

A vibrant sunflower field in Provence with a stone house and a large tree in the background. The sunflowers are in full bloom, creating a sea of yellow. The stone house has a tiled roof and a chimney. A large, leafy tree stands to the left of the house. In the distance, there are rolling hills under a clear blue sky.

A GUIDE TO PROVENCE

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A (QUICK)GUIDE TO PROVENCE



Marseille: Where France Begins at the Edge of the Sea



Most people arrive in Provence through Paris, which is like entering a country through its attic. If you want to understand the south, begin where the French themselves began: at the oldest city in France. Marseille is loud, sunbaked, beautiful, and slightly dangerous in the way that only port cities can be. It does not try to charm you. It simply is.

Before you do anything else, spend a morning in the city. The Vieux Port is where Marseille has conducted its business, its arguments, and its daily theater for twenty-six centuries. The long rectangular harbor is lined with cafés and shops and a motley assortment of gruff fishermen who look like they have been there nearly as long. It smells of salt and diesel and coffee. The ferries to the Château d'If leave from the southern quay. The MuCEM, the Museum of European and Mediterranean Civilizations, stands at the harbor mouth like a latticework shadow box, its architecture alone worth the walk. Stand at the water's edge and you will understand immediately why people have been arriving here by boat for millennia and deciding not to leave.

Do not leave the Vieux Port without stopping at La Maison du Pastis on the north quay at 108 Quai du Port, a short walk from the Hôtel de Ville. This small shop carries nearly a hundred varieties of pastis and absinthe, including small-batch artisan bottles you will not find anywhere else. The owner knows every single one of them. They pour samples without being asked and will talk you through the differences between producers if you show any interest at all. Buy something. Buy several things. This is the correct introduction to Provence, and it costs less than a museum ticket.



From the Vieux Port, climb into Le Panier, the oldest neighborhood in Marseille and therefore the oldest quarter of the oldest city in France. It sits on a hill above the port: a dense warren of steep stairways, painted walls, laundry lines, and streets too narrow for anything but foot traffic and the occasional determined scooter. Twenty-six centuries of habitation have produced a neighborhood that feels simultaneously ancient and stubbornly alive. Street art covers the walls. Cats occupy the sunniest corners. Old men sit in doorways. The Vieille Charité, a seventeenth-century baroque almshouse built around a domed chapel, houses rotating exhibitions and is worth stepping inside even if you have no interest in whatever is showing. The building justifies the visit on its own.

Lunch in Le Panier

There is only one address that matters. Chez Étienne at 43 Rue de Lorette has been operating since 1943 with a consistency that borders on the philosophical. There is no printed menu. There is no telephone to call for a reservation. Credit cards are not accepted. What there is: a wood-fired oven, a pizza that Peter Mayle once called his favorite lunch in Marseille, supions (like calamari) sautéed in garlic and parsley that will make you reconsider every calamari dish you have ever eaten, and a room whose walls are covered in photographs of everyone from Michel Platini to Matt Damon, all of whom found their way here and all of whom appear to be having the best time of their lives. The pizza comes in the Marseillaise style, moitié-moitié: half

anchovy with garlic and oregano, half molten Emmental, on a sauce tomato that has been made the same way since the original Cassaro opened the doors. Come early. Come with cash. Do not ask for the menu.

On your way back down through Le Panier, stop at Les Navettes des Accoules, a family bakery making navettes since 1986 in the very neighborhood where the founder grew up. Navettes are the traditional biscuit of Marseille: boat-shaped, scented with orange blossom water, hard enough to survive a long journey and good enough that nobody wants them to. You can watch them being made through the window. You will buy more than you intended.



La Bonne Mère

Before you leave the city, climb to Notre-Dame de la Garde. Known to every Marseillais simply as la Bonne Mère, the Good Mother, this Romano-Byzantine basilica sits on the highest natural point in the city, 157 meters above the port, and has watched over Marseille, its sailors, and its fishing fleet since a small chapel was first built here in 1214. The current basilica, completed in the 1890s, is crowned by an eleven-meter gilded bronze statue of the Virgin that can be seen from almost anywhere in the city and from far out to sea. For eight centuries, sailors departing Marseille looked up at her. Those who returned safely came back to give thanks.

What makes the interior extraordinary is not the gold mosaics or the Byzantine architecture, though both are striking. It is the ex-votos. Votive offerings cover the walls in dense, layered rows: paintings of ships in distress, model vessels hanging from the ceiling vaults, plaques left by survivors of shipwrecks, accidents, and illnesses, each one a small, intensely private act of gratitude made public. Most depict maritime disasters, as you would expect in a city where the sea has always been both livelihood and threat. But there are also paintings of car accidents, railway disasters, and one, apparently, inspired by the events of May 1968. An Olympique de Marseille flag was left after a championship victory. Taken as a whole, the collection is an oddly secular history of the people of Marseille, written not by historians but by the people themselves, on the walls of a church. It is one of the most quietly remarkable rooms in France.

The view from the terrace is the finest in the city. The entire coastline, the calanques, the îles du Frioul, the Château d'If, and the white limestone hills stretching north and east: all of it spread below you in the light of the south. It is the kind of view that makes you understand, without anyone explaining it, why this city exists where it does.

