



Of Land and Sea

Savoring French flavors on a gastronomic trail between Marseille and Dijon.

By Lauren Jade Hill

FOR A TASTE of Marseille, and how its culinary heritage is shaped by the sea, there are few places like **Le Petit Nice Passedat** (*tasting menus from \$255*). Since it opened on the water's edge in 1917, the restaurant has served refined versions of bouillabaisse and other local specialties. But in the hands of Gérald Passedat, the current chef and grandson of the original founder, it has taken seafood to new gastronomic heights—and earned its third Michelin star in 2008.

When I arrived for lunch on a sunny autumn day, I was struck by the setting: an all-white dining room built over the rocky shoreline, with a curved wall of glass that

gives the place the feel of a luxury liner sailing on the Mediterranean. After taking my seat by the window, I ordered the eight-course “Passedat” tasting menu.

Each dish told a story. The amuse-bouche had a seafood broth that was as blue as the cerulean waters outside. The chef's signature dish was steamed sea bass topped with ribbons of zucchini and cucumber, served over a flavorful base of wild fennel, tomatoes, lemon, and a touch of truffle. Passedat named the dish after his grandmother Lucie, who was raised in Quercy, a region

FROM LEFT
“Poissons du Sud,” a dish at Le Petit Nice Passedat, in Marseille; the Old Port in Marseille.

FROM LEFT: RICHARD HAUGHTON/COURTESY OF LE PETIT NICE PASSEADAT; JULIETTE CHARVET





LEFT Chef Gérald Passedat carrying the day's catch to his restaurant.

BELOW Beekeeping at Domaine Michelas St. Jemms.

known for its farming and truffle hunting.

"It's about a way of life that goes back to the region's roots and embraces local products," Passedat told me at the end of the lunch service. He added that he sources 70 types of seafood for his menus, including monkfish, scorpion fish, and lobster caught off Marseille's rugged coast. "I've worked with the local fishermen for many years."

All this may explain why his restaurant is highlighted by the Vallée de la Gastronomie, or the Valley of Gastronomy, a food-and-wine

trail created in 2022 to promote the storied culinary heritage of three regions of France. The 385-mile trail traces a thousand-year-old trade route between Marseille and Dijon that passes through Lyon, arguably the capital of French gastronomy. Foodies and wine lovers can choose their own adventure, with some 500 stops to pick from, including restaurants, wineries, inns, farms, markets, bakeries, chocolatiers, creameries, museums, castles—even a snail breeder. The trail celebrates family-run businesses and small-batch artisans that visitors might not otherwise encounter.

With only three days to spare, I focused on the lower half of the trail. I began my gastronomic road trip in Marseille, where I wandered through narrow streets until I reached the Old Port, the city's historic heart. Boats swayed mast-to-mast and fishermen sold their catch in the fish market. The action mostly takes place around 8 a.m., when the market opens; I arrived later in the morning, but despite the hour, crates piled high with sardines, red mullet, and sole still lined the stone-paved waterfront, a few feet from where the fishermen had moored their vessels.

The following day, I drove north for an hour, on winding roads flanked by yellow fields of late-fall grapevines, until I arrived at Château La Coste, just



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FRANCE À LA CARTE

The Vallée de la Gastronomie lets food lovers plot their own culinary journey between Marseille and Dijon. Here are four more of our picks.

ESCARGOT DES RESTANQUES

Learn all about heliciculture, or snail breeding, at this family-run farm in St. Remèze. Jars of Burgundy snails are ready for purchase.

FERME DU BRÉGALON

This small goat farm in Rognes grows its own animal feed and makes cheeses using traditional methods.

LES ATELIERS WEISS

Craft your own candy bars and nibble to your heart's content at this venerable chocolate factory, founded in 1882 in St.-Étienne.

MOULIN SAINT MICHEL

This ancient mill in Mouriès has been making olive oil the same way since 1744. It also sells tapenade, jams, and other local products.—Denny Lee



outside Aix-en-Provence. The 500-acre estate includes a sculpture park, an art gallery, an organic winery, and a luxurious 28-suite hotel, **Villa La Coste** (*doubles from \$1,068*).

I had gone there to have lunch at **Hélène Darroze à Villa La Coste** (*tasting menus from \$166*), one of six restaurants on the estate. Housed in a glass pavilion, the space overlooks fields of organic vineyards, olive groves, and patches of woodland interspersed with installations by art-world heavyweights such as Louise Bourgeois, Frank Gehry, and Yoko Ono.

Darroze, a French chef who also runs Michelin-starred restaurants in Paris and London, had crafted a menu in which the region's vegetables were cast in



FROM LEFT Lavender fields in the village of Grignan; a melon dish at Hélène Darroze à Villa La Coste; the restaurant, which overlooks Château La Coste's art-filled grounds.

FROM LEFT: BERNHARD WINKELMANN/COURTESY OF HÉLÈNE DARROZE; ANAÏS BOILEAU

starring roles. I ordered a six-course menu, “A Walk into the Gardens of Provence,” that included a mousseline of carrots topped with carrot crisps, served with tandoori-spiced shrimp in a cubeb-pepper sauce. Another dish featured a medley of tomatoes from the château’s garden—as a jelly and a compote, as well as candied, dried, and sliced raw—alongside a goat-milk cheese garnished with fish roe from Martigues, a town near Marseille.

After lunch I drove north past the Luberon mountains to **Domaine de Montine** (doubles from \$166), a family-run wine estate near the medieval village of Grignan. The estate has a truffle orchard and a farmhouse hotel, where I spent a restful night after sampling some of its wines with local cheeses. In the morning, I visited a century-old truffle market in nearby Richerenches. Held every Saturday between November and March, it is split into two sections: a public area that takes over the main street, and a wholesale-only area on a side street.

I was accompanied by Jean-Luc and Rémi Monteillet, whose family own **Domaine de Montine**. They gave me a glimpse into the secretive world of “black gold” trading,

pointing out negotiations taking place out of car trunks. Before leaving the market, we stopped at a food truck. I ordered a corn velouté soup, which was hearty, warm, and perfumed with truffles.

Back at the estate, Rémi and I went truffle hunting with Sydney, a boisterous Australian shepherd that bounded ahead of us, sniffing under neat rows of oak trees. Whenever she frantically started to dig, we caught up with her and carefully unearthed the precious mushroom using a small hoe. We stopped after she found four walnut-size pieces. Nobody could come here without tasting the estate’s truffles, so I had a decadent lunch of chestnut soup and cheese ravioli, both topped with truffle shavings, which I savored on the hotel’s sunny terrace.

My final stop took me another hour north to **Domaine Michelas St. Jemms**, a small but prestigious wine estate in Mercuriol-Veaunes, a commune in the northern Rhône Valley. When I arrived, a tasting led by Sébastien Michelas, who runs the winery with his three sisters, was under way in the cavernous cellar. Michelas moved from barrel to barrel, drawing wine and passionately describing the method and terroir at each stop.

His enthusiasm was infectious, his stories evoking the rugged hills, the generations of winemakers, the soil itself. Standing amid stacks of dusty bottles and aging barrels, I savored the Viognier and the Syrah. Their complex layers lingered on my palate, a final tribute to the many flavors of Provence and the Rhône. 🌍