



From top: Breakfast is served at Petra's; Some of Petra's students get to grips with a seafood stew; Canal Du Midi; Carcassonne castle.

A TASTE OF FRANCE

MARK COLLINS VISITS PETRA CARTER'S CHARMING COOKERY SCHOOL IN THE SLEEPY REGION OF THE LANGUEDOC IN THE SOUTH OF FRANCE WHERE HE EXPERIENCES LOCAL LIFE AND FINE FRENCH FARE

It's fair to say that many people who live in Northern Europe dream about moving to the southern part of the continent. Some of these dreams are simple: we seek the sun of Spain, or the golf of Portugal. For those with more complex dreams, Southern France, especially the Languedoc, is not just a pretty destination, but the modern equivalent of personal alchemy. By moving there your life will be transformed into something better. You will be more fulfilled, healthier and less stressed.

In short, you will become, well, French.

The French have been icons for the Irish and English for hundreds of years. Initially, we weren't interested in their food, just their clothes. In fact, their ability to cook was sneered at for many centuries. They served *soup meagre*, and their *bouf* was brutal. Obviously, that's all changed now as we're obsessed with Mediterranean food. And few Northerners personify this obsession more than Petra Carter.

Originally from Holland, Petra spent most of her adult life in Ireland before deciding to live the dream. She moved to Mirepresset, a small village in the Languedoc. You wouldn't call it sleepy – the place has never actually woken up. With great effort and pain, she restored a three-hundred year-old house, cleverly splitting it into a B&B and cookery school with an artist's studio on the top floor.

I was there for weekend cookery course entitled 'Kitchen Suppers'. However, 'Being a Gourmand' would be a better description, as not all of our time was actually spent cooking. Instead, Petra took us on a permanent field trip, soaking up the French way of life.

Within an hour of landing at Carcassonne airport, we were deep in the countryside staring at goats. Not just any goats, but organic ones with shiny

coats, whose milk was used to make some stunning cheese. One curious slab of cheese was star-shaped and coated in black ashes.

Come evening, we made our way to Petra's home where she gave us a food demonstration. She's a natural teacher and within minutes we all pledged that, once home, we would make our own version of the Swedish classic, Salmon Gravlax. After some time to ourselves, Petra showed us how to cook a wonderful dinner comprising of a goats-cheese starter and roast pork with cherry sauce, which we promptly ate.

After breakfast the following morning, we headed for Narbonne, where we wandered around the food market and paid a visit to the cathedral. For lunch, we sat in a pretty bistro on the banks of the Canal Du Midi and ate the Plate du Jour – a rustic dish of duck breast served on a bed of mushrooms and potatoes, washed down with white wine.

Later on, we visited a bee keeper. Honey, when perfected in such natural circumstances, is remarkably sweet, almost medicinal in its flavour. The bees had their hives moved around to different fields to soak up different influences. How rosemary, for example, flavoured the honey was a revelation, though an acquired taste. Another surprise was the grotesque lives which bees, including the queen bee, lead. She's pregnant for all her life, while the other female bees work for six weeks then die, while the male bees do nothing, apart from having sex once before their genitals fall off.

As part of appreciating the social history of the Languedoc, Petra took us to Carcassonne castle and also the lesser known village of Minerve. It's perched on the top of a hill overlooking the River Cesse and like Carcassonne, was once a Cathar stronghold. These were a religious sect who had an ideological clash with



the Vatican and were ethnically cleansed from the Languedoc during the Cathar Crusade 800 years ago.

What is great about Petra's weekend courses is that they are all encompassing. In a relatively short time, she merges history and food, geography and wine, while espousing her philosophy of the good life abroad, not to mention showing you how to cook some local classics. If you are thinking about moving to the south of France, taking one of Petra's courses is a must. Not only will she give you a great introduction to life there, she'll be able to inform you about the good, the bad and ugly aspects of settling there. And if you just fancy a foodie tour of the area, there are few guides as gifted as Petra. www.sunfrance.com. ☑

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