

PROVENCE ON A PLATE

For *GT* contributors and Francophiles Sue Dyson and Roger McShane, exploring the bistros and restaurants of Provence has been a work in progress for nearly 10 years. Here they open their little black book of favourite places.
Bon appétit.



Words Sue Dyson & Roger McShane Photography Christopher Wise

Provincial pleasures
Savour the views
from Hôtel Crillon
Le Brave's terrace
or indulge in a
plate of truffles
with goat's cheese
at Restaurant Chez
Serge (opposite).





For us, choosing where to eat in Provence presents a daily dilemma. Nearly four years ago, we bought a house with some friends in Caromb, a village in the wine country near Mont Ventoux. We visit each year and we now have a firm collection of favourite nearby restaurants. Each day, we debate the big issue: do we make our lunch excursion somewhere new or do we treat ourselves to a meal at one of our favourites, somewhere we know will give us joy? There's always the thought that a new restaurant could be our next transcendent eating experience. It doesn't happen often because we've tried most of the likely candidates but it does occasionally – we had one this year at Le Petit Nice in Marseille. And, because we give a restaurant guide to the guests who rent our house and review restaurants on our own website (foodtourist.com), we will no doubt keep exploring. But, just at the moment, here are the restaurants that top our list of great places to eat in Provence – the list we give our friends and now to you, from the best place to enjoy truffles to a classic Provençal bistro.

RESTAURANT CHEZ SERGE

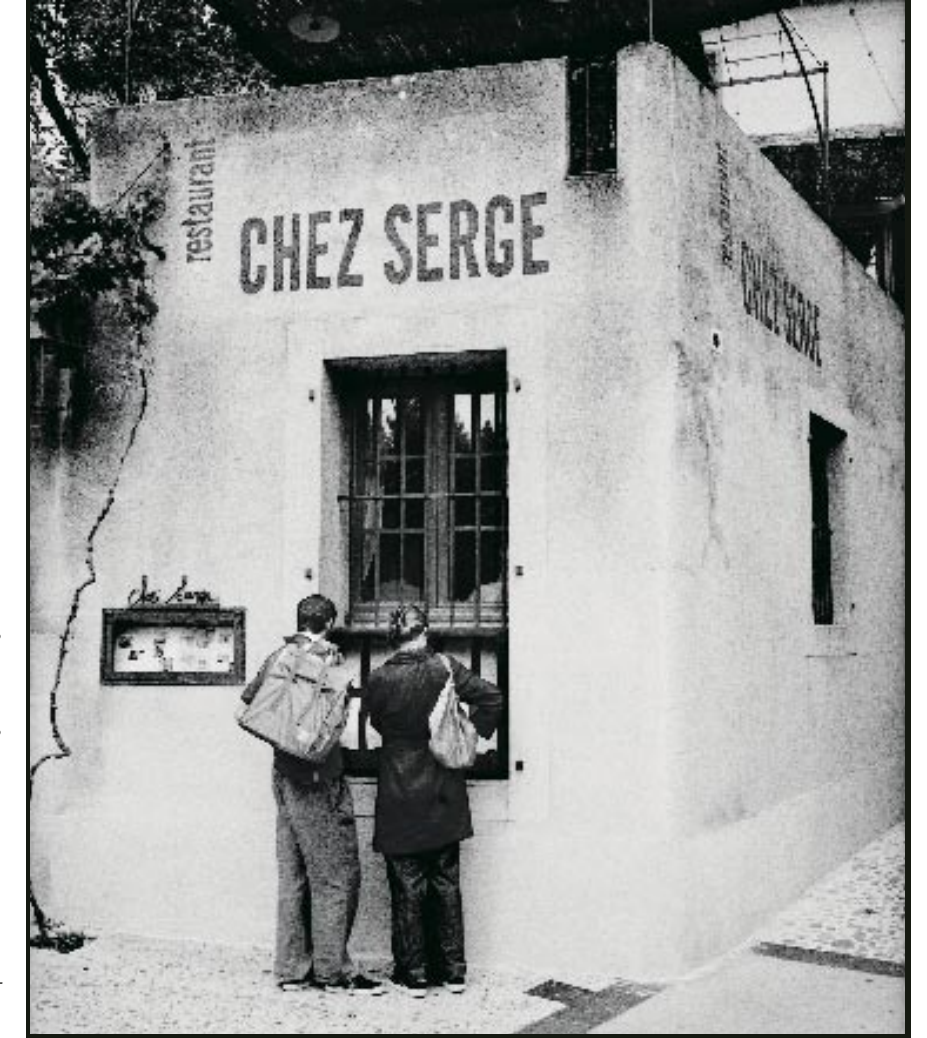
If we want to pretend that we belong in Provence, then Friday lunch on Chez Serge's terrace, after the Carpentras market, is the best place we know. Owner Serge

Spend your days like a local and enjoy a lazy Friday lunch on Chez Serge's bustling terrace.

