



Great meals in Provence begin with fresh ingredients procured at a local market, such as the one shown here, in Valbonne.

Land of Plenty

Nearly anywhere you go in Provence, there are delicious elements for creating a food-and-wine lovers' incentive By Julie Barker

Near a stone-walled shop where fresh herbed bread, jars of honey and cloth packets of herbs are arrayed on a table in the sun, a seller of sausages and cheeses is urging samples upon an English-speaking group. Several try the Corsican sausage, which gets its flavor from the sweet chestnut flour fed to the pigs.

With an eye toward creating new options for incentive winners, the tasters were incentive planners (and this author) visiting Fayence, a village in the South of France, 33 miles from Nice's international airport. They were thinking about Americans' strong new interest in food and wine, and agreed Provence would be an ideal destination for a food-centered incentive trip.

Provençal cooking is healthy. Flavors range from subtle (as with the lavender added to a crème brûlée) to esoteric (shaved truffles) to intense (capers, olives and anchovies in a tapenade). In this particular part of France, easily accessible from North American cities, wine tastings, cooking classes and meals exquisitely prepared by star chefs can all be part of a restful program that incorporates *de rigueur* levels of pampering—there is a Four Seasons Resort located in Tourrettes, a neighboring town to Fayence.

The calendar here is agricultural. There are displays of lavender in the summer, the grape harvest in September. The time for collecting green olives is October; shaking the same trees in January brings down black olives. And of course spring means slim new carrots and the greenest lettuce.

Meals and events are done outdoors as often as the weather permits. Within 15 minutes of the Four Seasons (see sidebar, this page) are several options:

cocktails by the reflecting pool in the garden of Christian Dior's chateau; a visit to a winery to sip Provence's signature wine, rosé; a casual lunch in a charming restaurant, Moulin de la Camandoule. Groups of up to 60 people representing companies such as Jaguar and the Australian Film Commission have enjoyed dining at Moulin on vegetables from the Fayence market and cheeses from a local master cheese supplier.

Seeing Stars

According to the Web site www.go-provence.com, there are 20 Michelin-starred restaurants within 50 kilometers of Fayence. The Four Seasons' Faventia, is one of them. Executive Chef Philippe Jourdin, who trained at the famous Parisian restaurant La Tour d'Argent, created a menu for the representatives of U.S.-based incentive houses last spring. It featured ingredients from local pastures and farms and the Mediterranean sea. Nothing seemed exotic, but everything was a bit out of the ordinary. For instance, he served scallops as an opener, along with a chickpea pancake and botargo oil, botargo being the salted roe of a mullet. The fish course was turbot with a creamy seafood risotto flavored with saffron, and the main course was lamb with asparagus and morel mushrooms with tarragon enhancing the *jus*. Two delicious local wines accompanied the meal. The dessert had all the diners moaning with pleasure: a praline chocolate bar, molten chocolate cake and pistachio ice cream.

There are enough fine restaurants in the area to do dine-arounds. An all-star theme would be easy, visiting only Michelin-star chefs such as Bruno Clement at

Planner Resources

Maison de la France
(212) 745-0960
www.franceguide.com

Bouches-du-Rhône Tourism
(covers Marseille and Cassis)
www.visitprovence.com

Var Tourist Board
(covers Fayence and la Cadière d'Azur)
www.tourismevar.com

Allied Europe
(destination management company)
www.allied-europe.com

The Four Seasons

The Four Seasons Resort Provence at Terre Blanche, with 97 suites and 17 villas set on 650 acres, is larger in area than the nearby principality of Monaco. The resort's dining room can accommodate 60 and is set on the property's most prominent hill, with picture windows (and terrace seating for up to 76 in season) that offer sweeping views of traditional tile-roofed buildings. The colors sooth; the vegetation and man-made structures share the same palette. Says director of sales André Devillers, as he gestures at the panorama, "This is what we sell here. 'Authenticity, peace.' Cari Iken, proposal development manager for

Maritz Travel, in Fenton, Mo., says the Four Seasons is perfect for small incentive groups, but for larger groups an ideal solution is a city/country split, pairing an incentive-quality hotel in Monaco with the Four Seasons, bringing in the top tier two nights early. Another planner argues for a full week of peaceful relaxation in the area around Fayence. "People work so hard [to win the award] and if they win it, let it be something peaceful," says Mary Enke, travel purchasing manager for Excellence in Motivation in Dayton, Ohio. Who would object to the chance to simply enjoy looking outside "because it's the most beautiful view you've ever seen?"

