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Provence's Back Country: Moustiers-Sainte-Marie, Faience, death defying gorges, and Michelin star meals

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Forests mingle with hills of lavender, olives and wheat in the landscape of Provence in southern France.

Submitted photo

I find the back country of Provence infinitely intriguing, particularly the rural parts of the Department of the Alpes-de-Haute Provence, where the village of Moustiers-Ste-Marie is located. The plateaus and rolling hills of olives, lavender, and wheat are rudely interrupted by ravines and dense chunks of pine and oak forests made almost impassable by the scrubby underbrush of prickly juniper.

Only a few stone houses, some in ruins, can be discerned from the narrow roads traversing the area until reaching the outskirts of scattered villages. Perhaps the most well-known village is Moustiers-Ste-Marie, home to the *faïence* (tin-glazed earthenware) first created here in the 17th century and made famous by the French king and his court.

The village is built on steep, rocky cliffs, divided by the Rione River, and its waterfall, which can, depending upon the season, be a trickle or a torrent. A stone bridge spans the river's gorge, and the cliffs are joined far above at their apex, by a chain hung with a gold star. It was first placed there in the Middle Ages by a grateful returning crusader.

Just below the anchored chain is the Chapel of Notre-Dame de Bouvoir, a site of pilgrimages since the 5th century. The chapel was first built in the 8th century, then rebuilt again in the 12th and 16th century.

With its small, verdant gardens and towering cypress trees, the tiny chapel exudes both mystery and tranquility, and the views over the village and beyond are spectacular. To reach the chapel, the visitor must climb the switchback of wide stone steps, all 256 of

them, worn smooth by centuries of pilgrims and marked with stations of the cross. The steps can be quite slippery, especially during a rain, so care is advised.

Moustiers' dramatic setting, ochre buildings, cobbled streets, riotously-colored window boxes and panoramic views of the mountains has earned Moustiers the official recognition of the French government as one of the most beautiful villages in France.

The village is notable for its faïence, which is still decorated with traditional motifs ranging from pastoral scenes of previous centuries to mythological creatures, but also with contemporary decorations. Faïence workshops flourished during the 17th and 18th centuries, but thereafter steadily declined until by the late 20th century, there were only a few producers remaining. Now, there are almost a dozen manufacturers, a few of which you can visit, and shops line the streets selling faïence in every form from simple cups to huge, elaborate platters.

Moustiers is a long-time favorite of mine, having been introduced to it in 1976 when artist friends of mine moved there from a tiny village in the Var. They, with their family, were one of the early revivers of the faïence, and their shops and workshops still flourish under the names Michel Fine and JMV Fine.

A visit to Moustiers' Museum of Faïence provides an excellent exhibit with artifacts, photos, historical notes about faïence through the present, concluding with a permanent exhibit of contemporary works, including some pieces by the Fines.

Moustiers is also the western gateway to the canyon of the Verdon River, the Gorges du Verdon, carved 3,000 feet deep through limestone over thousands of years, which cuts across from Castellane on the east to the Lac St. Croix in the west. The lake itself was created when the river was dammed in 1973.

Today the lake is the largest man-made lake in Europe, and during the summer months is a center of recreation. Along the sandy shores of the northern part of the lake, below the medieval village of Moustiers –Ste.- Marie, kayak, peddle boat, and paddle board rentals abound, along with shaded snack stands and umbrellas.

The canyon itself has a mesmerizing complex of trails that lead along the rims of the gorge and descend to the Verdon River far below. People come from all over the world to hike the gorge, considered either the first or second largest in Europe.

Some of the trails, like Sentier Imbut and Sentier Vidal, include tunnels so long and dark that flashlights are required in order to see, and steep, nearly vertical steps are cut into the limestone. These trails, and others are rated as difficult. Personally, I would rate them as scary, but then, I'm not an adventuresome hiker.

