



# A day in Provence

In the up-and-coming wine region of the Luberon, **Dominic Rippon** visits the estate that once welcomed Russell Crowe as a big-screen *vigneron*

**U**ntil the 1990s, the Luberon was a forgotten region, nestling secretively beneath its eponymous mountains; a landscape scattered with vines, field crops and tumbledown cottages, overlooked by hilltop villages that would be perfectly at home in the sleepiest corners of Tuscany. Then in 1989, Peter Mayle's best-selling novel *A Year in Provence* was published, putting the village of Ménerbes on the map. The initial stream of literary enthusiasts gave way to a larger tide of wealthy urbanites, politicians and international celebrities, who bought up ancient châteaux and farmsteads as peaceful retreats from their busy lives.

While tourism boomed in the Luberon, the area's wine industry struggled. Its vineyards gained *appellation d'origine* status in 1988, but it is only during the past decade, in an initiative spearheaded by a group of local cooperative cellars called Marrenon Vignobles, that the Luberon's wines have begun to gain recognition further afield. The Luberon is quintessentially Provençal, but its *vignerons* look west to the Rhône Valley for their vinous identity. South-east of the sun-baked Côtes du Rhône villages, where the grenache grape thrives in the torrid *garrigue* scrubland, the Luberon enjoys



**Dominic Rippon has many years' experience in the wine trade, both in the UK and France, and now runs the wine merchant business Strictly Wine.**

a more temperate climate than its neighbour: cool air spills down from the Alps through the valleys of the Coulon and Èze rivers, giving milder days and cooler nights. Although the Luberon's crisp, spicy rosés now represent more than half of its production (the fashion for pink is hard to ignore in such a touristic region), this is historically red wine country, where the syrah grape makes wines that have more in common with the northern Rhône *appellations* of Saint-Joseph and Côte-Rôtie than the more southerly Gigondas and Châteauneuf-du-Pape.

I followed the road beneath the village of Ménerbes, glancing toward the hilltop ruins of Château de Lacoste, once home to the infamous Marquis de Sade, as I made my way to nearby Bonnieux. As I entered the driveway of Château la Canorgue, I had the unnerving feeling of having visited it before, as if in a dream. I mentioned my disquiet to owner Nathalie Margan, who quickly explained: this is the château where the 2006 film *A Good Year*, starring Russell Crowe, was filmed. "It's been crazy ever since," Nathalie admitted. "We've found people wandering around and even climbing the walls, trying to take 'selfies'. And they're often not even interested in our wine!"

In Peter Mayle's novel, on which the film is based, the fictional Griffon wine estate is



PHOTOGRAPHS: DOMINIC RIPPON





**LEFT AND TOP:** The vineyards and house of the Château la Canorgue estate; **ABOVE:** Vigneronne Nathalie Margan

believed to produce poor-quality wine until its true potential emerges, but the quality of Château la Canorgue's wines is no such secret. The estate is built on the remains of a Roman villa and its water is still supplied by an ancient subterranean system of wells and channels. When Nathalie's father Jean-Pierre took over the estate in the 1960s, he understood that any chemical treatments to the vineyard risked poisoning the estate's water supply; so he pioneered organic viticulture in the region decades before it became fashionable.

Nathalie uncorked a bottle of the white IGP (*Indication Géographique Protégée*) Viognier, and I was reminded of the Luberon's alluring potential for white winemaking. It showed subtle peach aromas with fresh mineral hints: the result of a long ripening period combined with those cool nights. La Canorgue Rosé was no less zippy, with crunchy red fruit flavours and an explosive mid-palate.