The property has two 18-hole golf courses and golf academy, and a brand-new spa opens in March. There is skiing one hour away, canoeing and water games on a lake 10 minutes away, and perfume-making at Grasse; participants can make up their own scent formula and keep a sample as a souvenir.

www.fourseasons.com/provence

Working Off the Calories

"Golf Pass" is a book of tickets for play on three courses in seven days or five courses in 14 days. Participating courses include the Dolce Frégate in Saint-Cyr-sur-Mer, Pont Royal in Mallemort, Sainte Victoire in Fuveau and 11 others.

www.golfpass-provence.com

Other recreational options include bicycling, or for an adrenaline rush rather than a slow calorie burn, the Paul Ricard High Tech Test Track. The course is renowned for aesthetics and safety.

www.circuitpaulricard.com

The Tourist Board of Marseilles took incentive planners on a fast-paced scavenger hunt around the city to teach the city's history, culture and the local dialect. Teams competed to find the answers to intriguing clues, like one that took them to a vending machine to purchase fishing worms. They easily walked off a few thousand calories.

www.marseille-tourisme.com



Tapenade and anchoiade hors d'oeuvres, right, prepared by the group of incentive planners in Chef René Bérard's farmhouse kitchen, where he holds his cooking school; above, Chef René Bérard.



Restaurant Bruno about 45 minutes away in Lorgues, for a meal centered around truffles, or Alain Carro, whose restaurant, La Castellaras, seats 60 indoors, 60 on the terrace. He and his wife run a stylish establishment with eclectic décor, handmade plates, whimsical art and delicious food. Carro's daughter Hernance trained in his kitchen and now runs her own, Le Relais d'Oléa, in nearby Seillans. She is a television star in France, due to the show, *Madame le Chef*, which followed Hernance as she hired and trained her restaurant team. The 27-year-old chef has chosen a sleek, modern space, 180 degrees from her parents' style, but her work in the kitchen shows the family pedigree.

Learning the Tricks

Hands-on opportunities to create cuisine should be a component of any gastronomic adventure in France. To that end, we visited the village of La Cadière d'Azur, where Master Chef René Bérard and his family run a Michelin one-star restaurant and 40-room hotel, Hostellérie Bérard (an example of the "charming hotel" category that falls between three and four stars), and where he gives cooking classes, or as he puts it, "a discovery of cuisine and of the art of living in Provence."

Charming, energetic and funny, Chef Bérard works—performs is a better description—with an assistant and a translator, while scuttling around the kitchen, demonstrating techniques and encouraging participants who are all thumbs. The group created four dishes, including a roasted saddle of lamb stuffed with green garlic and topped with a pistachio crust. The stock was already simmering on the stove, but the chef described its preparation and provided a list of ingredients. "Add

one calf's hoof at the end of putting it all in the pot," he advised. "You need it for the gelatin," his translator interjected. We apprentice cooks chuckled, no doubt considering the likelihood of finding such a hoof on sale at their local grocery store. But the meal went together easily; we peeled garlic, then stuffed and tied the pieces of lamb. We prepared the pistachio crust, rolling it like a sausage, and under the master chef's watchful eye added a slice of crust on top of each piece of lamb. The final result, consumed in Le Petit Jardin, the hotel's bistro, under the softly warming rays of the Provençal sun, pleased everyone.

Wine by the Sea

Provence is not all farmland and mountain villages. Its Mediterranean resorts are justifiably famous, and its seaside villages offer a different take on a gastronomic-centered incentive award. Cassis, near some of the most spectacular seaside scenery in France—the Calanques, which boast beautiful, clear, turquoise water and steep hillsides—also produces a respectable dry white wine. Incentive winners could attend a wine-tasting event in the Le Chais Cassidain wine shop followed by a lunch of seafood in the open air next to the boats, or take a bouillabaisse cooking class. Alternatively, an organization called Oenosud can organize events such as "Wines and Appellations" and "Wine and Olive Oil."

We had a final dinner together in a hotel dining room in Marseille. The meal was prepared, the server said, "with fresh local ingredients and a touch of the magic of the chef." Everyone smiled at that, for it seemed to describe every meal we had had in Provence. n