Instead of hiking, I drive along the N552 road, which clings to the northern rim of the gorge, starting at the base of Moustiers where the road forks, turning in the direction of La Palud and Castellane. At every turn and switchback there are stunning views, but I keep my eyes on the road while driving, pulling off into one of the turn outs to take in the view and silence of millennia.

I find it not incongruous that Alain Ducasse, the famous French chef of many Michelin stars, opened an inn at the base of Moustiers, just a few kilometers from the N552 road. The area, while remote, is steeped in history, and I can imagine 18th and 19th century travelers, with mules, donkey, horses and coaches going from the mountains of Haute Provence east along the plateaus to reach Castellane and then on south to Nice, just as travelers today do, but with modern conveyances. A comfortable inn, with good food, is always a compelling respite from the day's travels.

Ducasse's inn, the Bastide de Moustiers, is a tastefully renovated, old stone manor house which he opened to the public in the 1990s. There are only 11 rooms, plus two suites, some in the main building, others scattered around the expansive property.

Perhaps one of the most compelling aspects of the Bastide is its restaurant. Sitting on the restaurant's terrace at lunch, shaded by white canopies and sycamore trees, looking down across the valley to the Plateau of Valensole beyond, feels more like starring in your own movie about Provence than a weary traveler stopping for a respite.

I've even saved my menus, over 12 years of them, because re-reading them brings back the memories of my lunches on the terrace along with the occasional lunch taken in the indoor dining salons with a fire burning in the grate during wild storms and inclement weather.

For example, on a Wednesday in May, 2003, when the wild thyme was in bloom, and the fields along the roads were scattered with wild red poppies, I feasted on a first course of potato gnocchi with Parmesan, spinach and tiny mousseron mushrooms, followed by spit-roasted local lamb with fennel, small onions, and olives.

Next the cheese trolley arrived, featuring local sheep and goats milk cheeses to choose from, accompanied by a salad of greens from the garden. Dessert was a frozen parfait with caramel, fresh sheep's milk curd, and a roasted pear, reads my menu.

On a recent visit, after not having been to the Bastide for six years, I wasn't disappointed. The lavender had just started to bloom, and there were still remnants of red poppies. Once again I was smitten by the food and the setting.

With the new chef, Frédéric Garnier, who has been with the Alain Ducasse properties for more than 20 years, including the flagship Plaza Athénée in Paris, the food continues to be rooted in the land and the region, and still surprises with its elegant simplicity.

"I start with the vegetables" he told me, "creating a dish depending upon what sounds good."

Many of the ingredients come directly from the inn's large vegetable and herb garden, others from neighboring farms, lamb producers, foie gras producers, and Mediterranean fishermen. "I don't like to do too much to the ingredients, to overwork a dish," he tells me.

That evening for dinner, served in the main salon, I had caramelized onions with seared foie gras, followed by turbot and the last of the season's incredibly sweet white asparagus.

Instead of the cheese trolley of my memory, the server brought a large, irregular olive wood board with the goat's milk and sheep milk cheese selection, including a perfectly ripe, creamy Banon. A specialty of Haute Provence, from the village of Banon, the rounds of goat's milk cheese are aged, then dipped in eau-de-vie, wrapped in brown chestnut leaves, and tied with raffia. I was happy to see the cheeses were still accompanied by the salad of slightly bitter garden greens.

Dessert that night was a "cookpot" of warm cherries and strawberries with a crunchy topping.

The next day, before leaving, I had a warm flatbread baked with tapenade, served with slightly brined kohlrabi from the garden. So simple, yet so perfect.

Although I've been many times to Moustiers-Ste-Marie, each time I leave I look forward to my next visit. A climb again to the high chapel, a visit to my favorite faïence shops, a drive along the twisting gorge, a peddle boat ride on the lake and up the narrow canyon of the river. Perhaps lunch in one of the village restaurants along the River Rione, or back to the sanctuary of the shaded terrace of the Bastide de Moustiers.

Tapenade Flat Bread

Walnut, Black Olive, and Dried Tomato Tapenade

