

# VIRTUOSO

THE MAGAZINE



EUROPE



# Pitch Perfect

GAME ON IN PROVENCE.

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY CLARA TUMA

Pétanque is the French  
Riviera's favorite pastime.



From left: La Ciotat's Old Town, the birthplace of pétanque, and players in Sainte-Maxime's boulodrome.

ON A RECTANGLE of packed dirt fringed by leafy plane trees, an older gentleman in faded red shorts crouches over his feet, which are firmly planted inside a circle he's just sketched in the dust with his shoe. Behind his back, the fingers of his right hand spin a metal boule (ball) about the size of an orange as he studies a much smaller apricot-sized ball (called a *cochonnet*, or often a *bouchon* in Provence) about 25 feet away. Then, in one frictionless pendulum swing and

flick of arm and wrist, the sphere is airborne and hurtling toward its intended target: his opponent's boule. The metal-on-metal clack of its direct hit elicits whoops from spectators as the rival orb rolls out of play.

Round after round, and with the élan of a skilled marksman, he quickly racks up his winning 13 points and swaggers off to collect back pats and toasts. There's no question this guy's been around the pétanque pitch a few times.

For nearly two decades of summers,

my family and I have watched (and sometimes played) pétanque in Sainte-Maxime, an unpretentious village on France's Mediterranean coast between Cannes and Saint-Tropez. Nary an *apéro* hour passes that we don't meander to town to sip rosé and admire a game whose short history traces its roots to the port village of La Ciotat, just 80 miles away.

It's there one afternoon that I meet Martine Pilate, the granddaughter of Joseph Pitiot, who, along with his brother



## Culture

Ernest, created what has grown into France's most popular boules sport, a memory that fills Pilate with pride.

"I do believe that my family has contributed to a harmony between men," she says. "It's a game synonymous with conviviality and friendship and is as much an emblem of Provence as lavender fields and the chirping of the *cigales*."

Over a cup of tea at Café de l'Horloge, once owned by the Pitiot brothers, Pilate's soft voice pulls me into her memories. Pétanque, she tells me, is one word smooshed together from two – *pieds tanqués* – and derives from the Provençal expression *à ped tanca*, meaning "on planted feet."

On what is now La Ciotat's main pitch, Joseph and Ernest had an annex to their in-town café, which put them front and center to *la longue*, a popular boules game of the time that saw players taking long run-ups before throwing. But on a spring day in

1910, they noticed one of their friends couldn't participate due to debilitating rheumatism. So they retooled the game: They shortened the length of the pitch and declared balls were to be thrown while standing stationary, *pieds tanqués*, in a circle. That same year, they hosted their first tournament, which would award the winning team ten francs. *Et voilà!* Pétanque was born.

AS A CHILD, Pilate listened to her grandfather's stories – many of which were about pétanque – with joy. "It was a game played to aid digestion after a good meal or bouillabaisse," she says. "When families and friends gathered at their stone *cabanons* [small sheds or shelters typical of Provence] to escape the city and enjoy each other."

The game spread rapidly around France and the world. Today it's estimated that pétanque, along with other similar boules games, is played

in more than 160 countries by hundreds of millions of people. Casual games and recreational clubs flourish, and professional leagues vie for hefty prize money. There are even bids to include boules sports in the Olympic Games (the bid for the 2024 summer games in Paris failed).

Carving out our part of the tradition, my family and I bought a cheap set of boules one summer and taught ourselves the most basic rules: Get your ball closer to the *bouchon* than your opponent. The first to 13 points wins. My husband also built a mini pitch in the backyard of our California home, just to keep the swoon of our Provençal summers alive all year long.

While pétanque is simple at its core, there's always a competitive edge. It's not uncommon to see players, even friends, produce tiny tape measures from their pockets to decide a winner. And beware the shouted phrase "*Faire Fanny!*" According to lore, Fanny was

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La Ciotat's port and (right),  
pétanque royalty Martine Pilate.



a young woman in Lyon. These days, however, she's a puppet, picture, sculpture, or some other likeness of a bare-bummed woman found on or around the pitch who awaits a smooch on her "cheeks" by any team not pétanque-savvy enough to garner a single point.

For my final Sainte-Maxime sundowner of the summer, I wander, as usual, to the barrel-shaped bar adjacent to the pétanque pitch, order a glass of rosé, and grab a seat at an open table. A din of laughter rises over the dwindling chant of the *cigales*, and four teens draw their first circle in the dirt, not an iPhone in sight. I'm reminded of something Pilate said when I asked about her favorite recollections of playing pétanque: "Always with friends, in the summer in the shade of the trees, with a glass of pastis on a small nearby table."

I recognize that sentiment. Though times have changed since 1910, her grandfather's game has not. It remains now as it was then: a template for living in the moment, for bringing friends, family, and even strangers like me together to make memories in the Provençal dirt as deep as the dents left by boules.



“It’s as much an emblem of Provence as lavender fields and the chirping of the *cigales*.”

## Play a Round in Provence

**GO** Seabourn's ten-night cruise from Monte Carlo to Barcelona calls at Amalfi, Malta's capital of Valletta, Saint-Tropez, and more. During a day in La Ciotat, the *Seabourn Sojourn's* 458 passengers can disembark for day trips to Marseille's Old Port and walking tours of Aix-en-Provence, or head to the town center for a glass of rosé at an outdoor café and to watch locals play pétanque in the sport's birthplace. *Departure: October 4; from \$5,899.*

**STAY** Guests at Oetker Collection's 46-room **Château Saint-Martin & Spa** can explore the estate's 32 acres, indulge at its La Prairie spa, and discover nearby villages such as picturesque Saint-Paul-de-Vence, whose place de Gaulle pitch is well loved by pétanque players. The town's tourist office also offers lessons in French and English. *Doubles from \$566, including breakfast daily and a \$100 dining credit.*

Two renowned golf courses and one of Provence's top spas (35,000 square feet, complete with a garden and terrace) await at the 115-room **Terre Blanche** in Tourrettes. The resort offers pétanque lessons to guests and can organize a visit to a nearby vineyard for rounds of

pétanque with sides of wine and olive oil tastings. *Doubles from \$645, including breakfast daily and a \$100 dining credit.*

You can almost hear the daily clack of boules on nearby place des Lices from the unassuming entrance of **Airelles Saint-Tropez, Pan Deï Palais**. Originally a private residence built for Indian princess Bannu Pan Deï, the 12-room hideaway has a walled garden with a pool for evening *apéros* and alfresco dinners. Don't miss the hotel's private Jardin Tropézina for lunch on the sands of famed Pampelonne Beach. *Doubles from \$1,015, including breakfast daily and a \$100 dining credit.*

The 37-room **Château de Berne** in Lorgues is home to more than 60 miles of hiking trails that weave through its 1,272 acres of Provençal farmland, forests, and vineyards. Reserve a table at the Michelin-starred Le Jardin de Berne or a tasting in the wine room for a sampling of the estate's red, rosé, and white Côtes de Provence vintages, then try your hand at pétanque on its private pitches. *Doubles from \$586, including breakfast daily and a vineyard tour and vertical winetasting.* 📍

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