



There is always some point in a summer holiday when you need to get off your sunbed and go and look at something. It might be no more spectacular than the wine shelves of the local supermarket, but if you are in the south of France and want a relaxing, enjoyable excursion, then Abbaye de Valmagne is a splendid choice (www.valmagne.com).

Located near Villeveyrac, about an hour's drive south-west of Montpellier, this huge 12th century monastery nestles in the landscape, barely showing above the neighbouring vineyards. What sets this abbey apart from any other historic monument I have toured in France is that there is a strong Yorkshire connection here.

I was greeted by the son and daughter of the owner of this privately owned monument and expected to have to muddle through a conversation in Franglais, but that wasn't needed. Roland d'Allaines speaks perfect English, although he does have to think occasionally for the right word, and explains that he really doesn't get enough practice. With an English mother and a childhood spent holidaying with relatives in Ilkley and Harrogate, he is now in charge of the vineyards and the restaurant at the Abbaye. His sister Eleonor is also involved in running a busy programme of events at the monastery – from weddings to a summer jazz festival. Her English is totally fluent, since she is married to an Englishman.

Apart from this Yorkshire connection there are many reasons to visit this abbey. We are more used to the ruins of Fountains or Rievaulx but this one is pretty much complete and it still has space, light, beautiful buildings and cloisters. There is a sense of history and contemplation here.

Through gifts from local landowners, it became one of the richest monasteries in southern France, but over time its population of monks dwindled. Eventually the French Revolution took it away from the Cistercian monks who had lived there for over 600 years and it was sold to a wine grower who installed huge barrels in the side chapels of the church.



Many of these are still in place, definitely unused now apart from displaying local artwork. I have seen barrels stored in many places but these monster barrels lining the nave of an abbey was a first.

The whole estate, with 350 hectares of land, including 40 hectares of vineyard, is now family owned and presents a vast amount

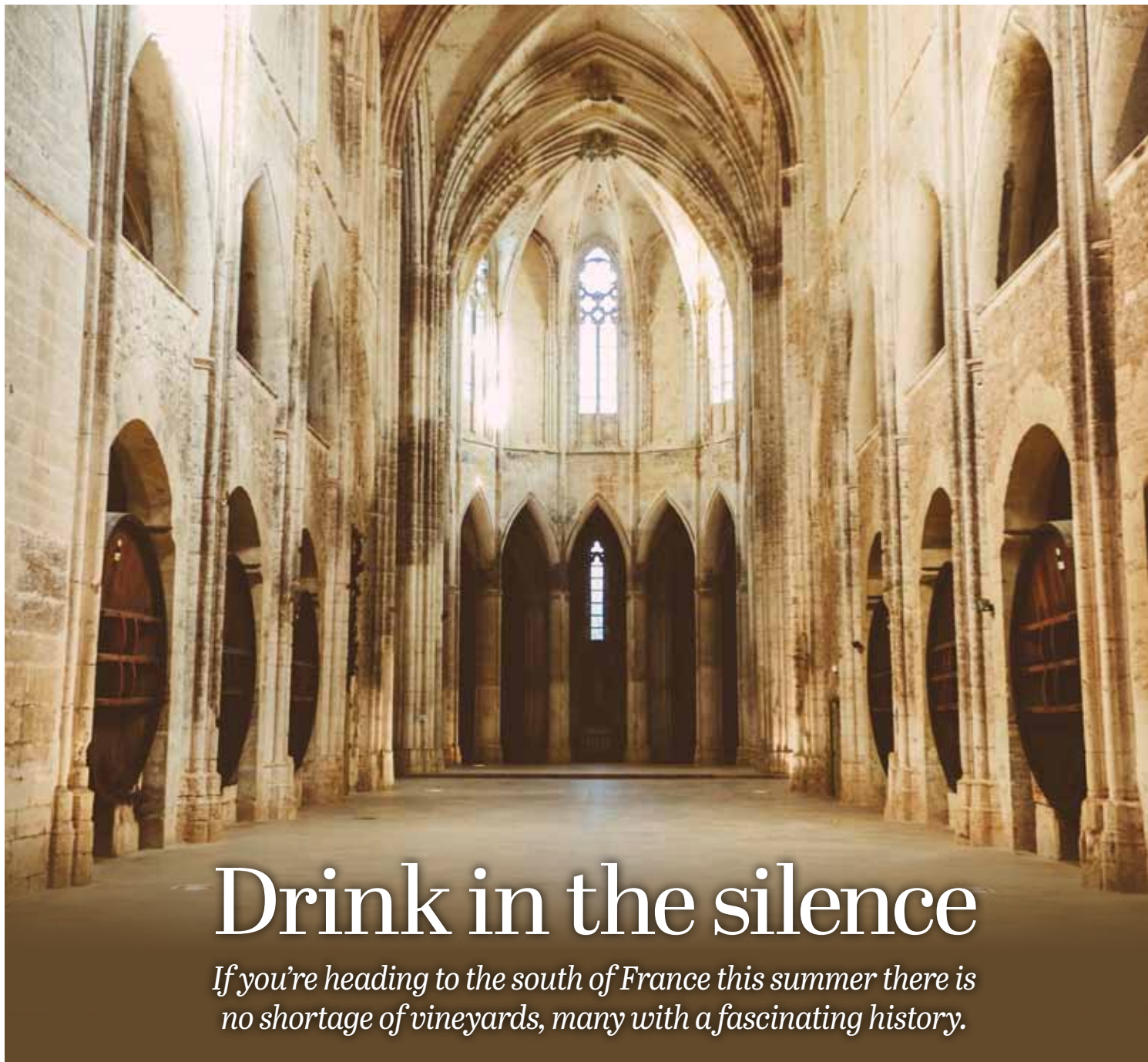
DETOUR DE FORCE: Above, giant barrels in the nave at Abbaye de Valmagne; inset left, Roland d'Allaines and his sister Eleonor.

