



# *return to provence*

*From Cap d'Antibes to the hills of tiny St.-Jeannet, LUKE BARR follows in the footsteps of Julia Child and M.F.K. Fisher, exploring the farmers' markets, cheese shops, and patisseries of the original culinary paradise.*

PHOTOGRAPHED BY  
KATHERINE WOLKOFF

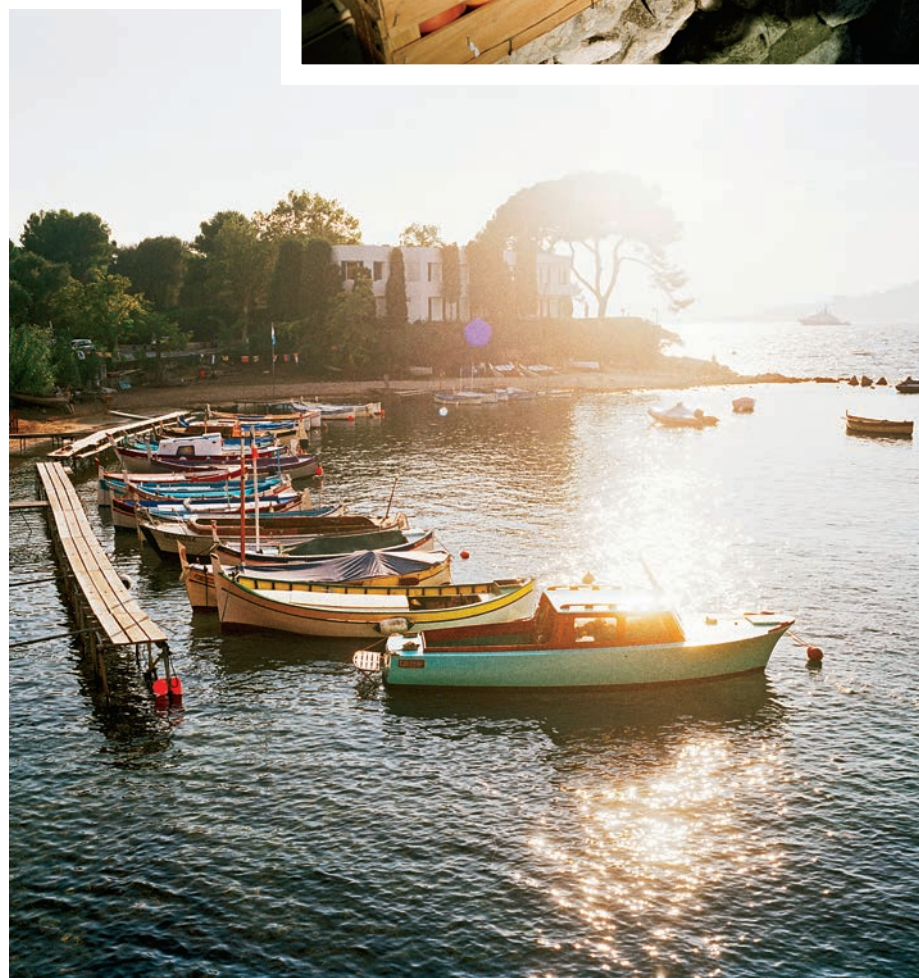
The outdoor dining table at Le Moulin de la Cagne, the house the author rented in St.-Jeannet, France.



When my mother and father fell in love, in the summer of 1967, they took off for Provence. They were in Switzerland at the time, and both 21 years old. A few days after they met, an impromptu Mediterranean weekend vacation seemed like the thing to do, and so they boarded a train to Cassis, a pretty fishing village east of Marseilles. They arrived in the evening. My mother decided they would sleep on the beach, and she tossed my father's too-heavy American suitcase under a bush near the train station with an energetic flourish. My mother was Swiss, and fearless. She had packed a small tent, which they pitched near the water after walking through town and along the length of the beach. They shared a baguette and a bottle of wine. That night, when the mosquitoes came, they lit cigarettes and smoked furiously inside the tent, which my mother insisted was the standard European method of fighting them off.

I think of my parents in their smoky tent as I stand in the shallow water in front of Plage Keller, on the Cap d'Antibes. The bohemian romance of the French Riviera of 1967 seems a lifetime away—my lifetime, in fact, since I was born in 1968—but the freewheeling, sybaritic mood remains. There is the sheer physical beauty of the place, the infinite gradations of blue sky and blue water in the distance, the golden, glowing sunlight and air, the extra-attractive people in their bathing suits, the sound of laughter and ice cubes melting in the heat, the whole scene taking on the sudden, nostalgic glamour of an old Polaroid or an Instagram shot.

