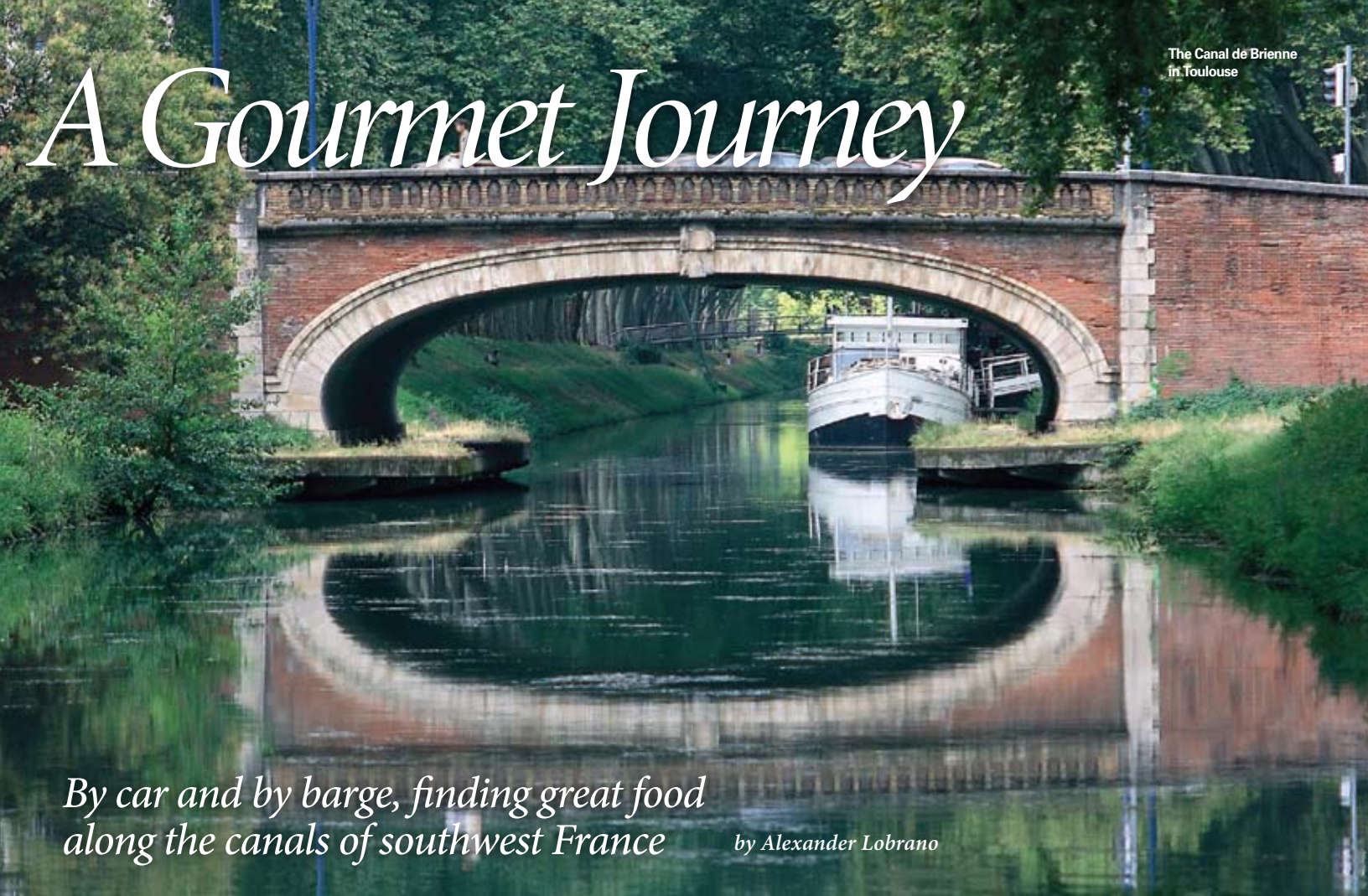


A Gourmet Journey



By car and by barge, finding great food along the canals of southwest France

by Alexander Lobrano

On the third day of living on the water, in the dappled shade of the great green nave of plane trees, I woke early to birdsong. Then a buttery waft told me the local bakery was open, luring me up to the tidy deck of the Emma Saint Patrick. The mossy green waters of the Canal du Midi were tufted with down from the flowering trees, and as I set out on the foot path to Roubia, a musky caramel smell came from the vineyards just beyond—following local tradition, farmers had spread their *marc*, pressed grape skins, among the vines as fertilizer.