of work for the small family team. "Maintaining the fabric of the building is a constant job," said Roland and, while I was there, a small patch of ceiling was being repaired with the help of three large cranes and a great deal of money.

This is why the vineyards are so important to the Abbaye de Valmagne. Cistercian monks certainly knew where to plant vines and when Roland took over the management of the vineyards he decided to implement a programme of replanting

the plots that were not performing well. I toured the various vineyards, some on steep breezy hillsides, some on rich red soil and some with a clear view out to the huge sea lagoon known as the Etang de Thau. Each plot has been studied, its soil evaluated and matched to a grape that will do well there. In addition, the vineyards are being cultivated biodynamically. This is one step beyond organic, when all vine treatments are based on plants and naturally occurring minerals and the phases of the moon dictate when treatments, picking and ploughing take place.

When there is so much to do, why did Roland decide to take this route? "I tasted



Drink in the silence

If you're heading to the south of France this summer there is no shortage of vineyards, many with a fascinating history.

wine club august offer

BARBECUE SELECTION – 12 BOTTLES FOR £85

Summer evenings can bring so many delicious aromas wafting in from neighbours' gardens as they sizzle their way through steak and sausages. This collection of wines is perfect to accompany whatever you have on your grill, and if you prefer cooking indoors, they will still match the food.

There are 12 bottles in the case, two bottles of each wine. They include two whites, both good as "aperitif-into-foodie" wines, a delicious rosé and three reds that can accompany anything from chicken legs to rump steak.

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including your telephone number and we will ring you back.

There are 12 bottles in the case, two each of:

White: Gewurztraminer 2017, Alto Los Romeros, Chile – light, dry and fresh, with just a hint of fragrant spice; Soave 2018, Zeni – zingy with the taste of crisp apples and herbs.

Rosé: Granbeau Grande Cuvée Rosé 2018, Pays d'Oc – fashionably pale pink with soft summer berry fruit.

Red: Nero d'Avola 2017, Fedele, Sicily – supple and juicy red berry and plum fruit, organic; Old Vines Garnacha 2017, Principe de Viana, Navarra, Spain – lively, peppery black cherry fruit; Coroa d'Ouro 2017, Manoel Pocas Junior – packed with supple dark fruit, perfect with steak.


a lot of organic and biodynamic wine and I just love the vitality and vibrancy of wines made according to biodynamic methods."