Then go eat bouillabaisse.



Bouillabaisse: A Sermon in Two Courses

I will say this plainly: bouillabaisse is not fish soup. It is not a chowder, not a bisque, not a “hearty seafood stew” as it is described on too many menus from here to Minneapolis. It is a specific dish, born on this specific coastline, built on a specific ritual, and it rewards patience and appetite in equal measure.

The name tells you how to cook it. Bouille means to boil hard. Baisse means to lower. In old Provençal, boui abaisso means to boil fiercely for a few minutes and then reduce the heat. The hard boil is not accidental; it amalgamates the oil and broth the way whisking brings together oil and vinegar into a vinaigrette. The liquid becomes unified and viscous, thickened further by flecks of fish protein and the gelatin released from the milled rockfish. That food mill is the secret. That is where the soul of the dish lives.

A proper bouillabaisse arrives in two courses. First, the broth: deeply saffron-colored, pungent and aromatic, poured over garlic-rubbed croutons with grated Gruyère and rouille alongside. You eat this slowly. You accept second helpings without being asked twice. Then, and only then, does the fish arrive, presented whole on a platter, filleted tableside, served in a shallow pool of that same remarkable broth.

I once wrote that eating bouillabaisse is a carefully choreographed religious ceremony, requiring twenty-four hours of notice and preparation, whose consumption is performed in two sacred rites ending with genuflection to the sacred cauldron. I stand by those words with more conviction today than when I first wrote them.



Where to Eat It

In Marseille, two restaurants have earned the right to serve it.



Chez Fonfon sits at the edge of the Vallon des Auffes, a tiny, almost implausibly picturesque fishing port tucked beneath the Corniche. Fishing nets hang from the walls. The terrace hovers over the water. Fonfon has been

servicing bouillabaisse since 1952, and the kitchen does not improvise. The broth arrives with the weight and authority of a dish that has been made the same way, in the same place, for seven decades. Order nothing else. You will not have room, and besides, nothing else is the point.



L'Esplai du Grand Bar des Goudes sits in the small fishing hamlet of Les Goudes, and the name says everything about its attitude. L'Esplai translates loosely as "the spot," the kind of secret fishing hole every fisherman keeps to himself. There is nothing precious about the place. It is unpretentious in the way that only restaurants absolutely confident in what they do can afford to be.

Bouillabaisse here is a play in five acts. It begins when the waiter carries the raw fish to your table to show you what was caught that morning by the restaurant's own fisherman, whose boat you can see bobbing in the harbor just outside the window. Act two brings the basket of toasted bread, raw garlic cloves, rouille, and grated cheese. You rub the garlic over the croutons yourself. You drop a hefty spoonful of rouille on top. A word of warning: rouille is a sneaky devil. It tastes so good you will want to smear it on everything, including a few bites on its own. It will also fill you up with ruthless efficiency if you are not careful, and you have a long way to go.

Act three is the soupière, a massive tureen brimming with what Curnonsky famously called "La Soupe d'Or," the golden soup. The broth arrives saffron-

hued and viscous, specked with milled rockfish, and you ladle as much as you like. Then the fish, poached whole in that same broth, is filleted tableside and presented alongside a quantity of boiled potatoes that will seem optimistic at the time.

By act five you will be groaning softly, unbuckling your belt, and trying to remember why you ordered profiteroles. Order the profiteroles anyway. My cousin André will tell you to, and he is right about most things.

Eating bouillabaisse at L'Esplai reconnects me with my Marseille roots every time I come back. It has become a ritual. Les Goudes, the restaurant, the fisherman's boat, the rouille, the golden broth: this is what I came for. This is what you came for too, even if you did not know it yet.

One final and important note. At both Fonfon and L'Esplai, bouillabaisse must be reserved at least two days in advance. The kitchen requires time to source the fish, prepare the broth, and perform all the necessary rituals. There is also, one suspects, a fisherman who needs to be located, persuaded, and pointed in the right direction. Plan accordingly. A trip to Marseille without bouillabaisse is just a long drive to a noisy city.

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The Garrigue: Provence Before It Was Bottled and Sold

Somewhere between the coast and the high plateau, Provence reveals its true character. It does not announce itself with a landmark or a view. It announces itself with a smell.

The garrigue is the wild, sun-scorched scrubland that covers the limestone hills and plateaus of Provence, and it smells like nothing else on earth. Thyme, rosemary, lavender, and wild herbs you cannot name all bake together under the same relentless sun, releasing an aroma so concentrated that your first encounter with it will stop you in your tracks. Roll down the windows. Pull over if you have to. This is the scent of Provence before anyone thought to put it in a small bottle and sell it in an airport gift shop.

The garrigue is not pretty in the conventional sense. It is scrubby and dry, the color of dust and silver-green, the vegetation low and tenacious in the way that things growing in poor soil and fierce heat learn to be. In summer the cicadas are deafening. The heat radiates off the white rock. The light is so sharp it seems to have an edge to it.

But walk into it for ten minutes and you will understand why Provençal cooking tastes the way it does. The lamb here grazes on wild thyme. The honey carries it. The olive oil suggests it. The garrigue is not a backdrop to

Provençal food; it is the source of it.

