Consuming Provence:  
The Place of Gastronomy in Provençal Tourism and Culture  
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It is a rich pleasure to sit at the side of the market and watch people come and go, weaving in and out of the many stalls, looking at the produce, sometimes picking up something to smell or squeeze in order to test its ripeness or freshness, and then perhaps finally to buy it. At Saint-Rémy we sat at a café and watched an old lady walk slowly around the market with her little dog on a leash, buying bits and pieces and placing them in her basket. Today, a clear but chilly Wednesday in December, it would appear that freshly roasted chicken [Fig. 1], and an assortment of vegetables such as fennel, potatoes and green beans are on the menu, along with some clemetine and almonds [Fig. 2]. She travels around with an air of knowing every little inch of the marketplace as if it were an extension of her own home, and nods and greets people as if they were her own family members. The market is a place of interconnectedness: chances are the people with whom the old lady at Saint-Rémy was engaging were indeed family members, or at least members of her community; possibly neighbours, members of her church, or simply people that she sees each week at the market. For her it is not just about the produce for sale, but a social engagement.

All around the marketplace are the sounds of social interaction, of buying and selling. At the dried fruit and nut stall in Saint-Rémy [Fig. 3] a customer shouts ‘une bonne poignée, s’il vous plaît’ (‘a good handful, please’) to be heard above the rhythmic sound of the chopping of salted fish that is going on at the neighbouring fish stall [Fig. 4]. Every now and then you hear a seller conversing in English – this is common in Nice, but at the smaller markets of Provence not so prominent. The most common noise is the shouts of sellers making sure that everyone knows that theirs are the best and freshest endive or radishes around [Fig. 5]. The market is like a performance space; the sellers speak much louder than is usual in order to thank someone for their custom – it advertises to other potential buyers that they have a satisfied customer. Frequently you are asked to try olives or slices of sausage – the seller recognises that these two products are among reasons so many tourists frequent the markets of Provence; vegetables are not practical to transport, but olives and sausages are easy for travellers to take with them [Fig. 6, Fig. 7].

It is important when walking around the markets to admire their setting: much pleasure can be gained from looking around and even up at the houses that provide the frame for the market. All of the markets that we visited were located centrally in the town, on the main squares and streets; the marketplaces are at the centre of the township, both physically and conceptually. For instance, at Aix-en-Provence the farmers market at Place Richelme is surrounded by some of the oldest and most beautiful houses of the city. It is little wonder that Paul Cézanne found so much inspiration in the town itself, and the surrounding countryside. The famous market at Cours Saleya in Nice is located about two hundred metres from the sea, where locals and tourists alike have long promenaded [Fig. 8, Fig. 9]. People are drawn into these places; the little medieval streets invite you to follow them towards the larger square where the market takes place.
The market is not arranged in any particular order: there is no demarcation and specific foods are not grouped together. So you end up with a fantastic variety of produce all in a row: fresh meats stalls are next to nut and seed stalls, that are next to fish sellers [Fig. 10, Fig. 11]. It is up to the individual to explore the market. The market itself is arranged in such a way that everyone – local and tourist alike – is to some degree a traveller at the market. The market evolves: stalls come and go, and the produce changes with the seasons. Certainly the little old lady at Saint-Rémy who gave the impression of ownership, that this was her market, would have seen many changes over the years.

The stalls themselves are carefully put together: the wares are placed to grab the attention of passers by [Fig. 12]. The range of colour differs little between winter and summer; capsicums and aubergines are on offer for most of the year; red, yellow and deep purple, which alongside the variations of green leafy vegetables are stunning [Fig. 13, Fig. 14, Fig. 15]. It is evident that a great deal of thought has been put into presentation. The olive oil stall has bottles with bright labels and trademarks of the origins of the oil [Fig. 16]; bright scenes of the Cote d’Azur or an olive tree grove near a lavender field. Yet for a fresh olive seller, the display needs little aesthetic encouragement: soft and darker greens sit next to the jet black or even ash coloured olives, not to mention their flavourings of fennel, pimentos, chillies, slices of lemon and bright green herbs. The olive stall makes for a rich painter’s palette [Fig. 17, Fig. 18, Fig. 19].

There is certainly a sense of locality: the food that the old lady collects has been grown not too far from the market, and transported here for sale. Sometimes the stall itself is on the back of a truck or a specialised van with extendable awnings [Fig. 20, Fig. 21]. In Marseille, the fish at the Quai des Belges are transported one metre from the fishing boats to the stalls on the quai for sale [Fig. 22].

