



FROM BASQUE TO BORDEAUX

BY MONICA PARPAL

Discovering a world of flavor in the **SOUTHWEST OF FRANCE**

Tucked into the southwest corner of France, bordered by the Pyrenees mountains and the Atlantic coastline, lies the French region of Aquitaine. About the size of Belgium, Aquitaine (French for “land of water”) encapsulates diverse geographical, historical, and cultural characteristics. The terrain climbs skyward with imposing peaks to the south, descends into vine-covered landscape to the north, and dissolves into a stunning, beach-covered coastline to the west. The people of Southwest France are just as diverse, with French-Basque fisherman, pepper farmers, Bordelais winemakers, entrepreneurs, and young students calling Aquitaine home.

Connecting the diverse landscape and people is a deep-seated pride, hard-working ethic, and a passion for good food and wine. Aquitaine has a culinary identity all its own, a compass by which to explore all the region has to offer. If you choose to journey to this dramatic corner of France, begin in the Pays Basque—the French Basque Country.

Getting to the far southwestern tip of Aquitaine is as simple as a flight into Paris or Bordeaux, followed by a high-speed train through the countryside to the rugged base of the Pyrenees. As an old Basque saying goes, “Before God was God, before boulders were boulders, the Basques were Basques.” Though the Basques have occupied this area for thousands of years, both their origins and their language remain shrouded in mystery. Today, fishers, farmers, ranchers, and bakers do things the way their grandparents did, and their grandparents before them. The result? Satisfying food worth rejoicing over.

Along the coasts of the Basque Country, tapas are served at all hours of the day. Near the luxurious seaside tourist destination of Biarritz,

a two-year-old restaurant called **CRAMPOTTE 30** {30 Port des Pêcheurs, 64200 Biarritz; 011.33-5-35.46.91.22} serves tapas out of a former fisherman’s quarters. Owner Sophie Rolland has converted the tiny room into a restaurant kitchen, where tapas—known by the Basque term, “pintxos”—are made fresh to order and served on a simple terrace overlooking the expansive ocean. Jovial guests, tourists, and fisherman sit on wooden benches around picnic tables, ordering off the one-page menu.

Basque tapas are simple and hearty: slices of baguette topped with Iberico de Bellote (local ham); freshly-caught tuna spread with bright pesto; thinly sliced ewe cheese with spoonfuls of black cherry jam; and pungent Ossau-Iraty sheep’s cheese from the nearby mountains. Tiny glass verrines of carrot and cumin mousse come equipped with miniature spoons. A regional dish called pipérade—a blend of tomatoes, green peppers, and onion sautéed with piment d’Espelette (a locally-grown chile pepper)—is eaten on bread or by the spoonful, sometimes served with egg or ham. All the ingredients come from within a few miles, served



atop repurposed wooden pelote paddles used in the much admired local sport known in the U.S. as jai alai. To complement the food, Rolland pours sparkling white Txakoli (or Chacoli) wine with a theatrical flourish.

“My passion is cooking,” says Rolland, who creates new menus each week. “To have a small restaurant in Biarritz is an amazing opportunity.”

For many Basques, this brand of culinary passion runs deep. People live in traditional white and red cottages, raising sheep, tending vineyards, milling grain, and growing Espelette peppers they way their ancestors did. Espelettes—the earthy, mild, slightly sweet red chile peppers that have grown here for 400 years—are found primarily in the Basque country. In the old days, residents would dry the peppers by hanging them in festoons from their walls and balconies. It’s a practice that lives on today, delighting droves of tourists at the annual Espelette Pepper Festival.

Just outside the town of Espelette—a short, scenic drive from Biarritz—visitors engage

firsthand in the traditions surrounding the humble chile at **ATELIER DU PIMENT D’ESPELETTE** {Elizaldeko Bidea, 64250 Espelette; 011.33.5.59.93.90.21; atelier-du-piment-espelette.fr}, where Owner Ramuntxo Pochelu—a native Basque Frenchman—oversees this pepper workshop and farm. He plants fields of knee-high pepper plants by hand each spring, harvests them in the fall, then dries, crushes, and packages them for sale all over the world.

“Everything is done by hand the same way it’s been done for 400 years,” Pochelu says in French. “We want to share the Espelette with as many people as we can.”

Culinary traditions like this are just a taste of all that Aquitaine has to offer. Make your way north, and the hilly countryside gives way to vineyards and river valleys—the landscape of Bordeaux wine country.

Surrounded by bucolic green countryside and nearly 300 acres of vineyards, the city of Bordeaux is a buzzing metropolis. Often called the “Pearl of





As an old Basque saying goes, "Before **GOD** was God, before **BOULDERS** were boulders, the Basques were **BASQUES**."



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Aquitaine,” the capital city is known for its striking 19th century architecture, sophisticated culture, and strictly-controlled, world-renowned wine. Age-old vineyards and wine châteaux decorate the landscape along the banks of the Garonne and Dordogne Rivers—the historic thoroughfares of the wine trade.