It certainly means a lot of work, in particular for vineyard worker Adil who was hand-weeding a vineyard in hot sunshine while I was there. Not all the vineyards are new. There are many old plots of vines, planted with Carignan, Grenache and one old, almost extinct variety known as Morrastel Bouschet. Each one finds its place in the range of wines that are made in the on-site winery.

I tasted through the range in the restaurant known as a ferme-auberge which continues the theme of natural produce. Everything served in the restaurant is organic and is produced on its own or local farms and the fresh flavours in the food are amazing. Lunch at this ferme-auberge is well worth a detour, especially if you get there early enough to get a table on the terrace.

All of the wines shone out with flavour and style. I particularly enjoyed the delicate, fragrant Nicolây rosé 2018 made from Syrah, Mourvèdre and Grenache. Light enough to be an aperitif, it had enough flavour to partner my starter of vegetable terrine. The Portalis Blanc 2018, made from Roussanne and Marsanne grown on the chalky part of the vineyard, has savoury, herby notes as well as structure and finesse. The top wine, named Cardinal de Bonzi after the last Abbot of Valmagne, is made in tiny quantities from old Mourvèdre vines and it shows deep rich, complex flavours and will certainly age well. My favourite on that hot sunny day was Vitrail sur L'Abbaye 2018, a red wine made from Grenache, Carignan, Syrah and that almost extinct variety Morrastel Bouschet. This was served chilled and its raspberry fruit jumped out of the glass.

These wines are available locally in France, but at the present time, no one is importing them into the UK. "The next time I come over to visit my Yorkshire family, I will bring some with me," said Roland. If any merchant or restaurant is interested in trying these wines, just let me know.

If you are heading to the south of France this summer, the city of Montpellier is also well worth a visit, for its grand facades, for its informal, quality restaurants and for the huge open city square of Place de la Comédie where you can sit in the cool of a Mediterranean evening and enjoy a glass or two of local wine. 

off the shelf

Plaimont Côtes de Gascogne 2018, France, 11.5%, Sainsbury's, down from £8 to £6.25 until August 13: Crisp and refreshing with notes of pink grapefruit and lemon. Ideal as an aperitif, or with shellfish.



The Best Muscadet 2018, Loire, France, 12%, Morrisons, down from £8 to £6.50 until Tuesday: Apple-fresh with citrus notes and a sea-salty finish. Team this with grilled fish and scallops.



Miguel Torres Las Mulas Cabernet Sauvignon Organic Rosé 2018, Chile, 13%, Waitrose, down from £9.39 to £6.99 until August 13: Slightly deeper in colour than is strictly fashionable but with enough summer berry fruit to cope with sizzling spiced prawns.



Trapiche Pure Malbec 2018, Mendoza, Argentina, 13.5%, Co-op, down from £8 to £7 until August 13: No oak in this one, just pure unadulterated blackberries, black cherries and smooth, supple tannins.



on the grapevine

Bargains for barbecue:

Hoult's in Huddersfield (01484 510700) has reduced prices on two wines that are perfect for barbecue drinking. The fresh, fruity flavours of El Tesoro Viura Sauvignon from Spain are now down from £7.99 to £4.99 and the soft, red berry-filled Prime Cuts Red from South Africa was £7.50 but now costs £4.99.

Print or drink? We all know we should resist printing documents to save paper, but keeping files on the computer could save vast amounts of money too. On average, cartridges for home printers cost around £16 for 10ml, which works out at £1,200 for 750ml. That means that printer

ink is 35 times more expensive than Pol Roger Champagne from Waitrose, now on offer at £34 until August 13. I know which one I would rather have in stock.

Wine in the freezer: Should wine go in the freezer to chill it when unexpected guests arrive? I must admit I do this occasionally, especially if I need a certain wine chilled rapidly. The important thing to remember is to set a timer for 30 minutes so that you retrieve your bottle before it is frozen solid and shattered into a hundred pieces. And do it only for regular drinking wines. Your top Burgundies and Sauternes should be treated more gently.



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