

Rick Stein's French

Over 100 new
recipes inspired
by the flavours
of France

Odyssée

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Rick Stein's
French Odyssey

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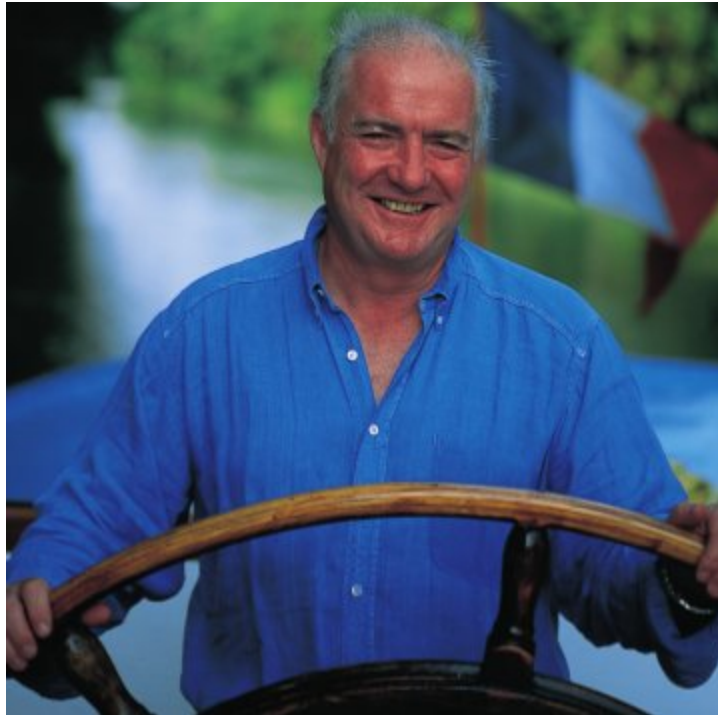
Notes on the recipes

- All teaspoon and tablespoon measurements are level unless otherwise stated and are based on measuring spoons: 1 teaspoon = 5 ml and 1 tablespoon = 15 ml.
- All recipes have been tested in a conventional oven. For a fan oven, reduce the temperature by about 20°C. I always test with an oven thermometer before cooking.
- Free-range eggs are recommended in all recipes. Recipes with raw or lightly cooked eggs should be avoided by anyone who is pregnant or in a vulnerable health group.



LA COTINIÈRE
JETEE

Notes from a journey



It might have been sensible to close the little top window at the front of my cottage in Padstow when I left at 5.30 a.m. on Monday 7 June for the ferry terminal at Plymouth. A week later, on the canal boat from Bordeaux to Marseille, I found out someone had tried to squeeze through it, but had been surprised by one of my restaurant chefs rolling home at 3 a.m. and had run off down the road, followed closely, apparently, by his lurcher dog.

It was overexcitement, I'm afraid. I was too busy packing my Michelin guide, well-thumbed copy of Elizabeth David's *French Provincial Cooking*, a CD called *Learn French Now!* and maps of Charente-Maritime, Bordeaux, Gascony, the Languedoc and Provence. I had a little book on the Canal du Midi by a rather pedantic yachtsman who preferred the canal system to get to the Mediterranean rather than sailing round Spain and Portugal. My prized possession, though, was a treasured copy of Caroline

Conran's *Under the Sun*, in which she describes the complete euphoria of leaving 1960s' London and driving the plane-tree-lined straight roads all the way to Saint Tropez. As she pointed out, the food from the south is simple to make and relies on a harmony of flavours rather than a lot of decoration or extravagant ingredients. 'The French call it *cuisine de terroir*,' she wrote, and that was what I was looking for, the sort of food that has made Italy so popular but which I knew I could also find in the French Midi.

I packed a couple of knives, too, hoping to do some cooking on the way, and some Proust, Alexandre Dumas, Montaigne, and DVDs of *Jean de Florette* and *Manon des Sources*, foolishly thinking I would have plenty of time on the long voyage south to catch up on relevant reading and watch a couple of atmospheric films of Provençal peasant life.