But the glamour is real, not a special effect. The drive to the beach had taken us past the grand villas of the superrich hidden away among the trees. Villa America, Sara and Gerald Murphy's 1920's outpost—where they entertained everyone from Picasso and Hemingway to Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald—was a few minutes' walk away, and so was the iconic Hôtel du Cap. At Plage Keller, meanwhile, athletic waiters adjusted our bright-yellow beach umbrellas, tracking the sun throughout the day, and took orders for refreshments, drinks, and lunch. My wife and friends and our kids sprawled on our chaise longues drinking Badoit and reading Gillian Flynn and Hilary Mantel novels. We were on vacation. We were in Provence.



From top: Fruit for sale in St.-Paul de Vence; small boats near the Port de l'Olivette, on Cap d'Antibes. Opposite: Cafés on Rue Georges Clémenceau, in Antibes.







An alleyway in Carros, northeast of St.-Jeannet. Opposite: Fresh goat cheeses at Au Poivre d'Âne, in Vence.







Clockwise from far left: The swimming pool at Le Moulin de la Cagne; Julia Child and James Beard in Grasse in the early 1970's; M.F.K. Fisher on a walk in Aix-en-Provence in the 1950's; inside the Matisse-designed Chapelle du Rosaire, just outside Vence; the sculpture garden at the Fondation Maeght, in St.-Paul de Vence.

It's funny how a place can insert itself into your life, seemingly by accident, and then take on mythical powers of attraction. I have been coming to the Côte d'Azur repeatedly over the past several years, sometimes for vacation, sometimes for work, and the more I come here, the more I want to come back.

I am not the only one, needless to say. In my family, it was my great-aunt, the writer M.F.K. Fisher, who led the way. She had come to France for the first time in the late 1920's, living in Dijon with her first husband, and she made a career out of writing about food and life—and quite often, France—seducing American readers with her descriptions of oysters, or freshly picked green beans, or of sitting alone at a café, happy, drinking a glass of vermouth. M.F. loved Provence. She and her sister Norah—my grandmother—came to France often, and for months at a time. In the fall of 1970, the sisters rented an apartment not far from Plascassier, where Julia Child and her husband, Paul, had built their vacation house. Contemplating her future in a letter to a friend, M.F. wrote: “I know, at this far date in my life, that I was meant to live and if possible to die on a dry, olive-covered hillside in Provence.”

The trip that fall of 1970 was a fateful one, not only for my great-aunt, but for the entire American food establishment. They were all there in Provence together that fall and winter, more or less coincidentally: Julia Child, James Beard, Richard Olney, Simone Beck, Judith Jones, and M.F., the people behind the seminal cookbooks and food writing of the era. They ate and drank and cooked together (and talked and sniped and gossiped, too), and they were all, in one way or another, rethinking their attachments to France, where they had each fallen in love with food and cooking to begin with.

I have been writing a book about this historical moment, about the American love affair with France and how it came to an end—or at least, how the terms of the relationship, in the realms of food, taste, and snobbery, had changed rapidly in the late 1960's. The unquestioned authority of French haute cuisine was waning; the American counterculture, with its co-op vegetable gardens and homemade bread, was on the rise. And as it turned out, the casual, rustic cooking of rural French bistros and Provençal home kitchens had an outsize role to play in inspiring the modern American food revolution, from Chez Panisse to every farm-to-table menu in the land.

This is why I've been coming to Provence again and again: to untangle the strands of cultural and



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culinary history that made it so influential for Child, Beard, my great-aunt, and the others—a place where food and life intertwined so easily, and indeed still do.

On this trip, I had rented a house in the hills. It was about a half-hour's drive from the coast, in St.-Jeannet, a tiny town outside Vence. The massive stone former olive-oil mill, Le Moulin de la Cagne, was built in the 1700's and set on a steep, terraced hillside that fell away into a gorge. The owner of the house was a Dutch flower-bulb impresario, and the gardens were appropriately grand, full of rare and spectacular plants, otherworldly blooms, and enormous cacti. There was a grape arbor above the outdoor table where we ate every meal; there were mulberry, olive, lime, grapefruit, plum, and kumquat trees; there was a mossy pool for a collection of carp. We hung our laundry to dry instantly in the heat on the upper terrace, and swam in the pool on the lower terrace. Farther below was a large vegetable garden, where we picked tomatoes and cucumbers.