In the village, the canal-side café was already open, and portly men in sleeveless sweaters were reading the papers over coffee on the terrace. The cheerful blonde woman in the bakery put six croissants into a paper bag and twisted its corners to close it, placing my change on the counter. I turned to leave, but she called me back. “Monsieur! Voilà, pour la route!” she said, handing me a seventh croissant, still warm, to be eaten on my way back to the barge. Instead I went to the café, ordered coffee, and bought a faded post card of Roubia and a stamp. Seated outside, I wrote a thank-you to Madame Gérard back in Paris.

The origins of most memorable journeys are always unexpected. On a rainy March morning, I’d run into Madame Gérard, a retired cabaret dancer and now my neighbor in Paris, having a glass of wine in the corner café. With Jasmin, her white poodle, dozing in a fluffy heap next to her red alligator pumps, she insisted I join her, and then

regaled me with an account of a recent journey to Castelnaudary, her home town in southwest France—she’d visited relatives in Bordeaux, a cousin in Agen, more family in Castelnaudary and a friend in Béziers. “All week long I drove along the Canal du Midi, and, *mon Dieu*, did we eat well! For someone like you who loves good food, it would be a perfect trip.”

It turned out she was right.

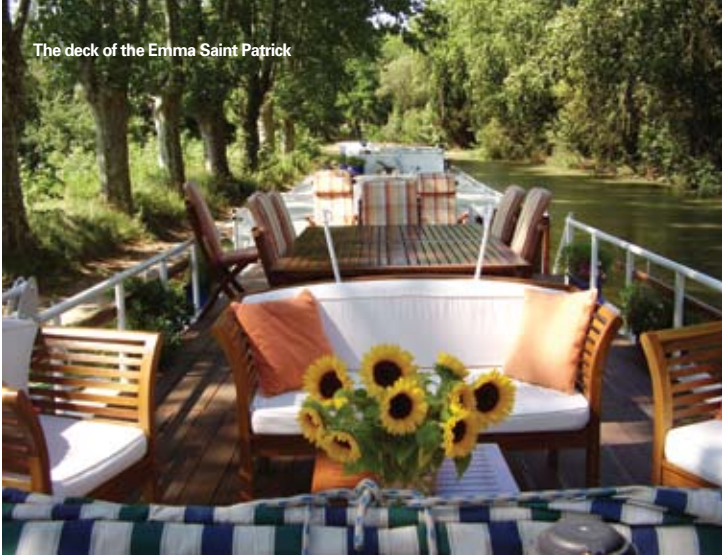
Starting just south of Bordeaux and ending at the Etang de Thau, a saltwater lagoon on the Mediterranean shore, the waterway system commonly called the Canal du Midi runs diagonally across the entire southwest. In fact, only the lower portion, from Toulouse to the Thau lagoon, rightfully claims that name; north of Toulouse it’s the Canal Latéral à la Garonne (also called Canal de Garonne), running parallel to the Garonne River, which is often too shallow for navigation.

There’s probably no waterway in the world that stretches across more gastronomically blessed territory, as French schoolchildren learn from annotated classroom maps on which almost every town along its route is famous for at least one pedigreed food—the tomatoes of Marmande, the prunes of Agen, the Chasselas grapes of Moissac—to say nothing of restaurants and wines. So I hatched a plan—I’d drive the canal from Bordeaux to Carcassonne, and continue to Béziers by barge.

