

Drinks

An insider's guide to Paris, The Rhône Valley

When I think of wine travelling in France, the usual suspects come to mind: Bordeaux, Burgundy, Champagne. Like most wine lovers, I gravitate towards the familiar... regions whose names I hear most often, wines I know most about.

Through the Grapevine

Christine Carroll

This spring Crossing Vineyards and Winery hosted a trip to one of France's less familiar wine areas: The Rhône Valley. Don't get me wrong.

Champagne and Burgundy are amazing places to visit. But our recent tour of the Northern and Southern Rhône Valleys surprised and delighted us with beautiful scenery and great food and introduced us to a whole new world of wonderful wines.

Our adventure began in Paris. This was our third trip to The City of Lights, but the first time we'd ever experienced Paris in the springtime. I have one word of advice: Go!

Insider Tip: "Summer hours" for many of the main attractions in Paris begin in April; so May visitors enjoy a longer touring day (not to mention more hours of daylight... the sun doesn't set until after 10 p.m.)

We were pleasantly surprised by the lack of crowds: reasonable lines at The Louvre, open benches in The Tuilerie and Luxembourg Gardens, plenty of seats on the top deck of L'Open Tourbus. The scarcity of tourists may have been due to the abysmal dollar-euro ratio this spring, (\$1.58-1EU), but the comfort we enjoyed made it a bargain.

On day 2 we took the TGV (high speed bullet train) to Lyon, which marks the beginning of the Northern Rhône Valley.

Insider Tip: The TGV is the only way to go. The train is prompt, comfortable and spotlessly clean. The trip from Paris to Lyon took about 2 hours. (We booked first class tickets. Reservations are necessary.)

The highlight of our trip to Lyon was a cooking class at Paul Bocuse Institute. Our group enjoyed a private session with Cyril Bosviel, a talented young chef with a good sense of humor, an essential qualification for dealing with the "cooking rookies" from Crossing Vineyards.

After being offered "hot dog vendor" hats and disposable paper smocks to designate our lowly status, Chef Cyril helped us prepare an appetizer, entrée and dessert. We enjoyed the fruits of our labors and left with certificates acknowledging the successful completion of our class.

Insider Tip: Private cooking classes at Bocuse are expensive. Opt instead for dinner at the Institute in the student-run restaurant "Saisons."



The wine highlight of our Northern Rhône tour was the visit to Condrieu, a small appellation legendary for its Viognier.

If you go, three excellent wineries to visit are: Domaine Gérin (rude owner, great wine), Domaine Mouton Père et Fils (a family-owned business... charming, hospitable people...) and Domaine du Monteillet.

Insider Tip: My favorite wine from Condrieu was a non-vintage sparkling Viognier: Grand Vin Mousseaux, Fortuna, Reserve du Monteillet (Domaine du Monteillet). Good luck finding it in the States.

Next we travelled via TGV to Avignon, then on to the town of Arles, famous for its Roman ruins and Van Gogh's paintings. We used this location as our home base for visiting Châteauneuf de Pape and Provence.

We did an olive oil tasting at Moulin St. Michel in Mouriès, a small, picturesque village at the foot of Les Alpilles in the heart of the Vallée des Baux. The product was good, but the experience disappointing.

Insider Tip: Don't miss the Marché (Saturday Market) in Arles. All things Provençal can be found here... from freshly butchered meats to homemade croissants to fruits and vegetables picked that morning. Hundreds of local vendors sell their wares, including linens, spices, soaps and olive oils. Plan to spend the morning there.

Another highlight of the trip was our visit to Châteauneuf du Pape.

We enjoyed a close to perfect experience at Domaine de Cristia, where vigneron Baptiste Grangeon took us through a tasting of numerous vintages. Our favorite was a 2006 Vieilles Vignes (Old Vines), a traditional Châteauneuf du Pape blend of Grenache, Syrah, Mourvedre.

Insider Tip: For great regional food and wine (and a spectacular view) have lunch at Le Verger des Papes, a restaurant in Châteauneuf du Pape.

I think of sunflowers and lavender when I think of Provence. Instead we found acres of poppies that would put Van Gogh's paintings to shame. Provence lived up to my every expectation. It's charming, romantic, beautiful. In short, I understand why Peter Mayle (author of A Year in Provence) came for a vacation and never left.

We toured the Luberon Valley and had a memorable lunch at La Ferme de la Huppe, a tiny farmhouse in the town of Gordes. Our leisurely meal occupied an entire Sunday afternoon.

Insider Tip: When visiting Provence, don't miss the town of Beaugues de Venise. Some of the world's great dessert wines are produced here. We especially enjoyed the Muscat de Beaugues de Venise from Domaine de Durban.

We (reluctantly) ended our stay in Provence with a visit to Tavel, a French appellation known for its rosé wines. We were treated to a private tour and tasting at Domaine Moulin-la-Viguerie by owner Gaël Petit-Roudil, whose family has been making wine in the region since the 15th century. His passion for and pride in his winery reminded

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us of the reasons we decided to get into the wine business in the first place.

Our trip from Avignon back to Paris took four hours on the TGV, but the experience was comfortable and pleasant. We enjoyed the gorgeous countryside with its brilliant blue skies and fields of vibrant poppies while sipping espressos and munching on fresh croissants purchased in the restaurant car on board.

Insider Tip: Hold on to your ticket when you board the TGV. People can sit in the first class car without reservations in hopes that no one will claim their seats. You may need to produce your ticket to get the "squatter" to move. Locals sometimes take advantage of inexperienced travelers who don't speak the language.

We made the most of our remaining two days in Paris.

We took time to tour The Pompidou Center, a modern art museum not far

from our hotel, and The Rodin Museum, where the original sculptures "The Thinker" and "The Kiss" are on display. The rose gardens at The Rodin in May are breathtaking.

We also visited the little known Carnavalet Museum located in The Marais. This attraction is famous for its extensive collection of art from the Revolutionary period.

Don't miss the Palace at Versailles. It was under construction when we visited, but still over-the-top fabulous. Make time to tour the Gardens.

Insider Tip: We made our way around Paris on L'Open Tour Bus. We purchased a two-day pass and hopped on and off at any attraction we wanted.

In spring the buses run until 7 p.m. (The company offers different routes, color coded on the bus map. You can transfer from one line to another and see the entire city.) The Metro is a faster way to get around, but L'Open Tour Bus is much more scenic.

We spent our final night in Paris

enjoying an evening cruise on the Seine. As we watched the sky behind Notre Dame turn pastel pink, we shared a bottle of Côte du Rhône and toasted our romantic adventure.

Just when we thought it couldn't get any better, the lights on the Eiffel Tower started twinkling like thousands of tiny stars. We sighed and sipped our wine. Ah, Paris in the springtime...

We plan to offer more international wine trips as part of Crossing Vineyards' Travel Program and can only hope they will be as memorable as our time in The Rhône Valley.

Quel fabuleux voyage....

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