Provence A-Z

Peter Mayle

Published by Profile Books

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

Click here to buy this book and read more

This opening extract is exclusive to Lovereading.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

Introduction

I am now in the land of corn, wine, oil, and sunshine.
What more can man ask of heaven?

—THOMAS JEFFERSON
in Aix-en-Provence, March 27, 1787

t's an impossible business, trying to squeeze Provence into a single volume. There's too much history, too much material. Thousands of years of human habitation; an encyclopedia's worth of churches and châteaus, towns and villages; a small army of distinguished or notorious residents, including Petrarch, Nostradamus, Raymond de Turenne, and the Marquis de Sade; artists, poets, and writers galore: Vincent van Gogh, Paul Cézanne, Frédéric Mistral, Marcel Pagnol, Alphonse Daudet, and Jean Giono; legends and myths, mountains and vineyards, truffles and melons, saints and monsters. Where to start? What to include? What to leave out?

It's a problem that many writers have faced, and their solution has often been to specialize. They have confined themselves to particular themes—ecclesiastical architecture, the influence of the Romans, the cultural significance of *bouillabaisse*, any one of a hundred facets of Provence—and they have produced comprehensive, often scholarly books. Admirable though these are, I haven't attempted to add to that collection. Probably just as well, since I'm no scholar.

Instead, I have compiled an autobiographical jigsaw of personal interests, personal discoveries, and personal foibles. That may sound like a

cavalier way to approach a book, but I can at least say that I have observed certain rules and restrictions.

As much as possible, I have tried to avoid the more celebrated landmarks, buildings, and monuments. I have left to others the Pont du Gard, the Roman amphitheater at Arles, the Abbey of Sénanque, the Palais des Papes in Avignon, and dozens more historic marvels that have already been so frequently admired and so well described. For the same reason, I have neglected great tracts of glorious countryside, like the Camargue, and one of the most beautiful stretches of the Provençal coastline, the Calanques east of Marseille.

My choice of subjects has been guided by a set of simple questions. Does the subject interest me? Does it amuse me? Is there an aspect of it that is not very well known? It's the technique of the magpie, hopping from one promising distraction to another, and it has the great advantage of being virtually all-inclusive. Anyone or anything can qualify, as long as it has piqued my curiosity. That, at any rate, is my justification for assembling a collection that includes such unrelated topics as a recipe for *tapenade* and a morning spent with a public executioner.

In the course of my research, I have often been reminded of the Provençal love of anecdote, conversational embroidery, and the barely credible story. I make no excuses for recording much of what I've been told, however unlikely it may sound. We are, after all, living through a period in which the truth is routinely distorted, usually for political advantage. If I have sometimes overstepped the limits of verifiable accuracy, at least I have done so in a good cause, which is to make the reader smile.

In the same spirit, I have not questioned too closely some of the specialist information passed on to me by experts, and Provence is full of experts. Almost without exception, they are generous with their time, their advice, and their opinions. The problem comes when you ask two of these experts the same question. When is the correct time to pick olives? How can I keep scorpions out of the house? Is the Provençal climate changing for the warmer? Is *pastis* the cure for all ills? Invariably, you will

receive totally conflicting answers, each delivered with enormous conviction. I admit that I always choose to believe the most improbable one.

Among these experts, one in particular deserves to be mentioned here, even though he also appears several times in the pages that follow. He is the emeritus professor Monsieur Farigoule. Now retired from the mainstream of academic life, he has established a charitable course for the education of backward foreigners, and I am his favorite pupil. In fact, I think I may be his only pupil. Lessons are held in the local café, and the curriculum is remarkably wide-ranging, since Monsieur Farigoule seems to be an expert on everything. Among other things, I have tried him on hornets' nests, Napoléon's love life, the use of donkey dung as fertilizer, the poetry of Mistral, the essential character differences between the French and the Anglo-Saxons, and the Avignon Papacy. He has never been short of an answer, is usually contentious, and is always extremely opinionated. It is to this unconventional muse that I owe a considerable debt, which I now acknowledge with great pleasure.