The old lady, like everyone who visits the market is just one part of a larger network that creates the market: the processes of growing the produce (and the climate and history that is behind the selection of what is grown), its delivery to a local market, the setting up of the stall in a designated spot (frequently allocated according to a set tradition), the sellers’ communication with the people who visit the market via shouts and colourful presentation, which will hopefully lead to a sale of the produce; this is then taken and prepared for consumption, perhaps at home according to a long-held recipe. The market is an important social space for the town; it is a place of interaction, culturally as well as economically. The noises of the market aurally express these underlying community networks and the colours and displays remind the viewer that they are not just engaging with cultural and social experiences and rituals, but are participating in the economics of the region. These networks exist in many market towns all over Provence.

The intrepid traveller can follow some of these networks and connections to other places within Provence; one can start with the market and then pursue other adventures from this central location. For instance, one can find a wine seller at the market, and then visit the winery. Chances are you will find a family run winery with a small output and selected varieties.
It is details such as these that render vivid the tourist encounter with this particular place, and more specifically with the markets and cuisines of this region in southern France; what follows will explore the intersections between Provençal life and tourism.

**Provence and the Mediterranean: Some Observations from the Marketplace**

While distinctly French in flavour, Provence’s cuisine undoubtedly reflects a wider Mediterranean influence. There are many similarities with other Mediterranean cuisines, with much overlapping of ingredients and of culinary practices: olives, salads doused in olive oil and tomatoes and herbs, tomato-based dishes with zucchini and aubergine, and a variety of cheeses. The sea itself offers a rich platter of culinary delights: fish, squid and octopus to name only a few. Around the coast many of the traditional Provençal dishes include seafood, from the famous bouillabaisse of Marseille to the sea urchins of Carry le Rouet, and the tellines (shellfish) of Les Saintes Maries-de-la-Mer.

These culinary links are the product not only of a similar climate, but also of a long tradition of inter-communication and exchange between the cultures that inhabit the region around the Mediterranean. At the museum of Mediterranean Civilisations (Musée d’Archéologie Méditerranéenne) in a seventeenth-century hospice called the Vieille Charité in Marseille, the importance of Provence’s connection to the Mediterranean can clearly be seen [Fig. 23]. Ancient artefacts have been collected here from all over the Mediterranean: there are Egyptian sarcophagi, bronzes of Greek gods and goddesses and Roman amphorae and ceramics; and while not all of the pieces are from Provence, the effect is to place Provence’s rich history alongside these other cultures. Maps show the major sites of prehistory and antiquity of Provence: prehistoric cave paintings and settlements found in the hills near Aix-en-Provence. It is, however, the ancient Mediterranean powers of Greece and Rome whose presence in Provence generate the most interest for tourists. Marseille’s foundation as a port was thanks primarily to the Greeks: the city of Massalia, was an important Phocaean colony. Rome’s impact on Provence can still be seen in the many ruins scattered around the region. Known as Provincia Nostra, Provence was the first Roman province. The towns of Aquae Sextiae (Aix-en-Provence), Glanum (Saint-Rémy) and Arelate (Arles) were all important and strategic Roman centres.

By the simple act of walking around the market places you can gain a sense of Provence’s long history; for instance, at Vaison-la-Romaine, the fresh produce market is completely surrounded by the open-air ruins of the old Roman town; to the north of the market is the Roman theatre, to the west a Roman villa and to the south the Pont Romain. We stumbled upon the Roman ruins unexpectedly, and they left a strong presence in our experience of the market, creating a direct link between the markets and the other layers of human habitation below.

There are endless possibilities for exploration of Provence’s Mediterranean connection and history through food and wine; for example, you can sample what wine from Roman Provence might have tasted like, and see how it was made at ‘Mas des Tournelles’ in Beaucaire, located on the old Roman road, the
Via Domitia. The three varieties of Roman wine, ‘Mulsum’, ‘Turriculæ’ and ‘Carenun’, are available at many tourist offices and shops around Provence. Quite fittingly, we purchased some in the tourist shop at the Pont du Gard, after exploring the famous Roman aqueduct.

While Provence’s ancient history and extant ruins have always been appealing to tourists, the medieval and modern history of Provence has left an indelible mark on Provençal cuisine. For example, the introduction of the tomato in the sixteenth century led to the development of Ratatouille; around Menton gnocchi has been adopted by Italian settlers, rice is grown southwest of Arles and is used in a variety of dishes, and in Marseille north-African ingredients such as couscous are frequently used.