This was the start of another food journey, a French odyssey. David Pritchard, the producer I work with, and I had decided to make the trip some months before. We had suggested the idea of a voyage of food discovery through southern France to the BBC, who seemed interested but asked for a written outline. On a paper tablecloth in Le Quartier Vert, a restaurant near the BBC in Whiteladies Road, Bristol, David drew a map of southern France. He put in the canal system we were going to travel along: the Canal Latéral à la Garonne, the Canal du Midi and the Canal du Rhône à Marseille. Then he drew pictures of various food areas - a rather rudimentary duck here with the comment 'foie gras country', and a sheep there, 'brebis cheese from these marsh sheep near Pouillac'. Here 'an Aussie flying winemaker makes great Viognier', down on the Mediterranean 'étang de Thau oysters growing on stakes', and in another place 'Rick has posh Sauternes-maker chum'. Then he spilt a little red wine on it, borrowed

a fag and made a couple of cigarette burns, folded the tablecloth and posted it to the boss at the BBC.

Next day it seemed like a bit of lunchtime euphoria and maybe they wouldn't enjoy our sense of humour, but they did, though they asked for a more conventional treatment as well.

When I picked up that phone message about my house, I was out fishing for shad in the Garonne, some 20 kilometres east of Bordeaux, with fisherman Alain Penichon. We had boarded our first canal boat the day before at Bègles, Bordeaux. Named the *Rosa*, it was 130 feet long, slept eight and had a crew of three. Boarding the barge, as they are called, was astonishing. I had been used to British canal boats, long and very narrow, where you have to pull your tummy in when anyone passes you. Here was luxurious accommodation: rooms with double beds and bathrooms, and air-conditioning too - well, sometimes. The main cabin was spacious with sofas and a big dining table and a small bar, behind which I determinedly hung a painting of Chalky, my Jack Russell. We had hoped to take him with us. He likes being on the water and would have been great at chasing ducks, but sadly we hadn't had him computer-chipped in time, and the vet back home said he was a bit old anyway.



And I was off fishing for legendary shad. We caught a dozen handsome deep-bodied silver fish using a light net cast out into the current. The softness of the light, the weedy smell and the warm brown river were captivating, quite unlike sea fishing. Alain, like all the river fishermen I met, was quiet, relaxed, content to watch the river flow. We were going to take these fish back to Alain's house on the banks of the river and cook them over vine prunings. A vine-pruning barbecue in the Bordelaise: of such things are dreams made. It wasn't just the fragrant smoky steaks of fish, but a frying pan filled with sandy pommes sarladaise cooked in goose fat with a persillade of parsley and garlic, and a sauce gribiche of chopped egg yolks, capers, parsley and red wine vinegar – the perfect accompaniment. Then,

to finish, a tart of sliced caramelized apples. A local Bordeaux red, Domaine de Labache, was a perfect fit. I had to pinch myself, even with that mobile-phone message about my house.



The Canal du Midi near Argeliers between Carcassonne and Béziers

That night we reached the beginning of the Canal Latéral à la Garonne, which runs beside the river all the way from Bordeaux to Toulouse, built because much of the river is too shallow for barging. I had to become used to the word barging – or, more accurately, bargin’. The crew of the *Rosa*, Bernard, Michel and Julie, were French and formal and so much of the secret life of bargin’ was at that stage unknown to us.

Bernard, we soon learnt, ran a very tight ship, but the extraordinary formality of the meals he cooked and served was one of the most revealing parts of the trip, revealing about the difference between the British and French attitude to food. Julie described a visit to a pen-friend in Grimsby a couple of years previously as being very enjoyable, but extraordinary in that the whole family seemed to be constantly watching TV and eating while they

did so. Bernard's lunches and dinners were always four courses, always taken at a leisurely pace and always just enough and no more. There is a French saying to the effect that one should always leave the table wanting more. That is why French women don't get fat - they take their time about eating. I did a little chat to the DVC camera towards the end of the voyage, an inspired idea of David's: ten things we like about France. Number one, of course, was the women - their style, their elegance in dress at whatever age - but number two was the simple fact that everything stops for lunch. Other things were: there are very few signs telling you what to do or not to do, and, surprisingly perhaps, after a month or two there you realize that the French, certainly in the south, are actually nice.