There is no restaurant to book here, no admission to pay, no best time to visit listed in any guidebook. You simply stop the car on any back road between Marseille and the Luberon, step out into the heat, and breathe. The garrigue will do the rest.

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Valensole: Purple as Far as You Can Imagine



From the garrigue, the road climbs onto the Valensole plateau, a broad, high plain above the Durance valley that in late June and early July turns a color that stops conversation. Row after row of lavender stretches to the horizon, ruler-straight, the purple so saturated and the light so specific that your first instinct will be to wonder if someone has adjusted the contrast. They have not. This is simply what Provence looks like in summer.

The painters knew it first. Cézanne spent decades circling this landscape, obsessed with its geometry and light. Van Gogh, during his time at the asylum in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, painted the fields and hills with the urgent, electric brushwork of a man trying to capture something that kept shifting. Monet came south chasing the light. What drew them all was the same thing that will stop you at the side of the road: the quality of light in Provence is not like light anywhere else. It has a clarity and intensity that makes color look like color for the first time.

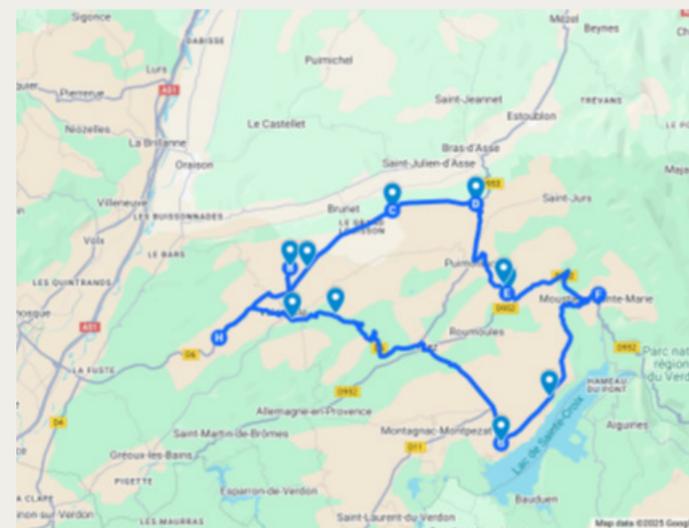
The lavender fields of Valensole are at their peak from mid-June through mid-July, and the window is shorter than you think. Come too early and the rows are green. Come too late and the harvest crews have already moved through. The first two weeks of July are, in most years, the sweet spot.

Between the lavender you will also find sunflowers, particularly along the road from Puimoisson toward Moustiers-Sainte-Marie, where tall yellow fields stand alongside the purple in a combination that would have made Van Gogh put down his breakfast and reach for a canvas.

Get there early in the morning or return in the evening. The midday light is harsh, the heat is brutal, and the tour buses have already claimed the obvious viewpoints. The lavender haze that settles over the plateau during the hottest hours is beautiful in person but unforgiving to a camera. Between six-thirty and ten in the evening, when the sun drops toward the western horizon and bathes the rows in warm amber, is when the fields reveal what the painters were trying to tell you.

A Few Notes for Photographers

The linear perspective of the lavender rows is the great gift of this landscape. Use it. Position yourself low and let the rows pull the eye toward the horizon or toward whatever sits at the end of them: a stone farmhouse, a lone almond tree, a distant range of hills. The geometry is already there; your job is to find the angle that makes it sing.



Five locations are worth knowing. Along the D8 between Valensole and Puimoisson, the fields sprawl east with a row of trees providing natural perspective. Nearby, a lavender field lines up with a stone cottage and a tree standing in a wheat field, a composition so Provençal it looks staged. Along the Route de Manosque (D6), fields roll over hilltops toward the sunset, ideal in the last hour of light. The road to Mas St. Andrieux delivers sunflowers and lavender side by side, with an old stone cottage that faces directly into the setting sun. Further along the Route de Riez, fields push toward the mountains with enough distance from the village to escape light pollution, making it the best spot for star trails above the rows.

For a map with exact locations and GPS coordinates, visit The Wandering Lens guide to photographing the lavender fields of Valensole. Load the coordinates into your phone before you leave the hotel.

Do not walk into the fields. The farmers have understandably grown tired of visitors trampling their crop for portraits. Shoot from the edges and roadsides. The best compositions are almost always found from exactly there.

One last piece of advice: lower your expectations for the rest of the day. Nothing that follows the lavender fields will seem particularly impressive, and that is entirely appropriate.

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Gorges du Verdon: The Canyon Nobody Told You About



Somewhere between Valensole and Moustiers, the landscape tears itself open. The Gorges du Verdon is Europe's answer to the Grand Canyon, a twenty-five kilometer gash in the limestone plateau carved by the Verdon river, in places over seven hundred meters deep. Most Americans who stumble upon it are quietly furious that nobody mentioned it sooner.

The color of the water is the first thing that will stop you. It is an impossible turquoise, the kind of color that makes you check your sunglasses to see if they are tinted. They are not. The Verdon runs clear and cold off the alpine plateau above, and the limestone gives it a blue-green luminescence that seems lit from within. Standing on the rim and looking down at it is one of those moments that recalibrates your sense of scale.