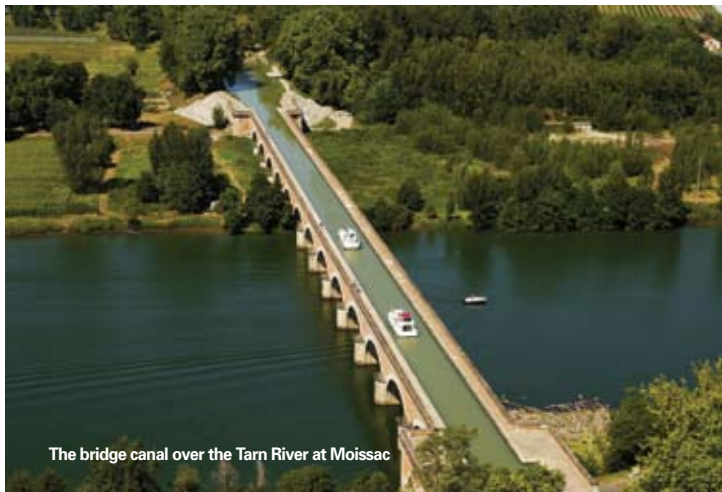
Succulent start

In Langon, some 20 miles south of Bordeaux, the almost brutally pollarded plane trees embody a cardinal tenet of French thought:

The deck of the Emma Saint Patrick



The terrace of the restaurant Claude Darroze in Langon



The bridge canal over the Tarn River at Moissac



The cloister of the Saint Pierre abbey in Moissac

nature in all forms, including human, exists to be tamed, improved and ultimately civilized.

When I arrived just past noon on a warm May afternoon, the town was drowsy as the last shopkeepers closed for the important business of lunch. In the corner of a butcher shop's window, the white paper frill on a chicken leg poking out from behind a lowered shade told me I was in the right place too, a town where the casual crossing of Eros and gastronomy was completely unselfconscious.

Any good trip should start with a celebration, so I was in Langon to have lunch at Claude Darroze, a textbook example of those quiet old family restaurants that have played by Michelin's rules forever—it has one star—to soldier on as the ballast of good eating in France.

Despite the *maitre d'hôtel's* predictably self-important solemnity, the atmosphere in the old coaching inn's lovely garden was rescued by grinning busboys in black trousers and crooked bowties, and the *amuse-bouches* composed a delicious calling card for southwest France—delicate eggs of *alosse* (a meaty fish from the Gironde, the Garonne estuary) in an herb-and-piquillo-flecked vinaigrette; duck foie gras with a vinegary onion compote; and a miniature foie gras *crème brûlée*. The *brouillade d'oeufs aux asperges blanches des Landes*, eggs scrambled so

precisely they had the texture of thick cream, was garnished with succulent chunks of lightly caramelized white asparagus from the nearby Landes region, and the roasted lamb from Paulliac—served with an excellent and very *vieille France* garnish of wilted lettuce, green asparagus and tiny first-of-season spring peas—was superb.

So was the tableau surrounding me—a clientele straight out of one of those boulevard farces about provincial life that Parisians inexplicably enjoy: the notary having lunch with his mistress, perhaps; the middle-aged bourgeois couple—Madame with her meringue hair, Monsieur with matching socks and tie—who plunked the Michelin Guide on their table as a thinly veiled threat; and a florid gaggle of local politicians getting squiffed over snifters of Armagnac.

A few miles farther along, the canal starts at Castets-en-Dourthe. Lilac trees and purple iris surround the lock keeper's house, and I watched as a barge slipped into the deep stone-lined lock. Four people were seated at a table on the roof deck of the barge, surrounded by pots of geraniums, and when the rushing waters lifted them into view, I saw that they were sharing a roast chicken, a good-looking cheese tray and a tomato salad. "Bon appétit!" shouted the lock keeper, and they waved before gliding away.

The happy quartet on board might not have



Chef Claude Darroze

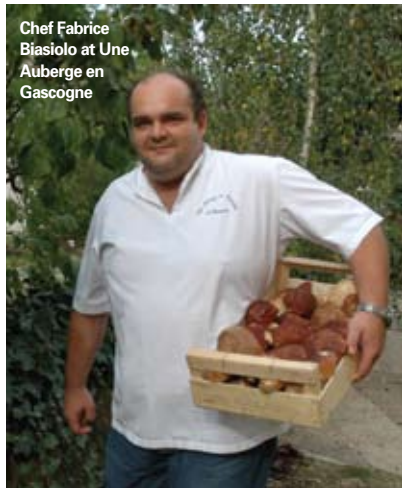
realized that they were enjoying the realization of an ancient dream—connecting the Atlantic to the Mediterranean. The fantastic idea was first floated by the Roman governors of Gaul, and later nursed by successive French kings, all eager for their ships to avoid the potentially perilous straits of Gibraltar.