We then returned to white and tried one of Nathalie's happy experiments: a fascinating blend of viognier, marsanne and roussanne grapes, called 'Tout Simplement', fermented using indigenous yeasts and aged in acacia barrels. The result was at once fresh and nutty, with a honeyed caramel nose and a warm, savoury palate. As we tried Château la Canorgue Rouge, with its complex red fruit, liquorice and warm spice flavours, my eyes were drawn to an empty space in the wine rack, with a label that read '*Coin Perdu*' (literally 'hidden corner'). Recognising the name from *A Good Year*, I wondered if I could taste the wine that bore the name of the Griffon estate's secret blend. "Alas," Nathalie declared, "we're completely out of stock." 🍷

## THE WINEMAKER RECOMMENDS

Château la Canorgue vigneronne Nathalie Margan reveals her favourite places to stay and dine in the area

### WHERE TO STAY

#### Hôtel La Bastide de Capelongue

Les Claparèdes  
Chemin des Cabanes  
84480 Bonnieux  
Tel: (Fr) 4 90 75 89 78  
www.capelongue.com  
Luxurious hotel with exquisite rooms and a two-Michelin-star restaurant. Doubles from €140.

### Le Clos du Buis

Rue Victor Hugo  
84480 Bonnieux  
Tel: (Fr) 4 90 75 88 48  
www.leclosdubuis.fr  
A cosy, chic hotel with panoramic views. Doubles from €98.

### WHERE TO EAT

#### Restaurant L'Arôme

2 Rue Lucien Blanc  
84480 Bonnieux  
Tel: (Fr) 4 90 75 88 62  
www.larome-restaurant.com  
Chef Jean-Michel Pagès gives Mediterranean cuisine an oriental twist in his vaulted medieval dining room. Menus from €29.

### Restaurant Le Fournil

Place Carnot  
84480 Bonnieux  
Tel: (Fr) 4 90 75 83 62  
www.lefournil-bonnieux.com  
This restaurant is set in

a troglodytic cave in the centre of the village and has a large, shady terrace. Menus from €24.90.

### WHERE TO VISIT

#### Lacoste

Pretty village dominated by Marquis de Sade's château, now being renovated by fashion designer Pierre Cardin. www.lacoste-84.com

### L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue

Riverside village famous for its Sunday morning market. It also makes a great base for a lazy afternoon's kayaking. www.oti-delasorgue.fr



**GETTING THERE:** The 6hr direct rail service from London to Avignon TGV can be booked through Voyages.sncf.com (tel: 0844 848 5848, www.voyages-sncf.com) with returns from €109; Bonnieux is a 9hr

drive from the northern ferry ports; The nearest airports are Marseille and Nîmes; **TOURIST INFORMATION:** Vaucluse tourist board, tel: (Fr) 4 90 80 47 00, www.provenceguide.com; **WINES:** Les Vins Luberon, Boulevard du Rayol, 84160 Lourmarin, tel: (Fr) 4 90 07 34 40, www.vins-luberon.fr.

## TOURING THE VINEYARDS

### Château la Canorgue

Route du Pont Julien  
84480 Bonnieux  
Tel: (Fr) 4 90 75 81 01  
www.chateau-lacanorgue.com  
**Choice wine:** Château la Canorgue Luberon Rouge.  
**Taste:** Syrah, grenache and carignan grapes give a liquorice-scented wine with ripe tannins.

**Drink with:** Rack of lamb.  
**Price at the estate:** €9.80.

Also visit:  
**Domaine de la Citadelle**

84560 Ménerbes  
Tel: (Fr) 4 90 72 41 58  
www.domaine-citadelle.com

**Choice wine:** Gouverneur Saint-Auban Blanc IGP.  
**Taste:** A spicy, exotic, ageworthy blend of mostly viognier and roussanne grapes.

### Château la Verrerie

1810 Route du Luberon  
84360 Puget-sur-Durance  
Tel: (Fr) 4 90 08 97 97  
www.chateau-la-verrierie.com

**Choice wine:** Grand Deffand Luberon Rouge.  
**Taste:** A tight, grainy, perfumed wine that needs time to develop: one of the world's best syrahs.

### Marrenon Vignobles

Boulevard Saint-Roch  
84240 La Tour-d'Aigues  
Tel: (Fr) 4 90 07 27 47  
www.marrenon.fr  
**Choice wine:** Versant Sud Luberon Rouge.  
**Taste:** This spicy, blackberry scented red is a dead-ringer for Côtes du Rhône Villages.