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TRAVEL

> THE ROAMING GASTRONOME

In Provence, tapping my inner tapenade

Writer discovers olive love and the revered Provençal paste during tour of French foodie region

JENNIFER BILL

SPECIAL TO THE TORONTO STAR

AVIGNON, FRANCE—"If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen." The adage echoed in my head as I stood stock still by the grand wooden table set for 10 in our Provençal-style cooking class in Avignon.

I was motionless, yet it took all of my might not to turn and flee.

I'd been handed the task of making the olive tapenade for our group at Maison de Fogasses, a magnificent 16th-century mansion and restaurant.

But I had barely touched an olive. Ever.

As a child, I shunned the funky little green and black ovals. Would my cooking classmates see through my nervous smile? Would they sense my olive-aphathy? I could only hope they wouldn't be able to detect an olive-hater in their midst. Or taste it in their tapenade.

In a country where a chef's passion shines through a dish and is really the essential ingredient, a passionless tapenade would be a showstopper.

I looked around for our teacher-chef, hoping I wouldn't be hearing the get-out-of-the-kitchen words for real. Surely, she could see I had broken a sweat before the stove had even been turned on.

The scene around me was light and buoyant as my cooking-class comrades conversed and laughed, buzzing around their stations, confident as they got ready to prepare the onions and tomatoes.

I couldn't have been tasked with grilling the peppers? Frying the bacon? Slicing the bread?

In France, olives are an essential ingredient in local cuisine. Olive trees are about as common as pine trees in Canada, and the Languedoc-Roussillon region is touted as producing some of the highest quality olive oil in the Mediterranean.

CUISINE continued on T4



JENNIFER BILL PHOTOS/TORONTO STAR

It is easy to see why the ancient town of Gordes, near the city of Avignon, is included in the official list of the "most beautiful villages of France."



Left: Chef Caroline Millet gazes at her students while glazing the cod during her cooking class at Maison de Fogasses in Avignon, in the south of France. A market in Marseille offers up dozens of delicious olives in many shapes and colours.



> ONLINE



An Interactive Tour of Provence

Read Jennifer Bill's gastronomic photo diary from her 8-day tour through one of the world's great foodie regions at thestar.com/france

> AMSTERDAM

Beyond the red lights, a city rich in culture, cuisine and history

After a decades-long slide into the city of sleaze, canal city works to shine a light on its culture

JIM BYERS

SPECIAL TO THE STAR

AMSTERDAM—I don't know when it happened. But some time in the past few decades, this city was hijacked.

A proud and culturally rich city that's the equal of any in the world in so many ways acquired a reputation for sleaze.

You couldn't walk the streets without dishevelled

folks whispering "Hey, man, hash?" or something worse.

Crowds of teens and young people crowded the city in summer, cruising the sex clubs and partying loud and hard at bachelor and bachelorette parties. And everywhere in the city centre were those famous red lights.

"Even police wouldn't patrol some areas," says Machteld Ligtoet of the city's tourism department.

AMSTERDAM continued on T6



JIM BYERS FOR THE TORONTO STAR

The In 't Aeipjen is a colourful "brown café" in central Amsterdam that's filled with monkey memorabilia and old bottles of booze.

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