Ghoukassian, *Gault Millau's* 2008 Sommelier of the Year, is an inspired host and we learn something new about the region's wines whenever we visit, partly because he has a good list by the glass. You can have the best wood-fired pizza here but there's much more than that: eggs en cocotte with cèpes in autumn, terrines, braises and truffles in winter, and seasonal desserts such as apple crumble. The charade can only go so far though. To truly belong we'd have to be back again next week, not catching a flight to Australia. 90 rue Cottier, Carpentras, Provence, + 33 4 90 63 21 24, chez-serge.com. Mains from \$40 to \$56.

RESTAURANT LE VIVIER

When we're daubed out, we head to Le Vivier in L'Isle Sur La Sorgue, a village best known for its Sunday antique market. It became our favourite thanks to a pigeon pie (rare pigeon breast, cèpes and foie gras enclosed in pastry, almost like a beef Wellington), served with salad and the bird's slow-roasted thigh and leg. It typifies what there is to like about this place – strong well-matched flavours, skilful, self-assured cooking, and clean lines. While not particularly Provençal – a starter such as pig's trotters with red mullet and a coriander vinaigrette could feature on any modern restaurant's menu – it takes full advantage of the extraordinary produce in the region, and that's what gives it a strong sense of place. A good list of wines by the glass is another plus. 800 cours Fernande Peyre, L'Isle Sur La Sorgue, Provence, +33 4 90 38 52 80, levivier-restaurant.com. Mains about \$45.



LE GRAND PRE RESTAURANT

Le Grand Pré is just outside Roaix, one of the named Côtes du Rhône villages, and is an ideal place for lunch when visiting the southern vineyards. As well as ingredients from as nearby as his own kitchen garden, and other Provençal specialties such as figs (about which he's written a book), Raoul Reichrath, who grew up in the Netherlands, also serves jambon de noir de Bigorre, the great Pyrenées ham, and uses renowned Allaiton lamb from Aveyron. Everything is quite perfect here, from the crudités and cheese biscuits, the bread, and the salad of leaves and flowers served with the cheese, through to sommelier Flora Reichrath's deft wine suggestions.>

Vine and dine
A meal at Restaurant Chez Serge (top and opposite) features local specialties such as truffles (above left) and a fine selection of wines overseen by owner and sommelier Serge Ghoukassian (above).



Farm to table
A leisurely stroll through Nice's street markets (above) will sharpen your appetite for lunch. Locals and tourists alike flock to La Fourchette (opposite) to see owner/chef Philippe Hiely (opposite, bottom right) serve up his signature daube of beef with macaroni gratin (opposite, top right).



In summer and **winter**, **La Fourchette** is a mirror of Avignon's soul.

(The Reichraths also own the lovely Bistro du'O, in partnership with Gigondas producer Yves Gras of Domaine Santa Duc, in nearby Vaison La Romaine, another good destination for foodies.) *Route de Vaison-la-Romaine, Roaix, Provence, +33 4 90 46 18 12, legrandpre.com. Mains from \$49 to \$70.*

LA FOURCHETTE

We were enthusiastic about La Fourchette in Avignon before we'd even tried it, after wandering past one morning and seeing the staff at a table eating lunch together before service. That's usually a good sign. Returning for lunch, the same table was weighed down with baskets of fresh cèpes – another good omen. And we weren't let down. Since our first lunch, La Fourchette has been on our list of best restaurants. Classic must-try dishes are caillettes (offal meatballs), marinated sardines, chicken liver parfait, daube of beef with macaroni gratin, pieds et paquets (sheep's tripe and trotters), steak tartare, and baba au rhum. Filled with locals, whether it's the middle of summer or deepest winter, this place mirrors Avignon's soul. *17 rue Racine, Avignon, Provence, +33 4 90 85 20 93. Three-course fixed-price menu about \$57.*

HOTEL CRILLON LE BRAVE

In France, a predominantly English-speaking clientele is a warning to steer clear, but the restaurant at Hôtel Crillon Le Brave is an exception. Only a few kilometres from our house, we usually eat here on each visit, just for the lamb, which is slow cooked in the dining room's fireplace, sliced to order and served with ratatouille.

It's wonderful with a bowl of ratte potatoes and, if greed wins, another of green beans with melted shallots. There are plenty of other good things – Bigorre ham is hand-cut to order, wild sea bass is roasted with Provençal herbs or in a salt crust, spelt from nearby Sault is served as a risotto, and the apple tart is classic. Philippe Monti, the chef, grew up in this region, but honed his skills at l'Espérance, l'Auberge de l'Île, and Taillevent before taking on this project. *Place de l'Eglise, Crillon le Brave, Provence, +33 4 90 65 61 61, crillonlebrave.com. Mains from \$41 to \$63.*

LA BEAUGRAVIERE

The department of Vaucluse, where we are, produces most of France's black truffles (by some accounts up to 75 per cent). The quintessential place to try them is La Beaugraviere, which we like to visit for a winter Saturday lunch after watching the wheeling and dealing at the Richerenches truffle market. La Beaugraviere's salad of ratte potatoes and truffles is a candidate for any list of "must try before dying" dishes. Not that there's anything wrong with the truffle risotto or truffle omelette though. La Beaugraviere is also renowned for its cellar, particularly its Rhône collection. A word of warning

though: generally this restaurant is affordable but the truffle dishes can make it expensive. *Route Nationale 7, Mondragon, Provence, +33 4 90 40 82 54, beaugraviere.com. Mains from \$49 to \$174.*