Construction of the Canal du Midi finally began in 1667, under Louis XIV. Supervised by architect Pierre-Paul Riquet, it was an epic feat—some 12,000 workers dug up millions of square feet of earth and built several huge reservoirs to supply the canal with water before it was finished in 1681. The rise of railroads bogged down the north-western half of the canal—no one was sure if it was still strategically necessary or economically viable. Work eventually started in 1839 and was completed in 1856. For the next 50 years, the canal was plied by barges laden with wine, grain and oil, but in the 20th century, trains and then trucks got the upper hand. Today it's the tranquil preserve of boaters and bargers, people who like to travel slowly enough to spot dragonflies and hear the occasional cow moo. In 1996, UNESCO classified the Canal du Midi as a World Heritage site.

Lovage and lamb

Even after living in France for 20 years, I never cease to be amazed by the good food you can find in the middle of nowhere. That's even truer today as a new generation of chefs and restaurateurs looks beyond the old formula of fancy silverware, whispering service and a prime location. When I arrived in Moirax, a few miles south of the Garonne canal, old men in berets were playing cards in an open-air pavilion in the market square, and someone had placed pink roses

in a jam jar at the feet of the marble Mère de France war memorial.



Chef Fabrice Biasiolo at Une Auberge en Gascogne

It wasn't until I spoke to chef Benjamin Tournel that I understood why this rural area has developed a small constellation of really excellent one-star restaurants—Tournel's L'Auberge du Prieuré in Moirax, and Une Auberge en Gascogne and Le Square Michel Latrille in nearby Astaffort. "For me, Paris is too harsh," said Tournel. "After cooking in England for a few years, what I want-

ed most of all was a place where I could work with really good local produce, but I also needed a setting where my children could go out the front door and play without my giving it a second thought." Tournel's lovage soup with morel mushrooms emphasized his preference for the pastoral—it was herbaceous and earthy, like a country garden after a spring shower. The mackerel tartare with wild garlic and the juicy baby lamb with toasted pine nut cream were similarly vivid and pure.

As a die-hard fan of offbeat food museums, I wasn't going to miss the Musée du Pruneau in Granges-sur-Lot, north of Agen, the prune capital of France. Although I arrived on Tuesday, when it's normally closed—causing much consternation for the sole employee, a middle-aged woman with prune-colored hair—I was finally allowed



Wild mushroom croquette with transparent gazpacho at Michel Sarran



The restaurant Michel Sarran in Toulouse

to look around, and learned that the plum tree had been brought back from Syria to this region, notable for its gentle climate, by homecoming Crusaders in 1150. Other exhibits detailed the transformation of a juicy plum into a prune, and documented plum culture around the world, including the stinging fact that it was a certain Louis Pellier who introduced the "French plum" to California around 1850, "little realizing that he was putting the French prune industry at great peril". Afterwards, having shown myself to be a diligent student of the prune, I was rewarded by Madame with a plump, glossy one filled with creamy prune puree, and despite the fact that it smelled like my uncle's hair oil—an old-fashioned masculine smell of leather, tobacco and port—it was delicious.

Doves were cooing in the ancient cedar tree in the cloister of the magnificent Romanesque abbey of Saint Pierre in Moissac, and I could happily have spent a whole afternoon studying the intricately carved and filigreed stone capitals on its columns, if I hadn't been meeting a friend in Toulouse for lunch. So with teasing views of the Canal de Garonne through the sentry ranks of plane trees on its banks, I headed south.

Invention and tradition

In a beautifully decorated old brick house on a tree-lined street in Toulouse, chef Michel Sarran's eponymous restaurant mirrors the city, which is young, sexy and southern and has none of the bourgeois torpor common to many provincial cities. Sarran's cooking is precise and inventive but unpretentious. Foie gras soup garnished with a plump oyster is a primal meeting between the earthy richness of the duck liver and the clean, iodine-rich freshness of the oyster.

