

Truffles, seafood and armagnac: the chef's guide to Aquitaine

Place Royal in Labastide-d'Armagnac



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I grew up in the Landes, part of Aquitaine in southwest France. It's a place that has always been close to my heart and I return as often as I can. My parents had a restaurant in my home village of Villeneuve-de-Marsan, about an hour from the sea, surrounded by aromatic pine forest.

Much of the area is made up of pine forest — it covers about two thirds of the *département*. Both sides of my family come from the area. When I was 12, we moved into a beautiful house — an old watermill on a lake. It was very isolated and set in stunning countryside. I spent my weekends there, staying with my grandmother during the week while I went to school.

Every summer holiday we went to the sea — my father rented a house on the beach. Ah, the beaches along Aquitaine's coast, they are really something else. It's a truly magical place and those beaches are still as wild and unspoilt as they always were. There are 66 miles (106km) of sandy beaches stretching down the coast, peppered with charming seaside towns where the French like to holiday. They range from Biscarrosse and Mimizan towards the northern end, down to bustling Hossegor in the south, with its Basque-style villas and the big, empty beaches of Capbreton. If you love surfing and seafood, this is the place to come, thanks to the Gauf, a deep-water crevice that reaches more than 1,000m (3,300ft) below sea level.

The ocean is very special here. We don't call it the Atlantic; we just refer to it as "the ocean". It has such power. Yes, it can be dangerous, but it can also be friendly. And then there are the sand dunes — huge, rolling dunes, including the biggest dune in Europe, called Pilat. It has a constantly varying height of well over 100 metres.

Away from the roar of the ocean, the mood is quieter. Head to quaint medieval villages, such as Labastide-d'Armagnac, in the heart of Bas-Armagnac, where many producers of the digestif

open their cellars to visitors. Fruity, golden armagnac is a drink close to my heart because my brother Marc is one of the producers. It has been made in this region since the 15th century. Fuller bodied than cognac, armagnac is often aged for many years, even decades, and the result is delicious; you can try Marc's armagnac in my restaurants.

The produce in the Landes is also very special; I use a lot of it in my restaurants. Many of the producers I know from way back — they used to come by my parents' restaurant every morning to make their deliveries. There is corn-fed chicken here, plump guinea fowl and delicious duck, plus foie gras, of course. There are also intense black truffles, the freshest, briniest oysters and thrilling local wines. And the Landes grows the best asparagus in the world — the sandy soil is perfect for it.

Less than 20 miles from where I grew up is Michel Guérard's Les Prés d'Eugénie, a three Michelin-starred restaurant that has had a huge impact on me. Michel is a mentor and a hero for me, an important part of my life and a big influence on everything I've done. His place is authentic, elegant and beautiful — I go there every year.

You can choose between two restaurants owned by Michel. As well as Les Prés d'Eugénie's fine-dining restaurant, hotel and spa, he owns a bistro near by, La Ferme aux Grives, so you don't have to do the three-star thing to try his cooking. He also owns a couple of houses you can rent on a remote beach on the Courant d'Huchet, where they can send a chef from Les Prés d'Eugénie to cook a seafood supper for you. That really is something else.

One of my grandmothers is from the Basque Country and my other grandparents lived in Biarritz, which is not far away, so we would go there often too, for our holidays.

My parents live in Biarritz now and I visit three or four times a year, either renting a house on the beach, or if it's just for the weekend then I love to stay at the Hôtel du Palais. The hotel was once Empress Eugénie's palace, Napoleon III's wife, and the uninterrupted views across the bay are magical. When I was a little girl we used to rent a tent on La Grande Plage opposite the hotel, sometimes visiting the hotel's terrace in the winter months for a cup of hot chocolate. I used to dream about staying here, and now that dream has come true. I feel like a princess every time I stay.

Biarritz is an elegant city and very friendly. People are always happy to see me when I go to the market. I know many of the producers and they always want me to have a drink with them — the prodigal child returning home.

One of my favourite things to do when I'm staying in Biarritz is to drive south to La Ferme Ostalapia, a lovely little auberge with ten pretty bedrooms facing the Rhune. The chef, Christian Duplaissy, was my sous chef in Paris ten years ago. He's a fisherman too, and he cooks beautiful, simple food using great local products.

The Rhune is the most northerly summit in the Pyrenees and there are incredible panoramic views from the top. As well as the peaks of the Pyrenees, you can see all seven provinces of the Basque Country, the beaches of the Landes and the Basque coastline, stretching from Biarritz to San Sebastián.

If you are feeling energetic, you can walk up — locals boast of doing La Rhune at the weekends. If not, take the train. The *Train de la Rhune* dates back to 1924 and takes 35 minutes to reach the top. Along the way you'll see pottok — wild, small, sturdy Basque ponies — and manech (red-face) sheep, plus griffon vultures.

One of my favourite things to do when I visit Biarritz is to picnic on the beach with my two daughters and some friends. I'll pick up a roasted corn-fed Landes chicken from the Rôtisserie des Halles in Biarritz market and we'll eat it with *cogollos* (Spanish lettuce hearts), which I'll dress with some olive and espelette pepper and salt.

And I'll take some brebis — the famous Pyrenees sheep's cheese, which is great with a dark cherry jam made in a little Basque village called Itxassou. We'll have it on a baguette from Loubère, a bakery in Biarritz. I take home-made lemonade for the kids and fresh local wine for the adults.