LE BISTRO DU PARADOU

Somehow, despite the fact most customers are regulars, Jean-Louis Pons still manages to make tourists feel part of the show at the classic Provençal restaurant he runs with his wife Mireille, who's in charge of the kitchen. And, despite the fact the formula's predictably the same each day (a single menu, from a set repertoire of dishes, with no choices until dessert), there's no hint of complacency. A meal here is simply a joy – a beautiful room full of happy people, an ebullient host, supremely professional floor staff, and delicious uncomplicated, expertly cooked food. Expect no surprises but what you get is a textbook rendition of each of the day's chosen dishes – maybe eggplant in a rich tomato sauce, then cassoulet, cheeses at the peak of ripeness, and, to finish, an apple or pear tart or chocolate mousse. No wonder some of the locals eat here at least once a week – so would we. It's good dining territory. (Just along the road is Chez Bru, which we're predicting might be the next place on our list of favourites. We just have to get there first.) *57 avenue de la Vallée des Baux, Le Paradou, Provence, +33 4 90 54 32 70. Four-course fixed-price menu, including wine, about \$77.*

BISTRO LE FRANCE

Bistro le France is one of the best addresses we know for soaking up "Le vrai Provence". Provence still completely>





Journey of discovery
La Merenda offers typically Niçoise fare such as tomato tart (opposite, left) and sardines (opposite, right) that contrasts with the menu at La Fourchette in Avignon (opposite).

There's no telephone at La Merenda. You just have to drop in and hope there's room for two.

shuts down for lunch, and in Apt, a busy town on the edge of the Luberon, this little bistro is a preferred address for many locals. In summer, we start with jambon and Cavaillon melon, its seeds scooped out and replaced with a slug of chilled Muscat de Beaumes de Venise. Anchoïade, with generous quantities of crudités including artichokes, sliced at the table to minimise discolouring, is also good. Other favourites are daurade grilled over fennel, daube of beef, and an autumn omelette bulging with trompettes de la mort. Bistro le France is also a good place for affordable truffles in winter. 67 place de Bouquerie, Apt, Provence, +33 4 90 74 22 01. Mains from \$23 to \$37.

LE PETIT NICE

We have two three-star Michelin restaurants within an easy drive – Maison Pic in Valence and Le Petit Nice in Marseille. We haven't been to Maison Pic, although we like Anne-Sophie Pic's lively Le 7 bistro, and its three-course fixed-price menu (\$48) is a great way to sample her cuisine. We had lunch at Le Petit Nice for the first time earlier this year, however, and it became an instant favourite. The location, overlooking the Mediterranean, is sublime but it's the essence of the sea and its Provençal hinterland, both of which Gérald Passédat embodies in his "bouille-abaisse" menu (\$258) that had us beyond superlatives. The nicely paced build-up to the intense, rich, bouillabaisse, which includes a carpaccio-like gem of a dish of raw shellfish, is as memorable as the menu's centrepiece. Le Petit Nice also has a bar, where you can order fractionally more affordable dishes, including a fish soup that doubtless also captures Marseille's soul. *Anse de Maldormé, Corniche JF Kennedy, Marseille, Provence, +33 4 91 59 25 92, passedat.fr. Mains from \$105 to \$169.*

LA MERENDA

If you were to plot the locations of the restaurants we've chosen on a map, most are near our house. La Merenda is the exception. Nice is almost a three-hour drive away. We'll sometimes arrange our itinerary to start in Nice just so we can visit La Merenda. It's a bit risky though. There's no telephone so the only way to make a reservation is to drop in when you arrive and hope there's going to be room. We fill in our time waiting to dine by strolling through the Nice market and tasting some socca. Le Merenda seats only 24 people on backless stools, it doesn't take credit cards and there's no wine list to speak of. These are all small inconveniences though. Dominique Le Stanc, previously chef at Le Chantecler at the Hôtel Negresco, cooks authentic Niçoise dishes that get under your skin. He writes a short daily blackboard menu from a repertoire of classics that includes tarte de Menton, pasta with pistou, stuffed sardines, tripe à la Niçoise, daube of beef, and tourte de blettes, the Niçoise dessert made with silverbeet – not to be missed. 4 rue Raoul Bosio, Nice, Provence. Mains from \$18 to \$28.*



THE FINE PRINT

Getting there

Air Austral flies from Sydney to Paris twice weekly with connecting flights to Marseille. Low-season fares from \$2090. From Paris, passengers can connect to Nice by train express with the TGV Air ticket. 1300 306 365, airaustral.com.au
Vroom Vroom Vroom online booking service finds the best prices on car rentals in France by comparing major brands. 1300 722 920, vroomvroomvroom.co.uk

