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Walk among the vines with a winegrower in Provence



Alain Graud

A walking tour of the TerraVentoux vineyards in the Provence region of France is a lovely way to spend a morning.

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VILLES-SUR-AUZON, France — Provençal light claimed the broad valley quilted with rows of grapevines and olive groves and sweeps of wild fields and forests. Mount Ventoux loomed in the distance.

It was a lovely spot for a Saturday morning winegrowers walk.

I'd been searching for some kind of wine-tasting experience during our week in Provence and since I'm a sucker for guided walks of all kinds, when I found Cave TerraVentoux's winegrowers walk, I was intrigued.

TerraVentoux, a wine co-op, is the only winery in the area that sponsors this form of wine tourism, taking advantage of its location in the Mount Ventoux UNESCO bio-reserve where more than 200,000 acres of rare ecological diversity have been protected since 1990. The guided rambles lead visitors among the vineyards



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to learn about wine production and through some of the wild areas for exposure to the natural history. They end with a unique wine tasting.

The walk started along a mowed path between a wheat field sprinkled with lavender wildflowers and a broad expanse of emerald-green grapevines climbing and trailing over their structures of stakes and wires.

Franck Lazare, a genial winegrower with a rugged face and infectious grin, tells us — *en Français* — about growing grapes, including the surprising fact that all of the vineyards' rootstock comes from the United States, and French grape varieties are spliced on. This is due to the 19th-century infestation of phylloxera insects that damaged French vines.

TerraVentoux uses various rootstocks, depending on soil conditions, which vary greatly, as we see, from sandy to almost claylike.

My husband, Ron, and I aren't native French speakers, and, happily, TerraVentoux has assigned Camille Fossat, a charming translator, to accompany us. With her help, we can understand Lazare's descriptions and laugh at his jokes as well as enjoy the enthusiasm of his cohort, Patricia Dos Santos.

Dos Santos is an environmental educator with Université Populaire Ventoux, an organization that educates the public on the ecology and natural history of the bio-reserve.

"Early man noted how well seeds grew here and began cultivation," Dos Santos says, but her special delight is in the edible and useful wild plants that proliferate on the perimeters of the grapevines and the orchards of olives, pears, peaches and cherries. Dos Santos frequently darts off to pluck wild edibles, putting some in a straw basket and encouraging us to taste, which I do: peas; the new leaves of poppies; maroon, pear-shaped rose hips; skinny, white, curvy carrots; fennel; and lettuces.

Dos Santos revels in the variety of protected areas where wildlife thrives, but Lazare is less appreciative. The rabbits that live in thicket next to the grapevines and hop out to nibble his grapes are just one of the challenges of farming in this protected area.

As we ramble through an olive orchard, we spy tiny green beads hidden among the delicate, gray-green leaves and presume they are baby olives. They aren't. They're flower buds. After flowering, the olive branches will be carefully pruned to assure fewer, large, succulent olives. And, Lazare says proudly, "no cows or butter here. Olive oil is called the yellow gold of Provence."

Amid the vineyards is a primitive stone hut, a two-level structure where a farmer would have stayed during harvest. It has a small space on top for the farmer, a cot and a coal stove, and a roomier space on the cooler ground floor for his horse. Today, wineries use tractors, and these structures are merely charming touches in the landscape.

Beyond the fields rises a towering forest of pines. Dos Santos pops a pine cone off a low branch and breaks off its cased petals, passing them around for us to crush and taste the core. It's the delicacy known as pine nut.

We crush and munch into the next area, a mixed forest with brick-red sand underfoot. This is ocher, Dos Santos explains, left from the iron in seaweed when the valley was under the sea 200 million years ago. Ocher, used for dyes and oil paint, ranges in color from yellow brown to almost tomato red, and the hilly paths we follow through the woods run nearly the full color spectrum. She points out several large caverns in a low, red-orange cliff — relic ocher mines from earlier inhabitants.

Our walk ends in a dramatic, ocher-walled gorge where a river once ran. Now a sun-dappled canyon overhung with green leaves, it's set with a long table covered with TerraVentoux wines for tasting and platters of local foods to nibble. Dishes contain sliced baguettes, three types of sheep's-milk cheese, a regional pâté made with spinach and herbs, strawberries and a platter of cold meats. Plus, Dos Santos provides her own addition to the degustation: a salad made from the morning's forage, tossed with a vinaigrette of local olive oil.

It's a grand climax to a lovely and educational morning, and I tell Fossat that she doesn't need to translate any longer. Between us, Ron and I know enough French to piece together words of appreciation for a Provençal experience fit for a Michelin star.

Mary Ann Sternberg is a freelance writer in Louisiana.

When you go

Details

The winegrower walk costs about \$11. It's offered several times weekly until midfall. It lasts from 9 a.m. to about noon and covers a little over 2 1/2 miles on uneven, partially hilly terrain.

TerraVentoux also offers an electric bicycle ride, horse-drawn carriage ride, gourmet twilight walk and truffle walk.

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