full of winding streets, picturesque squares and a famous Saturday food market, notable for its wide selection of local cheeses and seafood. After a leisurely cafe au lait in the main square, we wander around its ancient streets which house a surprising amount of seasonal art exhibitions and galleries.

Don't be fooled into believing that a trip to Languedoc is solely about the wine. A wealth of other attractions await, including sailing down the Midi on a canal barge, endless opportunities for cycling and hiking across Languedoc National park and a bevy of picture-postcard villages and towns desperate to be explored. The coastline is also just over an hour away if you tire of your own private pool. Culture nuts can head out to Carcassonne, Montpellier, Beziers, the list goes on.

This beguiling and exciting region remains one of France's best kept secrets and has been compared to Provence before the hordes of tourists arrived. It's quieter, the towns and villages feel like 'real' places rather than ersatz tourist haunts, the people are friendlier and the food and wine indefinitely more interesting and varied. But if Château les Carrasses imitations start to catch-on, it's only a matter of time before Montpellier airport becomes as busy as Nice and the magic fades. My advice is to visit sooner rather than later. 📍

Château les Carrasses,
0845 686 8067,
lescarrasses.com.

Château suites start at
€169 (£139) per night
in low season. For a
seven night stay or
more, the price falls to
€125.

For guided wine tours
vinenvacances.com