Bordeaux wines span a range of ages and price points, but they have one thing in common: they're all made by blending different grapes to achieve maximum balance and finesse. Primary red grapes include Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, and Cabernet Franc, while Sémillon, Sauvignon Blanc, and Muscadelle round out the dominant local white varieties. The best of the best are classified as Grand Cru Classé.

Near the Dordogne River and the hilly medieval city of Saint-Emilion, **CHÂTEAU LA DOMINIQUE** {33330 Saint-Emilion; 011.33-5-57-51-31-36; chateau-ladominique.com} treats guests to a 17th century wine cellar, recently renovated and redesigned by famed French architect Jean Nouvel. Floor-to-ceiling cellar windows, modern winemaking equipment, and an artistic aesthetic enliven the historic architecture, while brilliant wine-colored exterior walls hearken to regional roots.

Vineyards and wine **CHATEAUX** decorate the landscape along the banks of the **GARONNE AND DORDOGNE RIVERS**—the historic thoroughfares of the **WINE TRADE**.

On the rooftop, **LA TERRASSE ROUGE** {1 La Dominique, 33330 Saint-Emilion; 011.33-5-57-24-47-05; laterrasserouge.com}—one of the only wine châteaux with an onsite restaurant—serves a vibrant wine country lunch overlooking sweeping vineyard views in every direction. The menu tempts with hors-d'oeuvre of Duck Foie Gras, Charcuterie à la Bordelaise, Caviar, and Oysters from the nearby seaside village of Arcachon. Entrées include local Leg of Lamb, spit-fired Roast Chicken, and fine cuts of beef served with cream-poached potatoes and roasted local vegetables. Cap the experience with a glass of fine Château La Dominique Grand Cru Classé, which boasts a ripe and spicy nose, notes of truffle and licorice on the palate, and a full, silky finish. For dessert, soft, chewy macaron cookies are a Saint-Emilion favorite.

And no visit to Bordeaux is complete without canelés—tiny cakes traditionally baked with rum and vanilla that can be found in restaurants and cake shops all over the capital city. Baked in distinctive copper molds traditionally greased in bees' wax, canelés are caramelized to a crisp golden-brown crust with a soft, honey-vanilla-flavored crumb—a true regional delight.

All this is only a taste of the culinary opportunities in Aquitaine. Traveling from the southern Pays Basque to the illustrious wine-producing region surrounding Bordeaux introduces a side of France that, to many, is still undiscovered. If you choose to visit, let the cultural traditions of food and fine wine be your compass. From the bright red Espelette peppers to the indulgent canelés de Bordeaux, culinary discoveries abound. Relish steak frites in an airy Bordeaux brasserie. Linger over tapas on a seaside terrace. Swirl and sip a crimson red Grand Cru from within a luxurious château. From the mountain tops to the cresting waves, the southwest of France is ripe for discovery.

For more information on how to plan your culinary experience in Aquitaine, visit us.rendezvousenfrance.com or tourisme-aquitaine.fr/en.

A TASTE OF FRANCE **AT HOME**

No need to travel far for authentic French cuisine. These local restaurants deliver joie de vivre right here in Chicago.

KIKI'S BISTRO {900 North Franklin Street; 312.335.5454}

Owner Georges “Kiki” Cuisance treats River North to authentic French fare at Kiki's Bistro, a romantic and cozy eatery known for its expertly-crafted, classic French food. Cuisance originally came to Chicago to help open Maxim's in 1964, and in 1969 opened and became well-known for his restaurant Le Bordeaux. He now owns his present restaurant, Kiki's Bistro, where guests return again and again for authentic dishes like Cassoulet Toulousain, Coq au Vin, and Bouillabaisse Marseillaise. The exceptional wine list presents an array of French wine, with offerings from Bordeaux to Burgundy (Cuisance's home town). ▶ KIKISBISTRO.COM



BISTRONOMIC {840 North Wabash Avenue; 312.944.8400}



This Gold Coast restaurant offers authentic and affordable French fare. Seasoned French Executive Chef/Owner and James Beard Award nominee Martial Noguier wanted a bistro with gastronomic offerings at an economic value—hence the name. Guests love the Scallops, Duck Confit, and Mussels—examples of the sophisticated fare that remind people of Paris. Dishes like Rack of Lamb with winter squash purée and pipérade honor the Pays Basque, as do seasonal dishes like Calamari with chorizo. With his wife Laurence working the front of the house, and his son in the kitchen, Noguier has created an independent, family-run standby for French food in the city.