Every night at exactly eleven o'clock, the sprinkler system would activate. It was a very thorough, drenching, professional sprinkler system, one befitting a Dutch flower man. He had forgotten to mention it, and so on one of the first nights we were there, we found ourselves frantically clearing wine glasses and stowing chair cushions as the sound of the hissing, spraying water grew louder and louder, surrounding us. We escaped inside.

The timing and coordination of the various sprinklers was fiendishly complicated, I learned, and could not be changed. And so we got used to the late-evening water. (One night, my older daughter, Sachi, 8, asked if she could stay up and run through the sprinklers. We all watched as she ran back and forth laughing in the dark in her

long, wet nightgown, looking like a ghost in the mist in a gothic fantasy.) We would wash up in the kitchen every night at five to eleven, and drink brandies in the living room, where an enormous millstone and other remnants of olive-oil production served as décor.

The garden sparkled in the morning, lush and green. Towering above the house, above the village of St.-Jeannet, was a small, bare mountain—the Baou de St.-Jeannet. It was craggy and beautiful, like a smaller Montagne Ste.-Victoire in a Cézanne painting, and had some of that flinty hardness. This is the essential duality of Provence, I thought as I stood in the garden and looked up at the cliff. The softness and the toughness. The wild, fertile abundance, and the austere, unforgiving stone; the unbelievable richness and perfection of the tomatoes and peaches, but also the dry prickliness of rosemary bushes and thistles. Two sides of the same lovely coin.

I walked through the garden and climbed the stone staircases connecting the terraces above the house. Sachi had discovered a path that led up the steep hill to an abandoned viaduct that spanned the gorge. She led the way, collecting flowers. The vegetation was wild, overgrown and unwatered, full of long grasses and thorny bushes. We crossed the viaduct and looked down at our miniature house and garden and pool, waving at the rest of our miniature family. They waved back.

Provence is made for cooking. The markets, fruit-and-vegetable stands, butchers, fishmongers, bakeries, and cheese shops all have the best stuff imaginable: large crates of peaches and nectarines, all just ripe, sell for a few euros. Your average supermarket chicken is mind-bogglingly delicious. Staples like wine and bread are transcendent.

The local bakery, Aux Suprêmes de St.-Jeannet, didn't look like much. It was set just off the main roundabout in the center of town, in a little shopping area next to a pharmacy and gift shop. Parking was haphazard. But inside was that amber smell of all French bakeries, the smell of butter and flour being fired into golden-brown croissants at high heat. In the morning, a long, fast-moving line led past trays of petits fours—tiny éclairs, apple tarts, Mont Blancs—toward the bins of baguettes in front. The bakery was famously good, I learned, drawing customers from miles around. I came every day, and felt a little more French each time, rattling off my order and then driving the mile or two to the house with my window rolled down, bread and croissants tossed on the back seat.

A slightly longer drive was required to get to the food shops in Vence, a larger town with a well-preserved medieval center that has narrow streets opening onto squares lined with cafés, and plenty of kitschy Provençal gift shops, but plenty of real food shops, too. There were greengrocers in small spaces with cement floors, and specialty markets selling cheese and wine. I found a butcher whose store, Boucherie Centrale, was built into the exterior wall of the old town. He was an icon of French bourgeois contentment, a portly man in a bloody apron slicing off large pieces of his house-made terrines of pâté, dispensing sausages and cooking advice, steaks, pork chops, and legs of lamb.

I spent most of my time in Provence thinking about, looking at, buying, preparing, and eating food. My wife, Yumi, and I were the de facto chefs of the operation, feeding friends and relatives from morning until night. We loved it. The kitchen was state-of-the-art, with an enormous Lacanche stove, and approximately the size of our Brooklyn apartment.

Late afternoon at Plage Keller, on Cap d'Antibes.



For more on Luke Barr's forthcoming book, *The Invention of American Taste*: M.F.K. Fisher, Julia Child, James Beard, Richard Olney, and a Season in Provence, 1970, log on to [lukebarr.net](http://lukebarr.net).

