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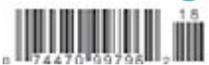
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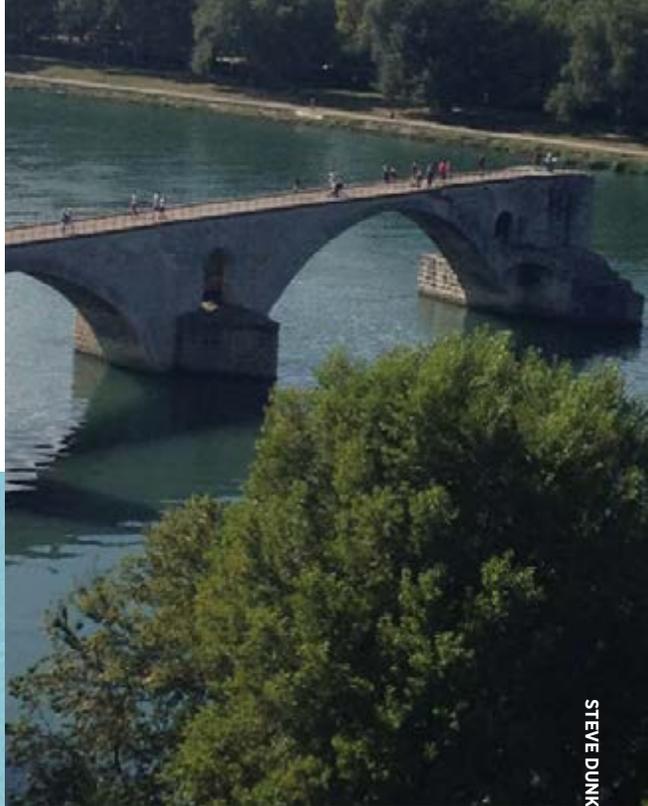


FOR PEOPLE WHO LOVE TO *read*, LOVE TO *eat*, AND LOVE TO *travel*

AVIGNON

Aliment

by CATHERINE VAN BRUNSCHOT



STEVE DUNK

BLAME IT ON THE HEAT.

Or a case of bad timing.

Or too many years of anticipation since I first heard that sweet ditty in French class — “*Sur le pont d’Avignon/ L’on y danse, l’on y danse...*”

But the Avignon that first unfurled before me — its broad avenue lined with international chain stores, its sidewalks and central square chock-a-block with English-speaking river cruisers — was not the Avignon I’d signed up for. Where were the narrow, winding medieval streets? The cozy café-dotted squares, where local patrons discussed the day’s news over glasses of espresso or Châteauneuf-du-Pape?

In the distance, even the famous bridge seemed a mite underwhelming.

Enter Aurelie Gilabert, dynamic owner-guide of **Avignon Gourmet Tours**. “*Alors* — I will take you through the alleys of Avignon, to where the locals go to shop. You will taste products from our region and meet some of the artisans who make them.” She seals the deal with a bag of fresh croissants to launch our walk (but, in truth, she had me at “*alors*”).

We begin beneath the statue of a curly-haired youth that clings to a building overlooking Place des Corps Saints. Only here on this quiet square does his likeness replace the Madonnas that more typically grace Avignon’s medieval corners. “Our little shepherd,” says Aurelie, “is Benezet” — who, according to Catholic tradition, had a holy vision to build the first bridge across the southern Rhône. With the aid of a timely miracle, he won over the 12th-century town leaders, garnering not only a sainthood for his efforts, but construction of the bridge now enshrined in the famous song. Sadly, centuries of flooding have taken their toll, reducing the bridge’s initial 22



WHERE ON EARTH

arches to the four that remain in the river today.

Still brushing the final flakes of croissant from our lips, we pause at the window of **La Princiére**, where a large newspaper clipping announces the shop’s claim to fame as Number 4 on Trip Advisor’s Top Ten ice-cream shops in France. Here, artisanal ice cream is made on the premises with flavours that change seasonally to match the freshly picked produce ever-present on its kitchen counters. We lust after exotic

blends like orange and wolfberry, and caramel and rose — but, alas, the shop is closed at this hour and we must content ourselves with a vow to return later.

Further down on the square, we find the source of our fine croissants, **Boulangerie Olivero**, where a muted mix of locals and tourists sip espresso with their morning pastries. The bakery’s logo is posted in French and Occitan — the local dialect of Provence — a practice that we see repeated on the street signs of old Avignon, as the region makes efforts to reclaim its traditional language.