What Bernard cooked for us was not particularly unusual: artichokes with vinaigrette, sautéed eel with persillade, an onion tart, grilled magret de canard - the large duck breasts from birds reared for foie gras, with a faint flavour of that delectable luxury. It's not really a criticism to say he was pretty parsimonious, too. It goes, I think, with a proper sense of economy in cooking. The first course was always a small quantity of soup, a thin slice of tart or salad. On one occasion he produced a salad of sliced Quercy melons, Marmande tomatoes and cucumber with some crumbled brebis, a sheep's milk cheese - summer in Gascony on a plate.

The next course would be a simple piece of fish or meat, again modest in size, followed every day by at least three cheeses, which Bernard would slice with the skill of a Japanese sashimi chef, and which he would deliver individually and with a running commentary, often of donnish anecdotes about the cheeses, such as the mould in the caves of Roquefort, the carrot juice giving the extraordinary orange colour in Mimolette, or the fact that the word 'crottins', for the little disc-shaped goat's cheeses, comes from their resemblance to goat's droppings.

The sweet would be maybe a local tarte aux pommes from a patisserie near the canal, or a crème caramel, again from a local shop. Often Bernard would only make one course, but that is another thing so different in France – the availability in any nearby small town of shops that specialize in really good quality cooked food. Doing all the cooking for these regular four-course meals would be both unthinkable and unnecessary. Why make things that you can buy almost better locally?

But I wasn't quite so happy with the sense of economy with the wines. On most nights, David wondered if we would be presented with yet another rusty wine, for the reds were often brown and old, and the whites dull and flat. He thought they had been stored next to the boat's engine for too long. I don't know if Bernard thought he was treating us as ignorant Britons and getting rid of some wines that frankly should have gone into the vinegar barrel, or if he genuinely thought he was giving us hallowed old bottles. I do know that on a research trip earlier that year with my girlfriend Sarah, we went to a restaurant in Auvillar famed for its regional wines only to find there was not a white on the list less than four years old. In contrast, most of the wines on my restaurant list, with the exception of some expensive Burgundies or Bordeaux and a few others, are no more than two years old, since most whites are best drunk within a year or two of making.

The trip made me realize that there is an awful lot of extremely ordinary wine in France. This year 284 million bottles of rusty Bordelaise wine have been turned into industrial alcohol. It's a bit like British cars in the early seventies, swept inevitably away by better products from elsewhere. (Remember the Allegro or the Montego?) Give me a bottle of Cricket Pitch, Cloudy Bay or Mad Fish any day.

Nevertheless, I still think that the French make the best wine in the world. Earlier on, when we were travelling