The drive along the rim road, the Route des Crêtes on the north side or the Corniche Sublime on the south, is among the most dramatic roads in France. It is narrow, spectacular, and not entirely forgiving of inattention. Keep your eyes on the road and pull over at the belvederes when you want to look. There are enough of them that you will not miss anything.

But do not stay in the car.

The Sentier Martel is the great walk of the Verdon, a full-day traverse along the bottom of the canyon following the river through tunnels, over footbridges, and past walls of limestone that rise vertically on both sides. It is not a casual stroll. You will need proper shoes, water, a headlamp for the tunnels, and a reasonable tolerance for heights. What you will get in return is a view of the gorge that the people standing on the rim above cannot imagine. The light at the bottom in the morning, when it first catches the water and the canyon walls, is worth every blister.

For something less committed, the Lac de Sainte-Croix at the western end of the gorge offers a gentler introduction. Rent a paddleboat at Les Salles-sur-Verdon and paddle up into the mouth of the canyon, where the walls close in around you and the turquoise deepens. The water is calm, clear, and swimmable, and on a hot July afternoon there is nowhere better to be. Children love it. Adults who have just survived the rim road love it even more.

If you prefer to swim without the pedaling, the small beaches along the Verdon between the gorge and the lake offer spots to wade in and float on your back staring up at several hundred meters of limestone cliff. This requires no planning, no reservation, and no equipment. Just stop the car when you see water, and get in.

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Moustiers-Sainte-Marie: The Village That Hung a Star

The road into Moustiers-Sainte-Marie arrives without warning. One moment you are on an open plateau, and then the village appears, stacked improbably against a cliff face, split by a narrow ravine, with a waterfall threading through it and a small Romanesque chapel clinging to a notch in the rock three hundred meters above. It looks like something a medieval painter invented to fill the background of a larger scene. It is entirely real.

Moustiers is known for two things: its faïence pottery, the hand-painted earthenware produced here since the seventeenth century that fills every shop window in town, and the star. Stretched on a chain between the two cliff faces above the village, suspended two hundred meters in the air, hangs

a gilded star roughly a meter and a half across. It has been there, in one form or another, since the fourteenth century.



The story goes that a knight from Moustiers, a member of the Blacas family, was captured during the Crusades and spent years in a Saracen prison. He vowed that if he was ever released, he would hang a star above his village as an offering of thanks. He was released. He hung the star. Whether the story is entirely true, mostly true, or simply too good to challenge is a question best left to the historians. The star has been replaced several times, fallen in storms, been re-hung, and remains one of those small, stubborn mysteries that give old villages their gravity.

The Morning Market

The market in Moustiers is exactly what a Provençal market should be and rarely is anymore: small enough to navigate in twenty minutes, serious enough to mean it. Farmers from the surrounding plateau bring lavender honey, fresh goat cheese, dried herbs, tapenade, early summer vegetables, and, in season, the fat white asparagus from the Crau plain that the French treat with the reverence normally reserved for truffles. The honey deserves special attention. Lavender honey from the Valensole plateau has a floral intensity that supermarket honey does not prepare you for. Buy more than you think you need. You will give some as gifts and regret that you did.

The Climb

The path begins at the top of the village and ascends through scrub oak and rosemary, switch backing up the cliff face to the Chapelle Notre-Dame-de-Beauvoir, built into the rock notch above town. It is not a long hike, perhaps twenty minutes, but it is steep and the footing is uneven. Wear shoes that grip. The chapel dates to the ninth century in its earliest form, though most of what stands today is twelfth century. It has been a pilgrimage site for over a thousand years, and on the feast of the Assumption in August, the village processes up the path by torchlight.

What the climb gives you, beyond the chapel and the votive offerings left by centuries of pilgrims, is the view. From the notch you can see the rooftops of Moustiers below, the plateau beyond, the shimmer of the Lac de Sainte-Croix in the distance, and on a clear day the Verdon gorge cutting through the limestone. It is the kind of view that makes the previous two weeks of travel suddenly cohere into a single image.

Come down slowly. Stop at one of the café terraces in the village square for a pastis or a coffee. Watch the potters in their workshop windows. Buy the honey. Argue pleasantly about whether to have lunch now or wait another hour. Wait the hour. You are in Provence. There is no reason to rush anything.

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A Few Things Worth Knowing Along the Way

The Weekly Markets

Every village in Provence holds a weekly market, and if you are staying for any length of time you will begin to organize your days around them. This is not a suggestion. It is what happens. The markets are morning affairs, setting up at dawn and gone by one in the afternoon. They sell what the surrounding country produces: fruit and vegetables still warm from the field, goat cheese in various stages of defiance, olives, tapenade, honey, saucisson, herbs tied in bundles, and wine sold by people who made it. Bring a basket. Bring cash. Arrive early.

Two markets anchor the week. The Sunday market at L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue is the largest in the Luberon, sprawling through the streets and along the quays of the Sorgue river. The town is sometimes called the Venice of Provence, which is an exaggeration in exactly the right direction: canals, moss-covered waterwheels, and on Sunday mornings several hundred stalls selling food, antiques, and enough bric-a-brac to furnish a chateau or a very ambitious attic. You will arrive intending to buy cheese and leave carrying a cheese,

a 1920s enamel sign, and a set of Provençal bowls you did not need. The Wednesday morning market in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence is smaller, calmer, and more purely local. The produce is exceptional.



