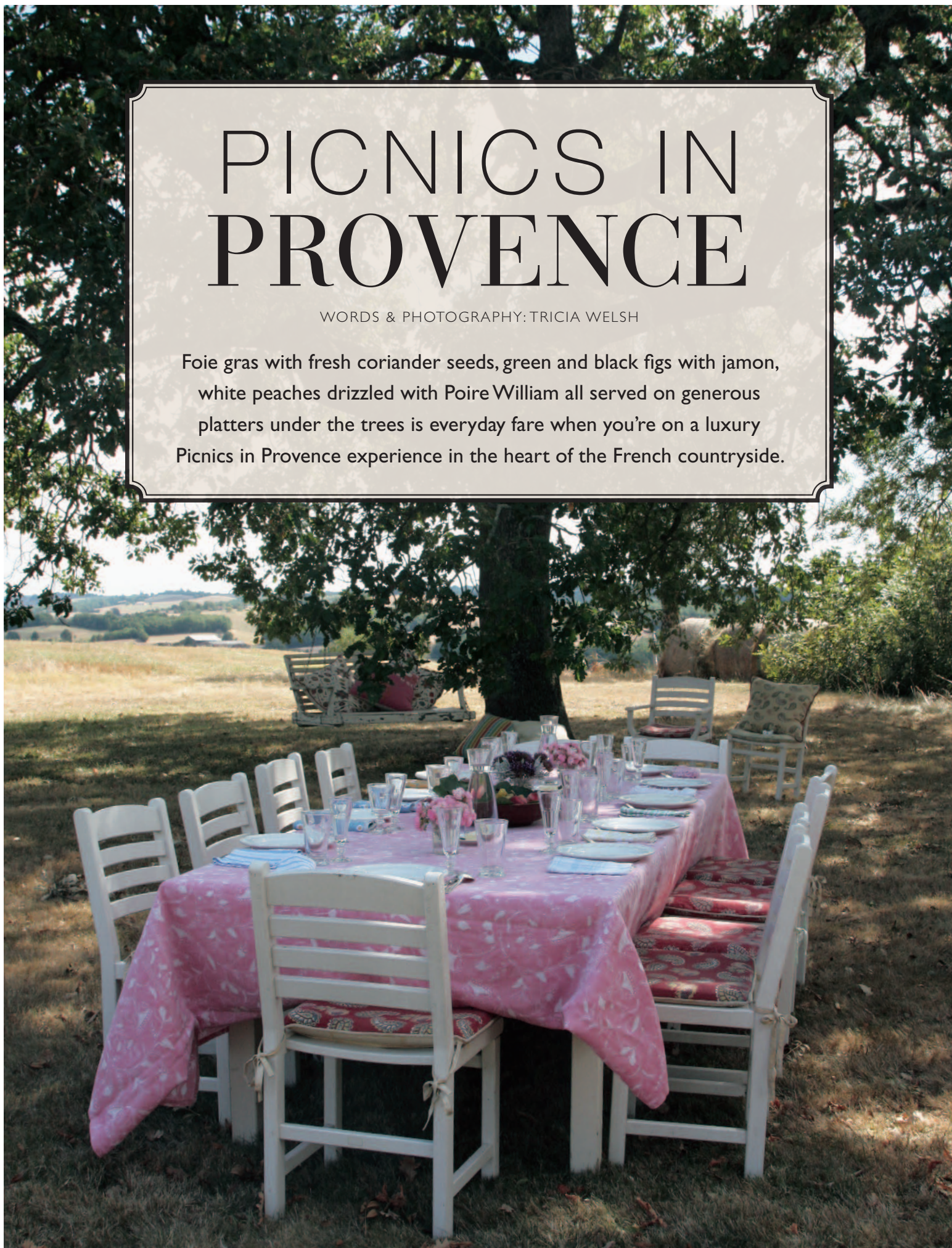


PICNICS IN PROVENCE

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY: TRICIA WELSH

Foie gras with fresh coriander seeds, green and black figs with jamon, white peaches drizzled with Poire William all served on generous platters under the trees is everyday fare when you're on a luxury Picnics in Provence experience in the heart of the French countryside.