Some Unreliable Geography

It seems to me that almost everyone, from the first Roman mapmaker onward, has had very definite ideas of exactly where Provence is. But unfortunately for the seeker after geographical truth and precision, these ideas have varied, sometimes by hundreds of kilometers. I was told, for instance, that "*Provence commence à Valence*," way up north in the Rhône-Alpes *département*. Recently, I made the mistake of passing this information on to my personal sage Monsieur Farigoule, who told me that I was talking nonsense. One might stretch a point, he said, and include Nyons in Provence, as a reward for its splendid olives, but not one centimeter further north. He was equally adamant about the eastern boundary (Nîmes) and the western limit (Sisteron).

The fact is that, over the centuries, boundaries have expanded and contracted; a bulge here, a dent there, sprawling or shrinking. Names have

changed, too, or have disappeared from popular use. Not long ago, the lowly Basses-Alpes were given a leg up in the world and promoted to the Alpes-de-Haute-Provence. And who nowadays could tell you with any conviction where the Comtat Venaissin begins and ends? It is not an exaggeration to say that the whole area, for many years, was an affront to the French sense of neatness, order, and logic.

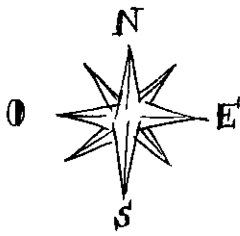
Clearly, this haphazard, almost medieval state of affairs couldn't be allowed to continue in the modern world. Something had to be done. And so eventually, throwing up their hands in frustration, the officials in charge of such matters decided to consolidate several *départements* of southeastern France into one new, all-embracing region. Naturally, this needed a name, and who better to provide one than that shadowy but influential figure, the minister in charge of acronyms? (We can thank him for such triumphs as CICAS, CREFAK, CEPABA, CRICA—and these come from just a brief glance at the Vaucluse telephone directory. There are literally thousands of others.)

The minister was called in. He rummaged through the alphabet and deliberated. And having deliberated, he brought forth. PACA was born: Provence–Alpes–Côte d'Azur, stretching from Arles in the west to the Italian frontier in the east—a single, tidy, administratively correct geographical unit. What a relief. At last we all knew where we were.

Or did we? Today, people spending their vacations in Saint-Tropez, in Nice, even in distant Menton, still send postcards home with enthusiastic descriptions of the wonderful time they're having in Provence. Foreign journalists have only to catch a glimpse of lavender in the hills above Cannes to write about the glories of the Provençal countryside. A fish supper in Antibes is promoted as a true Provençal *bouillabaisse*. And in the lexicon of real estate agents—those incurably creative souls—any stone-built villa with a tiled roof, albeit within spitting distance of Monte Carlo, is automatically classified as a Provençal *mas*.