Sarran dish © Jacques Vieussens; restaurant © Laurent Baranco

The signature roast lamb is outstanding, seasoned with orange-flower water and fresh coriander, brilliantly balanced by a shot of salty mint bouillon and a tiny zucchini, its flower stuffed with béchamel sauce and slivers of green Lucques olives.

Sarran threw over his medical studies to become a chef, and cooked with Alain Ducasse, Michel Guérard and Michel Lorrain before returning home 12 years ago to open what's become one of the best restaurants in southwest France. "The most important thing I learned was when Michel Lorrain told me that a warm welcome and good service are as important as the food. People go to restaurants to have a good time, and it's taken us a long time to understand this in France."

Later that afternoon, I continued on to Castelnaudary, where I unwittingly launched a missile in a café on the Cours de la République when I asked, "Where do I go for the best cassoulet in town?" I got a real earful in response, since it was this most emblematic dish that put this quiet little town on the map. Following a lively debate, I went with the recommendation of an older waiter with curly white hair and a black apron straining over a girth that inspired confidence—"Go to Le Tirou."

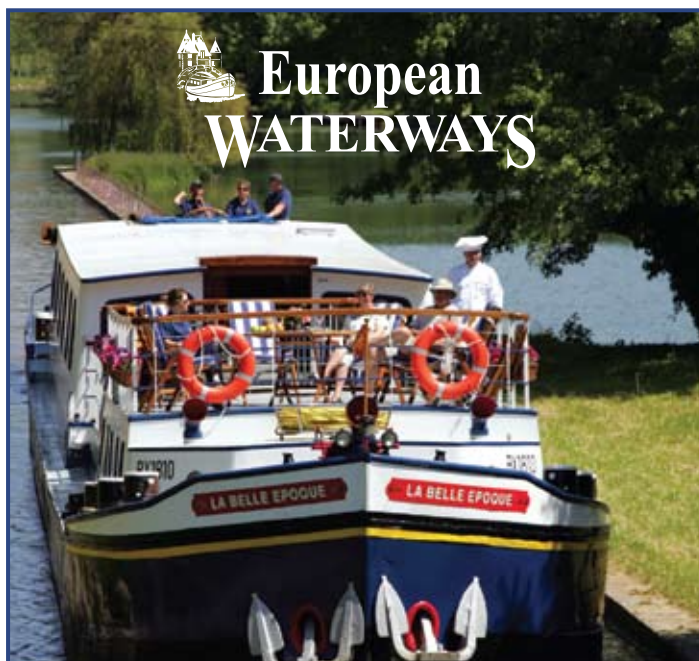
I immediately liked the simple, friendly place, just outside of town, when I arrived the next day for lunch. The deep purple lilacs on my table looked so improbably perfect that I touched them, guessing plastic, but the waitress caught me. "Mais, non, Monsieur!" she said. "They're real, just like the cassoulet." And it was, too—a glazed ceramic dish of white beans with a thick slice of free-range Gascon pork, delicious sausage and a big piece of *canard confit* (preserved duck). For such a hearty dish, the taste was surprisingly delicate, with whiffs of thyme and garlic, and each meat held its own in the bubbling broth—though I think it's only fair to confess that I slept all afternoon afterwards, and skipped dinner.

Fine food afloat

After a fleeting glimpse of the fairytale ramparts of Carcassonne, lovely from afar but the world's best-fortified collection of souvenir shops when seen up close, I found Joy. The aptly named septuagenarian widow from Sheffield was sitting in a deck chair on the roof of the lovely forest-green barge Emma Saint Patrick when I boarded, and our first chat saw off any qualms I had about joining a floating house party of strangers. When another passenger looked up from her movie-star magazine and said of Hollywood's most notorious pop star, "All she cares about is sex," Joy didn't miss a beat. "Sex? What's that?"

After superb food from Bordeaux to Carcassonne, I was expecting a respite on this last leg of the trip—the cooking on many barges is often done by well-meaning but inexperienced young British amateurs. After glasses of excellent sparkling wine from Limoux on the deck, however, the six of us went below to the attractively laid table, and the meal proved me wildly wrong: goat cheese terrine with roasted red-pepper coulis; lamb shank with Le Puy lentils; Roquefort cheese; and a brioche pudding with orange and Agen prunes. Liz, our Irish hostess and chef, resident in France for 20 years, had clearly been well-mentored by the charming René, her husband, our captain, and a native of Sète.

