



WORDS ELISABETH KING

## LIKE NAPOLEON AND COLUMBUS, SET YOUR COURSE FOR CORSICA

DON'T ask me why I had never been to Corsica until earlier this year. I've been to the south of France countless times and deeply regret missing the boat - or rather ferry - to the French island they call Ile de Beaute (Isle of Beauty) so many times before. The only excuse I can think of for the huge blank in my 'travel diary' is that I had been swayed by stories of Corsican separatists and the fact that Corsican gangsters were the masterminds behind the notorious French Connection drug network.

It was love at first sight when the car pulled up at La Villa, a five-star luxury hotel with a Michelin two-star restaurant in Calvi. Not only because of the plush surroundings, but also because of the breathtaking view of the Mediterranean and the town's ancient citadel. A huge marina and smart beachside bars lead up to the old town's warren of cobbled lanes where Napoleon lived in hiding from Corsican nationalists during the French Revolution and Christopher Columbus was born. At a quayside cafe, I couldn't resist ordering a glass of Foreign Legion Esprit de Corps Rosé, whose wine label depicts tough-looking soldiers firing automatic weapons. The Foreign Legion maintains a base and museum near Calvi so there are plenty of buff-looking guys strolling through town. The tattooed veteran sitting next to me leaned over and said: "Tourists always order Esprit de Corps. There are much better Corsican wines."

He was right. Many wine buffs thought it was a one-off when a Corsican bottling won the best sub-£10 gong for a red blend at the Decanter World Wine Awards in 2009. But I decided to find out for myself whether the victory had been a fluke.

The French island with an Italian temper is also attracting more non-French tourists for other reasons. The nature of Corsica's history - secretive and closed-off - has led to the opening of designer

hotels such as the Casa Del Mar in Porto Vecchio, where celebs like Kylie Minogue, Bill Gates, Giorgio Armani and Sting can holiday without being bothered by the paparazzi. The rugged coastline and perfumed air that Napoleon claimed he could smell even before he sighted the island of his birth has also proved romantic to A-listers. Songbird Alicia Keys tied the knot with rap producer Swizz Beatz in Corsica this year.

The principal Corsican appellation is Vin de Corse, which covers the whole island, but most of the vineyards are in coastal areas so you can enjoy a great beach holiday as you discover that the local wines owe more to Italy than to France. Ten years ago there were 9000 hectares under vine, with only 1050 hectares qualifying for the appellation. Today, more than 3200 of the current

building has a connection to the great man - from the house of his birth to the cathedral where he was christened. At a local cafe, I enjoyed my first taste of nielluccio, a red varietal thought to be a kissing cousin of sangiovese. The waiter then suggested we try a glass of grenache, cinsaut or carignan. "They are not typically Corsican grapes, of course," he revealed. "Many pied-noirs from Algeria came here after the war of independence. Most of them went broke because they expected Corsican conditions to be similar to North Africa but they weren't. The grapes stayed, though."

Some pied-noirs are still around, including the Skalli family, the largest private vineyard owners in Corsica, thanks to their 220-hectare Terra Vecchia near Bastia. It was a Skalli wine which won the Decanter award and the family

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7000 hectares of plantings make the Corse A/C grade. One thing hasn't changed, though. Driving is the best way to get around, and the stereotypes of the Corsican road hazards are true. Perfect territory for a *Top Gear* test-drive, the winding, guardrail-free, cliff-top lanes make Italy's head-spinning Amalfi Coast seem tame. The most efficient circuit for leisure and wine tourism begins in Ajaccio and weaves through Corte, Bonifacio, Porto Vecchio, Figari and Calvi.

Ajaccio, Corsica's main gateway to Le Continent, as locals call the French mainland, is a sun-bleached port that reveres its most famous son - Napoleon - as a demi-god. Just about every second

have been pioneers in blending more recently introduced grapes such as merlot with nielluccio and chardonnay with Corsica's principal wine grape, vermentino. Sciacarello, another red grape unique to the island, whose name means "the grape that bursts under the teeth" in the Corsican dialect, might be a little lacking in body but it went very well with the local cheeses we sampled in Corte.

Once the capital of Corsica during the island's brief 15 years of independence from Italy and France in the 18th century, Corte is the town where you are most likely to see evidence of the Corsican separatist movement. Some road signs are riddled with bullet holes

and people openly smoke in cafes and restaurants, flouting French law. Don't bypass Corte, though, because it's also a gourmet's paradise of food shops bursting with locally made sausages, hams, cheeses and casks of sciacarello. Sadly, it's also one of the few places where you will hear people speaking the native Corsican language.

Legend has it that Ulysses and his men pulled into port at Bonifacio, where the staggeringly beautiful coastline is a blend of chalk cliffs and stalactite-filled caves. Champagne chugged by visiting European soccer players and their WAGs is the drink of choice in the town's waterside restaurants during summer. But the patron of the restaurant where we had lunch suggested a Patrimonio, the liveliest of the Corsican appellations, with 30 growers making reds, whites and rosés. "I fear for the future of these wines," he said. "Many of the vineyards are close to St-Florent, the St Tropez of Corsica. Developers are offering vigneron crazy prices for their land."

Corsican nightlife is sleepy, except in Porto Vecchio, where a glamorous crowd hangs out in the art galleries, gelato beers and cafe terraces. Strangely enough, it's here that you see more people drinking Corsica's native beer, Pietra. A speciality bottom-fermented beer made from selected malts and sweet chestnut flour, it has a beautiful amber colour that hides its six per cent alcohol wallop.

The only vineyard of note near Porto Vecchio is Domaine de Torraccia, so I ordered a bottle of Cuvee Oriu 2006. A blend of nielluccio and sciacarello, aged in oak barrels, it was warm, spicy and tannic. As intoxicating as the clarity of the surrounding sea and the view of the nearby Caribbean-style beaches, it was the perfect vin du pays to end my Corsican stay. I twirled my Napoleon key-chain and vowed to return - soon.



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