Julia Child came to Provence to escape her American fame, and to cook for her friends. Here, she was anonymous, just another (very tall) American perusing the farmers' markets and waiting in line for her morning baguettes. She and Paul had built their house in 1965, on the estate of Simone Beck, her co-author of the *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* books. They named it La Pitchoune; it was a small, single-story house near Grasse. It was quiet. The phone did not ring. No recipes needed to be tested, no television programs needed to be filmed. The cooking that happened here was casual and communal.

For a few weeks in 1970, the kitchen in the Childs' house in Provence was the epicenter of the American food world. James Beard and M.F. came to dinner, or stopped by on their way back from a day at the Fondation Maeght museum; Richard Olney, the reclusive American author of the just-released *French Menu Cookbook*, who lived a few hours away outside Toulon, came to pay his respects. Judith Jones, the editor at Knopf who'd discovered Child and Beck, visited with her husband, Evan, staying at a nearby inn.

France had inspired them, but it was the simple, seasonal cooking of Provence that now resonated most of all. Stews, braises, roasts, bouillabaisse—Provence represented a humbler,

less theatrical cooking, a break from the deluxe classics of French restaurant cuisine, where everything came draped in rich sauces, or was flambéed, or both. It was simple; it suited the times. This was also a moment of broadening interest in American regional and international cuisine. Beard was finishing his opus, *American Cookery*; Child was ready to move beyond purely French recipes and teach her readers and TV viewers to make New England clam chowders, and to explore Indian curry. Still, it made perfect sense that it was here, in Provence, that this group came together to contemplate their culinary futures. This was where it had all started.

Our days were leisurely affairs, during which we drove and walked aimlessly, letting ourselves get lost and semi-lost, shopping for groceries, stopping for coffee, visiting the local sights. Like M.F. and Beard, who in 1970 had embarked on numerous art excursions, we stopped at the Matisse Chapel, in Vence, a beautiful building designed by the artist in the late 1940's and containing his stained-glass windows, murals, and other works. And in St.-Paul de Vence, the next town over, at the Fondation Maeght, a strange, Brutalist-looking cement structure surrounded by lawns, trees, and sculpture gardens that was built in the mid-60's by Paris art dealer Aimé Maeght. There were Giacomettis, Chagalls, Calder's, and Braques.

The largest farmers' market in the area was in Antibes, in the center of the old town. It was vast, with long rows of specialty purveyors selling everything from cured meats and olives to fresh cheeses and fresh fish. Local fruit and vegetable farmers set up shop in the center aisle, with their piles of artichokes, eggplants, and enormous heads of lettuce, their apricots and tiny wild strawberries.



The ocean was a few blocks away. We wandered the alleys in the direction of the Grimaldi Castle, built on the ramparts surrounding the city, and the sudden looming-into-view of the Mediterranean was almost shocking. It sparkled, bright blue. The Grimaldi now houses a small Picasso museum. This was where the artist worked just after World War II, producing dozens of paintings and drawings, including the famous *La Joie de Vivre*. The museum also has numerous colorful ceramics with his designs and drawings. The aesthetic of this art—all of it, at the Matisse Chapel, the Maeght Foundation, the Picasso museum—was sunlit, happy, vigorous, and bold; it was Provençal.

The same adjectives could describe the food we ate. Dockside in Antibes, at Le Novella restaurant, we ordered garlicky salads, *moules frites*, and *petits farcis*—stuffed eggplants and peppers. The flavors were intense.

Back at the house in St.-Jeannet, we cooked with Child, Beck, Beard, Olney, and M.F. in mind, re-creating the communal atmosphere and sense of hedonistic possibility in the kitchen, embracing the pleasure of the land itself—the tomatoes, the crates of peaches. When my friend Kathie Alex came to lunch one day, toward the end of our trip, I felt the past connecting to the present. I'd met Kathie on previous trips here, while researching my book: she is a former student of Simone Beck's and the present owner of La Pitchoune. The Childs had built their house with the understanding

that it would belong to the Beck family after they died, and the Becks eventually sold it to Kathie. She teaches cooking classes in the house, where Child's kitchen remains unchanged—her kitchen utensils still hanging on the walls.

