

Travels with Anzie: A Perfect Day in Narbonne

February 1, 2014

Here we are in the South of France. When you think of the South of France, what images come to mind: The Riviera? St. Tropez? Bathing in the Med.? Sunbathing in bikinis and thongs? Wrong! It's cold here! Sure, it's not as cold as frosty New England. But at least you have Central Heating there. In S. of F. we have 30" thick stone walls that seem to never heat up, and little electric heaters that work effectively for a six ft. radius.

What we do have is great food and wine. Our modus operandi is to take off in our car in the morning and explore the incredibly beautiful medieval towns that dot the Languedoc region. Around 1:00 we will stop at a little restaurant for a three-course "prix fixe" lunch.

After one month here, we are still amazed at the quality of restaurant fare. In this part of France lunch is sacred. All businesses, even museums and churches are closed from noon to 2:00. In the larger towns, particularly farther north, this custom has been abandoned, and the one-hour lunch is standard.

Take yesterday, for instance. We awoke to sun, which is, in itself, unusual. Our plan was to grocery shop in Narbonne. Narbonne lies about 40 minutes to the Southeast of us, about a half hour from the Spanish border. It was an important town in Roman times – known as "the daughter of Rome". A sign at the town entrance purports that Narbonne is "The birthplace of French wine." Like Newburyport, it was an important seaport, until the port area silted up. Now the city lies 10-15 kms from the Mediterranean. The Canal du Midi and the Canal de la Robine intersect the city and provide limited access to the sea.

Our objective was **Les Halles**, the famous covered market that's located in the heart of the city. It's a beautiful Art Deco building opened in 1901. As far as the fresh ingredients that make French cuisine so wonderful, if you can't find it here, you don't need it. Check out the attached photos to give you an idea. Along with groceries there are four cafes that offer wines and tapas. In the center of the building in front of one of these bars, three long tables were set up with "Reserved" signs for some lunch group. We just had to stop for a plate of serrano ham and some wine with which to wash it down.

Then we went to lunch. Next door is **L'Estagnole**, a restaurant that was recommended by an acquaintance. What a find! Their 12 Euro *prix fixe* featured succulent roast leg of lamb with frites. How can one rave about french fries? We can. These were butterflied, probably before a second trip to the stove.

After lunch we explored the rest of the town center. We wandered along the **Canal du Robine**, discussing the possibility of cruising it on a barge. We pictured ourselves piloting our own private barge, maneuvering through the locks, docking in charming villages to explore on foot or bike. It's been a dream of ours for many years. It would be great to do with at least one other couple. Are you game?

“The winemakers are revolting!” “You can say that again.”

We came upon the Bishop's Palace. A wall plaque explains that this was the scene of a demonstration of winemakers from throughout the region in 1907. They were demonstrating against the lack of government regulation that would prevent fraud in winemaking. The wine industry was in a serious depression for several years. It was difficult for the winemakers to make any money. After a prolonged and sometimes violent time, the winemakers established a federation that set standards for wine production and marketing, including labeling. Today the A.O.C. (Appellation d'Origine Controlee) standard assures that only the grapes produced in a particular region are used to produce the wine. For instance, we reside in the Corbiere region. Only wine that is made in this region that comes from grapes that are grown in the region can carry the “AOC Corbieres” on the label. You will also see bottles marked A.O.P. – Appellation d'Origine Protegee. This is supposed to be an updated version of AOC.

So, what's the problem now? The whole French wine industry is in trouble. Part of it can be blamed on the high value of the Euro. However, the major problem lies in the spread of wine growing and making technology. Remember when names like Rothchild, St. Emilion, Medoc assured one of wine unmatched by any other? Thanks to oenological advances, wine lovers are able to find excellent wines made around the world, and at reasonable prices. Here in France the market has become so glutted that the government is paying winegrowers not to grow grapes. Locally winegrowers are reverting to growing olive trees, a crop that farmers produced here back in the time of the Romans.

So ... sun, gorgeous scenery, excellent food and wine ... what more do you need to make a perfect day? In two weeks we hit the beaches of southern Spain. I hope it will be warm enough that I can wear the shorts I brought. As for a bathing suit, I'm afraid I won't be wearing a speedo. All of this fine food is making me gain weight to the point that my speedo will look like a thong.

A la prochaine,

Chuck and Anzie