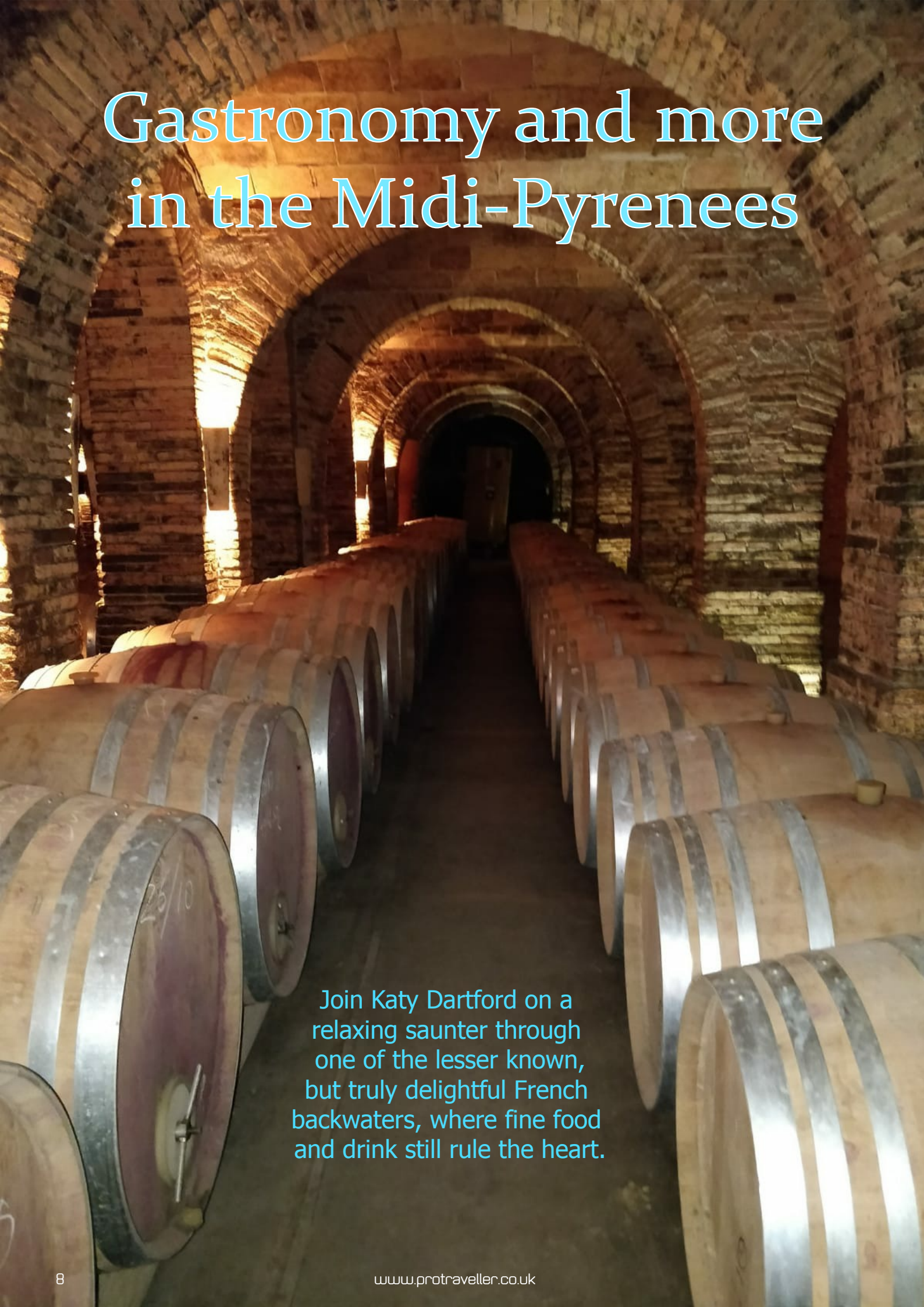
Gastronomy and more in the Midi-Pyrenees



Join Katy Dartford on a relaxing saunter through one of the lesser known, but truly delightful French backwaters, where fine food and drink still rule the heart.



Doused in heritage with old hamlets, drowsy villages and towns studding its lush green hills, Southern France's Occitania region only officially come into being in 2016 with the pairing of Languedoc-Roussillon and the Midi-Pyrenees, two historically Occitan regions, with a stack of UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

Food and drink are still approached with reverence in the region, and a whistle stop tour around four different departments of the Midi Pyrenees; Tarn, Gers, Tarn-et-Garonne and Haute Garonne gives you plenty of opportunity to experience some of its best gastronomy.



Here's what not to miss in the Midi Pyrenees:

Learn how Armangnac is produced

Gers, Auch

Armagnac Delord in Auch, Gers has a family history of four generations, starting in 1893 when a travelling distiller and cellar master, Prosper Delord, went from farm to farm, transforming white wine into Armagnac.

