

Letters from Grignan-les-Adhémar

By NEIL ALLANBY

Perched on one of the limestone hills of Drôme Provençale in the Rhone Valley is the beautiful town of Grignan. Surrounded by fields of lavender and sunflowers, oak forests and now grape vines, it makes a colourful spectacle. The surrounding hills and close proximity to Mont Ventoux make this area the ideal training ground for the most important cycling event in the world, the Tour de France.

Back in the 17th century, François Adhémar de Monteil married his third wife, Françoise-Marguerite de Sévigné while living in Paris. The Adhémars were a noble family dating from the Middle Ages and originating from the Drôme Provençale, and François was in fact the Count of Grignan. Shortly after the wedding, he was appointed by King Louis XIV as Lieutenant Governor of Provence. Consequently having to leave Paris to set up residence in his constituency, he returned to the family chateau in Grignan, accompanied by his new wife. Over a period of 30 years, the bereft mother-of-the-bride, Madame de Sévigné, who was left behind in Paris, kept up a correspondence with her daughter in Grignan that totalled about 1000 letters, often writing as much as 20 pages per day. These letters were celebrated

for their wit and vividness. With their subsequent publication, Madame de Sévigné has become known as one of France's greatest icons of literature. The mother-daughter love story has inspired quite the tourist attraction centred on visiting the Chateau de Grignan, which is now owned by the State and restored to its former glory.

Driving south from Lyon on the A7 autoroute, to arrive at Grignan, you take the exit at Montélimar. Montélimar's claim to fame is its delectable nougat, available from shops and producers in the city. However, a better alternative is to take the exit and then continue on in the direction of Grignan with a detour to the beautiful Cistercian abbey of Notre Dame d'Aiguebelle (www.abbaye-aiguebelle.cef.fr). This abbey has been in existence since the 12th century and still functions today as an abbey. The monks manufacture a range of products and the boutique sells these plus a range of articles sourced from other abbeys throughout France. Here, you can buy nougat in beautiful surroundings.

In France, each region has its own food specialities and the best wine to match with these specialities can often be found at a local vineyard. So it is with nougat. If you feel the need to match

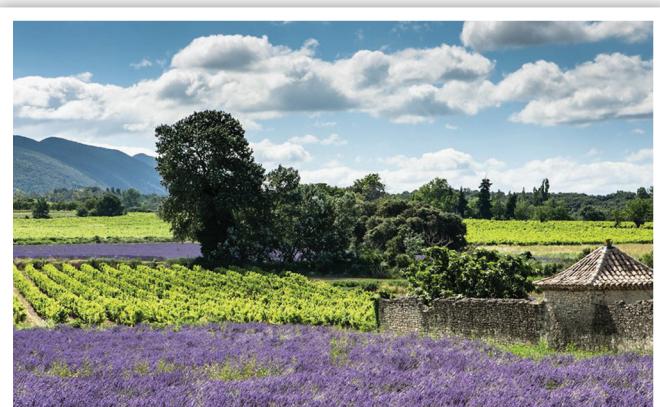
vineyard of Domaine de Grangeneuve (www.domainedegrangeneuve.fr). The winery makes a viognier with fabulous apricot, yellow peach and almond flavours that is fermented and matured in aged oak – making it a great match for nougat.

Today's vineyards around Grignan were planted in the 1960s, many by French families returning from Algeria after the War of Independence. While there are winemaking relics from Roman times in the nearby town of Donzère, this region is better known for its black Tricastin truffles than for wine. The wines are steadily improving in reputation and quality, with the creation of the appellation Côteaux du Tricastin in 1973. The appellation was recently changed to Grignan-les-Adhémar, and this provided the opportunity to impose stricter regulations to further improve quality.

Located on the northwest fringe of the southern Rhone valley, Grignan-les-Adhémar still has a Mediterranean climate but has higher altitude than the southern Rhone. This terroir produces robust elegant wines of higher acidity but without as much warmth as wines from further south. Mourvèdre will not ripen here, and so the grape varieties are grenache, cinsault, syrah and carignan. Around 70 per cent of production is red wine, plus approximately 20 per cent rosé and 10 per cent white wine.

Domaine de Grangeneuve was planted in the 1960s by the Bour family, and the second and third generations still run the vineyard today. >>

"These letters were celebrated for their wit and vividness."



Located in the region's parched Mistral-swept landscape but protected locally by the surrounding hills, the main buildings of the domain are located amid landscaped gardens in a renovated 18th-century coach inn. The cellar door presents as a true statement of provincial living and is an important retail outlet for locals and tourists alike. Their website provides details about special events like the winemaker's picnic, bike rides through the countryside and the most enjoyable jazz music evenings in summer. This vineyard was the inspiration for my business, The Discreet Sommelier (www.thediscreetsommelier.com), which aims to cut through the snobbery of wine and provide information about good quality, honest wines at great value, bringing pleasure to everyone. I worked several weekends at Domaine de Grangeneuve's cellar door and passed some of the most enjoyable periods of my working career there, helping customers work out which wines they liked best.

Beneath the oak trees in this region's forests are found the famous black Tricastin truffles, *Tuber melanosporum*. They sell for over 100 euros for 100 grams, and are prized for their flavour. The syndicate controlling the marketing of these truffles is headquartered in the nearby city of Saint-Paul-Trois-Châteaux, where I lived for five years. Tricastin truffles are used in many local dishes so, when matching wines to food, it is a good idea to use the local wines. For meat dishes such as *ragout de sanglier* (wild boar stew) flavoured with cooked

black Tricastin truffles, I suggest La Truffière from Domaine de Grangeneuve. This red wine made from syrah actually does have aromas of black truffles. It also works well with game birds such as pheasant. For *omelette aux truffes* (truffle omelette) flavoured with truffle shavings, I suggest a white wine based on viognier such as Les Dames Blanches du Sud also from Domaine de Grangeneuve. Try them at the Sunday-morning truffle market in Saint-Paul in winter.



"the region's parched Mistral-swept landscape"



Also located in the region is the Château de Suze-la-Rousse, which houses the University of Wine (www.universite-du-vin.com), where I studied during my time in France. The university also runs short and weekend courses on local and national wines, running classes in French, English and German.

For a place to stay in Grignan, I suggest the boutique hotel Le Clair de la Plume (www.clairplume.com), owned by the charming Jean-Luc Valadeau. Sample the local delicacies in style at its one-Michelin-star restaurant and adjacent tearooms. The hotel has great views toward the Chateau de Grignan guaranteed to inspire your letter writing, Madame de Sévigné style! ♡



©picturenews