

# At Home in Provence

Fifty years after his family—including his great-aunt, celebrated writer M.F.K. Fisher—set down roots in Aix-en-Provence, LUKE BARR finds the pleasures of the south of France have diminished not one bit: the colorful farmers' markets, the streetside cafés, the long and lazy outdoor lunches. Photographed by MAX KIM-BEE



Reine Claude plums at the Place Richelme farmers' market, in Aix. Inset: A 1959 picnic outside Aix, with the author's father, John Barr (*standing*), grandmother Norah Barr (*far right*), and great-aunt M.F.K. Fisher (*center*). Opposite: The courtyard at Le Mas des Lauriers, the farmhouse the author's family rented on the outskirts of Aix-en-Provence.

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Guyot pears, above, and a vegetable stand, below, at Place Richelme. Inset: The author's family returning to the United States from France aboard the *Vesuvio*, in 1955. Opposite: The Four Dolphins fountain, just off the Cours Mirabeau, in Aix.



W

E SHOPPED MORNING, NOON, AND NIGHT in Provence—we shopped for croissants, baguettes, newspapers, and cigarettes, for tomatoes, peaches, string beans, strawberries, eggplants, mushrooms, and lettuce. We shopped for legs of lamb and chickens, for cubes of beef for stew, and for pork sausages. We shopped for butter and milk and cheese, and for honey and cases of wine and Badoit mineral water. We shopped for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and then we started over again.

For basic provisions, we went into the village—our house was in tiny Puyricard, on the outskirts of Aix. The town had an old stone church next to the post office, three bakeries, a little Casino supermarket, a butcher, and a café with vaguely unfriendly, pastis-drinking middle-aged men, the kind that can be found in every French village. Sometimes they played *pétanque*.

I never did figure out which bakery had the best croissants, and it didn't matter, they were all good. We bought them eight or 10 at a time: not too big, buttery but not overly rich, satisfyingly crunchy but still tender and elastic inside. At the newsstand we'd pick up the *International Herald Tribune* and *L'Équipe*,

the sports tabloid. We got to know the mom, pop, and son who ran the supermarket and who did their best to help find what we needed, with mixed success (dried red-pepper flakes? "...*Non*," came the reply, heads shaking sadly). The butcher was hip and friendly, in his thirties but his close-cropped hair already going gray. His lamb chops were incredible.

And so it was that we developed a routine, a rhythm, a kind of easygoing daily schedule, loosely correlated to hunger and appetite. The main event was the farmers' market in downtown Aix. On the Place Richelme, under the shade of a canopy of tall plane trees, this was a farmers' market to end all farmers' markets. Not that it was very big, or particularly fancy, but it was idyllic; the market was busy from early morning until just after lunch, full of sturdy matrons pulling two-wheeled carts and parents pushing strollers, the hustle and flow of commerce. The vegetables were beautiful—densely colored peppers, eggplants, and tomatoes, fresh garlic, yellow string beans—and the fruits were even more beautiful—







Toujours Provence Clockwise from above: Croissants at the Banette Puyricard, in Puyricard; cafés along the Cours Mirabeau, in Aix; a view of the Église St.-Jean de Malte from Aix's Rue Cardinale; currants and blueberries at the Aix farmers' market; the restaurant terrace at L'Hostellerie de l'Abbaye de la Celle, 45 minutes from Aix; the pool at Le Mas des Lauriers, in Puyricard; M.F.K. Fisher on the Cours with her daughters and a family friend, in 1955; raw-milk cheeses at the farmers' market; a waiter stacks chairs on the Cours; harborside in Cassis, a 40-minute drive south of Aix. Inset: The author's father (far right), with his brother and cousins, hanging laundry at the Château du Tholonet, 1955.





small, sweet strawberries, baskets of red currants, figs, and apricots, all sorts of peaches, nectarines, plums, and melons. One man sold goat cheeses, aged to different vintages, and honey; another had hams and salami, including a heavy and rectangular aged *lonzo* from Corsica. We sliced our pieces thin, so it would last longer.