CYRANO'S FARM KITCHEN

{546 North Wells Street; 312.467.0546}

Chef Didier Durand's culinary mantra is simple: “Good food makes people happy.” With fresh produce and ingredients sourced largely from Durand's Indiana farm, Cyrano's Farm Kitchen offers rustic, authentic French fare inspired by Durand's childhood in the southwest of France. “I think the energy comes from my mother,” he says. “During the week we would work the farm, but Sundays were when my mother and I would



cook together.” Those simple childhood dishes—game sausages, soups, and apple tarts—are reflected on his menu today, along with Cassoulet, Onion Soup, and Boeuf Bourguignon. Head downstairs to the Barrel Room for live music every weekend. ▶ CYRANOSFARMKITCHEN.COM



LES NOMADES {222 East Ontario Street; 312.649.9010}

Originally opened as a private dining house in 1978, Les Nomades remains one of the longest running fine-dining French restaurants in the city. For 21 years, Owner Mary Beth Liccioni and Executive Chef Roland Liccioni have provided exquisite dining and attentive service to loyal diners from near and far. Vietnam-born Chef Liccioni grew up in the southwest of France and worked in Paris and London, developing a repertoire of flavors and techniques that sets Les Nomades apart. Particularly notable are his Foie Gras and Duck Confit, as well as game meats, savory consommé, and fresh, pillowy soufflés. All this—alongside wood-burning fireplaces, fresh flower arrangements, and romantic, Old-World décor—makes Les Nomades a one-of-a-kind Chicago experience. ▶ LESNOMADES.NET

GOOSEFOOT {2656 West Lawrence Avenue; 773.942.7547}

When you're craving fine American fare with French roots and modern flair, amble over to goosefoot. Produced almost solely by Chef/Owner Chris Nugent and his wife Nina, the artful, seasonal chef's tasting menu is inspired by Nugent's classical training and traditional French influence. "I try to put my own twist on French technique," he says. He may start with a traditional cheese course of Roquefort and Port, and then incorporate local quince, goji berries, and an airy Roquefort foam to make it his own. Make reservations well in advance and allow time to enjoy each bite amidst the thoughtful décor—which includes three tiny Rodin sculptures. Be sure to check out the Nugents' own food and wine shop next door—the perfect source for your BYO-bottle of wine. ▶ GOOSEFOOT.NET

CHEZ JOËL {1119 West Taylor Street; 312.226.6479}

Chez Joël comes to us from two brothers, Executive Chef Joël Kazouini and General Manager Ahmed Kazouini. Inspired by their French upbringing and

talented mother ("the best cook ever," according to Ahmed), this quaint restaurant serves classic, upscale southern French fare and wine by the glass or bottle. French posters adorn the walls and crisp linens cover the tables, creating an atmosphere reminiscent of a true French bistro. Traditional favorites include Steak Frites, savory Lamb Shank, warming Bouillabaisse, and tender Mussels Marinières. A delightful diversion in Little Italy—with a sister location in the brothers' hometown of Marrakesh, Morocco—this restaurant has served the neighborhood for 15 years. ▶ CHEZJOELBISTRO.COM

VANILLE PATISSERIE {2108 North Clark Street; 773.868.4574}

At Vanille Patisserie, the art of French pastry comes to life with bold flavors in petite packages. Especially known for their French macarons, Owner Sophie Evanoff and the team at Vanille bring luxurious and authentic French pastries to their French and American clientele. "People often come in and say, 'I was just in Paris and tried macarons for the first time, and yours are just as amazing,'" says Executive Pastry Chef Stacy Waldrop. "They are so happy that there's a place in Chicago where they can find them." A deceptively simple treat, macarons consist of two almond meringue cookies sandwiching a ganache, buttercream, or jam filling. But the process takes more than 48 hours to do correctly for that crunchy-on-the-outside, chewy-on-the-inside result. And yet, Vanille does it right every time, with more than 20 flavors of macarons—as well as tarts, cakes, and other confections. ▶ VANILLEPATISSERIE.COM

CITÉ {505 North Lake Shore Drive; 312.644.4050}

This modern downtown restaurant at the top of Lake Point Tower offers seafood, steak, and succulent French-inspired dishes with an unbeatable view. Start with Escargot François or a Petit Steak Diane before venturing into luxe Cité Caviar Service or Seared Hudson Valley Foie Gras. French Onion Soup is a must for a chilly day, and any of the savory entrées—Filet Mignon, Surf and Turf, or Duck—are improved with additions of au poivre or pomme purée. ▶ CITECHICAGO.COM

ALLIANCE PATISSERIE {615 North State Street; 312.374.4144}

Those who know and love the celebrated Alliance Bakery and Café will be delighted with the new Alliance Patisserie. Pastry Chef Peter Rios's French pastry shop, situated in River North, offers modern desserts, breakfast pastries, and cakes prepared with traditional French technique. Order a coffee and have a seat in the bright, modern space, or take home treats for friends and family. Try a Dominique with milk chocolate-raspberry mousse and vanilla crème brûlée; a Toasted Coconut and Salted Caramel Éclair; and Rios's famous macarons. Romantics take note: they'll have even more special treats come Valentine's Day. ▶ ALLIANCEPATISSERIE.COM

