

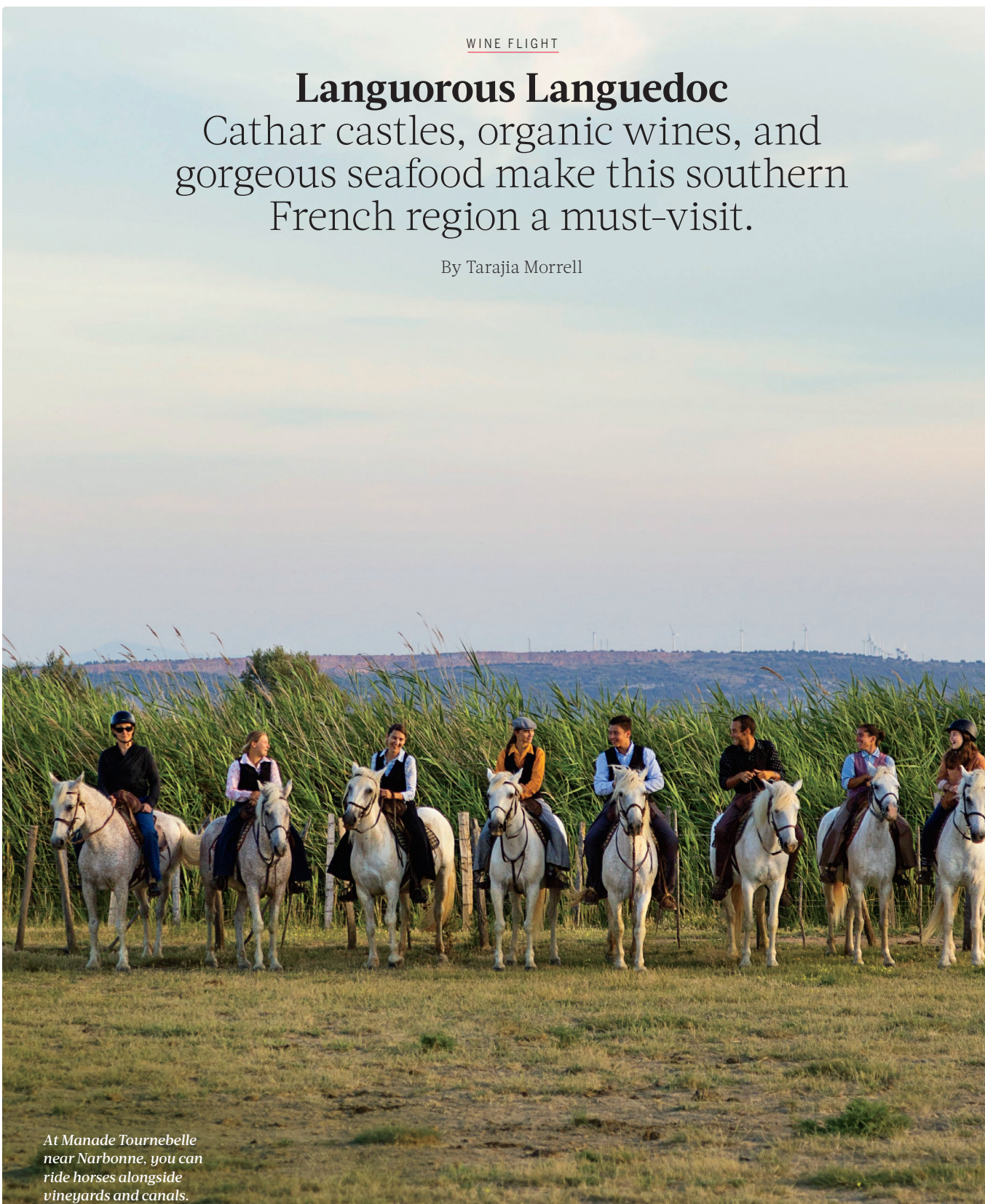
TRAVEL

WINE FLIGHT

Languorous Languedoc

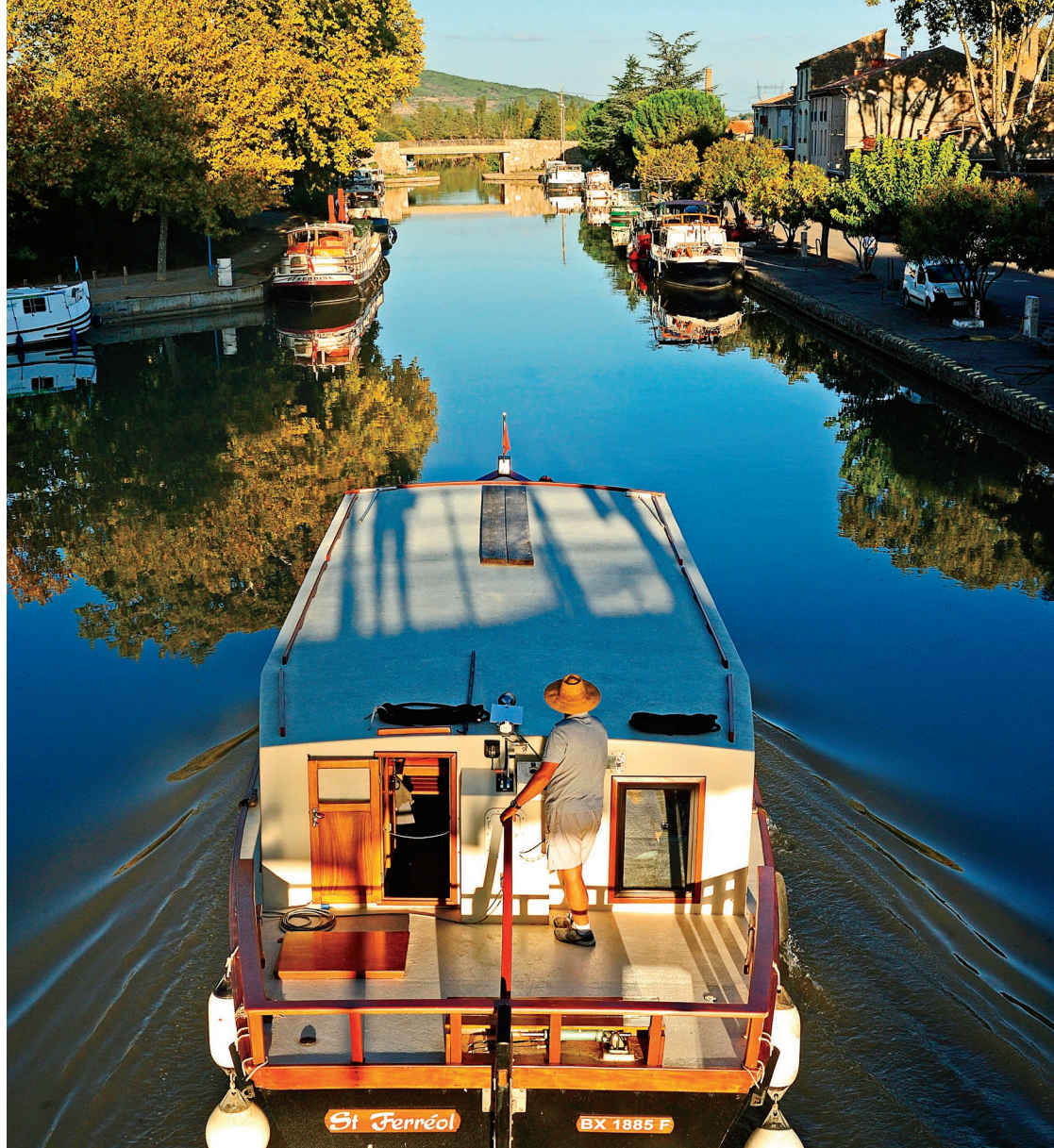
Cathar castles, organic wines, and gorgeous seafood make this southern French region a must-visit.

By Tarajia Morrell



At Manade Tournebelle near Narbonne, you can ride horses alongside vineyards and canals.

There's little better than a springtime boat ride along the placid Canal du Midi.



THERE'S SOMETHING AT ONCE EXOTIC and approachable about Languedoc, the northern swath of the sister territories known as Languedoc-Roussillon, France's largest wine-producing region. Its wines, culled from over 100 grape varieties that grow in Languedoc-Roussillon, are as varied as the jigsaw of its microclimates and terrains, which stretch along the Mediterranean between Provence and the Spanish border.

The Languedoc is beautiful, and despite its proximity to the eternally popular Mediterranean, there's a remarkable (and welcome) lack of tourists. In fact, as you walk oak-lined roads to petite villages cobbled around a single central square, you get a constant sense of peeping through a keyhole into a panorama that's so charming and undisturbed—and, well, French—that it's hard to believe the place isn't overrun. Take Puimisson, the tiny town between Montpellier and Béziers where I couldn't find a cash machine but did encounter a group of septuagenarians playing their daily game of late-afternoon *pétanque*. There I stopped in on natural winemaker Jeff Coutelou of Mas Coutelou and sampled his *Classe cuvée*, a vivid, juicy, fruit-forward blend

of Syrah, Grenache, and either Cinsaut or Mourvèdre that epitomizes Coutelou's no-added-sulfites philosophy.