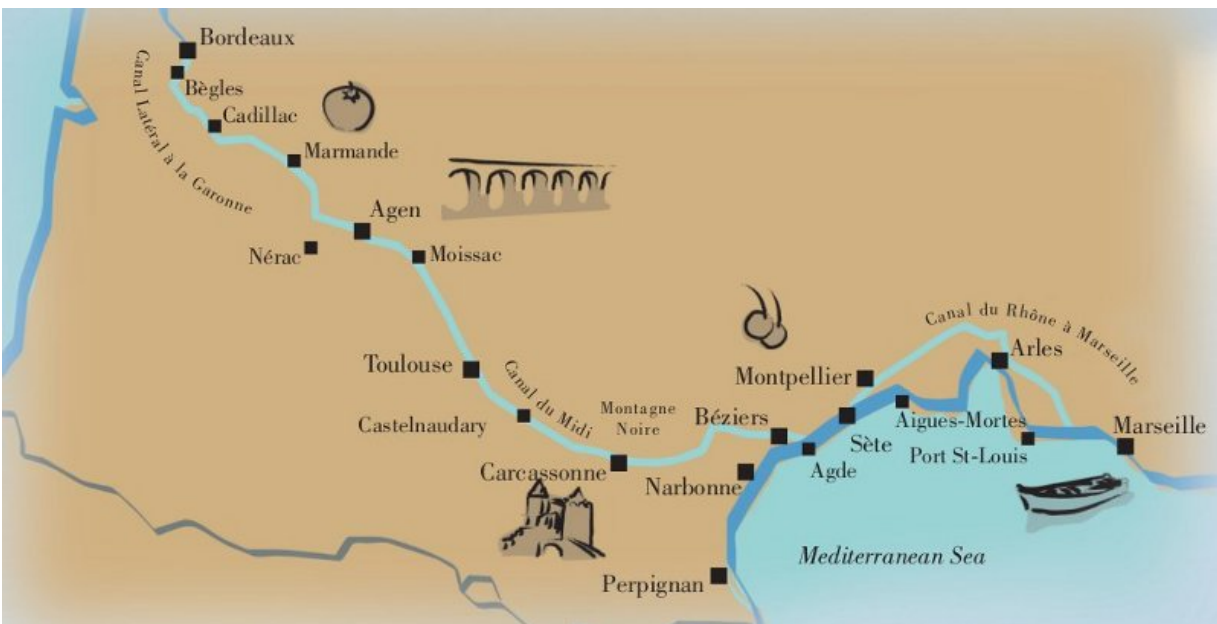
down from Roscoff in the Land-Rover before we joined the barge, we stopped off at Vallet, just south of Nantes, to meet our Muscadet producer, Jean-Ernest Sauvion. When we arrived, Jean-Ernest came out of the chateau to greet us and immediately suggested a cold glass of Château du Cléray, his Muscadet. We sat in the shade of a leafy tree and I enjoyed the slight unkemptness of the grass – the French don't really have lawns round their houses, just grass. His PR and marketing manager Roselyne sat down too, needless to say wonderfully elegantly dressed, and as we sat in easy chairs on a hot summer afternoon just across from the slightly faded chateau with peeling shutters in pale green, a shade even the National Trust couldn't match, I was moved to comment on the extraordinary complexity of that lovely wine: its Melon de Bourgogne taste, its freshness, its clarity. Later we drank more in the dining room with langoustines and mayonnaise, then with poached sea bass and the local butter, wine vinegar and shallot sauce, beurre blanc Nantais, and finally a slightly sweet old botrytis version with raspberries and crème fraîche.

I awoke early next morning in the chateau and looked through the half-opened shutters past a tall beech tree over straight green lines of vines on a soft cloudless summer morning and thought, France really is *la belle*.

Meanwhile, life on the *Rosa* became a routine. Both barges we travelled on, this and later the *Anjodi*, were long and wide. The eight passengers slept at the bow in four cabins. Life was serene; the old girl chugged along at about 4 miles an hour. These boats are converted cargo barges, their hulls sixty to eighty years old. Barge owners tend to grow geraniums in pots along the railings and put easy chairs and umbrellas on the decks. There you relax as the barge meanders along through arcades of green shade from the overhanging plane or oak trees, planted to keep the sun off the animals in the days of horse-power. It's a

constantly changing vista: sometimes a ruined chateau, then a distant village with church and spire, then yellow fields of corn and endless rows of vines running up the hills beyond. All the time you pass antiquated pumps sucking water out of the canal to irrigate the fields. Some of the bridges are so low you have to duck to go under them. There's often somebody fishing just by the bridge. Sometimes, in the cities, there are out-of-work youths smoking and drinking cans of lager.

I wouldn't fancy the fish from the canal. I jumped in once, from the *Anjodi*, to help the skipper remove a nest of rope, wire and, bizarrely, women's tights from the propeller. The water was cleaner than it looked, sort of grey-green, like dishwashing water. There's no sewage, but the hundreds of uniform white plastic boats on hire up and down the journey, and universally known as Noddy boats, surely churn out a lot of washing-up water. On a barge, you are the correct form of canal transport, and you feel superior to those over-cheerful Noddy-boaters getting in the way. It's total bliss.



Canal life is fantastic. Mind you, you do hear of complaints about the state of some of the canals in France. On one stretch of the Canal Latéral, we saw a lot of old lock-owners' houses that had been left to fall to ruin. We looked over one, a substantial house with the front door hanging off a hinge and plaster falling off an upstairs ceiling, and the remnants of wallpaper with tiny blue flowers in what must have been the bathroom. The back of the house was built into the slope up to the stables, long since empty but once accommodating the canal horses, and a fence and vines stretched into the distance as far as you could see. In a way, parts of the canal system in disrepair add romance to the journey. It's a bit like the Lost Gardens of Heligan in Cornwall, parts of which are still not reclaimed - and long may they remain so.