Previous page: lunch under the trees at La Castellane. This page: enroute to Gaillac. Facing page from top left: Gaillac grapes; La Castellane (the author's 'home' whilst on Picnics in Provence); hammocks and lounges invite relaxation at La Castellane; local sign, Cordes Sur Ciel; pre-dinner glasses of sparkling Mauzac; chef Daniel selects local ingredients for a cooking class; in the cellars of Plageoles; fresh garden figs and jamon; roses and rosé at La Castellane

Energetic Melbourne-based food-lover and Francophile Nikki Maxwell leads small groups of food and wine-lovers each year off the beaten track in various parts of France to indulge in regional gastronomy – becoming immersed in the relaxed country lifestyle and meeting local characters along the way.

As founder and proprietor of Picnics in Provence, Nikki's week-long food and wine adventures did indeed begin in Provence, but she has recently introduced a new itinerary in the picturesque but lesser-known Tarn et Garonne region north of Toulouse.

To offer this new all-inclusive indulgence, Nikki has joined forces with US-based international interior and textile designer Kathryn Ireland with guests staying in Kathryn's classic two-storey farmhouse, La Castellane, in the French countryside. Located on 20 hectares of farmland, one side rolls down to the pretty Tescou River; the other side ambles along towards the tiny village of Verlhac Tescou which guests get to know quite well over the next few days on early morning walks or bicycle rides.

A former working vineyard and foie gras duck farm, La Castellane accommodates guests in the main house as well as in a charmingly renovated 18th-century pigeonier or pigeon house – literally a love nest for two. Decor is country chic making good use of Kathryn's gorgeous fabrics. There are horses and chooks to feed, eggs to collect, apples, tomatoes, quince and figs to pick – and eat – numerous bicycles on which to explore the countryside, a pool to cool down in and myriad lazy hammocks to swing in – just catching the breeze or watching romantic crimson sunsets.

Our group of ten gathers each day for breakfast in the huge kitchen/dining room of the main house or outdoors on the terrace. Lunch might be

under the trees or in a local restaurant sampling regional specialties while dinner is mostly in the open-ended candle-filled Dutch barn – hailed by an international glossy magazine as "one of the 100 most beautiful outdoor rooms in the world."

By day we tour the countryside, meander through medieval villages, visit bustling markets, sample local produce and quality wines, bone up on the life and colourful art of locally-born Toulouse-Lautrec, pay our respects in historic cathedrals, savour local eau de vie – and even try our hand at sculpting a human torso under the patient guidance of art teacher Madame Claude Palmier in Albi. For many of us, it is the first attempt at modelling clay since plasticine at kindergarten – the artistic exercise proving to be one of the funniest and most unexpected highlights of the trip.

Back on the farm, Nikki and her small team of helpers make things happen seamlessly – producing satiny scrambled eggs for breakfast, preparing trays of refreshing iced teas on sunny afternoons, whipping up gourmet dinners and keeping thirsty wine glasses filled. Nikki has also recruited the services of local Franco-English chef Daniel de la Falaise who creates several exceptional meals for us. With his signature straw Motsch hat, Daniel and his iconic white Citroën delivery van crunching up the gravel driveway become familiar sights during our stay.

Fashion and food are a natural combination in the de la Falaise family. The grandson of celebrated fashion model and food writer Maxime de la Falaise, Daniel is himself a former model who trained at his great-uncle Mark Birley's Harry's Bar in London and later launched the George Club. His designer aunt Loulou was for many years the muse of Yves Saint Laurent and had her own boutique in Paris. Today, Daniel lives on a 20-hectare property nearby where he tends an extensive vegetable and herb garden and travels around cooking for private clients.



We meet local characters everywhere, not the least being two wine heavies in Gaillac, one of the oldest wine-growing regions in France. Driving through rolling vine-covered hills, we come to the renowned family-run Plageoles winery where fifth-generation wine-maker, Bernard, welcomes us to the vineyard. His much-revered father, Robert, has been instrumental in re-introducing old wine varieties original to this region and has written two books on the subject. Together they have been producing organic wines for 25 years – “natural wines without preservatives and pesticides.” We sample wines and stock up on sparkling Mauzac for pre-dinner drinks on the terrace back at the farm.

