Learning to love tapenade in France

CUISINE from **T1**

In 1889, Vincent Van Gogh was drawn to paint Provence's olive trees many times over.

Here, where tapenade originated, botching it would be a crime.

This highly anticipated meal we were toiling over would start with a

Chef Caroline Millet, who teaches the cooking classes twice a week with local products in season, was eyeing me as I hesitated over the blender. A bowl of black olives sat untouched nearby, the olive oil idle and uninspired.

My group's collective confidence had been challenged earlier when we were handed artichokes to pare. Chef sliced and trimmed hers effortlessly; it took us many tries before we stopped shaving off the delicate part we were trying to protect.

The collective failure had been fun. Collapsing solo in front of a blender full of olives . . . not so fun.

The sumptuous cuisine of the south of France took centre stage on my recent eight-day gastro-odyssey through Nîmes, Avignon, Gordes, Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, Les Bauxde-Provence, Aix-en-Provence, Cassis and Marseille, France's secondlargest city.

Dishes came to the table decorated with swipes of sauce along the periphery like avant garde art, and I marvelled at the stacks and layers and clusters of ingredients adding depth, dimension, colour and texture to the meals.

In class we were learning to create our own masterpiece, a traditional Provencal meal of cod with prosciutto, marinated peppers and Barigoule, a local recipe of braised artichokes with onions, tomatoes, bacon, thyme and bay leaf. The meal was to be started, of course, by everyone's favourite hors d'oeuvre, olive tapenade. The crusty bread, all cut up, waited naked in baskets for its olive dressing.

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A brief foodie tour of Provence

A snapshot of some of the regions as seen through its delectable cuisine.

Ciele du Nimes, Nimes Organic bull steak with creamed garlic

Not a steak person, I took the bull by the horns and ate a bull steak. In the land of bullfighting it made sense that the local offering here would be bull - and a très gamey one at that.

Benvengudo Hotel restaurant, Les Baux-de-Provence

White asparagus

This dish was made especially for me the diner rude enough to rebuff the beef tartare hors d'oeuvre. In fact, when chef Aurelien Laget heard I'd



White asparagus — a work of art.

politely declined the rare beef he took it upon himself to create a work of art just for me. He dressed perfectly in-season white asparagus like an avant-garde painting.

Les Domaines Qui Montent, **Aix-en-Provence**

Veal fusilli

When pasta came to the table at Les Domaines after a delightful pork pâté, I will admit there was a touch of dismay. Pasta? Not Italian food, I want French! But my oh my, was this dish cooked to perfection. Melt-inyour-mouth morsels of veal in an herbed tomato sauce atop al dente fusilli went fast, and we all reached for the communal bowls for seconds.

For an interactive snapshot/diary of the cuisine of Provence go to thestar.com/france

like the right time to revisit the idea of eating one. I allowed my taste buds to decide. Zut alors! Agréable. Très agréable.

Suddenly, I needed to make this tapenade – make my tapenade.

I tilt the bowl of black spheres into the blender, I bathe them with the olive oil, drop in the capers and garlic and press power with a graceful sweep of the finger. I pop off the lid and look inside - it sure did resemble a fine tapenade. Hopefully a little bit of passion had made its way through.

Seated and spent, our spirited class couldn't wait to try the beautifully crafted dishes laid before us. Our Provençal meal in this warm kitchen under the tutelage of Chef Caroline was a hit, my tapenade included. Our bellies were soon full, our egos fed.

I shudder to think of all the years I'd reached for boring butter over tapenade.

Jennifer Bill's trip was subsidized by Air Transat, Atout France and its partners. Follow her on her blog, billofwrites.ca/ blog, on Twitter @billjennifer, and Pinterest: pinterest.com/billofwrites.

> IF YOU GO

Maison de Fogasses holds traditional Provençal-style cooking classes on Tuesdays and Thursdays. The 16th-century maison, owned by jovial restaurateur and artist Corinne Guyon, has eclectic rooms: art studio, fashion boutique, kitchen and backvard, and can be rented out for events. Visit maison-de-fogasses.com.

Air Transat has launched a seasonal, eight-hour direct flight from Toronto to Marseille once per week until Oct. 13. Splurge a little on Club Class and enjoy priority check-in, extra baggage allowance, complimentary champagne, cocktails and wine, spacious leather seats and extra leg room in your own cabin. Transat gives passengers the option to fly into one city and fly out of another. Visit airtransat.ca.

Leave your schedule up to Transat Holidays' expert planners and sign on for an escorted, city-hopping package that will take you, for instance, to Marseille, Nice, Aixen-Provence, Eze and Monaco. Visit transatholidays.ca.

A \$40-million renovation is under way at the Marseille Provence Airport. This will expand its second terminal and add more shops and restaurants. Visit marseilleairport.com.

Learning about the intricacies of olive oil and how it could elevate a dish, I had come to appreciate how tapenade, and everything olive-related, was representative of the magic of France's famous food.

I couldn't help but feel a fraud.

Couldn't they get some pans sizzling so some other sweaty brows could materialize? Surely my dawdling wasn't enough to break a sweat. Someone's going to know...

Gulp — Chef Caroline is coming

I dump the anchovies into the blender in haste.

"How are we doing over here?" I watch as her eyes dart from the deadlocked blender to my perspiring

"Très bien," I say, hoping my terrible French accent will distract from my delinquency. She turns her attention to the stoves behind.

I eye the olives. They eye me back. And then it happened.

If you can't take the heat . . . there was that voice again.

What to do?

I pop an olive into my mouth. In this moment of panic, it seemed





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