



PICNICS IN PROVENCE

Tricia Welsh finds a gourmet paradise in the lush countryside of southern France.

Foie gras with fresh coriander seeds, green and black figs with prosciutto, white peaches drizzled with grappa... Picnics aren't always like this, but on a Picnics in Provence experience in the heart of the French countryside, such simple yet superb dishes become the norm and are highly anticipated.

Each year, energetic Melbourne-based food lover and Francophile Nikki Maxwell leads small groups of adventurous food and wine lovers off the beaten track in various parts of France to indulge in regional gastronomy and to immerse themselves in the relaxed country lifestyle.

As founder and proprietor of Picnics in Provence, Nikki's week-long food and wine adventures did indeed begin in Provence, but she recently introduced a new itinerary in the picturesque but lesser-known Tarn-et-Garonne region north of Toulouse.

To offer this new indulgence, Nikki has joined forces with US-based international interior and textile designer Kathryn Ireland. Guests stay in Kathryn's classic two-storey farmhouse, La Castellane, set amid 20 hectares of farmland that rolls down to the pretty Tescou River and ambles along towards the tiny village of Verlhac-Tescou – a place guests get to know quite well over the next few days on early morning walks or bicycle rides.

These same undulating hills are also home to Academy Award-winning actress Louise Fletcher, of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* fame, who has a house in the next village. Nearby, a film-director neighbour has been hosting Robert de Niro just days before we arrive and we learn that the next guests at La Castellane are Barbara Streisand and her family.

A former working vineyard and foie gras duck farm, La Castellane accommodates guests in



the main house as well as in a charming renovated 18th-century pigeonier. There are horses and chooks to feed, eggs to collect, organic apples, tomatoes, quinces and figs to pick and eat, numerous bicycles on which to explore the countryside, a pool to cool down in and myriad lazy hammocks to swing in – catching the breeze or watching crimson sunsets.

Each morning our group of 10 gathers for breakfast in the huge kitchen-dining room of the main house. Lunch might be under the trees or in a local restaurant sampling regional specialties, while dinner is mostly in the open-ended, candle-filled Dutch barn, hailed by *Vogue* magazine as “one of the 100 most beautiful outdoor rooms in the world”.

By day we tour the countryside, visit bustling markets, sample local produce and quality wines, bone up on the life and colourful art of locally born artist Toulouse-Lautrec, pay our respects in historic cathedrals, savour local eau de vie – and even try our hand at sculpture in Albi under the patient guidance of art teacher Madame Claude Palmier. For many of us, it is the first attempt at modelling clay since plasticine at kindergarten, the artistic exercise proving to be one of the funniest and most unexpected highlights of the trip.

Back on the farm, Nikki and her small team of helpers make things happen seamlessly – producing satiny scrambled eggs for breakfast, preparing trays of refreshing iced teas on sunny afternoons, whipping up gourmet dinners and keeping wine glasses filled. Nikki has also recruited the services of private chef Daniel de la Falaise, who creates several exceptional meals for us. With his signature straw hat and his white Citroën delivery van crunching up the gravel driveway, Daniel becomes a familiar sight during our stay.

The grandson of celebrated fashion model and food writer Maxime de la Falaise, Daniel (himself a former model) trained at his great uncle Mark Birley's Harry's Bar in London and later launched the George Club. Today, he lives on a 20-hectare property nearby, where he tends an extensive vegetable and herb garden and travels around cooking for private clients.

We meet local characters everywhere, not the least of whom are two wine heavyweights in Gaillac, one of the oldest wine-growing regions in France. Driving through rolling vine-covered hills, we come to the renowned family-run Plageoles winery, where fifth-generation winemaker Bernard welcomes us in the vineyard. His much-revered father, Robert, has been

Opposite page from top: The Pont Neuf over the Tarn at Montauban; La Castellane, our home while on our Picnics in Provence. Above, left to right: St Cecile Cathedral in Albi is the largest brick building in the world; La Castellane is the country home of interior designer Kathryn Ireland; intense local red wine from Plageoles.



Above, left to right: Hammocks and garden seats invite relaxation; the makings for a top green salad; lunchtime table set up under the trees.

instrumental in re-introducing old regional grape varieties and has written two books on the subject. Together they have been producing organic wines for 25 years. We sample the wines and stock up on sparkling Mauzac for pre-dinner drinks on the terrace back at the farm.

At Vigne en Foule, a restaurant and wine shop in Gaillac, we meet owner Laurent Cazottes, a passionate young man whose outstanding Distillerie Artisanale eau de vies and his sensational Poire William are served in 25 Michelin three-star restaurants throughout Europe. Cazottes grows all his own fruit, including wild cherries and green walnuts and has vineyards to produce over-ripe grapes for his raisin vie. As well, he grows sunflowers for oil, crocuses for saffron, has 1,300 oak trees that produce some 15 kilos of truffles each season, harvests wheat for bread and grows specific herbs such as lavender, savoury, thyme, sage, peppermint and various mints for his artisanal floral waters.

Another morning, we wake early to accompany Daniel to the Monday market at Caussade. The village is alive with shoppers inspecting baskets that hold chickens, ducks, guinea fowl and cute, ill-fated brown rabbits. Stalls laden with local white peaches, plums, pears, apples and apricots meander through the village streets. Deep bowls hold marinated and stuffed olives; circular wooden containers display fanned salted sardines. Together Daniel and Nikki choose ingredients necessary for upcoming meals at the farmhouse.

But today we're in for another treat: a private hands-on cooking class at La Castellane. We scrub, peel, chop, trim, stir and generally lend a hand as we learn. Then, under shady trees

in the garden, we dine royally on carrot and tarragon soup, roast shoulder of lamb with velvety potato mash and beans and a terrific herb-filled salad accompanied by top local wines – the crisp rosé becoming a particular favourite.

But Nikki has kept the week's highlight a secret, to be revealed when we visit Daniel's garden. Unbeknown to us, Nikki and Daniel have set up picnic tables by his private lake. We arrive and head for the garden, savouring sun-warmed tomatoes straight from the plant and wander through the vegie patch picking fresh herbs to enjoy their intense flavour. Before we know it, we are curiously close to the lake. Then – voilà! – we spy check-clothed tables set up for a late-afternoon repast and comfy cushions laid out on the grass.

It is a truly idyllic setting. While local anglers try their luck at the other end of the lake we are served a meal that will remain etched in our memories for a long time to come. In his inimitable style, Daniel has selected many ingredients from his own garden, along with other local produce. We start with three sheep cheeses: a brique de brébis, a stunning Roquefort and an excellent tome from Albi served with crisp apple and olive oil. Then comes peeled garden tomatoes with basil flower, basil oil and fleur de sel. Chicken drumsticks arrive next, shallow-poached in tarragon chicken broth and with homemade mayonnaise for dipping. This is followed by slices of perfect cantaloupe and fresh figs with jamon. We then enjoy white peaches ("this is the world's epicentre of white peaches," Daniel declares) with Poire William, salt and oil, before we head home as the sun relinquishes its warmth and duty for another day. www.picnicsinprovence.com.au 