“*Alors*, the fun for me now begins,” says Aurelie. “As we continue, you will have to guess what flavours we are tasting.” Our first test occurs in the elegant aubergine and white confines of **Aline Gehant Chocolatier**, where we seek out the smoky tones and red-berry back notes of a 68%-cacao chocolate from Ghana, and the soft acidity of a 64%-cacao Madagascar. The house-made lavender ganache recalls the vast lavender fields of Provence that have only just lost their bloom, but the dark ganache infused with thyme and honey is a combination both unexpected and divine.

At **Cafés au Bresil**, Avignon’s oldest roasterie, we sip an Ethiopian Limu, a wine-spiced and well balanced espresso, while Aurelie purchases a handful of Avignon’s signature — and shockingly pink — *papaline* chocolates. These present a

new tasting challenge: to identify the predominant flavour of the candy's liquid centre. Turns out it's *Origan du Comtat*, a liqueur infused with some sixty herbs, first distilled in Avignon in 1870, and famous for its use to combat the cholera epidemic of 1884.

Tiled pedestrian streets give way to cobblestones as we move into the shadow of the Palais des Papes, the world's largest gothic palace, and home to a series of popes from 1309 to 1417. Beneath the plane trees of peaceful Place des Chataignes, we sample star-shaped *fougasse d'Aigues Mortes*. Also known as *pompe à l'huile*, this sweet flat bun laced with lemon zest and orange blossom water is one of the thirteen desserts traditionally served in Provence on Christmas Eve. This one's the product of **La Pause Gourmande**, the adjacent bakery known among Avignonites for its sublime *fougasse*, including a savoury variety that Aurelie purchases for our later consumption.

The tour's zenith is **Les Halles**, Avignon's central covered food market, its exterior draped in a curtain of green perennials. While Aurelie makes her final purchases, we are free to ogle the wondrous wares of its forty vendor stalls — including the city's only remaining purveyor of *pieds et pacquets* (tripe packets stuffed with salt pork and spices, to be stewed with white wine and lambs' feet). Here in the market's demonstration kitchen, our tastings begin in earnest: Picholine green and Nyons black olives; *tomates confites* and *fougasse* bread studded with pork cracklings; Muscat grapes and *jujube* fruit; young chevre, and sourdough bread with red wine, walnuts, and raisins. "It's like Romeo and Juliet, the sheep's cheese with the quince paste," says Aurelie, as she offers a *Tomme de Brebis*. We wash it all down with the region's quintessential designated-driver drink, *Pac à l'eau* (sparkling water laced with *Pac*, the locally produced lemon syrup).

But driving we're not, so it's off to wine and beer seller, **Liquid**, for our final stop. Amid an elegant selection of contemporary stemware and wine accessories, we talk wine with the manager and sip an ample glass of Châteauneuf-du-Pape. A rare white variety only available in the Rhône valley, the wine is crisp and fresh, with a smooth finish. It's the perfect antidote to the September heat — and to any vestige of my crowd-weary disposition.

I think it's time to find that bridge and see what the dancing is all about. 

This **TASTE OF AVIGNON** food tour is created and operated by *Avignon Gourmet Tours*, launched in March 2014. Also on offer are shorter specialty tours featuring "Sweets and Wine" or "City and Market." www.avignongourmetours.com 

Cook

FRANCE



BART EVERSON

MAKES 1 LOAF

NYONS OLIVE LOAF

THIS RECIPE ADAPTED from the blog of Avignon Gourmet Tours features black Nyons olives, an A.O.C.-designated variety grown in the Nyons region north of Avignon. The loaf is perfect on a charcuterie and cheese board, or as a side for a main course. If Nyons olives are not available, substitute Kalamatas.

Eggs 2

Salt ½ tsp

Pepper ½ tsp

Sugar 1 tsp

Thyme ½ tsp

Rosemary ½ tsp

Double Cream
4 TbsExtra Virgin
Olive Oil
4 Tbs

Flour 1 cup

Baking Powder
1 tspNyons or
Kalamata Olives
100 g, pitted

- 1 PREHEAT** oven to 350°F. Grease a loaf pan (10 cm × 20 cm) and set aside.
- 2 IN** a large bowl, beat the eggs with the salt, pepper and sugar until the volume doubles.
- 3 WHISK** in the thyme, rosemary, cream and oil.
- 4 SIFT** the flour and baking powder into the mixture and stir to combine. Stir in the olives.
- 5 SPOON** the batter into the loaf pan and bake for 40 minutes, or until a tester inserted in the loaf comes out clean.
- 6 COOL** in the pan for 5 minutes before turning out on a wire rack to cool completely. Slice to serve.

CATHERINE VAN BRUNSCHOT is a freelance food and travel writer based in Calgary.

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