I HAVE EVERY REASON TO LOVE THE MARKET IN THE PLACE Richelme: I inherited a love for it, indeed, for Aix itself. My father lived here when he was a kid in 1959: my grandmother Norah Barr brought her three sons and rented a house not far from her sister, M.F.K. Fisher, who had rented a place just outside Aix with her two daughters. I grew up hearing about this epic trip, and an earlier one in 1954—from my father and uncles, mostly, about the boat ride from California down through the Panama Canal and across the Atlantic; about learning French in school in Switzerland and then moving to France for the other half of the year; attending the same lycée Paul Cézanne had; about how my dad, at age 13, was able to distinguish the white wines of Switzerland by town of origin; about how they all rode around on Solex motorbikes and read Tintin comics.

M.F. by this point was a well-established writer, and she recorded the trip in subsequent years—in 1964 in *Map of Another Town*, for example, a book about Aix. She described the “green light” that filtered through the plane trees above the market at Place Richelme in an essay for *The New Yorker* in 1966: “Perhaps some fortunate fish have known it, but for human beings it is rare to float at the bottom of the deeps and yet breathe with rapture the smells of all the living things spread out to sell in the pure, filtered, moving air.”



Rereading her today, it’s often striking how little has changed. Fifty years later, the market is precisely as she described it, minus the “ducklings bright-eyed in their crates” and other livestock. Then again, in many other ways Aix has also changed completely—and so what if it has? I’m not going to pretend to be nostalgic about 1959—hell, I was born in 1968. But on this trip I was accompanied by my father and my grandmother, and I did want to see the city through their eyes—however momentarily, in whatever glancing, refracted way, to have a visceral sense of a past that lives on embedded in the present. But the strange thing is that’s not what happened at all. Or at least not the only thing.

THE HOUSE WE RENTED CAME WITH A RABBIT, AND OF COURSE THE kids loved him. He was plump and brown, and lived in a rather elegant wood-and-stone-framed (Continued on page 159)



**Slice of Life** Clockwise from above: Chez Thomé restaurant, in Le Tholonet, just outside Aix; Julia Child’s kitchen as preserved at her house in Plascassier, now a cooking school; Chez Thomé’s *assiette mixte*, with warm cheese and foie gras; a view of Mont Ste.-Victoire. Opposite: A 1950’s postcard from the author’s family collection, depicting the Château du Tholonet.

## GUIDE TO AIX-EN-PROVENCE



**WHERE TO STAY**  
**28 à Aix** An intimate hotel in the city center. 28 Rue du 4 Septembre, Aix; 33-4/42-54-82-01; 28aaix.com; doubles from \$384.

**GREAT VALUE** **La Pauline** A B&B on 20 acres of gardens. Les

Pinchinats, 280 Chemin de la Fontaine des Tuiles, Aix; 33-4/42-17-02-60; lapauline.fr; doubles from \$256.

**HOUSE AND VILLA RENTALS**  
For longer stays and family groups, house rentals are an affordable

option. **Here and Abroad** (610/228-4984; hereandabroad.com) owner Fabienne Perpiglia specializes in the Aix area, with some properties in other Provençal towns, and offers excellent, personalized service. **Homes Away** (800/374-6637; homesaway.com) and U.K.-based **Sanctuary Retreats** (44-12/4254-7902; sanctuaryretreats.com) both manage well-appointed rental properties.

**WHERE TO EAT AND DRINK**  
**Chez Thomé** 74 Ave. Louis Destrem, Le Tholonet; 33-4/42-66-90-43; dinner for two \$65.

**Les Deux Garçons** 53 Cours Mirabeau, Aix; 33-4/42-26-00-51; dinner for two \$76.

**L’Hostellerie de l’Abbaye de la Celle** 10 Place du Général de Gaulle, La Celle; 33-4/98-05-14-14; dinner for two \$107.