Coming into a village is particularly easy on the eye. The first two canals, the Canal Latéral and then the Canal du Midi, were built when the waterways were the deluxe form of transport, so that unlike entering a modern town either by train past back gardens, graffiti-daubed walls and rusty factories or by road past garish blocks of new industrial estates, by canal you go through the best bits: past chateaus and under elegant bridges and alongside towpaths with pretty houses right into the centre. In Toulouse, where we would change from the *Rosa* to the *Anjodi*, the canal basin is pleasantly close to the Victor Hugo market in the middle of the city.

The Canal du Midi is now a wonder of the world. It was built between 1667 and 1681, and paved the way for the industrial revolution in France. The care its creator, Pierre-Paul Riquet, took in the design and the way it blends with its surroundings turned a technical achievement into a work of art. The oval-shaped locks are a visual delight to match any sculpture. Every time we entered on the *Anjodi*, they made us smile. The French have the same reverence for Riquet that we have for Isambard Kingdom Brunel.

Everything he built has an uplifting quality: not only the locks, but the bridges over the canal, too, and the aqueducts that carry the canal over a river. He built a reservoir in the Montagne Noire to feed the system that finally connected *les deux mers* - the Atlantic with the Mediterranean - and this has the same feeling of permanence and elegance.



Ecluses de Fonserannes, Béziers - a flight of nine locks on the Canal du Midi



The Canal du Midi



La Cité de Carcassonne: the old medieval walled town surrounded by vineyards

I hope this book does wonders for barging holidays on these canals. It's not just the laid-back nature of the travel, but also that it's so interesting. There's the interaction with lock keepers, for example. I suppose on average you need to go through a lock an hour. Some keepers are dour with a job to do and a whiff of disdain for the Noddy-boaters; others are students. I particularly remember a pretty girl

who ran a double lock and whizzed between the two on a moped. Sometimes the keepers sell things, such as food, or on one occasion a series of differently sized wooden chickens on springs. There are restaurants, too, not as many as you'd think, but one in particular stands out: just outside Agen, with a lively cook called Vetou. She cooked a beautiful magret de canard for us, with a really good red wine sauce made from a Côtes du Marmandais from the Cave Co-operative de Cocumont, some prunes and a little chocolate.

Restaurants in France are the subject of much argument. It is common to hear British people bemoaning the drop in standards. Everyone remembers an excellent tomato salad, steak frites and crème caramel they got for £2.50 in the old days. I can report that you can still eat better in France than almost anywhere in the world, but you need to watch out. It's often the case that the less you pay for a meal, the better it is. I can think of a simple dish of clams in a velouté, garlic and parsley sauce we had at Les Grillardines, a roadside café just by the causeway to the mainland on the Ile d'Oléron near La Rochelle. And in Brittany, near Rennes, there was a routière, a truck-stop restaurant, where we had good hors d'oeuvres carrot salad with tomato, chicory, parsley and vinaigrette, beetroot with the same dressing and a touch of garlic, a local rabbit terrine with a few cornichons (gherkins), then a plate of eels stewed in local cider and a pitcher of the same to go with it - that lovely Breton cider, deep yellow with a warm sweet bouquet of soft raisins but dry to the taste with a good element of tannin too.

Another meal, a thick, dark fish soup in a seafood restaurant in Agde on the final stretch of the Hérault river before it runs into the Mediterranean, just near the sombre black granite twelfth-century cathedral. We were packed in at long tables and an enormous tureen of the soup was produced: deep brown, flavoured with North African

harissa, and with piles of French bread and rouille to float in it. The wine was a rugged rosé, the sort of thing that would taste quite unpalatable back home.