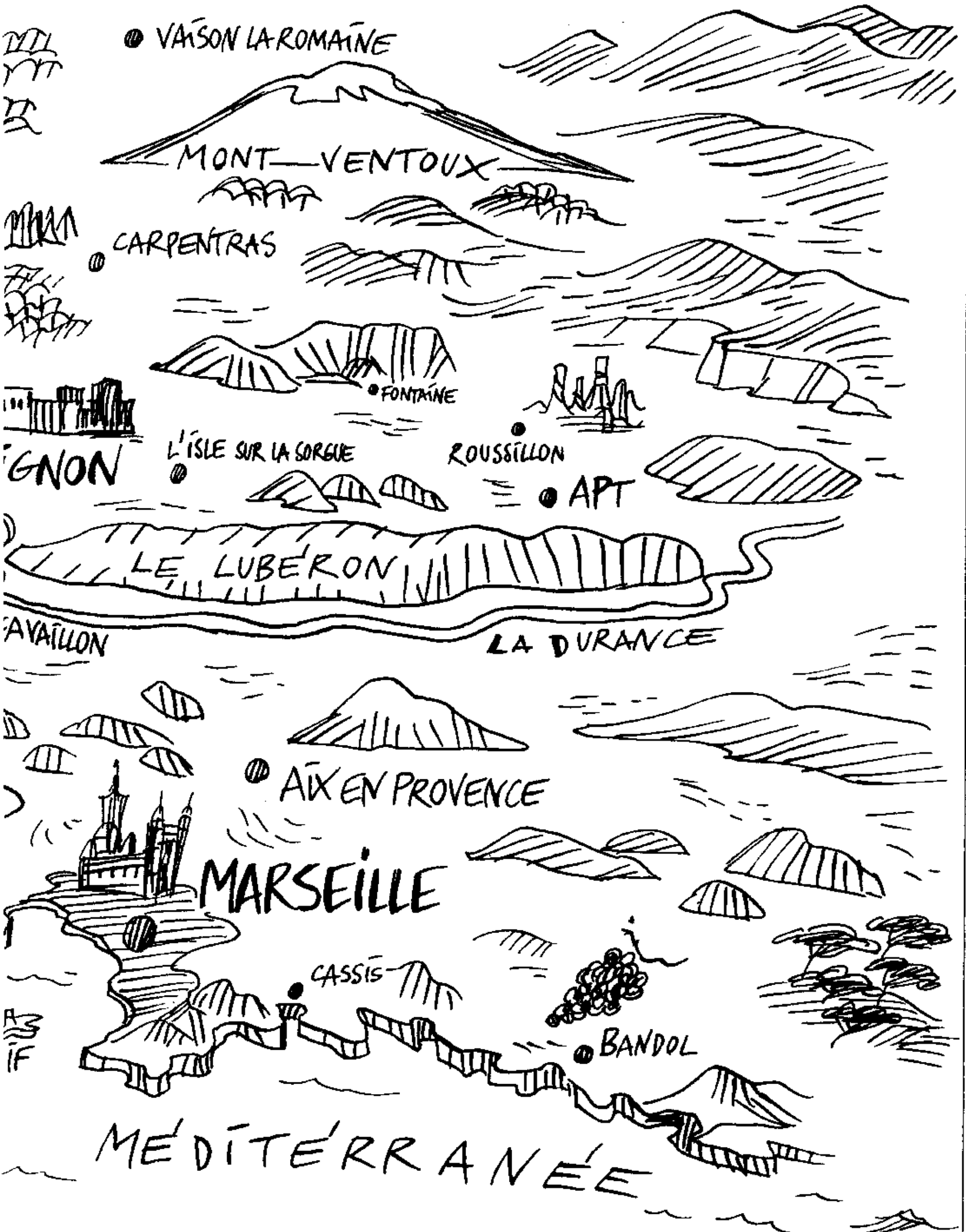
In other words, "Provence" and "Provençal" are finding themselves in areas where, strictly speaking, they have no business being.

So where is Provence, and what are its boundaries? Maps vary. Opinions differ. Confusion reigns. But in the end, I find myself agreeing with Monsieur Farigoule's geography, which you will see reflected in the map that follows. Provence—in this book, at least—consists of three *départements:* Bouches-du-Rhône, Alpes-de-Haute-Provence, and the Vaucluse. It is, of course, possible that many people will denounce this as a purely arbitrary decision. It is even possible that some of the entries you will find on the following pages might overstep these arbitrary boundaries by a hair's breadth. Forgive me. All I can offer by way of apology and excuse is, in the Provençal manner, a shrug.