In 1932, his sons, Gaston and Georges, created the House of Armagnac Delord Frères in Lannepax, gradually selling their Bas-Armagnacs from Gascony to the United States. Since then the family has continued the Armagnac adventure.

At Armagnac Delord you can see many, many elegant bottles of blends ranging from three to more than 30 years old, as well as







some vintages from the 1900 to now. The distillery is now a small family business run by two brothers, distilling using the traditional methods to produce a large range of high quality vintages.

The whole bottling process… the labelling, wax sealing and gold embossing, is done by hand by a team of two or three. A tour of the facility includes a trip to "Paradise" which is where the oldest vintages are stored in glass jars, or Bonbonnes to keep them away from the light.

After the armagnac grapes are vinified, they are distilled and stored in these cellars, containing over 1000 barrels and a dozen oak tanks, to age and protect the Armagnac. The barrels have to be toasted french oak barrels to give it its colour, and the finished products are blended to give different flavours - which of course, you can sample at the end of your tour.

Take a horse and cart ride around a vineyard

Fronton www.vins-de-fronton.com

In less than an hour from Toulouse you can be amongst the vineyards of Froton, which are distinguished by their use of the black Négrette grape. This gives a fruity flavour of violet, blackcurrant, blackberry, raspberry and licorice with peppered notes to the wine. Over the centuries, Négrette, has become exclusive to the Fronton appelation, which covers the departments of Tarn-et-Garonne and Haute-Garonne.

Chateau Bellevue La Foret is located 30 km north of Toulouse and is one of the largest single privately owned wine estates in the Southwest of France. The unique Negrette grape is used to produce the red and rose Chateau Bellevue La Foret under the Fronton Appellation. Wine is said to have first started being produced here in the Gallo Roman period, but it's thought it was in the 12 century when the knights of St. John of Jerusalem brought the grape back from Cyprus and developed the vineyard.

As well as a tour by horse and cart, you can take a quad bike ride around the vineyards. www.rando-quad-adventure.com

Taste the wines and take lunch at the **Maison des Vins & Tourism of Fronton** at Château de Capdeville ,or at **Château Caze at Villaudric** - the oldest wine storehouse of AOP Fronton built in the end of the 18th century. www.chateaucaze.com

Other Midi Pyrenees vineyards worth visiting:

Chateau de Saurs - Lisle sur Tarn

Around 50km northeast of Toulouse, this vineyard is owned by the Gineste de Saurs family, who have lived in the area since the fourteenth century. The estate is now centred on the château, which was built in the mid 19th century. Most of the wines produced at the Château de Saurs are reds, and sold through





the family's group of restaurants in Paris and Geneva. All the wines that the vineyard have produced since the 2012 vintage are organic. www.chateau-de-saurs.com

Castelanu de Montmiral - 10 kms north of Gaillac

Located close to one of the oldest natural oak forests in France, Gresigne forest, the Château de Mayrague sits in rolling, wooded countryside on the slopes leading down to the Tarn river.

Built in the 13th and late 16th centuries, the Chateau de Mayragues is one of the few surviving examples of the local fortified architecture, with an overhanging balcony running round the top of the building that served in ancient times as a defensive walkway.

In 1980 Alan and Laurence Geddes bought the Mayragues when it was in a state of total ruin, and restored it with the help of local craftsmen, using only traditional materials. In 1998 they won the coveted Grand Prix of the Vieilles Maisons Françaises, and now Mayragues is listed as a Historic Building. www.chateau-de-mayragues.com

Learn more about how foie gras is produced:

Terre Blanche, Saint-Puy, Gers

This former eighteenth century farm is now a craft cannery specialising in breeding, cooking and tasting ducks. Owner Christine Labatut will introduce you to the farm and show you how a variety of their delicious products are made.

The farm was created in 1982 and the ducks there are reared in the same way as they are in the middle ages. All spend their time in open-air Gascon farms for 14 weeks, and are then force-fed whole corn for 12 days. The liver grows to make up about ten percent of animal. During the 12 days they put on 4kg - 6kg, which they can loose it in three days if they aren't killed.

Christine says its a natural process- similar to migrating birds, who fill themselves up with food before they cross the sea. In one day a wild duck can eat three times their body weight before they fly. She also says the birds are fed in the same way a mother feeds her chicks, by placing the food down their necks, so the animals don't suffer.

Don't miss out on the chance to taste the liver, before and after its cooked - with just a sprinkle of salt to flavour it.

Visit the Victor Hugo market.

Toulouse:

The famous Victor Hugo market is home to some of the best quality produce in the area, and features over 100 stalls with fish, charcuterie, fruit and vegetables, bakeries, and patisseries.

