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## France's Midi-Pyrénées

Hike the countryside—or, even better, plan an eating and drinking tour through it

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In a restored watermill in the south of France, I devour a pine tree. But it's not what you imagine. No beaver-like gnashing and crunching; no spewing of impossible-to-digest, spiky needles. Instead, I sip my tree as a delicate libation. Created by Michelin Star-awarded Hervé Busset at Domainé de Cambelong, his chef-owned hotel near the medieval town of Conques in the Midi-Pyrénées region, this dish vaunts sense of place. Here in the mountains, hovering above a rushing river, cosseted within the sleekly redone mill, inhaling the chilled, steely high altitude air, it seems perfectly natural to gobble up the landscape. So Busset serves it up as a mont blanc, an apéritif with a foamy top that suggests a snow-capped mountain peak. Perfumed with the pungent essence of Douglas fir trees, derived from needles foraged by the chef himself this morning, the amuse-bouche foretells the rest of the meal—and exemplifies Busset's terroir-driven culinary philosophy.

The dishes that follow have an earthy immediacy. Like metaphors, they depict the surroundings. We savor a purple carrot salad served with a delicate violette sorbet, munch moist local duck awash in gathered mountain herbs, nibble farm-fresh eggs

studded with field-found asparagus and finish with a “hedgehog”: a baked Alaska-type dessert, featuring clover ice cream (and merely shaped like that friendly forest beast). We wash down most of it with both a Marcillac 2010 Domaine des Costes Rouges and a Marcillac 2010 Domaine Du Mioula, Terres Blanche—wines of the region.

Though it seems the evening could not get better, it does. My dinner companion, the handsome mayor of Conques, Philippe Varsi, whose family has lived in the area for centuries, invites me for a stroll through his city—located just a half mile from the Domaine de Cambelong. Though this village on the St. Jacques de Compostelle Trail might buzz by day, at midnight it's as silent as a fasting friar's cell. Shadows, some gold-lit by the full moon, emblazon the narrow cobblestone streets. They cast a ghostly glimmer on the medieval houses, most of them miraculously intact and well preserved. The castle, its octagonal tower like a pointer finger to the stars, shimmers in an otherworldly glow.

But it's the Conques Abbey, best known for its tympanum (a carved picture over the entryway), that takes my breath away. Illuminated by bursts of celestial light, the abbey looks like something from a hazy dream. Over the doorway, the tympaneum, called Last Judgement, stops us in our tracks. A morality tale for the ages, it shows 24 ghoulish figures facing eternity in hell. Plenty petrified, we change tracks and poke our heads into the adjacent monastery's inn, where modern day pilgrims can take advantage of an affordable night's stay. Anachronistically, computers sit in corners. Pajama-clad men gather at a table playing cards. Rock music wafts through the air. But on the outdoor patio a pile of muddy hiking boots and a wall festooned with walking sticks speaks to another time.

Like those pilgrims, I am here, too, in the Midi-Pyrénées, to walk portions of the St. Jacques Trail. But I'd rather do it sustained by gourmet fare created by chefs like Herve Busset. So I plan my route through the Midi-Pyrénées based more on where I want to eat than anything else. In Albi, the hometown of Toulouse-Latrec, half-timbered houses, intact city walls, and ubiquitous cornflower blue doors mesmerize. But I find gratification at L'Esprit du Vin where youthful Michelin Star-garnering chef David Enjalran takes me on a gastronomic trip. Known for his seasonal menus and his roots in the region, Enjalran's reasonably priced, creative, set menus (only 25 euros at lunch) evoke the region, with a contemporary flair.

At Château de Mercués, a 13th century fairytale castle-turned-Relais Chateaux hotel, I

not only eat well but drink like a bishop (the Bishops of Cahors spent their summers here for more than 1,200 years). A medley of rich fabrics, eclectic French antiques, tower rooms with views of the Lot River Valley, and the sort of service a princess would expect, the hotel's virtues also extend to winemaking. Beneath its regal interiors, in an uber modern basement, Chateau de Mercues' Napa-like tasting room provides guests the opportunity to try wines from the vineyards that surround the castle, such as the elegant, well-balanced reds, derived from the Malbec grape. By the time my trip ends, I haven't walked as far along the trail as I'd hoped. But I've managed to sip armagnac in Gascony, try more wine in the Midi-Pyrenees than I knew existed, eaten foie gras at nearly every meal and dug into some pretty hearty cassoulet. I've put some miles on the Saint Jacques Trail, been a pilgrim for a day or two—but just so I could eat like a bishop. Is that bad?

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*This article appears in the [October 2012 issue of San Antonio Magazine](#)*

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