If you can arrange it, book a market tour with Ashley Tinker of Curious Provence, a Canadian transplant who has worked the stalls for years and knows every vendor by name. She will skip the tourist stalls and steer you to the good stuff, and midway through the tour she pulls a folding table out of nowhere and sets up an impromptu picnic with chilled rosé, real glasses, and everything she has been quietly collecting from vendors along the way. It is one of the best meals you will eat in Provence and none of it involves a kitchen.

Ashley also rents a lovely two-bedroom property called La Picholine, and guests who stay there get first priority for her tours. Check curiousprovence.com for availability.

Afterward, walk to the asylum of Saint-Paul-de-Mausole, where Van Gogh spent a year painting with an intensity that still feels present in the light around the town. Other markets worth building a day around: Arles on Wednesday and Saturday, Apt on Saturday, Forcalquier on Monday, Aix-en-Provence on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday.



Lunch at Le Bistrot du Paradou

In the Alpilles between Saint-Rémy and Les Baux-de-Provence, the Bistrot du Paradou sits behind baby blue shutters on the narrow D17, a road lined with plane trees that bear more notch marks than a Wild West gunslinger's pistol. There is one prix fixe menu: starter, main course, cheeseboard, dessert, with wine and coffee included.

There is no wine list, just an open bottle already waiting on every table. When we asked for one, the waiter laughed. "But you already have wine, why do you need a list?" The main course changes daily but repeats weekly. Wednesday is cassoulet day. Other days bring spit-roasted Bresse chicken, aioli, or local Alpilles lamb perfumed with the garrigue herbs growing wild in the surrounding hills. The cheeseboard arrives on a giant wicker platter with jams and fruit macerated in brandy, and it is seemingly forgotten at your table, allowing you to indulge until your conscience intervenes.

Peter Mayle wrote about it. Heston Blumenthal has called it a formative influence. Neither of them captures what makes it work, which is the air of

conviviality: open bottles, family-style salads, a dining room full of regulars who called at the beginning of the week to find out what was coming, and a bottle of rum left tableside with your baba au rhum so you can dose it to your own desires. We went back twice more that same week. Reservations by telephone only: +33 (0)4 90 54 32 70.

A Truffle Hunt at Les Pastras

If you want to get your hands into Provence rather than simply look at it, drive to Les Pastras. Johann and Lisa Pepin run an organic farm on a desolate hilltop near Cadenet in the Luberon. Johann will caution you that thieves are everywhere. He is not entirely joking. Secrecy is the first principle of the truffle business, and Johann observes it with the theatrical gravity of a man who knows a good story is worth protecting.



What follows is a three-hour education in truffles: how the oaks are inoculated (one gram of truffle contains over a million spores), why the success rate is only about twenty-five percent (and you wait seven to ten years to find out), why pigs were replaced by dogs (the signature scent of a truffle is chemically identical to that of a pig in heat, which leads to exactly the complications you are imagining), and how Johann's dogs Eclair and Mirabelle find truffles as a game of hide and seek, rewarded with bits of jambon cru and cheese. The hunt ends at the farmhouse with shaved truffle on buttered tartines, truffle over pools of golden olive oil, and bottomless Champagne.

You can also adopt one of Johann's truffle trees and receive an annual shipment of truffles delivered to your door, which is the sort of arrangement that makes you feel tremendously sophisticated right up until you explain it to your accountant. In September they run grape stomps: you pick the grapes yourself, climb barefoot into an oak barrel, and stomp them while Johann narrates the finer points of the harvest and Lisa pours rosé for the spectators. You will feel like a character in a Pagnol novel. You will look like a character in an I Love Lucy episode. Both feelings are correct. A visit to Les Pastras is a must-do for any real holiday in Provence.

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Pastis: The Milk of Provence

There is a drink in Provence that is not quite an aperitif, not quite a way of life, and not quite responsible for everything that happened after lunch. It is all three of these things simultaneously. It is pastis, and you will not understand the south of France without it.

Pastis is an anise-flavored spirit, pale gold in the bottle and a cloudy, luminous yellow when water is added, which it always is. The transformation when cold water hits the glass is called the louche, a milky bloom that spreads through the liquid like a small weather event. This is why the Provençaux call it le lait de Provence, the milk of Provence. They are not being entirely serious, but they are not entirely joking either.

The history of pastis begins, as many good stories do, with a ban. Absinthe, the stronger anise spirit that preceded it, was outlawed in France in 1915 on the grounds that it was destroying the moral fiber of the nation. The nation survived, but the distillers needed something to do. Paul Ricard, a young Marseillais entrepreneur with an instinct for marketing and an apparently inexhaustible supply of confidence, launched his pastis in 1932 with the slogan "the real pastis of Marseille." Pernod followed. The two companies eventually merged into Pernod Ricard, which today is one of the largest spirits producers in the world. All of this because someone banned absinthe.

For most of the twentieth century, pastis meant Ricard or Pernod, and in most Provençal cafés it still does. But in recent years a quiet revolution has been underway in the back rooms of small distilleries across the region. Artisan producers are making pastis the way it was presumably made before industrialization smoothed away all the interesting edges: with wild garrigue herbs, hand-harvested star anise, local liquorice root, and enough aromatic complexity to make the big commercial brands taste like they were designed by a committee, which they were. Look for small-batch producers in the village markets. Ask the bartender what he drinks when nobody is ordering. The answer is usually more interesting than the menu.



