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PUTTING ON THE BAIR-RITZ

TWO things made me visit Biarritz again. At the tail end of last year, the US-based *Wine Enthusiast* magazine named South West France as its 2017 Wine Region of the Year. Then Chanel launched a breezy new fragrance named after the swish seaside resort, where the legendary designer opened her first couture house and triggered the fashion for acquiring a summer tan.

Bordered by Bordeaux, Toulouse and Biarritz, South West France is the fourth largest French wine region by volume. As every sommelier knows, high quality bottlings at reasonable prices await winelovers who drive the designated wine route through the lush, hilly countryside. Whites from Cotes de Gascogne and Irouleguy, full-bodied reds from Cahors and Coteaux de Quercy and rosés from Fronton are just a few of the offerings at the many wineries and cellar doors along the trail that boasts 29 Appellation d'Origine Protegee (AOPs).

My advice is to begin in Bordeaux to indulge your bucket list fantasies when visiting the Sud-Ouest wine region, as its known locally, and spend at least five days in Biarritz. Like St Tropez, the resort was once a small fishing port. Less than 36km from the border with Spain, its golden beaches attracted the attention of Emperor Napoleon III and his Spanish wife, Eugenie de Montijo, in 1854. The couple built a summer home,

the Villa Eugenie, on a commanding bluff and royal visitors such as Queen Victoria and Russian grand dukes came in droves.

The Belle Epoque grandeur of Biarritz continued to attract the wealthy and fashionable well into the 20th century. Ernest Hemingway entrenched the resort as a stamping ground for the *Lost Generation* in the mid-1920s. Screenwriter Peter Viertel, the husband of movie legend Deborah Kerr, set Biarritz on the path to

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becoming the surf capital of Europe in the 1950s during the filming of Hemingway's novel, *The Sun Also Rises*. And this mix of old world charm and a laidback beach vibe keeps Parisians, surfers and overseas visitors packing into the bars, restaurants and cafes of Biarritz every year.

My first stop is always Les Halles Centrales. Opened in 1885, the covered market is very gourmet-oriented these days. From the Basque tapas bar, Les Contrabandiers, to Bayonne hams from Boucherie Didier. Then it's off to Jox & An,

which sells traditional espadrilles made in its 125-year-old factory in Mauleon, which are just the thing for elegant strolling for both sexes.

If you have a major royalty-for-the-day complex, the place to stay is the Hotel du Palais built on the site of the Villa Eugenie which burned down in 1903. Overlooking the Grand Plage, a pool and solarium were added this European summer, but historic charm remains the main drawcard in the hotel's two gourmet restaurants - L'Imperatrice and Villa Eugenie, of course.

To be honest, eating, drinking and surfing are the main activities of Biarritz, but set aside a day to get your bearings. The Place Georges Clemenceau lies at the centre of town, but the best view is from the Plateau de L'Atalaye, perched above the old port, which offers a panoramic view of the Atlantic coastline. The only cultural activity that ranks as a must-do is a visit to the Musee Historique de Biarritz, housed in a deconsecrated Anglican church. If only for a crash course on why the names of Napoleon III and Empress Eugenie are still splattered all over Biarritz.

As befits a vacation town Biarritz sprouts wine bars like mushrooms. L'Artnoa is where you will find a selection of some of the best wines of the South West. Basically, a wine shop with a tapas tasting menu, there's a new line-up of wines on offer every week. Le Cellier des Docks is another wine

shop that showcases the naturally-made wines of the region. Le Bar de la Cote has a full frontal view of the Cote des Basques coastline and rates highly as the perfect venue for a sunset wine tasting.

In fact, bars or restaurants with an ocean view are one of the unforgettable lures of Biarritz. Le Surfing may sound like a casual hangout for the thong-wearing crowd, but the reality is a super-stylish venue with huge windows that are open to sea breezes for breakfast, lunch and dinner, and terrific Asian and Basque-inspired menu listings. Arena Biarritz specialises in cocktails and has a vast terrace overlooking Port Vieux, but there's a shaded area if the sun becomes too fierce. Close by and also famous for its expertly-made cocktails is Les Baigneuses de Biarritz. Trendy and very busy, it's mandatory to pre-book during summer.

Seafood is hard to avoid in Biarritz, but some places obviously deliver the goods better than their many competitors. Chez Albert may be a big restaurant, but the waiters are very friendly and the signature seafood platter groans with oysters, lobster, langoustines and more. But for a true "regular customer" experience even when you aren't, head for Crampotte 30 in the Port des Pecheurs. It's tiny and they will give you a straw hat if you have left yours in the hotel or a blanket if the Atlantic winds are too cool. Beer is the drink of choice here to wash down the authentic Basque tapas.

At Bar Tapas Le Corsaire, also in the Port des Pecheurs, the freshness of the shellfish pulls in everyone from backpackers to senior execs on vacation.

There are over 60 restaurants in Biarritz with Michelin accreditations of some sort. But if you have stars in mind and want them on your plate, Le Clos Basque delivers local flavours and ingredients transformed through the most modern interpretations. Restaurant L'Impertinent, run by German chef Fabian Feldmann, should be a shoo-in for the Netflix series, *Chef's Table*. Local ingredients elevated to an art form are the order of every day, backed by superb service and a sleek decor. The menu changes constantly.

For my final night in Biarritz, I slipped on my new espadrilles and spritzed on Chanel Biarritz, a fresh, vivacious scent with a citrus opening, a lily of the valley "heart" and musk and a patchouli drydown. "What perfume are you wearing?" asked the waiter who escorted us to our seats at the Cafe de la Grande Plage and smiled when I told him the name. Yes, the terrace is on the beach level of the casino, but a plate of local oysters washed down by Cremant de Limoux, a local sparkling wine that claims to pre-date champagne, was worth every cent even when you haven't scored big at the gaming tables.

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