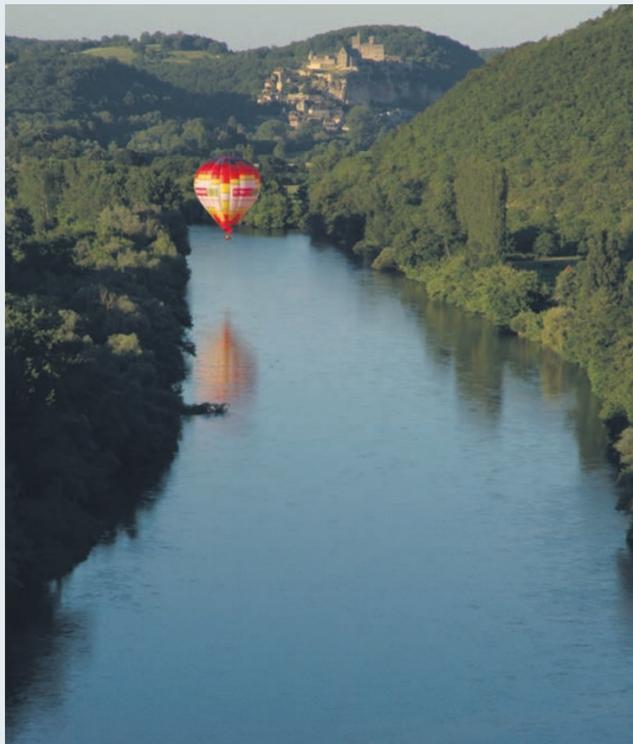


AQUITAINE SPECIAL //LIVING



‘You will not believe what I am looking at right now...’

On a magazine assignment to discover the Dordogne, travel writer Kimberley Lovato fell head over heels for its entrancing landscape, friendly people and delicious food...

Left: Floating over the sapphire river and fairytale châteaux of the Dordogne. Below: the famous Château de Beynac perched on high



I have always been enamored of France. As a kid, I had posters hung around my room of the Eiffel Tower and the Loire Valley castles, and waxy bags of postcards depicting the pastel-colored fishing villages of Cassis, Villefranche-sur-Mer and Honfleur would remain tucked into my desk drawer until I forgot about them. And of course there was my grand aspiration to become fluent in French so I could mingle seamlessly with locals while sipping local wine and looking effortlessly chic à la française. I am still working on that one.

Needless to say, I was elated to receive a magazine assignment to write a story about a chef, Laura Schmalhorst, and her culinary tour company in the Dordogne region of France. I was as excited as a kid at Christmas to discover a new corner of the country. I hopped in my car in Brussels and programmed my GPS for a tiny village I had never heard of before - Biron. This journey to the Dordogne, it turned out, was the catalyst for many more to come and sealed my love affair with France for life.

It's been said you never get a second chance to make a first impression, and the Dordogne impressed me the second I crossed into the province. Meandering towards Biron along the serpentine roads, images popped up around every curve like snippets from a romantic movie, so perfect they were almost cliché. Arched bridges spanned serene rivers, bright yellow sunflowers gazed up at the summer sun, and castles cut from storybook pages seemed perfectly placed. I still recall the first time I saw the Château de Beynac. I was driving along the D703 when I rounded a curve to see the medieval fortress hewn from a rugged cliff, presiding over the Dordogne River and valley below. I pulled over to call my husband. 'You will not believe what I am looking at right now,' was all I could think of to say. Words could not do justice to the scene before my eyes on that July day and it wouldn't be the last castle to steal my breath. Turns out the Dordogne is the land of 1,000 castles, and seemed to be the answer to every girl's question: just where did Cinderella go when she turned right at happily ever after?

Local lore says that when God was distributing castles over France, he discovered a hole in his bag when he got to the Dordogne and tumbling out were crenulated towers and drawbridges. He

had nothing left to do but shake out the remaining 'crumbs' over the hills and valleys of the department and head back to Paradise. It has to be true. No matter where you turn in the Dordogne there seems to be an imposing fortress, a regal river-side home, or a castle-crowned bluff to lure you deeper into the fairy tale. Though my camera worked double time to try and capture every brick and acre of the stunning scenery, I also discovered a land rich in history and tradition, impossible to capture in a photograph yet intertwined with the hardscape and landscape of the Dordogne.

How can a camera grasp the footsteps of prehistoric man in the grottos and cliff-side caves where traces of history date back 500,000 years? Two-dimensional images don't do justice to an abbey's silent cloisters that house the devotion of 800-years of religious pilgrimages. And how do you portray the ache of loss etched in marble monuments that bear the names of sons, brothers and fathers taken during World War Two? Even the bustling tourist sites, the brooding castles and the impressive bastide towns, remain living monuments to the medieval strife that once ravaged the region, scars of which mar the primitive walls.

