

**Lagrasse
and the Corbières**

ROUILLÉ, ROUILLÉ GOOD!



Lagrasse

Where to start? I am sitting in the kitchen of our recently purchased French house drinking ice cold rosé wine to the strains of an old Simon and Garfunkel album whilst my wife Sue heats up a take-away seafood paella. I could have bought take-away moules marinière, bouillabaisse, home-made fish soup, or even zarzuela (a traditional Catalan seafood stew) from the Poissonnerie in the nearby town of Lézignan-Corbières on our way home from the Lac de Taurize where my family spent the day swimming, jumping

LAGRASSE AND THE CORBIÈRES

twenty feet off the rocks and drying off in the blazing August sunshine.

As it happens, I did also buy the fish soup. The vendor even threw in some biscottes, grated cheese and rouillé: a garlicky creamy topping for the biscottes which bob on top of the soup enhancing the whole experience. Our eldest son, Jon, said it was “rouillé, rouillé good” which made us all laugh.

Now that I’ve got the first of many ever-so upper-middle class “Living in France” in-jokes over with, I feel ready to offer you, gentle reader, the chance to indulge your senses from afar, to dip a toe in the cool, clear rivers of the Occitanie; to get a taste of this region’s mouth-watering gastronomy and to be caressed by the incredible sensation of experiencing what it is like to enjoy living in France - or as a friend here so poetically phrased it – “doing gentle nothingness”.

We live in the south-west of France in the ‘département’ called the Aude, hidden away in the hills of the Corbières, half an hour from the cities of Carcassonne and Narbonne, and close to the Mediterranean Sea in the medieval village of Lagrasse. The French tourist board has classed Lagrasse as “one of the most beautiful villages in France”. Time stands still in this extraordinary place; it is a medieval marvel, replete with cobbled streets, golden stone houses and quiet squares. It has an abbey commissioned in the 8th century by Charlemagne which overlooks the river Orbière where, during the summer months, villagers young and old swim in the crystal clear waters. Two old stone bridges span the river and give access to the garrigue¹ and the green hills beyond.

There were many reasons for choosing to buy a house in this particular village such as the easy access to the river for swimming and the fact that there are half a dozen places to eat within the village itself. During the day, we can not only saunter out of our

¹ Garrigue refers to the low-growing vegetation on the limestone hills of the surrounding area. There are many fragrant plants that grow wild here, such as rosemary, lavender, juniper and thyme. According to one of our friends “the most wonderful honey in the world” is made here where the bees produce many different flavours depending on which plants they feed on.]

ROUILLÉ, ROUILLÉ GOOD!

front door and be on the small pebble beach in less than a minute but also choose to dine out at any one of the excellent, friendly restaurants, and afterwards meander home through the tiny, cobbled streets.

Everything is on hand: we have the obligatory café, boulangerie/pâtisserie, tabac and pharmacie, as well as the Poste and the Mairie, which are both located in the central square known as the ‘Place de la Halle’. This enchanting square, at the heart of the village, is enclosed by magnificent 14th and 15th century houses, with their wrought-iron balconies overlooking its very own medieval, open-air market hall. A wooden roof, supported by eight stone pillars, covers the large, shiny flag stones, polished and worn smooth over the centuries by countless passers-by.



Lagrasse - 8th century abbey commissioned by Charlemagne

Lagrasse is renowned for being an artists' village. We have potters, painters and sculptors who exhibit their art in quaint galleries, studios and shops throughout the village and along the Promenade, as well as an abundance of musicians who often appear out of nowhere to serenade us with trumpet, soprano saxophone and guitars, playing in the restaurants, outside the vintner's outlets or even on the beach at night. The abbey hosts cultural events during the year such as the internationally renowned book and philosophy fair “Le Banquet du Livre”, classical music concerts and even once

LAGRASSE AND THE CORBIÈRES

hosting a performance by dancers from the Royal Ballet.

