

House front



Some of the group at a stall of varied pumpkin and squashes at the market in the mediaeval town of Mirepoix

Gourmet getaway

The chance of working hands on with Michelin chefs and exploring the food culture and cuisine of South West France was alluring as Bidy White discovers.

Base camp, a cross between a contemporary boutique hotel and a traditional French small country house, had been named one of the top learning retreats in *National Geographic's* book *The 100 Best World Wide Vacations to Enrich your Life*. It promised an English-speaking host, the company of a small group of like-minded people, in a season when the food harvest was at its most prolific.

Davelling with a friend we were met by our host, Moira Martingale, and driven in a vast people carrier the short hop to her intriguing 200-year-old farmhouse. Located in the valley through which the canal *à midi* flows, with a backdrop of the Pyrenees, the land is rich and intensively farmed with vast fields of sunflowers, pumpkins, vines and olive groves. The house has been restored over many years by Moira. The eight bedrooms are all different but the overall style is art-déco. The large open-plan ground floor comes complete with a performance area furnished with a grand piano and a large, open log fire.

Upstairs there is a library with loads of books. The gardens have really comfortable furnishings, several al fresco dining areas, a swimming pool, tennis court, books, and a dancing room with jukebox.

This part of the Languedoc features many places of natural beauty and historical interest including a number of Cathar towns, a score of chateaux, and the World Heritage Site of Carcassonne is just down the road.

After many years of fierce

independence when travelling, I have come to appreciate organised trips: letting someone else do the driving, planning what to visit and where to eat, as long as it includes free time to wander and explore on my own.

Naturally it can depend on the company. We all bonded almost immediately. We had a fair bit in common: food, wine, an interest in history, a passion for shopping for food gadgets. When let loose for a few hours we tended to roam in a pack and laugh a lot.

Apart from my Gourmet Explorer six-day course, learning options at the French Country House experience are varied: song writing, creative writing, art and mixed media, sketching and painting, books and drama, digital film-making. Find your voice and learn to sing, and golf. Courses are from one to six days and it possible to have Moira Martingale arrange a tailor-made course, or even just chill out as a group or family get together.

Given the level of comfort, the excellence of a hands-on host, access to top of the range professional tutors, and absolutely everything from food, wine, transport included, the prices are keen and far less than a similar offering in Ireland.

Our tutors, starry Michelin chefs with an impressive number of awards, turned out to be totally different in personality, age, and style of cooking. Robert Abraham, 26 years a chef and chef de cuisine at the Chateau des Ducs de Joyeuse in Couiza just south of Carcassonne – a place with grand style cuisine and hundreds of covers a day – is a well-

known tv chef and has won an impressive array of awards – including Michelin. He was a firm task-master, used to teaching classic dishes and highly organised.

Jean-Marc Boyer, was younger, dynamic, very charming, and has spent 20 years at top Paris restaurants like the Ritz before returning home to run a small artisan-style restaurant Le Puits de Tresor in the Cathar town of Lastours. He explains his food creations as spontaneous, instinctive, and pursues authentic local cuisine from the heart.

We had two full days with each preparing lunch and dinner that we were to eat. In all we made over 20 multi-element dishes. Hard work certainly, but good-humoured and entertaining, even when the odd disaster meant we had to prepare something all over again.

Robert stuck to the printed recipes provided and translated by Moira, spoke a fair bit of English and used it to keep us on track. To the delight of the two men on the course who had a particularly interest in artistic presentation, he showed us all sorts of tricks of the trade.

Jean-Marc had rather less English, and his frequent inspired departures from the recipes led to the need for translations of his rapid-fire French. While resident chef-assistant Regine Thuille consulted a dictionary on finer points, we relied on a multilingual cacophony of suggested translations: Italian from me (the only foreign language I really know), Spanish from my colleague Jeanne, while Lucy (a travel writer) spoke a little of

half-a-dozen tongues. It was a tad like the *Tower of Babel* betimes. All of us mixed a lot and laughed a lot.

The days were packed. We had a tutored tasting at an olive growers' co-op of the local lucques and picoline olives, a vineyard with tastings, and a highlight was the market where we tasted a dozen cheeses, and speciality honeys, and marvelled at the preserved fruits, varieties of apples, pears and nuts, and delicious street food at very reasonable prices.

The historic walled hilltop town of Carcassonne is stunning. We walked around the battlements, poked in antique shops, and had a convivial beer in a workman's cafe that was half hanging from a cliff and was adorned with posters of bullfighters. (Carcassonne is not all that far from the Spanish border). At dinner we enjoyed our finest meal out (much more interesting and enjoyable than a Michelin one we went to in the new town).

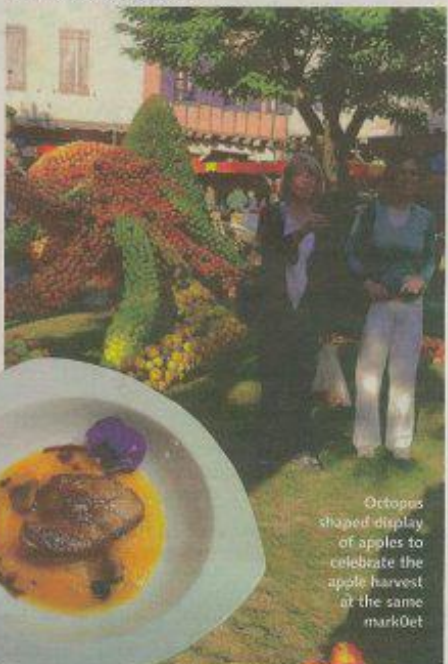
La Marquière is a family-run restaurant in the old walled town. It promises simple, tasty regional, seasonal cooking. Boy does it deliver. Three menus: the discovery, the traditional, and an à la carte. I had foie gras cooked in a sweet muscatel wine, pumpkin and cream soup, roasted pigeon with black pudding and apple crumble, and finished with a dish of autumn berries with a tasperry soufflé lemon cream. **CL**



Part of the group being shown how to skin and fillet fish



Learning how to "spin sugar"



Octopus shaped display of apples to celebrate the apple harvest at the same market

RyanAir fly direct to Carcassonne. Also from Cork and Shannon. To find out more about this destination and prices go to www.frenchhouseparty.co.uk or www.frenchhouseparty.eu.