It's no surprise that food is culturally significant in France, but nowhere is this more evident than in the kitchens of the Dordogne. The cuisine of the region is world-renowned thanks to black truffles and foie gras, walnuts, and duck. These culinary gems are the jewels in France's culinary crown and are deeply rooted in the agricultural

tradition and the *terroir* of the Dordogne. The staple in the Périgord pantry is duck fat, and the ultimate comfort food has to be *pommes sarladaises* and *confit de canard* cooked in the magic elixir.

Markets are the area's social glue and everyday, somewhere in the Dordogne, a market is in full swing. These food carnivals not only brim with local bounty, but are also ground zero for social life (and local gossip) in the region. You can learn a lot from observing the chattering ladies or the *chapeau*-sporting men who meet at the markets, and the vendors themselves are often the guards of valuable information. I was advised how to cook a *magret de canard*, told about the latest restaurant *not* serving duck, and given the name of an excellent *ferme auberge* - a must for anyone wishing to try locally prepared cuisine.

It's behind these ancient doors and in the kitchens and market stalls of those who call the department home where I really fell head over heels with the Dordogne, and where the idea to write a book was born. After years of frequenting the same hotels and restaurants, visiting farms and wineries, and taste testing my way around the daily markets, I slowly got to know the families, the market vendors, the inn owners, the producers, and was invited into their homes and kitchens. From those with deeply seeded roots in the Périgord to immigrants looking to start a new life in the region, there is a common thread amongst them: passion. Sitting down at their tables, listening to their stories and tasting their recipes revealed more over a single meal than all my wrinkled guidebooks ever told me. I found the people of the Dordogne delightful and eager to share their stories with me, yet still humbled by my interest in their heritage and their region. But why wouldn't I be? The Dordogne has it all - castles, churches, abbeys, historic villages, modern restaurants, ancient caves, museums, markets, rivers, forests, Michelin stars and AOC wines, traditional festivals, and most importantly, a benevolent population of inhabitants proud of their heritage and welcoming to new arrivals. It's the best of France rolled into one fairytale setting.

It's hard to believe that magazine assignment was only six years ago. I feel as if I have known the Dordogne my whole life. My GPS finally landed me at my destination in Biron, a 500-year-old priory with doors as big as elephants. I clacked the giant metal ring and as the door creaked open, a smiling face appeared in the open space and said, 'bonjour'.

It was a word that opened a door that I would both literally and figuratively walk through time and time again, and a door I hope will never close. **TFP**



Recipe

Warm Cabécou with Armagnac and Honey Roasted Apricots

A marriage made in heaven using two of my favourite market delicacies: fresh apricots and cabécou de Rocamadour, a goat cheese with coveted AOC status. If you can't find Cabécou de Rocamadour, any small goat cheese round will do.

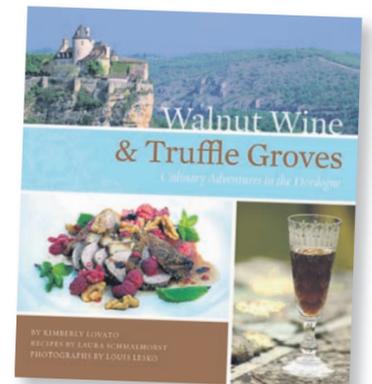
MAKES 4 SERVINGS

- 8 fresh apricots, halved and pitted**
- 60 ml Armagnac**
- 2 tablespoons good-quality honey**
- 1 teaspoon unsalted butter, softened**
- 4 baguette slices, each about 2.5 cm thick**
- 4 rounds Cabécou de Rocamadour or other goat cheese**

Preheat the oven to 375°F (190°C).

Place the apricots, cut side down, on a baking sheet and drizzle with the Armagnac and honey. Bake until the apricots begin to soften but still hold their shape, 12 to 15 minutes. Meanwhile, lightly spread the butter on the baguette slices. Place the baguette slices, buttered side up, on a baking sheet and bake until lightly toasted, about 10 minutes. Remove from the oven and top each slice with 1 cheese round. Return to the oven until the cheese begins to melt, about 5 minutes. To serve, place each warm baguette slice on a salad plate and garnish with the roasted apricot halves.

Kimberley Lovato is the author of *Walnut Wine & Truffle Groves* (Running Press), a culinary travel book, with recipes by chef Laura Schmalhorst, about the people, food and drink of the Dordogne. Available at www.amazon.fr



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