What's more, Lagrasse is just forty minutes from the Mediterranean coast with its oyster bars, pink flamingo lagoons (“étangs” in French) and luxurious sandy beaches that stretch for miles and miles. Peppered along the coastline, there are many hip and stylish beach bars and restaurants serving an abundance of fish and seafood in a relaxed, informal setting which we often visit in the company of friends. We've had some great parties here! Inland, there is a huge choice of restaurants in the nearby villages and towns from old fashioned bistros and lunchtime cafés to crêperies and even a Michelin star restaurant. Obviously it goes without saying that a trip to France, and especially the Occitanie, is a gastronomic delight. Oh yes...and the wine is very cheap as well.



ROUILLÉ, ROUILLÉ GOOD!

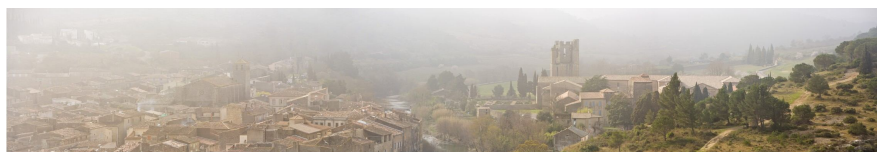
In the Corbières, you are surrounded by vines on all sides wherever you go. Green and luscious in the spring and summer, the vines turn gold, red and orange in the autumn adding unforgettable, breath-taking splashes of colour to the fields and hillsides. Wine production is the major industry in the larger Occitanie and it is said to be the single biggest wine-producing region in the world with output greater than that of Australia and the USA. The Corbières, as well as being the name given to the range of hills before the Pyrenees begin, is its largest wine AOC (Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée) with a variety of soil types and microclimates. The AOC Corbières stretches from Carcassonne in the north-west to Narbonne and Leucate on the coast, from the Black Mountains to the foothills of the Pyrenees in the south, covering an area of 11,800 hectares. The most famous local grape varieties (“cépages” in French) that go to make the red wine here are Carignan, Grenache and Cinsault; Syrah and Mourvèdre have also been used in recent times to boost quality and give the wine more body. For the whites the most common grape varieties are Maccabeu, Grenache blanc, Clairette and Terret (which is grown extensively around the port of Marseillan, home of French vermouth).



LAGRASSE AND THE CORBIÈRES

For us, the best of all has to be one of the oldest Languedoc grapes, the Piquepoul, which produces the crisp, dry Picpoul de Pinet wine - absolutely delicious when accompanied by oysters from Bouzigues, literally a stone's throw from where it is made. To finish off a traditional French meal in style, the versatile Muscat cépage is a treat. It used to be grown exclusively for vin doux naturel (sweeter wines) such as Saint Jean de Minervois and Rivesaltes but also serves as an excellent ice-cold aperitif and even produces full-flavoured dry wines as well.

The region is also justifiably famous for its ancient castles and they make for a great day out combined with a picnic or a simple 'plat du jour' lunch at one of the neighbouring village cafés. The most well-known castles are Carcassonne, Aguilar, Termes, Montségur, Lastours, Peyrepertuse and Queribus. Some of these are situated in remote mountainous areas and are best explored on less windy days as they are unsurprisingly built on higher ground. They were all used as temporary refuges in the 13th century by the Cathars, a religious sect of Gnostic Christians, when Pope (not-so) Innocent III called for a Catholic crusade to wipe them from the face of the earth...and he succeeded! Burnt alive by the hundreds, slaughtered by the thousands, maimed, disfigured and tortured, the poor Cathars were unceremoniously exterminated with the atmospheric castle at Montségur in the Ariege region being the last stronghold to fall after nearly a whole year of siege in 1244. More on this gruesome history in a later chapter, but for now let us leave 'the good Christians' to their sad fate and allow me to wax lyrical on how we came to be living in the heart of the Corbières, France's most beguiling and charismatic region.



Lagrasse