Languedoc is France's largest organic wine-growing region; the warm, dry climate discourages the growth of molds, mildew, and fungi, which makes synthetic pesticides, herbicides, or fungicides less necessary. A shining light of this movement is Gérard Bertrand, who, since 2002, has gradually converted his domains to biodynamic practices. Bertrand happily admits that already being one of the region's largest organic producers has made his adoption of the labor-intensive methods easier, but many much smaller estates, such as the lovely, biodynamically farmed *Domaine de la Réserve d'O*, share the same disinclination toward using man-made chemicals in their vineyards.

History literally runs deep here: The ancient *Via Domitia*—the first Roman road in Gaul, which connected Italy to Spain—can be seen in the city of Narbonne. Hilltops boast ruined castles that were Cathar strongholds in the 13th century. Along with Provence, it's the oldest wine region in France—vineyards have been here since the fifth century B.C. So book a flight to Paris (or Barcelona), a train ticket to Montpellier (or Perpignan), then jump in a rental car and start to explore.

Winemaker Gérard Bertrand is a force in the region for biodynamic farming.



WHAT TO TASTE

GÉRARD BERTRAND

"The winemaker's role is to read the music of the terroir," says Gérard Bertrand, a vocal leader in biodynamic practices. His crown jewel, Clos d'Ora, a Syrah-based red blend, shows the heights that Languedoc wines can achieve. (gerard-bertrand.com)

CLOS MARIE

"There are only good years at Clos Marie," says Christophe Peyrus, a second-generation winemaker in Pic Saint-Loup. His dark-berried blends, like Simon, deftly balance fruit, acidity, tannin, and structure. (Route de Cazeneuve, 34270 Lauret)

MAS DE DAUMAS GASSAC

Daumas Gassac founder Aimé Guibert was one of the first to prove that this region could produce great wine. The scenic estate boasts a shop and tasting room that's open year-round, no appointment needed. (daumas-gassac.com)

CHÂTEAU LA BARONNE

This 90-hectare, family-owned domain on Alaric Mountain fulfills every French winemaking fantasy, including a picturesque château in which the founders live. You can also find some of the region's most alluring wines here. (chateaulabaronne.com)



WHAT TO DO

MANADE TOURNEBELLE

You can ride gray Camargue horses—the ancient breed native to the region—along the Canal de la Robine, past marshes with seabirds and fields with black bulls. (tournebelle.com)

L'ABBAYE DE SAINT-HILAIRE

Another must-visit is this small Benedictine abbey, built in the Middle Ages, that has a rich history: In 1531, what is believed to be the first sparkling wine (Blanquette de Limoux) was created there. (saint-hilaire-aude.fr)



The biodynamically farmed vineyards of Domaine de la Réserve d'O

Carcassonne, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, has been a citadel since Greco-Roman times.



WHERE TO STAY

Tucked away off a narrow street in the hill town of Montréal, about 20 minutes from Carcassonne, lies the bohemian treasure that is **Camellas-Lloret** (from \$170/night, camellaslloret.com). Here, you'll want to photograph everything you see. Have breakfast with expat owners Annie and Colin Moore, then drive off for a day of exploration. If you prefer a more traditional hotel and crave a swimming pool, **Château l'Hospitalet** (from \$150/night, chateau-hospitalet.com) outside Narbonne offers comfortable, minimalist accommodations and the Michelin-recognized L'Art de Vivre restaurant (restaurant-art-de-vivre.com).



WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

LA CAMBUSE DU SAUNIER

Nothing highlights Languedoc's seaside locale like a meal of local shellfish at a table overlooking the pink salt fields of Gruissan. Try the seafood platter with fresh mussels, oysters, sea snails, and shrimp, or try the salt-baked whole fish. (Route de l'Ayrolle, 11430 Gruissan)

CHEZ BEBELLE

Les Halles de Narbonne offers the quintessential French market experience. Have lunch in the market at Chez Bebelles, where orders are directed by megaphone and the meat is thrown over from the butcher's stall across the way. Tartares are best sellers here, as is the seared steak haché. (chez-bebelle.fr)

CHÂTEAU DE FLAUGERGUES

Start or end your trip at Folia restaurant, inside this 17th-century oasis within the city limits of Montpellier. Don't miss touring the property, too: The Colbert family shares its exquisite gardens, Flemish tapestry collection, and, of course, its 10 different cuvées. (flaugergues.com)

COMTE ROGER

Though it may be the most traditionally touristic part of your trip, don't skip a wander through the medieval walled city of Carcassonne. When you're tired of walking, order a meal of cassoulet (which was invented in Languedoc) at Comte Roger as your reward for braving the crowds. (comteroger.com)