Follow a visit with a walk around Toulouse, known for its unique architecture made of pinkish terracotta bricks, which earned it the nickname la Ville Rose ("the Pink City"). Despite this, it was blue that made Toulouse wealthy. Varying shades of the colour can be seen everywhere on shutters, lamp-posts, doors and, windows. The city was founded on the trade in pastel dye, between the mid-15th and mid-16th centuries.

Other things to do in the Midi Pyrenees

Visit the historic cathedral at Ger, Auch- the birthplace of the legendary D'Artagnan.

A one hour drive west of Toulouse is Auch, the historic capital of Gascony, and a region of bastide castles, vineyards and small villages.



The first stone of its UNESCO registered cathedral was laid in July 1489, but the cathedral was only consecrated around 60 years later - and even then it wasn't completely finished. That happened almost two centuries later, with its classical facade dating from the 16th and 17th centuries.

Inside there are three treasures; its great 17th century organ which is said to be one of the finest in the world for playing Baroque music, its 113 Renaissance choir stalls of carved oak - which feature more then 1500 biblical characters - and the 18 renaissance stained-glass windows by Arnaud de Moles.

There is also an 18th-century archbishop's palace, with a 14th-century tower, adjoining the cathedral. Outside the cathedral is a statue dedicated to Louis XIV's famous captain of the Musketeers Guard, D'Artagnan.

Visit the 12th century Abbey de Flaran in Saint Puy-North Gers

Founded by Burgundian monks in 1151, the complex now represents one of the best preserved Abbeys in the south-west of France, and is a perfect illustration of Cistercian art in Gascony. During the 13th century the Abbey grew fast - but has since been in danger of being destroyed at many times, including the Hundred Years' War and the French Wars of Religion, before being sold off during the French Revolution.

In the 1970's part of the Abbey burnt down, but because it had been classified as an historical monument in 1914, it was saved and bought by the department of Gers, who then embarked on a long restoration campaign. In 2000 it became a Heritage Centre, and also houses a permanent exhibition on the pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostela, the Way of St. James.

Beyond the cloister and its walled garden, the eastern facade with its dormitories open out onto the gardens. Remodelled in the eighteenth century into a "French" style, there is an area at the foot of the garden that remains identical to the medieval





monastery's style, with aromatic and medicinal plants, that were once used by the monks for pharmaceutical purposes.

Don't miss the "Simonov" art collection, housed in the Abbey, containing an exceptional collection of masterpieces from the 16th to the 20th century. See works from Cézanne, Renoir, Matisse, Picasso, Monet, and Rubens. Michael Simonow has housed his collection at the abbey since 2002, when he emigrated to South Africa.

Take a Canal Cruise - Tarn-et-Garonne

A river cruise along the Canal des Deux Mers - or canal of the two seas - is a great way to relax and watch the world go by.

You can also cycle on a well maintained path beside the canal, which continues for almost 800km, linking the Atlantic and the Mediterranean seas. http://en.canaldes2mersavelo.com

Visit Moissac - Tarn-et-Garonne

Moissac - with its World Heritage cloister from 1100, is one of the prides of the Tarn-et-Garonne, and a mecca for those who appreciate Romanesque art. There is no other example in the world of a cloister of the time, that has survived so well. Moissac was and is still a major stop on the road to St Jacques de Compostela, and also the starting point for walks along the Canal des Deux Mers. www.tourisme.moissac.fr

Discovery the medieval village of Cordes sur Ciel - Tarn

From the nearby hills looking onto the Cordes sur Ciel, you can see how this bastide town got is name. Until 1993 the town was called was Cordes, thought to mean rocky heights or a reference to Cordoba in Spain, famous then for its leather craft.

That year, it was renamed Cordes-sur-Ciel, due to its height above the clouds, and a good place to watch for attacks. Now its classified as one of the Grands Sites Midi-Pyrénées.

Built in the early 13th century by the Count of Toulouse, the town is considered to be the first of the bastides or fortified towns - in Southwest France. The first impression of Cordes is a thickset and austere appearance, from its military role - with stones that are piled high for protection.

You have to break through this first line of defence (there are five in all!), through the gateways of 'les portes de l'Horloge, de la Jane or des Ormeaux' to discover the hanging gardens, the fig trees and the almond trees.

Higher still, is the central market square and the covered market, with the Middle Ages giving way to the Renaissance.

Cordes became wealthy through merchants, who, thanks to trade in leather and cloth, built sumptuous houses from the late 13th century, with ostentatious facades demonstrating their wealth. In the 15 century it was pillaged as part of the Hundred Years' War but because homes had been built within the original 13th-century ramparts, they escaped heavy damage during the religious wars at the end of the 16th century.

Exploring the town you can see many examples of Gothic architecture as it evolved over the 13th and 14th-century, lining the main road.