**WHERE TO SHOP**  
**Aix Farmers’ Market** Place Richelme; 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. daily.  
**Aix Flower Market** Place de l’Hôtel de Ville; Tues., Thurs., and Sat., 8 a.m. to 1 p.m.

**Souléo Provence** Traditional French tableware. 6 bis Rue Aude, Aix; 33-4/42-93-04-54.

**COOKING SCHOOL**  
**Cooking with Friends in France** One-week culinary-immersion programs. Plascassier; cookingwithfriends.com; six-day programs from \$2,450.

**MORE ON FRANCE**  
For the latest Paris destination guide, including classic hotels, neighborhood bistros, and the best boutiques, visit travelandleisure.com.



POSTCARD COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR. MAP BY YANIL TACTUK







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cage underneath the fig tree. We fed him carrots, and joked about eating him for dinner.

Our bedrooms were on the second floor of the 300-year-old *mas*, a solidly constructed stone building covered in vines and with terra-cotta-tiled floors. The kitchen was simple and spare, and had a long, zinc-topped table at its center and a door that opened out onto the graveled courtyard. In the morning I would walk out, say hello to the rabbit, and sit on one of the rickety chairs at the rickety wood-slat table, or on a creaking canvas lounge chair under the enormous plane tree, and drink my coffee. Who was driving into town, and how many baguettes did we need?

In addition to my grandmother and father, our group included my wife and daughter, and my childhood friend Adrian and his wife and son. The kids were both four, and spent half the time in the pool. We also had a stream of friends passing through—on the way back to Zurich from Spain, or on the way to Paris, or on vacation from New York. Our visitors stayed in the guest cottage, an adorable, slightly dilapidated little house out in the garden.

The grounds were magnificent—sprawling lawns; olive, apple, plum, fig, and unruly cypress trees; lavender and rosemary bushes all over—the lavender positively thrumming with bees—white and dark pink laurel, grapevines, and potted lemon trees; a *pétanque* court, a ping-pong table, a fabulous and overgrown herb garden—dry, fragrant thyme and sage, basil, lemon verbena, and three varieties of rosemary—a pristine pool and a pool house with a chimneyed charcoal grill and a large dining table.

We ate all our meals outside, carrying the heavy glasses, dishes, and silverware

to the table in shallow wicker baskets. We ate tomatoes drizzled with olive oil, vinegar, and chopped fresh herbs at every opportunity. We grilled many lamb chops, marinated in lemon juice, olive oil, rosemary, thyme, and garlic, and made potato gratins with Gruyère, and gnocchi with butter and sage, and my grandmother's awe-inspiring ratatouille.

Some combination of the dry heat and the easy back-and-forth from inside to outside—the screenless doors and windows were always open, with warm breezes, children, and the occasional grasshopper making their way in and out of the house—reminded me of California. My grandmother's house in Sonoma, the house I grew up loving, had a similarly overgrown and carelessly beautiful garden, a row of tall poplar trees, a scruffy lawn, and flower and vegetable plantings overlooking the Russian River and the Pacific Ocean. Inside were cats and a dog, threadbare Oriental carpets, a large kitchen, and endless evening bridge games. M.F.'s house in Glen Ellen was a little more formal, a thick-walled palazzo set back from the road overlooking a field of grapevines, but both of them epitomized for me a sort of genteel, unpretentious, and yet highly sophisticated California style.

I always knew, of course, that our California life had a Provençal flavor, in the dishes my grandmother and great-aunt cooked, in the art hung on their walls. But it wasn't until I arrived that I really understood how much of my family's aesthetic and cultural DNA had its roots right here, in Aix.

