

Barging In

French canal boat cruising (originally published: Cuisine magazine 2002)

The canal craft Liberté stands out among the crowd of traditional barges on the European waterways. This impressive houseboat was actually built in New Zealand and transported to Europe on a container ship by her Kiwi owners, David and Janette Wylie. Now the Wylie's spend the northern summers exploring Europe at their leisure onboard Liberté. With this stylish set-up and with many years' boating experience behind them, David and Janette expertly and safely navigate canals, rivers and locks, while passengers can be as involved with the process of boating as they choose.



I joined the Wylie's for an excursion on the Canal du Midi (Southwest France), cruising from Carcassonne to Toulouse. A shady canopy of giant plane trees protects much of the Midi and throughout the scenery is magical. Travelling via the canal yields an intimate view, allowing us to glimpse into people's gardens, houses and daily lives. I spent my time here delving into the landscape, wine and food of the Languedoc region, which surrounds the canal.



Moving through locks is a very distinct feature of canal life. Sometimes there's even an opportunity to purchase ingredients, such as olive oil, wine, honey or garden vegetables from the lock keepers. Local open-air markets are another incomparable place to shop for supplies to create a memorable breakfast or lunch to share.

One of the great advantages of this form of transport is having the freedom to stop when and where you please and there are bikes onboard for those keen on easy sightseeing tours.

Walking or cycling from the canal typically took us past fields of vivid sunflowers in full-bloom to small villages of faded stone houses to buy our daily bread; to markets and wine co-ops for supplies; or to local eateries to dine-out on regional specialities.

One of my favourite regional dishes is the speciality of Castelnaudary, cassoulet – a meltingly rich stew of creamy white beans flavoured with various meats, such as duck, pork and sausage. This simple meal takes its name from the cassole, an earthenware cooking pot in which it is made. Cassoulet is remarkably filling but I, like many others, find it deliciously irresistible.

I gained endless inspiration from visiting the village markets to select stunning produce to cook on the barbecue or in Liberté's spacious kitchen. During convivial meals onboard we savoured the flavours of market-fresh food, such as juicy sun-warmed tomatoes; wild asparagus; saucisson sec (dried sausage) enrobed in local herbs; perfectly ripened cheeses; and crusty baguettes and pastries still warm from the bakery.



During this memorable voyage I created the following recipe from local ingredients and discoveries made along the way. Try it and experience a taste of the French summer – canal-side. Bon appétit!

Cherry Tomato Pastries with Persillade

Persillade is a mixture of chopped parsley and garlic, which is added to certain French dishes after cooking. It works to deliciously perfume these tomato pastries.

Makes 4

Tomato Pastries

1 pre-rolled sheet puff pastry
¼ cup sun-dried tomatoes
sea salt and freshly ground black pepper
2 cups red cherry tomatoes

Persillade

¼ cup parsley leaves
2 cloves garlic, peeled

1. Preheat oven to 200C. Divide the pastry sheet into 4 even squares and place squares on a lightly oiled baking tray. With the tip of a knife, score a 1cm border around the edge of each pastry square and prick the center of each with a fork.
2. Puree the sun-dried tomatoes in a food processor and season with salt and pepper to taste. Spread puree over the center of each pastry square, leaving the border free of topping. Arrange cherry tomatoes to cover the sun-dried tomato puree.
3. Bake for 20 minutes or until the pastry edges are puffed and golden brown. Remove from the oven and sprinkle with persillade while still hot.
4. To make persillade, finely chop parsley and garlic and mix together.