How to Drink It

Pastis is drunk before meals, during meals if the meal is going well, and occasionally instead of meals, though this last application is not officially recommended. The ratio is roughly one part pastis to five parts cold water. Never warm. Never without ice. Never in a hurry. The ritual is part of the pleasure: the slow addition of water, the louche blooming through the glass, the first cold sip that tastes simultaneously of anise, herbs, summer heat, and the contentment of having nowhere pressing to be. This is not a drink you gulp.

It is also, and this cannot be stressed enough, a drink that deceives. Pastis tastes light and refreshing, which it is. It is also forty-five percent alcohol, which it also is. The combination of afternoon heat, good company, a shaded terrace, and the third glass of something that tastes like a sophisticated lemonade has undone more careful travel itineraries than any closed museum or missed train. You will feel perfectly fine right up until the moment you stand up. Plan accordingly.

The correct accompaniment, accepted without debate throughout Provence, is potato chips. Not olives, not charcuterie, not anything requiring effort or a plate. Potato chips, ideally slightly salted, in a small bowl beside the glasses. The combination of cold, anise-clouded pastis and a salty chip is one of those accidental culinary discoveries that no chef would ever put on a menu and that no serious food writer would admit to loving as much as they do. I am admitting it now.

Pétanque

Pastis and pétanque belong together the way lavender and bees do. Pétanque, the Provençal game of boules, is played on any flat gravel surface, requires two to six players, demands no particular athletic ability, and is significantly more competitive than it appears from a distance. The object is to land your metal boule closest to the small wooden target ball, the cochonnet, or piglet, while knocking your opponent's boules out of the way. Simple in theory. Ferociously argued in practice.

The greatest indignity in pétanque is the fanny. If a player loses thirteen to zero without scoring a single point, they are said to have taken the fanny, and in certain villages this still requires the loser to kiss a painted image of a woman's backside nailed to the wall of the nearest café. The origins of this tradition are disputed. Its continued existence is not. Lose badly enough and someone will point you toward the wall.



Find a shaded square, watch a game, order a pastis, eat the chips, and do not stand up too quickly. This is Provence at its most essential, and it costs almost nothing.

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A Last Word

Provence does not reveal itself all at once. It parcels itself out slowly: in the smell of the garrigue through an open car window, in the first spoonful of broth at L'Esplai, in the light on the lavender at seven in the evening when everyone else has gone back to their hotel. It is a place that rewards the unhurried and quietly defeats the itinerary-obsessed.

You will come back. This is not a prediction so much as a diagnosis. Something will snag you: a village, a wine, the way the mistral drops suddenly and leaves the air so clear you can see the Alps from the rim of the Verdon. You will find yourself, months later, in a supermarket in another country, picking up a jar of lavender honey and standing there longer than is strictly necessary.

Provence has been doing this to people for a very long time. The Romans built aqueducts here and apparently never wanted to leave. Van Gogh arrived and painted faster than he had ever painted in his life. Peter Mayle

came for a year and stayed for decades. The common thread is not the food, though the food is extraordinary. It is not the light, though the light is like nowhere else. It is the combination of beauty, stubbornness, and deep contentment that this place produces in everyone who spends enough time in it.

Go slowly. Eat everything. Reserve the bouillabaisse two days in advance. Do not stand up too quickly after the pastis.

You will be fine. Better than fine, actually.

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The Recipes



Bouillabaisse (Serves 6–8)

Swimming with the Fish

The fish list below would almost certainly give a person from Marseille a heart attack. That said, the principle matters more than strict orthodoxy. What you need is balance: a rockfish for soul and depth, a flaky white fish to melt into the broth, and a firm fish that holds its shape. Stay well clear of oily fish such as salmon, which have no business in this pot and will only confuse matters.

If you are fortunate enough to live in a large city, or near Montreal, where rascasse and its proper companions can still be found, then use them and do not ask questions. On more than one occasion I have smuggled a cooler of fish back over the border to Vermont. Short of that, you may occasionally encounter a daurade or a stray loup de mer turning up on this side of the Atlantic, having lost its way but not its dignity. If one finds its way into your kitchen, take it as a small act of grace and carry on.

Ingredients

- 2 lb (900 g) monkfish on the bone
- 2 lb (900 g) whole rockfish or red snapper
- 3 lb (1.4 kg) halibut on the bone, lingcod on the bone, or striped bass
- 1 lb (450 g) mussels or clams
- 1 cup (240 ml) olive oil
- ½ cup (120 ml) pastis
- ½ cup (25 g) chopped fennel fronds
- 2 teaspoons saffron

Instructions

1. Combine all the fish with the olive oil, pastis, fennel fronds, and saffron. Let marinate while you prepare the broth. A few hours is fine, but overnight is better.