I particularly love Irouléguay from a producer called Domaine Brana, which I get from one of my favourite places to buy wine in Biarritz called Le Cellier des Halles. They make up a mixed box for me — I still love discovering new things.

Hélène Darroze was talking to Fiona Sims

Need to know

Getting there

Ryanair has returns from London Stansted to Biarritz from about £95

Where to stay

Hôtel du Palais in Biarritz has B&B doubles from about €370 (£278) (hotel-du-palais.com);

Getting about

Rhinocarhire.com has daily car rentals from Biarritz airport from £102 for a week (£14.50 a day)

Further information

Biarritz Tourisme (tourisme.biarritz.fr/en/home); the France Tourism Development Agency (uk.france.fr)

Hélène Darroze's top 10 bistros, bakeries and bars

1. Les Prés d'Eugénie

Chef-proprietor Michel Guérard has held three Michelin stars here since 1977. In addition to the hotel, with its sumptuous rooms and the famous restaurant, there is now a spa, a cookery school and a vineyard on the estate. Eat Landes white asparagus cooked in the local Tursan wine, roasted lobster lightly smoked over the fireplace and the signature dessert, Marquis de Béchamel soft cake with melted rhubarb ice cream.

Details: Tasting menu €130 (£97; Eugénie les Bains, 00 33 5 58 05 06 07, michelguerard.com). Rooms cost from €250 a night

2. Jean des Sables, Soorts-Hossegor

I love Capbreton as it has the best of both worlds — a bustling town and big empty beaches. This Landes restaurant is run by another gastronomic family, the Coussau. It has two Michelin stars and it's right in front of the dunes. They do a great pan-fried foie gras with grapes and, in season, I love to eat the sole with ceps.

Details: Meals cost from €33 (121 Boulevard de la Dune, 00 33 5 58 72 29 82, jeandessables.com)

3. La Ferme Ostalapia, Ahetze

The chef here, Christian Duplaissy, cooks very simple food with beautiful produce. I love the hake roasted with garlic and olive oil — so fresh. And he does a dessert to die for — “mamia”, a sheep's yoghurt that you eat with honey.

Details: Meals cost from €40 (2621 Chemin d'Ostalapia, 00 33 5 59 54 73 79, ostalapia.fr)

4. Bar Jean, Biarritz

I always come here when I visit Biarritz. It's the heart of the market. It's the place to eat tapas, to stop for a coffee or for a quick glass of wine. Like the tapas bars in San Sebastián it offers a long counter of pintxos — snacks on bread.

Details: Tapas from €5 (5 Rue des Halles, Biarritz, 00 33 5 59 24 80 38)

5. Le C Restaurant, Guéthary

This is about as isolated as it gets — Guéthary is a surfer town where I would love to have a holiday house. And this place is the best spot to watch the sun go down, with a chilled glass of txakoli and a plate of good, simple calamari

Details: Meals cost from €38 (257 Chemin de Cenitz, 00 33 5 59 24 01 47, le-c-guethary.com)

6. Maison Adam, Biarritz

This place has been going since 1660 — established first in Saint-Jean-de-Luz, but it also has a shop in Biarritz. Their speciality is macarons — but not like the Ladurée Paris macarons most people know. These are gorgeous, little, buttery almond biscuits. The turrón (nougat) is

particularly good, too.

Details: Box of 24 macarons from €29.90 (27 Place Clémenceau, 00 33 5 59 26 03 54, www.macarons-adam.com)

7. Moulin de Bassilour, Bidart

A bakery and pâtisserie in an old water mill in Bidart, near Biarritz, Moulin de Bassilour is famous for its gâteau basque — and you can't come to the area without trying one of these. There are many versions but it's typically made with layers of almond-based cake with a filling of either crème pâtissière or cherries.

Details: 1129 rue Bassilour, Bidart, 00 33 5 59 41 94 49, moulindebassilour.com

8. Pierre Oteiza, Les Aldudes Valley

This breeder and artisan charcuterie producer is credited with single-handedly bringing back the Pie Noir Basque pig from near extinction. Based in the Les Aldudes Valley in the heart of Basque country 30 miles from Bayonne, he has ten shops and exports all over the world. A visit here is a must.

Details: Route Urepel, Les Aldudes, 00 33 5 59 37 56 11, en.pierreoteiza.com

9. Bistrot Ahizpak, Bidart

In Bidart village, close to Biarritz, this is the Sisters' Restaurant (*ahizpak* means sisters in Basque). It is run by three sisters — Delphine, Yenofa and Nanou — and serves simple food with real personality. It's always packed, so book well ahead.

Details: Meals cost from €30, Avenue de Biarritz, Bidart, 00 33 5 59 22 58 81, bistrot-ahizpak.com)

10. Thierry Bamas, Anglet

My favourite ice cream is made by Thierry Bamas, a Meilleur Ouvrier de France Pâtissier, which is a big deal here. The cakes are beautiful, gastronomic creations but it's the ice cream I come for. I adore the turrón ice cream and one made with Itxassou cherries, while my little ones prefer the raspberry.

Details: Les Cinq Cantons, 3 Rue Charles Kraemer, Anglet, 00 33 5 59 59 01 74, bamas.fr