AIX IS A UNIVERSITY TOWN AND FORMER provincial capital, built around Roman baths and numerous churches. It has narrow cobblestoned streets leading through various plazas, and it's built on a slope. And so the town seems to carry you gently but persuasively down the hill and toward its center, at least when you enter, as we did, from the north side, which was where the road from Puyricard deposited us. The streets were lined with clothing stores, cafés, gift shops, and patisseries. One day my

wife and I stopped to buy some Provençal dishes to replace the ones my grandmother bought back in the 50's and 60's and which I still used (they ended up in my kitchen a few years back), even though they were chipped and quite possibly full of lead, i.e., poisonous. The dishes at Soulèo Provence were almost identical to the ones we had, beautiful medium yellows and dark greens, and the salesman assured me that they did indeed at one time have "the maximum amount of lead," but no longer. We bought as many plates and bowls as seemed reasonable to carry.

As I say, the town pulls you toward its heart, its grand central street, the Cours Mirabeau. With two tall rows of plane trees and a series of fountains and cafés, it makes you slow down and exhale. M.F. described the Cours this way: "It is a man-made miracle, perhaps indescribable, compounded of stone and water and trees, and to the fortunate it is one of the world's chosen spots for their own sentient growth." I'm not sure I experienced "sentient growth," but I wholeheartedly agree.

We ate dinner at Les Deux Garçons, the famous (and these days quite touristy) café on the Cours, a place M.F. spent hours watching the comings and goings, and never a place one came for the food, but rather for the ambience, as my grandmother pointed out. My daughter ordered a hamburger, and was of course dismayed when it failed to arrive with a bun. She soon managed to polish it off, however.

Not far away, on a quiet street just off the Cours, we paid a visit—we paid our respects, I want to say—to the fountain of the Four Dolphins. This fountain was my grandmother and M.F.'s favorite, my father and his brothers and cousins' favorite: our family favorite, in other words. As advertised, the fountain consisted of four stone dolphins, smiling and cheerful but each with a slightly different expression, spouting thin streams of water into the basin below. "This fountain is great," said my father definitively, expressing neither a strictly aesthetic judgment nor simple, unbridled enthusiasm, but rather something more transcendent, a serious claim of affection, and one that he wanted us to share. (And which we did.) He remembered the Four Dolphins so well from when he was 13, and here it was, 50 years later, and still wonderful. »

But of course, some things do not survive, some things become unrecognizable. A few blocks away was the Hôtel Roi René, where we now thought we'd go for an after-dinner drink before heading back to the house. The Roi René was once *the* hotel in Aix, the epitome of elegance and so forth, the place where M.F. had stayed for weeks at a time in the early 50's, where she and my grandmother and the kids would check in every so often for a weekend in the late 50's, to take hot baths and order room service, and where my father remembers a sprawling suite with a balcony overlooking the Boulevard du Roi René, and watching the Tour de France whiz by below.

As we walked in we were confronted with a beige-and-pink color scheme and a collection of hyperbanal corporate furniture. The place had none of the glamour my dad and grandmother remembered—not an iota.

My father looked puzzled, studying the angles of the walls and wondering if the original hotel had been torn down and completely rebuilt. No, he and my grandmother decided, but significant structural changes had been made at some point or other. We were directed to a table with a view of the inner courtyard.

"Well, too bad," my grandmother said.

Yup, I said. But we might as well have a drink, right?

Sure, everyone agreed. We looked around for a few minutes at the perfectly pleasant and yet perfectly uninspiring hotel lobby.

After a while, no waiter had appeared.

Well, I said, I guess we may as well leave, right? Everyone agreed, and we quickly departed.

THERE WAS PLENTY OF TIME, OVER THE course of a lazy two weeks in July, for a few road trips. One day we drove to Cassis, about 40 minutes away on the Mediterranean. We wanted to swim on a beach, in the waves and among the sandy crowds. The coastline here was nothing if not dramatic, the drive down into town a series of steep switchbacks, the blue expanse of the ocean floating in the mid-distance like a dream. The town itself was charming and picturesque in the way that only a fishing village can be—with narrow streets

and dockside restaurants, cliffs looming in the background and a blazing sun overhead. We sprang for the 15-euro-a-day chaise longues and beach umbrellas, and watched the kids splash around in the surf. Every 45 minutes or so I would dive into the water to cool off, floating on my back and staring at the sky.

