

La France profonde

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Lindy Woodhead on Gascony

I must start by declaring an interest, as we are lucky enough to own a farmhouse in the Gers, one of the most beautiful départements in France, deep in the heart of Gascony. On a hot August day, sipping a glass of the local Arton rosé wine under the shade of our walnut trees, watching butterflies fluttering over the wild meadow flowers, is to enjoy la France profonde at its unspoiled, peaceful best.

Gascony is holiday heaven. There is something for everyone to enjoy. Stunning countryside, meandering rivers, Roman roads and ruins, Romanesque churches, fine wines, delicious food, the region's equally delicious Armagnac to drink — and as much great and often gory history as anyone could wish for.

For us British, centuries of intertwined history between England and Gascony have left an indelible mark. The wine-rich and fertile land was part of Eleanor of Aquitaine's spectacular dowry that passed into British hands when she married Henry of Anjou, thus handily delivering to the future King of England an area roughly covering one quarter of France. Thereafter the English fought the French fiercely over it for several hundred years, eventually losing it at the end of that mediaeval madness the Hundred Years War, during which time the Gascons had suffered from both the Black Plague and the Black Prince. When we bought our house, I quipped to our Lectoure-based estate agent, Laurent Lameille, 'I feel as though we are coming home', to which he replied, 'Yes, but this time we are making you pay!' He wasn't entirely joking.

Patrick de Montal and his wife Victoire de Montesquiou, who have revived the tradition of wine-making on their family lands, are, by dint of hard work, enjoying the upsurge of interest in local wines. At their Domaine Arton, housed in a pretty 19th-century chartreuse (albeit built over 12th-century cellars — their respective families having been part of 1,000 years of local history), they have 60 hectares of land under cultivation. Describing the resurgence of the industry, de Montal says poignantly about the Gers: 'Wine was so much a pillar of the rural economy but after the Revolution, and the phylloxera which devastated the vines, the land here fell asleep.' The region was hugely depopulated throughout the last 150 years by economic migration and catastrophic first world war losses, but it is precisely because there is so little industry that the area is so undeveloped — and so beautiful.

Today, the Gers remains serious farmland, growing wheat and vines, but is perhaps best known as the garlic centre of France — a third of the country's garlic is produced here. The weekly markets in our local towns of Fleurance and Lectoure have stalls groaning in the stuff in a delectable colour palette of the palest pink through to violet and white. At times it also seems that every duck (along with most of the geese) in France is in the Gers. This is serious foie gras country and duck in one form or another is served pretty much everywhere with the thrifty locals making good use of every scrap, right down to roasting the carcasses and cooking almost anything that grows or moves in the fat. You soon become a convert — especially when you learn that the Gersois not only live longer than anyone else in France, they also have the lowest levels of heart disease in the whole country. If you need a pause from magret, manchon or confit, Lectoure is the home of seemingly the sweetest, juiciest melons in France — add a slice or two of Bayonne ham, followed by some Chevre Fermier des Pyrenees or Rocamadour drizzled with honey, grilled and eaten with local walnuts, and you have a truly memorable feast.

No text on the south-west of France would be complete without mention of Agen prunes. Not strictly the Gers — Agen is the capital town of nearby Lot et Garonne — but as well as producing some of France's most spectacular rugby players it is home to the world's best prunes. Soak them in a few measures of Armagnac and you have the base of a delectable tart. Given that Armagnac has long been thought to cure thrombosis and is made from grapes stuffed full of anti-oxidants — and we all know the benefits of prunes — this is a healthy pudding, even better when enjoyed with a glass of the honey-coloured, fruity drink itself.

Armagnac is the pride of Gascony. The region has been producing Armagnac since 1411 — it is thought to be the oldest eau-de-vie distilled from grapes in the world — with the name coming from the old 9th-century Gers territories of the once all-powerful feudal warlords, the Counts of Armagnac. No additives of any kind are permitted in the production of grape to bottle, meaning Armagnac can truly be called 'natural', although the patenting of a single-pass distillation process in the early 1800s makes the process more simple than production of its up-country rival Cognac.

Distilling the complexities of the Roman-Visigoth-Frank-Norman-Anglo-French history of Gascony into a single traveller's page is a lot less simple. Arming yourself with the right guide book (I can particularly recommend Cadogan Guides Gascony & The Pyrenees) is an obvious start, but nothing really prepares you for the beauty of the mediaeval 13th-century Bastide towns; or the surprising number of villages that were turned into mini-fortresses, complete with imposing watch towers during the Hundred Years War. Children and adults alike are enthralled with the 'Carcassonne' of the Gers, Larressingle — the smallest fortified village in France — and subdued by stories of Blaise de Monluc who, in the wars of religion, specialised in tipping the local Protestants down the well in the ancient hamlet of Terraube. In this land of the legendary Henri IV and his manic mother Jeanne d'Albret, the juxtaposition of pilgrims walking to Santiago de Compostela versus the Protestant massacres is sometimes hard to grasp.

A visit to one of the many local spas for a mud-wrap or massage is pretty much an essential after all the eating and drinking that goes with rural Gascony, plus of course planning the shopping to take home. With the restrictions on flying — no bottles allowed — and given the opportunity of visiting the romantic city of Toulouse (where the highly regarded Tugan Sokhiev is the principal guest conductor of the Orchestre National), taking in the famous summer jazz festival at Marciac or heading west to Biarritz and its neighbouring town, the enchanting St-Jean-de-Luz, the best way to come is by car. That way you can load it with booty — in the manner of the best Gascon routiers and British marauders — except of course, this time you must pay.

However you travel, come soon.