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Gourmet Celebration in Gascogne

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By Patricia Woeber

After friends told me about their food, wine and culture honeymoon in France, I decided to follow their example. In a rented Renault Clio, I drove west of Toulouse to Gascogne, an area in the Gers departement, Midi-Pyrenees Region in southwestern France. Amid fertile rolling hills lay a land of corn, wheat and grapevines, the air fresh, the light soft.

Gascogne, the ancient name for part of the Gers, enjoys a reputation for exceptional and plentiful food. The Romans acknowledged it as "the granary of the Gauls" for its ample variety of produce, including grapes, vegetables and wild mushrooms, as well as locally raised duck and lamb. River and lake fish add to the plentiful choices. Herbs, spices, garlic and shallots enrich the flavors.

I limited my visit to an eastern section of Gascogne and headed for Auch, the birthplace of d'Artagnan. After a tour, I parked in the nearby medieval village of Montreal, founded in 1255, for lunch at Chez Simone, a casual restaurant with a wonderful reputation.

When Madame Daubin, wife of Chef Bernard Daubin, waited on my table, she poured the aperitif, "a Tariquet from Eauze." I took a sip. When she saw my stunned appreciation, she nodded, smiled and rushed off to return cradling a bottle of white wine that she lovingly set on the table to accompany my scallops in cream sauce.

"Cote Tariquet, a marriage of the exotic nose of Sauvignon and the full body of a generous Chardonnay," she said.

Lunch became a conspiracy of sampling while Madame smilingly watched my responses. Throughout, she approached my table embracing each bottle as if it were precious and poured every glass as if dispensing a treasure. With the next dish, a delicious grilled salmon, she served a fruity, elegant Tariquet, a pure Sauvignon Blanc.

Next came duck with a flavorful glass from Le Ruminant des Vignet produced by Dominique Andiran, also a local winery. And then Madame lovingly poured a prized Tariquet liqueur as a digestif, a late harvest of the local variety Petit Manseng called Dernieres Grives, whose freshness balanced its sweetness.

Chateau du Tariquet's winery, a family-owned property (now held by the third generation of the Grassa family), produces excellent Cotes des Gascogne white wines and Bas-Armagnac brandies. Their 2,200

acres concentrate on notable Chardonnay, Sauvignon and Chenin blends, some renowned for their smoky aromas.

After lunch I took a slow, contented stroll through Montreal's quaint streets and then made the short drive to Seviac to check out the Roman mosaics. Fortunately I had requested that Madame Daubin pour only samples of the wines for me to taste, so I was in good shape for the road.

The next day I headed for Condom for some Maison Ryst-Dupeyron Armagnac created by another family-owned business founded in 1905. Today the founder's great-grandchildren carry on the skilled craft of making outstanding wines and Armagnacs.

Ryst-Dupeyron produces a superb range of these spirits, the specialty of Gascogne. I purchased a bottle labeled Hors d'Age — denoting at least 25 years of age. No wonder this area is known as the land of Armagnac as wineries like this maintain its reputation for the best eau de vie.

In Condom, one-star Michelin Chef Eric Sampietro's restaurant, la Table des Cordeliers, occupies a spacious, beautifully renovated ancient chapel. The meal began with an amuse bouche of green bean mousse over duck, tiny cubed vegetables and sherbet served with Domaine Chiroulet white wine from Larroque near Fources.

For the main course there were three portions of duck: a roasted breast, a grilled leg and foie gras, giving different textures and delicious tastes. The waiter suggested a glass of red Domaine Seailles from Mouchan, a charming old village in the heart of Armagnac country.

The meal ended with a Domaine Berthoumiere Tanatis liqueur, a highly esteemed Madiran with an intense aroma of wild berries produced in the village of Viella.

Back in the rented Renault, I drove through lush fields southeast to Chateau de Monluc. a winery

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By John Blanchette I arrived in Thailand on June 4, Buddha's birthday, his day of enlightenment and the day he reached Nirvana 2,600 years ago. In 2004 I was scheduled to visit Thailand over the Christmas holidays, but the tour was canceled a month ...

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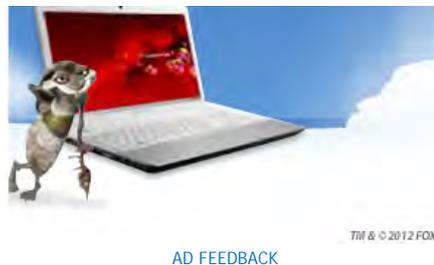
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in Saint-Puy. From the chateau's terrace high on a hill, owner Noel Lassus pointed south across a valley.

"The view shows that the use of land has not changed since the Romans were here more than 20 centuries ago," he said.

Across the valley trees fringed the top of the ridge. In the valley below were fields of corn and wheat. Cattle grazed on the valley floor. Lassus told me his 250 acres of vineyards contained wines brought there by the Romans, who had decided on exactly this spot.



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Chateau de Monluc is well-known as the birthplace of the aperitif Pousse Rapiere, a liqueur made by mixing Armagnac with a blend of oranges and adding white sparkling wine called Vin Sauvage, another of their products. They also produce an esteemed fruity, mellow Gros Manseng and red, rose and white Cotes de Gascogne wines. One favorite is a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Tannat grapes.

This chateau boasts a venerable history: It was first built during the 10th century, rebuilt in the 13th century by King Philip the Bold and then in the 16th century by Blais de Monluc. Visiting royals included English Kings Edward I, I and III, and French Kings Charles VI and VII.

This Midi-Pyrenees region is tucked in east of Aquitaine and west of Languedoc-Roussillon and is home to sophisticated cities such as Toulouse and Albi, groups of fortified medieval villages and a local gastronomy that's recognized throughout France. The town of Auch has a medieval village surrounding the Cathedral Sainte Marie, a UNESCO cultural heritage site known for exceptional 16th century stained-glass windows and 113 carved choir stalls. The town's museum exhibits ceramics and porcelain, Gallo-Roman frescoes, medieval objects and important pre-Columbian art.

As the least populated area of France, this region is not usually done on the usual tourist and package tour itineraries. That makes it even more of a treat to travelers who want to enjoy its wild canyons, great rivers, and fertile rolling hills and farmlands, all against the backdrop of the Pyrenees Mountains.

IF YOU GO

Getting there: Air France flies to Paris with connections to Toulouse: www.airfrance.com.

Places to visit:

For general information from the French Government Tourist Office: www.franceguide.com, www.gers-gascogne.com and www.tourism.midi-pyrenees.org.

Auch: www.auch-tourisme.com

Fources, built in a circle and considered one of the most beautiful villages in France: www.fources.fr.

Condom: A lively market town with a remarkable cathedral: www.tourisme-tenareze.com.

Eauze is known for a museum collection of Gallo-Roman treasures: www.mairie-eauze.fr

Valence-sur-Baise is home to the Flaran Cistercian Abbey from the 12th century, which offers art exhibitions and musical events: www.valence-sur-baise.com.

Where to stay: For budget-priced hotels and bed-and-breakfast inns, contact the Toulouse tourist office at www.ot-toulouse.fr.

Where to eat:

In Montreal, Chez Simone: 33 (0)5 62-29-44-40.

In Condom, Table des Cordeliers: 33 (0)5 62-68-43-82; www.latabledescordeliers.monsite.wanadoo.fr.

Wineries:

Chateau du Tariquet: www.tariquet.com

Ryst-Dupeyron tour and tasting: ryst-dupeyron@wanadoo.france

Patricia Woeber is a freelance travel writer. To read features by other Creators Syndicate writers and cartoonists, visit the Creators Syndicate website at www.creators.com.

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