Another day, we made our way to L'Hostellerie de l'Abbaye de la Celle, a small country inn and restaurant owned by Alain Ducasse, for a long afternoon lunch. La Celle is a tiny village about 45 minutes from Aix, and the inn incorporates a former Benedictine abbey, a 12th-century building that extends on one side of a back courtyard, where tables are set on the terrace under large canvas umbrellas. We ordered prix fixe tasting menus in the absolutely serene garden: artichoke hearts and mushroom ravioli, red mullet with tomato, basil, and balsamic reduction, veal loin roasted with sage, and so on and so forth.

A far less elaborate meal awaited us at La Pitchoune, Julia and Paul Child's one-time house in Plascassier, 95 miles east of Aix. This was the vacation house Julia built on Simone Beck's family estate in 1962, a place where she cooked and entertained. Today it's home to Cooking with Friends in France, a culinary immersion program run by Kathie Alex, a former student of Beck's. The kitchen is as Julia left it, with the outlines of her utensils stenciled on the Peg-Board wall.

We sat with Alex on the terrace eating *salade niçoise* next to a small olive tree, looking out over the craggy landscape. My grandmother and M.F. had been here in 1970, a moment when the entire American culinary establishment seems to have arrived en masse in the immediate area—in addition to the Childs, James Beard, Bert Greene, Richard Olney, Judith and Evan Jones, all cooking, eating, and writing. They were pioneers of taste, but also of having taste, of cooking and "the art of eating," bringing European recipes and attitudes to an American audience.

I LOVED THE GRAVEL IN PROVENCE: THE sound of it under the wheels of the car in the potholed driveway, the expanse of it around our house, on the paths to the guest cottage and herb garden and swimming pool. There's something pleasantly austere about Provençal gravel—it has a

calm, cooling effect, setting off the wild and abundant vegetation and the hot sun. At the restaurant Chez Thomé, tables were placed on gravel underneath the shade of the trees. This casual country place is another family favorite, up there with the Four Dolphins. We walked across the gravel to our table as cicadas chirped in the nearby fields.

When my grandmother and great-aunt lived here in '59, they both rented houses a few miles from Aix, M.F. along the Route du Tholonet, a winding road heading east out of town toward Le Tholonet, a small village in the shadow of Mont Ste.-Victoire. On the drive here, we'd tried in vain to spot the driveway to L'Harmas, the farmhouse she'd rented. It didn't matter—the road offered its own stunning dramas, curving through dry green hills and thickets of trees, Ste.-Victoire intimidating and stern in the distance. This is what's known as the Route Cézanne (he painted these scenes in the 1890's), and it still looks that way, like a painting.

Coming into the center of town, we passed by the imposing Château du Tholonet, where M.F. had rented an apartment above the stables in the mid 50's, and my grandmother and her sons had visited. Describing her mealtime routines, M.F. wrote: "There was always that little rich decadent tin of lark pâté in the cupboard if I grew bored, or we could stroll down past the great ponds under the plane trees to the left, friendly welcome of the Restaurant Thomé and eat a grilled pullet or a trout *meunière*, and an orange baked *à la norvégienne*."

As for us, we ordered beautiful green salads with red currants, a bit of foie gras, warm cheese with a red pepper-and-garlic *rémoulade*, rabbit with a dried-fruit reduction, and *risotto aux fruits de mer*. I hesitate to write so hyperbolically, but I must say that it was a perfect lunch: perfect. Sitting under the trees in this unspeakably beautiful courtyard, at an informal table with my family and friends, I felt a connection to this place, and to Aix, that went beyond my own immediate experiences. I had come to find Aix, and found it was already in me, or to quote M.F. describing her arrival here all those years ago, "I was once more in my own place, an invader of what was already mine." ✚