The Soul of Bouillabaisse: The Broth

This is the secret. This is where the soul lives. Take out your food mill, the one you last used during an ill-advised baby food phase, and mill everything: fish, bones, vegetables. Press until nothing more can be extracted. Some will casually suggest a blender, usually people who have never had to explain themselves to a Provençal fisherman. A blender shreds rather than presses, whipping protein into the liquid and leaving you with a broth freckled by floating debris. The food mill applies patience and gravity. What passes through is smooth, dense, and properly emulsified: the difference between a broth that looks composed and one that looks as though it lost a small argument along the way.

Ingredients

- ½ cup (120 ml) olive oil
- 1 head garlic, roughly chopped (no need to peel)
- 2 sweet onions, sliced

- 1 fennel bulb, sliced
- 4 large ripe tomatoes, chopped, or one 28 oz (800 g) tin San Marzano tomatoes
- 2 bay leaves
- 1 large pinch saffron
- 1 strip dried orange peel
- Red pepper flakes or a small hot pepper
- 4 lb (1.8 kg) small rockfish
- ½ cup (120 ml) pastis
- 2 cups (480 ml) white wine
- Water or fish stock to cover

Instructions

1. Heat olive oil in a large, non-reactive pot. Add garlic, then onions and fennel, and sauté briefly, about five minutes. Add tomatoes, bay leaves, saffron, dried orange peel, pepper, and rockfish. Add pastis and white wine, cover with water or stock, and boil hard, then simmer for 30 minutes.
2. Ladle everything into a food mill and crank until the solids are pressed dry.

To Serve

- 2 lb (900 g) potatoes, peeled and cut into large chunks
- 1 baguette, sliced and toasted
- 4 garlic cloves, for rubbing the toasted bread
- 1 cup (100 g) grated Gruyère
- 1 cup (240 ml) rouille (recipe follows)

1. Bring the broth back to a rapid boil. Add the potatoes and cook them in the broth for 8 to 10 minutes, allowing them to absorb its flavor. Add the marinated fish and shellfish, return the pot to a boil, then simmer for about 10 minutes.
2. Place toasted baguette slices rubbed with garlic into warmed bowls. Add rouille and grated Gruyère. Ladle broth over the top.
3. Arrange the fish on a platter and let everyone help themselves. Spoon broth over if inclined. Eat with enthusiasm.
4. Drink wine. Argue gently. Be grateful.

Notes

Dried orange peel is easily made by peeling an orange and allowing the peel to dry completely in a dark, well-ventilated place. Drying concentrates the aroma and adds an unmistakable Provençal note.

Richard Olney suggested serving a very young red Bandol, still almost in its infancy. It works beautifully: assertive without bullying the dish. I had always preferred a good Provençal white or rosé, a Domaine Hauvette Jaspe or a Clos Sainte Magdeleine Cassis Blanc. Then I had the opportunity to try an infant Bandol still in the barrel. Once again, Richard is right.

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Rouille

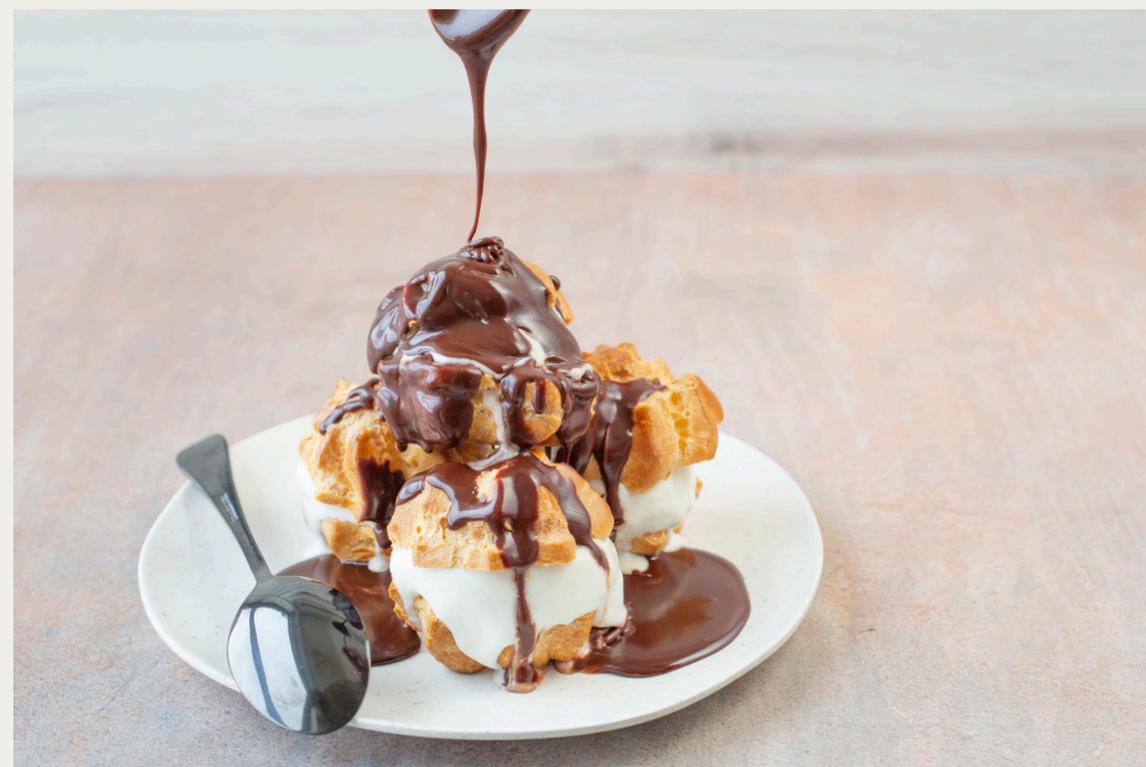
Rouille is the saffron-and-garlic mayonnaise that accompanies bouillabaisse the way a deacon accompanies a bishop: technically optional, practically indispensable, and capable of stealing the show if you are not paying attention. A tablespoon on a crouton is civilized. Four tablespoons eaten directly from the mortar with a piece of bread is what actually happens.