LA PROVENCE

ORANGE
LE RHÔNE
AV
TARASCON
LES BAUX
ARLES
LA CAMARGUE
PETIT RHÔNE
GRAND RHÔNE
ÉTANG DE BERRE
MARTIGUES
MER


VAISON LA ROMAINE
MONT VENTOUX
CARPENTRAS
FONTAINE
L'ISLE SUR LA SORGUE
ROUSSILLON
GNON
APT
LE LUBERON
AVAILLON
LA DURANCE
AIX EN PROVENCE
MARSEILLE
CASSIS
BANDOL
IF
MÉDITERRANÉE

Provence A-Z

Accent

There is a popular misconception that the language spoken in Provence is French. It resembles French, certainly; indeed, in written form it is almost identical. But remove it from the page and apply it to the ear, and Provençal French might easily be another language. If words were edible, Provençal speech would be a rich, thick, pungent verbal stew, simmered in an accent filled with twanging consonants; a *civet,* perhaps, or maybe a *daube.*

Before coming to live in Provence, I acquired a set of Berlitz tapes in order to improve my grasp of French, which I hadn't studied since my schooldays. Evening after evening, I would sit and listen to cassettes of the most mellifluous, perfectly enunciated phrases—spoken, I believe, by a lady from Tours. (I was told that the accent of Tours is considered a jewel among accents, the most polished and refined in France.)

Every morning in front of the mirror while shaving, I would do my best to imitate this accent, pursing my Anglo-Saxon lips until they could pronounce something close to the Gallic *u,* practicing the growl from the back of the throat that is so necessary for the rolling Gallic *r.* Little by little, I thought, I was making progress. And then I left England to come south.

It was an instant farewell to the lady from Tours, because the sound of the words I encountered in Provence was unlike anything I had heard before. And to make matters even more incomprehensible, these words were delivered with an incredible velocity, a vocabulary gone berserk. My ears were in shock for months, and for at least a year I was unable to conduct any kind of sustained conversation without a dictionary. This I used much as a blind man uses a white stick: to identify obstacles and try to find my way around them.

To this day, many years later, there are times when words, even sentences, pass me by in a glutinous blur of sound. Living as I do in the country, I have noticed that the rural accent is perhaps a little thicker—or, some might say, purer—than in bastions of urban civilization like Aix or Avignon. But then there is Marseille, a special case. Here the unsuspecting visitor will have to contend not only with the accent but with an entire sub-language. How, I wonder, would the lady from Tours react if she were offered a *pastaga,* directed to the nearest *pissadou,* cautioned against employing a *massacan,* accused of being *raspi,* invited to a *baletti,* or admired for her *croille?* Like me, I suspect, she would find it all extremely puzzling, even *comac.*

Translations:

pastaga = *pastis*
pissadou = toilet
massacan = a bad worker
raspi = miserly
baletti = a small dance; what used to be known as a *bal populaire*
croille = arrogance, effrontery, chutzpah
comac = extraordinary

Ail

It has been said that Provence is a region that has been rubbed with garlic. Whether you think of garlic as *le divin bulbe* or the stinking rose or the poor man's panacea, there's no getting away from it—in soups, in sauces, in salads, with fish, with meat, with pasta, with vegetables, on or in bread. And if there isn't quite enough of it for your taste, you can always resort to this old Provençal habit: Take a clove of garlic (probably the one you always carry in your pocket for just such a gastronomic emergency), peel it, and hold it between the thumb and index finger of your right hand. With your left hand, hold a fork with its tines facing downward on a plate. Grate the garlic briskly across the tines until you have enough aromatic

juice and fragments on your plate to season the food to your liking.

When considering garlic's history and reputation, it is often difficult to sort out fact from legend. We are told that the laborers building the pyramids of ancient Egypt went on strike because their garlic ration was late in being distributed. This is confirmed by several sources and is probably true. On the other hand, you have the vampire-repellent theories—carry a head of garlic with you at all times, and rub garlic on window frames, door handles, and the floor around your bed for nocturnal protection—which probably aren't. Other slightly dubious claims include garlic's supposed ability to neutralize snake and insect venom; to cure leprosy, asthma, and whooping cough; and to protect against cholera and the evil eye *("Bon ail contre mauvais oeil")*.