Perhaps my fondest memory, though, of incredibly inexpensive eating was the station buffet in Agen. We arrived there on the *Rosa* by night, crossing over the spectacular aqueduct across the Tarn, and the next morning headed to the station buffet for an early lunch. I had been before and completely enjoyed the twelve-euro menu, which started, unbelievably, with foie gras salad, then chargrilled tenderloins of magret: those little contra fillets that cling to the main breast. I could also have had a salad of confit de gésiers instead of my foie gras: duck gizzards, salted and slow-cooked in duck fat, then sliced and served cold. Or I could have had a bavette of skirt steak, a long cut they normally top with shallots fried till brown and a deep bordelaise sauce. In Britain we turn our noses up at such cuts since they are a bit tough, but in France, along with the locals, we enjoyed their chewy flavour with frites. Dessert and a pichet of red wine were included in the price. We waited until a train arrived on the way to Marseille, and I did a little piece to camera imagining what similar delights one could expect from an English station buffet: cheese and mayonnaise sandwiches, a Cornish pasty, perhaps to be reheated in a microwave, maybe a similarly reheatable sausage roll. I also mentioned that the train would take its passengers to our destination in a few hours; by barge we were still weeks away.

We made our way from Agen to Toulouse, stopping briefly at Moissac. On a number of occasions we came across food I could not give a recipe for in this book because the ingredients would be impossible to get at home. In Bordeaux, for example, there's a fabulous restaurant called La Tupina, in rue Port de la Monnaie right near the Gironde. It is famous for its open-hearth cooking and excellent wine list of carefully chosen Bordeaux. A log

fire burns summer and winter, and chicken and other meat and game roasts in front of it on spits driven by chains and clockwork. They cook chips in duck fat and beautiful côtes de boeuf on little grill ledges, and they also use duck fat to fry pig's chitterlings cut into 4-centimetre sections, which they season with salt and pepper and sprinkle with parsley. They are called tricandilles grésillent, and they taste a bit like andouillettes. I love them, but you'd never find them here in the UK. In Moissac, just by the river Tarn, there's a restaurant called Le Pont Napoleon. Here chef Michel Dussau takes a whole fresh foie gras and sautés it in a little duck fat in a big copper pan. He adds red Banyuls wine and fresh cherry coulis and cooks the foie gras for 20 minutes, then he removes it and keeps it warm and makes a sauce with the cooking juices, more cherry coulis and chicken stock. He reduces that right down and gently cooks some freshly stoned cherries, slices of peach and pear in the sauce, then serves the whole foie gras, still weighing about 700 grams, sliced, with some of the sauce and some of the fruit. It is sensational - the fresh and still tart fruit cuts through the richness of the foie gras and you feel you are eating something you could never recreate.

At Toulouse we remarked on the perfection of the sausages at the covered market, as well as the wonderful shops and sophisticated feeling of this red-brick university town. I went into a fish frenzy at the market, where the quality and variety were excellent and, interestingly, there were equal quantities of Atlantic and Mediterranean fish.

The next stop was Castelnaudary, and the search for a perfect cassoulet. First we visited the French Foreign Legion to see what they eat in their mess. It was confit of duck with a very nice salad and sarladaise potatoes. The Foreign Legionnaires are in very good shape. I noted that Coca-Cola comes in wine-glass-size cups, not the buckets we now get back home. We watched their parade and their slow, menacing march into battle, which they accompany

with the singing of a dirge. It was very moving; almost an anticipation of death.

Next we ate cassoulet, lots of it, at the Hotel de France. It was very good but needed lots of red wine to wash it down. We filmed at a cassoulet festival that evening, interviewing a robed celebrant who says he wouldn't touch cassoulet in the summer months - far too filling.

The next morning we went to see a legendary winemaker at Badens called Pierre Cros, with an Australian wine-writer friend of mine called Peter Forrestal. I'd mentioned to Peter one time in Australia that I was making a TV series in France and would like an Australian view of French wine. He had heard of Pierre, the winemaker from Minervois who was making a legendary wine from the Carignan grape called Domaine Cros Minervois Vieilles Vignes. He'd had some shipped out to Perth, and raved about it. The famous American winemaker Robert Parker had given the 1998 wine 90 out of 100 and described it as: 'Medium-to-full-bodied and velvety-textured, it boasts penetrating red/black cherry, blueberry and licorice flavors in its powerful, jammy personality.' Well, it might have been all that, but it was also a shining example of the quality of wine that now comes out of the Languedoc. Given the freedom that this part of France has to use whatever grapes it likes, it would be interesting if some other parts might be similarly free to produce more interesting wine than that prescribed by the Appellation Contrôlé system, where the precise grape content of the wine is laid down. These days, single varietals like Pierre Cros's are also more attractive to those brought up on New World wines. A Chardonnay du Pays d'Oc is much clearer than a Mâcon Clessé, though both are made with the same grape.