Ingredients

- 4 cloves garlic, peeled
- 1 small dried red chile (piment d'Espelette or cayenne), seeded, or ½ teaspoon cayenne pepper
- 1 generous pinch saffron threads, bloomed in 1 tablespoon warm fish broth or water
- ½ teaspoon fine sea salt
- 1 slice stale white bread, crusts removed, soaked in fish broth and squeezed dry (about 30 g)
- 1 large egg yolk, at room temperature
- ¾ cup (180 ml) extra-virgin olive oil

Instructions

1. In a mortar, pound the garlic, chile, saffron with its liquid, and salt to a smooth paste. This takes a few minutes of honest work. A food processor is faster but produces a slightly less silky result, and the Marseillais will know.
2. Add the soaked bread and pound until fully incorporated.
3. Add the egg yolk and stir until smooth.
4. Begin adding the olive oil in a very thin stream, stirring constantly in one direction, exactly as you would for an aioli. The mixture should thicken steadily. If it begins to look oily or threatens to break, add a few drops of warm water and keep stirring.
5. Continue until all the oil is incorporated. The rouille should be thick, vivid orange-red, and glossy. Taste for salt and heat. It should have a slow, warm burn that builds over three or four bites, not an immediate assault. Makes about 1 cup (240 ml). Keeps refrigerated for 2 days, though it rarely lasts that long.



Chocolate Profiteroles

Yes, it is a cliché. Yes, it is a dish from another decade. Yes, it is really good. Profiteroles are the perfect home dessert, guaranteed to please everyone from small children to grown adults. Once you master the choux paste you can easily make beignets, gougères, and pommes dauphine.

Serves 4

Pâte à Choux

- 1 cup (240 ml) water
- 1 pinch sea salt
- 1 stick (4 oz / 115 g) unsalted butter
- 1 cup (125 g) all-purpose flour
- 4 eggs
- 1 egg, beaten, for egg wash

Chocolate Sauce

- 1 cup (240 ml) water
- ½ cup (120 ml) heavy cream
- 5 oz (140 g) bittersweet chocolate
- 1/2 cup (65 g) sugar

Other

- 1 quart vanilla bean ice cream

Instructions

Pâte à Choux

1. Preheat the oven to 400°F (200°C). Line a rimmed baking sheet with a silicone baking mat or buttered parchment paper.
2. In a large saucepan over medium-high heat, combine the water, butter, and salt. Bring to a rapid boil, stirring as the butter melts. Reduce the heat to medium and stir in the flour all at once with a wooden spoon. Cook, stirring constantly, until the dough dries out slightly, about 1 minute. This is important: excess moisture will cause your puffs to collapse. Remove the pan from the heat and let the dough cool for 5 minutes.
3. Stir in the eggs, one at a time, until fully incorporated before adding the next. You can mix them in with a mixer, a food processor, or a wooden spoon if you want a workout.
4. Place the dough in a pastry bag fitted with a ½-inch plain tip and pipe golf ball-sized puffs onto the prepared baking sheet.
5. Brush the tops lightly with the egg wash and bake for 20 minutes. Reduce the oven to 350°F (175°C) and continue baking until golden brown and dry, about 20 minutes more. Cool on a wire rack.

Chocolate Sauce

1. In a medium saucepan, combine the water, cream, chocolate, and sugar and bring to a boil over medium heat, whisking constantly. Reduce the heat to low and simmer until it develops a sauce-like consistency, 5 to 7 minutes. Keep warm.

To Serve

Cut the cream puffs in half. Fill the bottom half with a spoonful of ice cream, then press the other half on top. Arrange them in a pyramid on a large serving platter. Shower with the warm chocolate sauce at the table and serve.

My cousin André approves this recipe. He approves all dessert recipes. He is right about most things, but about profiteroles he has never once been wrong.

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Addresses

L'Esplai du Grand Bar des Goudes, 28 Rue Désiré Pelapat, Marseille 13008
Chez Fonfon, 140 Vallon des Auffes, Marseille 13007
Chez Étienne, 43 Rue de Lorette, Marseille 13002 — cash only, no reservations, closed Sundays
La Maison du Pastis, 108 Quai du Port, Marseille 13002
Les Navettes des Accoules, 68 Rue Caisserie, Marseille 13002
Le Bistrot du Paradou, 57 Avenue de la Vallée des Baux, Paradou 13520 — reservations by telephone only
Les Pastras, Cadenet 84160 — book by email at lespastras.com
Curious Provence / La Picholine, Mollégès 13940 — market tours and vacation rental, curiousprovence.com