But nothing in the medical history of garlic, at least in Provence, is quite as impressive as the tale of the four thieves. It takes place in Marseille in 1726, when hundreds of inhabitants were dropping like flies from the plague. Our four thieves (today their nearest equivalent would be ambulance-chasing lawyers) visited the empty houses of the recently dead and ransacked them. Growing careless, the thieves were eventually caught and brought to trial. Fortunately for them, the judge had an inquiring mind. How was it, he asked them, that you were able to enter all those contaminated houses without being stricken yourselves by the plague?

Plea-bargaining ensued. In exchange for leniency, the thieves revealed their secret, a powerful elixir that made them immune from the plague. It must have seemed at the time as miraculous as the discovery of penicillin, and from that day on it was called *le vinaigre des quatres voleurs,* or four thieves' vinegar. The ingredients are vinegar, absinthe, rosemary, sage, mint—and, naturally, garlic. (Absinthe is difficult to find nowadays, but

pastis would probably be an acceptable substitute.) Not surprisingly, the Marseillais quickly found themselves among the most enthusiastic consumers of garlic in France. They still are.

There is no doubt about some other, less dramatic health-giving properties. Garlic is an antiseptic, a disinfectant, and an inhibitor of bacteria. It is rich in vitamins B_1 and C. Medical studies suggest that garlic eaters show a lower incidence of stomach cancer, may be less prone than average to strokes and cardiovascular disease, and possess blood of exceptional purity.

Alas, the same cannot be said for their breath. Garlic-induced halitosis has been something of a social obstacle ever since man popped that first clove in his mouth thousands of years ago. King Henri IV of France used to eat a clove every morning. It was said by one of his contemporaries that his breath could knock over a steer at twenty paces. And yet he was also a renowned ladies' man, which leads me to believe that his lady friends had discovered the only truly effective solution to the problem of garlic breath in others. Which is, of course, to eat garlic—and plenty of it—yourself.

Aioli

The Provençal poet Frédéric Mistral, a man with a lyrical turn of phrase and a practical turn of mind, praised *aioli* for possessing, among its many other virtues, the ability to keep away flies. I have also known it occasionally to repel humans, particularly those delicate souls accustomed to a cuisine that is largely innocent of garlic. *Aioli* is not for those with timid taste buds.

Technically, it is mayonnaise. But it is mayonnaise with guts, and to compare it to conventional mayonnaise is like comparing a slice of processed cheese to a ripe Camembert. This classic recipe explains why:

For eight people, you will need sixteen cloves of garlic, the yolks of three eggs, and nearly half a liter of the best olive oil. Peel the garlic, put the cloves in a mortar, and crush them to pulp. Add the egg yolks and a

pinch of salt, and stir until the yolks and garlic are thoroughly blended. Then, drop by drop, start adding the oil, stirring (and never stopping) as you go. By the time you've used about half the oil, the *aioli* should have thickened into a dense mass. The rest of the oil can now be added (and stirred) in a continuous, steady flow. The *aioli* becomes thicker and thicker, almost solid. This is how it should be. Add a few drops of lemon juice and serve with potatoes, boiled salt cod, peppers, carrots, beetroot, hard-boiled eggs, and maybe some Provençal snails, *les petits gris.*

As you can imagine, a plateful of this poses a significant challenge to the digestion, and you may wish to follow the advice of one Provençal writer who recommends a *trou provençal* in the middle of the meal. This is a small glass of *marc* that has the effect of cutting through the pungent ointment of eggs and oil to form a hole, or *trou,* through which the rest of the meal can pass. The practical Mistral would surely approve. But I wonder what he would think of a recent development in the social life of *aioli* that I find fascinating, although I haven't so far had the chance to experience it personally. It is an event—one can hardly dismiss it as a mere meal—known as an *aioli dansant.*

If one takes this literally, it sounds like a dangerous combination, mixing the careless rapture of the dance with the consumption of a rich, heavy, oily dish that is quite difficult to eat accurately even when sitting still. But perhaps it is an athletic substitute for the *trou provençal:* an exercise to shake down what has been eaten to make room for second helpings. Who knows? It might even take over from the *paso doble* that is traditionally danced at village fetes.