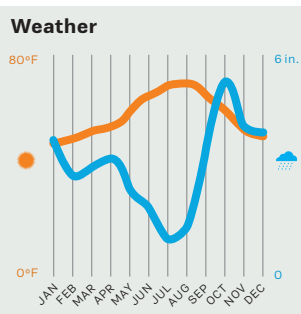
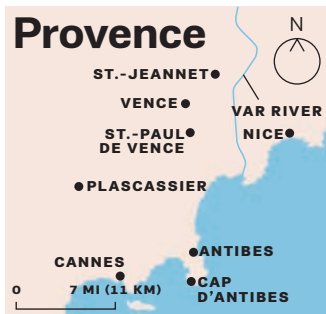
I made an onion tart—the onions cooked very, very slowly, with lots of thyme; Yumi made a large green salad and a small white-bean-and-tuna salad. We cut up baguettes and sliced tomatoes and cantaloupes. We opened a rosé.

We were ever-so-slightly nervous, cooking for a real cook, but of course we needn't have been. The atmosphere and philosophy and ingredients of Provence conspire to make this sort of outdoor lunch party a grand, sunny, rosé-tinted success. We ate and talked for hours.

Kathie remembered Beck as a daunting presence in the kitchen, but also as a fiercely loyal friend. Beck saw herself as the guardian of all that was true and French—*vraiment française*—and as Child grew as a cook, and became ever more famous in America, their relationship became ever more fraught. The second volume of *Mastering*, released in the fall of 1970, would be their last collaboration.

They'd always have Provence, though, where they and their families both came to vacation in their adjacent houses, all through the 70's and 80's. No longer co-authors, the women were better friends—sisters, they called each other.

By the time Kathie started teaching cooking classes, in the 1990's, the original generation of American pioneers had retired or passed on, leaving a booming food culture behind. M.F. died in 1992, in Glen Ellen, California, where I grew up visiting her as a kid, and where she served family lunches on the veranda. Now Kathie was pondering her future—who would take over Julia's La Pitchoune kitchen when she retired?—and we were serving lunch, keeping traditions alive. We toasted our meal, and the history all around us, the people who came before us, and Provence, of course. Then we unpacked the pear tart from the St.-Jeannet bakery, maybe the best pear tart ever made, and raised our glasses again. +



St.-Jeannet, e-mail owner Peter de Boer at [pcodeboer@gmail.com](mailto:pcodeboer@gmail.com).

#### EAT

**Le César** Plage Keller, 1035 Chemin de la Garoupe, Cap d'Antibes; [plagekeller.com](http://plagekeller.com). \$\$  
**Le Novella** 40 Blvd. d'Aguillon; Antibes; 33-4/93-34-73-29. \$\$

#### DO

**Chapelle du Rosaire** 466 Ave. Henri Matisse, Vence; 33-4/93-58-03-26.  
**Fondation Maeght** 623 Chemin des Gardettes, St.-Paul de Vence; [fondation-maeght.com](http://fondation-maeght.com).  
**Musée Picasso** Château Grimaldi, Place Mariejol, Antibes; 33-4/92-90-54-20.

#### SHOP

**Au Poivre d'Âne** An excellent cheese shop. 12 Rue du Marché, Vence; 33-4/93-58-04-25.  
**Aux Suprêmes de St.-Jeannet** Quai du Peyron, St.-Jeannet; 33-4/92-11-02-09.  
**Boucherie Centrale** 26 Ave. Marcellin Maurel, Vence; 33-4/93-58-01-03.

#### COOKING CLASSES AND TOURS

**Cooking with Friends in France** Cooking classes at La Pitchoune, the former home of Julia Child, taught by Kathie Alex. [cookingwithfriends.com](http://cookingwithfriends.com).  
**Les Petits Farcis** Market tours and cooking classes. [petitsfarcis.com](http://petitsfarcis.com).

## T+L Guide

### STAY

T+L A-List agent Bob Preston ([europeanache.com](http://europeanache.com); 888/600-6777) can arrange personalized itineraries in Provence. Several villa-rental agencies, including

**Hosted Villas** ([hostedvillas.com](http://hostedvillas.com)) and **Ville et Village** ([villeetvillage.com](http://villeetvillage.com)) specialize in the region. For information about **Le Moulin de la Cagne**, the house the author rented in

**HOTELS** \$ Less than \$200 \$\$ \$200 to \$350 \$\$\$ \$350 to \$500 \$\$\$\$ \$500 to \$1,000 \$\$\$\$\$ More than \$1,000  
**RESTAURANTS** \$ Less than \$25 \$\$ \$25 to \$75 \$\$\$ \$75 to \$150 \$\$\$\$ More than \$150