Gently floating through the countryside aboard the Emma Saint Patrick, it was easy to see that the region of Languedoc-Roussillon is still more informed by its ancient Roman bones than almost any other part of France. The Romans planted the vineyards that became



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the region's livelihood; most of its towns, including Narbonne and Béziers, grew up over Roman settlements; and the main modern autoroute follows the trace of the Via Domitia, the first Roman road in Gaul, built to link Italy with Spain.

In an eternal landscape of vines, cypress trees, parasol pines and low mountains, the almost 400-year-old Canal du Midi remains the most important public works project to have changed the region's appearance since the Roman Empire. It's easy to forget the canal is man-made, too, since its towpaths, stone bridges, ice houses and twin rows of plane trees have become such an intrinsic part of the scenery.

With a speed limit of five knots, or roughly five miles an hour, the Emma Saint Patrick rarely overtook a butterfly or ruffled the rippling wakes left behind by paddling ducks, and the daily schedule was similarly gentle. Morning excursions took us to the lovely old towns of Lagrasse and the Cathar stronghold of Minerve, the wonderful markets in Narbonne and Olonzac, and several wine tastings, the best of which was at the Château de Bassanel.

The easy conviviality and leisurely pace of each day, along with Liz's excellent cooking, were a testament to the pleasures of both slow food and slow travel. When this dreamy spell was finally broken, all I worried about when I boarded the train in Béziers after an excellent lunch at the stylish Octopus restaurant was Madame Gérard's judgment of my portlier new silhouette when I returned to Paris. But then again, no one eats their way across southwest France without adding a little happy roundness to their shadow. ■

Alexander Lobrano's book *Hungry for Paris* is published by Random House. hungryforparis.com

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CANAL NOTEBOOK

HOTELS

Le Square Michel Latrille Small, charming hotel with well-decorated French country style rooms and an excellent restaurant. 5-7 pl de la Craste, Astaffort, 05.53.47.20.40. latrille.com

Grand Hotel de l'Opéra Historic hotel in the heart of Toulouse. 1 pl du Capitole, Toulouse, 05.61.21.82.66. grand-hotel-opera.com

Hotel du Canal Simple rooms in a pretty, peaceful setting on the banks of the Canal de Garonne. 2 ter ave Arnaut Vidal, Castelnaudary, 04.68.94.05.05. hotelducanal.com

RESTAURANTS

Claude Darroze A family-run monument to the cooking of southwestern France. 95 cours du Général Leclerc, Langon, 05.56.63.00.48. darroze.com

Auberge du Priuré Tucked away in a tiny village, young chef Benjamin Toursel serves up a superb market menu with creative touches. Le Bourg, Moirax, 05.53.47.59.55. aubergeduprieuredemoirax.fr

Une Auberge en Gascogne Young chef Fabrice Biasiolo does inventive contemporary cooking in this unexpectedly hip little restaurant. 9 faubourg Corné, Astaffort, 05.53.67.10.27. uneaubergeengascogne.com

Le Square Michel Latrille see HOTELS

Michel Sarran Fascinating contemporary riffs on traditional southwestern French food in a beautiful townhouse restaurant. 21 blvd Armand Duportal, Toulouse, 05.61.12.32.32. michel-sarran.com

Le Tirou Delicious, copious cassoulet in a friendly restaurant just outside of town. 90 ave Mgr de Langle, Castelnaudary, 04.68.94.15.95. letirou.com

Octopus Excellent modern Mediterranean cooking in a stylish dining room. 12 rue Boieldieu, Béziers, 04.67.49.90.00. restaurant-octopus.com

Le Parc Great views of Carcassonne's walls from the garden of chef Franck Putelat's excellent table, and a terrific modern French menu. 80 chemin des Anglais, Carcassonne, 04.68.71.80.80. restaurantleparcfranckputelat.fr

BARGES

Emma Saint Patrick: 2 rue du Théron, Capestang, 06.07.99.38.78. emmastpatrick@gmail.com emma-st-patrick.com

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Liz and René Jacquot, and their barge the Emma Saint Patrick