Air

A man in a bar once told me that the air in Provence was the purest air in France, perhaps even in the world. He was a large and somewhat aggressive man, and I thought it wise not to argue with him. In fact, I was delighted to believe what he had told me, and for several years I would

pass on the good news to friends and visitors. "Every breath you take of Provençal air," I used to say, "is like ten euros in the bank of health." It wasn't until I started to research the subject that I discovered the truth.

Here it is: The *départements* of Bouches-du-Rhône, the Vaucluse, Alpes-de-Haute-Provence, and the Var make up one of the four most polluted zones in Europe, a distinction they share with Genoa, Barcelona, and Athens. (Source: Greenpeace France.) Apart from the emissions coming from heavy traffic on the *routes nationales* and the *autoroutes,* the principal villains are to be found in the industrial complex—*l'industrie-sur-mer*—that straggles along the coast from Marseille to the Gulf of Fos and the oil refineries at Berre.

How bad is it? By August 2003, there had been thirty-six days during the year on which the level of air pollution exceeded the official limit of 240 micrograms per cubic meter. More was to come as the summer heat wave continued. And, so we were told, the pollution was not necessarily confined to the area immediately around those who produced it, but could spread as far away as sixty to ninety miles.

Since each of us breathes about thirty pounds of air each day, statistics like this make uncomfortable reading. And yet, walking every day in the Luberon as I do, it's difficult to believe that such a thing as pollution exists. The air looks clear and tastes good. Vegetation seems untouched. Butterflies thrive. Birds and game go about their business, apparently in rude health. Can it be that the mistral is protecting us by blowing away the foul breath of industry? I must consult the man in the bar. He will know.

Alpes et Alpilles

Once upon a time, geographical names had a certain logic about them. They indicated, with varying degrees of accuracy or sometimes optimism, the physical or historical characteristics one might expect to find in that particular place. For instance, the town of L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue is surrounded by the river Sorgue; Pernes-les-Fontaines has thirty-six foun-

tains; Vaison was settled more than two thousand years ago by the Romans, and eventually became known as Vaison-la-Romaine. These were names that made sense.

Other names, however, seemed to have made too much sense, and here we have a good Provençal example. For many years, the *département* to the west of the Vaucluse was known as the Basses Alpes. It was a name that reflected the fact that in the neighboring *département,* immediately to the north, there were significantly higher mountains whose height was officially confirmed by their title—the Hautes Alpes. This clearly rankled in the Basses Alpes, and local pride was bruised. It is possible that some of the more sensitive residents developed alp envy. Whatever the reason, the name of the *département* was changed in 1970 to Alpes-de-Haute-Provence, which had the great advantage of suggesting a certain alpine loftiness without being too specific.

How high does a bump in the landscape need to be before it can be classified as an alp? The dictionary is of no help here, defining the alp simply as "a high mountain" without telling us how high. This, of course, is open to interpretation, and therefore very useful to those whose task it is to provide names for natural outcroppings. One can imagine such a man, many hundreds of years ago, scratching his head as he gazed at the range of sun-bleached limestone crags that runs from west to east between Fontvieille and Saint-Rémy-de-Provence. His problem was that the crags were certainly taller and more impressive than mere hills. And yet not really high enough, at 900–1,200 feet, to be described as mountains, let alone alps. Our man sat and pondered.

Who knows what caused inspiration to strike? Possibly the dazzling limestone reminded him of the snow-covered peaks of the Swiss Alps. Ah yes, that was it; what he was gazing at, in fact, was a miniature alpine range. Fortunately, in his search for a name he chose to ignore the dinky French habit of adding *-ette* as a diminutive suffix—*alpettes* somehow sounded too much like a group of female mountaineers—and so he decided to call them Les Alpilles.