

Delicious provençal food

by Guylaine Idoux

The nourishing sea

In Provence, food is above all the expression of an exceptional tradition, and the Mediterranean Sea is one of its finest jewels, providing quality fish, shellfish and seafood.

There is a Provence that smells of suntan oil. A few strokes out to sea and there is another Provence with the smell of salt and freshly caught fish. This is the Provence of fishermen on deep-sea trawlers and *poin-tus*, small traditional craft for coastal fishing. Every year, they bring back 4,500 tonnes of fish to the quaysides of Provence.

Our tour starts in the most famous fish market in France. On Le Vieux Port in Marseilles, tourists and locals walk up and down the stalls where the most famous species of Provence cuisine are paraded: sea bream, savoured whole or in fillets; red mullet, excellent grilled or cooked in the oven (*en papillote*) and definitely not poached or steamed; sole, delicious when it is cooked Provençal style, fried with tomatoes, aubergines and *fines herbes*; then scorpion fish and rainbow wrasse, essential for *bouillabaisse* (see box)... There are also those little blue-tinted fish

that divers meet in tight shoals, sardines! An integral part of the *Midi*, this delicately-flavoured fish is a symbol. Popular and inexpensive, sardines have made it to the tables of major chefs who are rediscovering its delicate flavour, grilled, fried or cooked in the oven. It is also excellent canned: in Port-Saint-Louis-du-Rhône (73 km to the west of Marseilles), there is the only sardine canning plant on the French Mediterranean, Ferrigno, producing 17 million cans a year.

Provençal food is a way of life. In the summer, don't miss the giant sardine



Le Vieux-Port

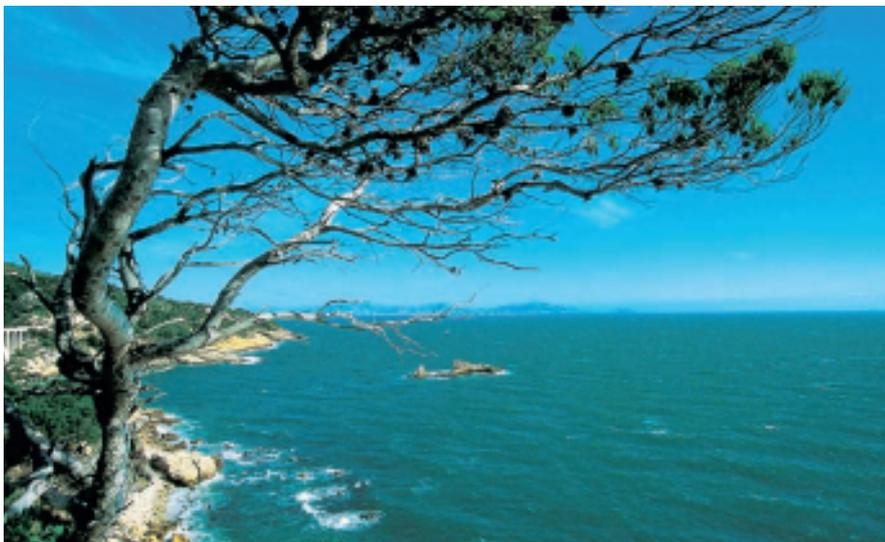
J. BOUTHILLIER

NOT SO POOR BOUILLABAISSE

Who would have believed it? The dish invented by fishermen to use up leftovers is now one of the most sought-after dishes there is. Loads of chefs have tried it, including Gérard Passédat, the three-Michelin star chef at the Petit Nice Passédat (Marseilles) who has come up with a brilliant post-modern version. It was nevertheless originally a poor dish for fishermen who put a few fish to one side for their family from those destined for sale. It is now difficult to find a decent version at less than €50. Our favourite address is the Miramar on the Vieux Port in Marseilles (see addresses). Successor to the Minguella brothers, the joint founders of the official "Bouillabaisse Charter" in 1980, young Chef Christian Buffa produces a bouillabaisse in the traditional way: fish one side, soup the other, on a stove. Gurnard, weewers, scorpion fish, John Dory, anglerfish, conger eels, whiting and bass are cut up by waiters in black livery in front of guests that taste it accompanied by *rouille source* or *aioli* and croutons rubbed in garlic. A delight.

BOTTARGA OR THE CAVIAR OF THE SEA

If Bouillabaisse was a poor man's dish for many years, bottarga has always been considered a luxury. Rare and expensive (€150 a kilo) it is made in Martigues, 40 km to the west of Marseilles, using salted fish eggs, those of the female mullet, a local fish that lives in the fresh water of the Etang de Berre. The egg pockets are recovered intact, soaked in salt a few hours and then dried for several days. Cut up into thin slices, the Mediterranean caviar is served on toast as an aperitif.



Côte Bleue

ADDRESSES

Fish market

Vieux Port metro exit
13001 Marseille - France
Daily from 8 a.m. to midday

Le Miramar

12 quai du Port
13002 Marseille - France
Tel: +33 (0)4 91 91 10 40
www.bouillabaisse.com

Sardinerie Ferrigno

Z.I., BP 69
13 Port-Saint-Louis-du-Rhône
France
Tel: +33 (0)4 42 86 00 91
www.ferrignosa.com

Poissonnerie de la Plage

(one of the rare bottarga specialists)
39 boulevard du 14.Juillet
13500 Martigues - France
Tel: +33 (0)4 42 80 44 22

Lou Mujou

Anse Auban
Quai des sardiniers
13 110 Port de Bouc - France
Tel: +33 (0)4 42 06 10 77
www.poutargue.com

D. GORGEON

festivals, great barbecues organised on the quays. There will be time afterwards to explore lovely little seaside villages on the rock and limestone Côte Bleue with magnificent creeks. In Carry-le-Rouet and Sausset-les-Pins, the speciality is sea urchins, cracked open like a boiled egg to feast on their delicate orange coral. It's quite simple, and even more delicious with a Cassis dry white wine in vineyards that look out over the sea.

The rocky coastline softens to the west, sliding towards the sandy coastline of the Languedoc. Our last stopping place in Provence, with Camargue beaches where

the Mediterranean leaves countless gifts: wedge-shell clams, small delicately-rounded shellfish that fishermen pick up by hand. People in Provence eat them slightly browned with butter and parsley. And it is just as the shells start to open in the pan and give off the delicate flavour of the sea that the Provençal magic is best expressed. ■



Bouillabaisse basket

OTCM ADD

CALENDAR

Sea urchin festival

January weekends in Carry-le-Rouet (www.carry-lerouet.com) and February weekends in Sausset-les-Pins. (www.ville-sausset-les-pins.fr). Large tables for eating freshly caught sea urchins outdoors.

Sardine festival

Every summer evening on the Renaissance port in Port-de-Bouc and on the Toulmond car park in Martigues.