At Vigne en Foule, a restaurant and wine shop in Gaillac, we meet owner Laurent Cazottes – a passionate young man whose outstanding Distillerie Artisanale eau-de-vies and, in particular, his sensational Poire William are served in 25 three Michelin-starred restaurants throughout Europe. Cazottes grows all his own fruit including cherries and green walnuts and has vineyards to produce over-ripe raisins for his raisin vie. As well, he grows sunflowers for oil, crocuses for saffron, has 1300 oak trees that produce some 15 kilograms of truffles each season, harvests wheat for bread and grows specific herbs such as lavender, savoury, thyme, sage, peppermint and various mints for his artisanal floral waters.

Another morning, we wake early to accompany Daniel to the Monday market at Caussade. The village is alive with shoppers inspecting baskets that hold chickens, ducks, guinea fowl and cute ill-fated brown rabbits. Stalls laden with local white peaches, plums, pears, apples and apricots meander through the village streets. Deep bowls hold marinated and stuffed olives, circular wooden containers display fanned salted sardines. Together Daniel and Nikki choose ingredients necessary for upcoming meals back at the farmhouse.



But today we're in for another treat: a private hands-on cooking class at La Castellane. We scrub, peel, chop, trim, stir and generally lend a hand – learning all the while. Then we dine royally under shady trees in the garden on carrot and tarragon soup, roast shoulder of lamb with bay leaves, rosemary and garlic, mashed potatoes made velvety with Daniel's own-label olive oil, al dente beans and a terrific herb-filled salad accompanied by top local wines – the crisp rosé becoming a particular favourite.

But Nikki has kept the week's highlight a secret when we visit Daniel's garden. Unbeknown to us, Nikki and Daniel have set up picnic tables by his private lake – behind a natural hedge. We arrive and head for the garden, savouring sun-warmed tomatoes straight from the plant – delicious! We wander through the vegetable garden pinching fresh herbs to enjoy their intense flavour and before we know it, are curiously close to the lake. Then, voilà! We spy check-clothed tables set up for a late afternoon repast – complete with fat colourful cushions on the grass.

It truly is an idyllic setting. While local anglers try their luck at the other end of the lake, we are served such a special meal it will remain etched in our memories for a long time. In his inimitable style, Daniel has selected many ingredients from his garden along with quality local produce. He liberally anoints them with his own special *le garde-manger de la falaise*-labelled herb-infused oils made using Tuscan olive oils produced by his noted winemaking godfather, Giuseppe Maria Sesti.

We start with three sheep cheeses: a brique de brébis, a creamy Roquefort made from the milk of just one herd and an excellent tome from Albi served with crisp apple slices and olive oil. Then come peeled tomatoes from the garden with basil flower; basil oil and *fleur de sel*. Next arrives chicken drumsticks shallow-poached in tarragon chicken broth which we dip in home-made mayonnaise; then slices of perfect cantaloupe and fresh figs with *jamon*. And finally white peaches – “this is the world's epicentre for white peaches,” declares Daniel – with Poire William, salt and oil before we head home as the sun relinquishes its warmth and duty for another day.



Facing page from top: wheels of raw milk cheese, Montauban; goats cheese sign at Caussade markets, Montauban on the Tarn River.
This page from top left: the neatly tended vines of Gaillac; the secluded setting of a surprise lakeside picnic; baguettes at Montauban market; the Dutch Barn set up for dinner at La Castellane

factfile

- GETTING THERE** Air France offers 53 weekly flights to Europe (via Singapore and Hong Kong) from five major Australian cities: Sydney, Melbourne, Perth, Brisbane and Adelaide in cooperation with Qantas. Air France is also delighted to offer 13 weekly flights via Guangzhou from Brisbane, Melbourne and Sydney with China Southern. To reach Provence visitors can then catch a connecting flight from Paris to Nice, Marseille or Toulon. For more details on flights visit www.airfrance.com.au For rail travel from Paris, Railplus can book and reserve seats on the TGV from Paris to Montauban or Toulouse, phone 1 300 555 003 or see www.railplus.com.au
- PICNICS IN PROVENCE FOR 2013** Picnics in Provence dates for 2013 are: June 1-8 and 9-16, September 11-18 (with a five-day optional pre-trip to Monte Carlo, Nice and the Riviera); other dates are available for customised tours for a minimum of six people.
- PRICE** The all-inclusive price from \$6495 includes an open pantry and open bar policy plus Michelin-trained private chef. Phone 0400 018 211, www.picnicsinprovence.com
- INFO** The author was a guest of Picnics in Provence and Railplus.