I remember that day with great affection. I can still see Pierre standing in his vineyard filled with gnarled and twisted hundred-year-old Carignan vines explaining why the roots of vines as old as this extract so much 'terroir'

flavour from the ground. He had a friend with him that day who was keen to promote his band, Zanda, and had artfully left copies of his CD lying around the vinery. I took one back to the *Anjodi* and stuck on the title track, 'Le Temps de Rien', and suddenly we had a vital part of the whole TV series there: it is nonchalant travelling music, slightly bitter-sweet. Philippe Abizanda is accompanied by drums, guitar and accordion, and honestly you could be nowhere else than passing joyously through the south of France when you hear it. We've got it on all the time now in our bistro back in Padstow, and David has commissioned Philippe to write some music for the television series mentioning lots of the local food on our journey. I can't wait to hear it.

Our second barge, the *Anjodi*, carried us all the way from Toulouse to Port St-Louis on the eastern bank of the mouth of the Rhône, which was the closest we could get to our final destination, Marseille. The crew had what I would describe as a love-hate relationship with us. Leigh, the skipper, was English but had spent most of his life in France; he was completely fluent in French but also had a gloriously uncompromisingly British accent. Philippe, second-in-command, was straight from central casting: arrogant and devilishly attractive to women, but with a remarkable understanding of idiomatic British humour. Then there was Louis the cook, who loved the food of Marseille, and Sonia, who cleaned the cabins, poor girl. She had a faintly bemused attitude to us. We wanted to please her.



Oyster shacks at Château d'Oléron on the Ile d'Oléron

Altogether they found us a bit of a handful. We were not like the normal gin-and-tonic-at-six passengers. For a start, David made enormous demands on them, requiring us to be driven out into the countryside to meet cheesemakers and winemakers, and off to the airport at all hours to pick up or drop off English visitors. At one time that meant me. I had to go back to the staff party in Padstow and to see Chalky.

Some nights we would be drinking in a carefree way with the crew, while at other times they would be muttering conspiratorially about us. Well, at least, we thought they were, in the wheelhouse at the stern. I don't blame them. You see, we don't always behave well when we are filming. Sometimes, yes, we do drink too much, laughing euphorically about the English settlers in France, the 'no-we-live-heres', or the self-appointed 'King of the Ducks', the

farmer who was absolutely pissed when we filmed his foie gras farm and tried to control his volatile flock with a series of high-pitched squeaks. The birds paid not the slightest attention. Sometimes we'd have enormous rows - me and David, anyway - and there'd be shouting and swearing. I remember on one occasion saying to him, 'And another thing, we've got to stop all this eating. I'm getting far too fat. I saw the rushes of me talking to the King of the Ducks yesterday and I'm like the side of a house.' Other times there would be aggro about the snorers in our midst as yet another of the boat crew endured a sleepless night. Was it Pete the soundman or Chris the cameraman? Bernard the second director or David? Certainly not Arezoo, our lovely assistant producer, or me. Well, if it was me, no one would mind, because being the 'talent' I had my own cabin. Always felt a bit guilty about that.

I know that the crew added immeasurably to the whole experience. I still keep in touch with them and I will certainly look them out when I go bargain' again.

When we finally got to Port St-Louis and headed out to sea, David asked me to jump in. I pointed out that as we were in a mighty current from the Rhône I might well disappear for ever. But I think we all knew we had had the most marvellous time. Then it was a short trip to Marseille and an exceptional bouillabaisse at a restaurant on La Corniche called L'Epuisette, with my chef friend Simon Hopkinson, and a little piece to the camera afterwards to say that in my opinion food was alive and extremely well in France.

My enduring memory of the trip is all the markets we visited: Cadillac, Toulouse, Narbonne, and above all Nérac, near Agen. The quality and range of food in them and the attention to detail is why I think France is still the best. A final image: a farmer in Cadillac market with a small table and 15 bunches of his own white asparagus. He sold them all in about 20 minutes, packed up and left.



Le Pont Canal d'Agen, which takes the Canal des Deux Mers across the Garonne