The Mediterranean experience of cuisine is not just about eating good quality local produce, but about the enjoyment of eating, especially with large family groups, and many courses over a long period of time. Certainly Provençal cuisine falls into this category: it is not just the ingredients and cuisine but the way in which it is consumed that is so appealing for tourists. For instance in summer meals might be light, fresh (such as a salade Niçoise) [Fig. 24] and served with light wines, or a tapas-styled grazing of many dishes of small quantity. The emphasis is on simplicity and enjoyment.

Provence’s lifestyle has long been an attraction for travellers; viewed as simple and idyllic, traditional peasant food is an important ingredient in the rustic idyll so desired by the artists and writers who have turned to Provence in search of the ‘authentic France’, the France of yesteryear. The Impressionist painters of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were captivated by the simple lifestyle: bright, warm summers, with an abundance of fresh produce growing in agricultural bliss. The results can be seen in the still-life paintings and scenes of idyllic rural lifestyles by Cezanne, Monet, and Van Gogh to name only a few. Writers such as Ezra Pound and the local Marcel Pagnol too were captivated by the simple and enjoyable life of Provence, its unique language, history and culture.

In contemporary society the Mediterranean diet has become linked with a better, more nutritious lifestyle. A diet that focuses on unprocessed food and comprises good quantities of olive oil, fruit and vegetables, unrefined cereals and fish, along side a moderate consumption of animal fats, meat and dairy products was promoted in the 1990s as being good for one’s heart and one’s health. This, mixed with the easy-living, low-stress lifestyle, has contributed to the image of Provence as being like a country or health retreat.

Certainly the markets of Provence can be viewed as part of this ‘easy living’, relaxed Mediterranean lifestyle. Watching people walking around the marketplace, it is evident that the market is to be enjoyed; people stroll around, taking their time, in a relaxed, outdoor environment, looking at a range of fresh, healthy produce [Fig. 25]. ‘Living on Mediterranean time’ is a common expression, and certainly people at the markets adhere to this. While one would assume that a fresh produce market is something that you would have to get up early in the morning to attend, this is simply not the case. While most are indeed up early, a majority of people would not attend the markets until well after 9 or 10am and finish around 2pm.
The Provençal climate contributes to the success of the markets themselves: they are held out of doors in the Mediterranean sun, and do not cease in the winter rains. The Avignon markets are one notable exception that we visited: the markets are held in Les Halles and operate in an environment not unlike a giant supermarket. However, the market is still made up of independent stalls and you can get all of the produce that you can other markets: excellent vegetables, cheeses, meats, fish and wine, chocolates and bread. [Fig. 26]

Avignon’s interior marketplace raises some interesting thoughts concerning the aesthetics of marketplaces; to put it bluntly, the market at Avignon lacks the romantic appeal of other markets we visited. With its tiled floor, large display fridges and fluorescent lighting, it seems to be an anomaly amongst the markets, and unlike what is displayed in the tourist brochures [Fig. 27]. Perhaps it is the sense of permanence to Les Halles; in all the other markets that we visited the market was set up in a public space, down winding streets or on city squares. The stalls come and go, and the space is then used for other purposes after the market has gone and on non-market days. [Fig. 28]

The vulnerability of the markets to the climate is appealing: perhaps it will rain on any particular day, but perhaps the sun for which the region is so famous will shine. When we were exploring the market at Vaison-la-Romaine it started to rain very heavily, but it did not really matter; the bookseller was a little distressed and the improvising jazz band moved under cover, but apart from that no one really seemed to mind. There is something appealing about the fact that the market is subject to the elements. Perhaps it is the sense that the climatic elements and environment that produce the very items sold at the market are being experienced along side the products themselves.

To some degree then, the appeal of the markets of Provence is that they operate within our sense of the ‘Mediterranean’, or at least what we expect the Mediterranean experience to be. However, there can be little doubt that the markets of Provence are distinctly Provençal – but how? In the next section I would like to look at representations of Provence’s markets and cuisines in tourist brochures and postcards in order to analyse how Provence is marketed, and the significance of this for the tourist experience of Provence.

**Provence: Consumption and Representation**

A rich and visible historical presence and culture, combined with a famous cuisine and climate has contributed to the popularity of Provence as a tourist destination. This has no doubt been aided by the popularity of such publications and television series as that of Peter Mayle and numerous celebrity chefs like Patricia Wells and Leslie Forbes. Interest in the growing of fresh produce, its preparation for the dinner table, and final consumption continues to rise. The tourist industry of Provence is certainly very strong. In this section we shall consider the ways in which the marketplaces and cuisines of Provence are presented in tourist brochures. While a great deal of information about the markets and cuisine of Provence can be found on-line, I have limited my discussion to brochures that we collected on-site at tourist offices throughout Provence. Information was gathered at the following places: Nice, Marseille, Avignon, Tarascon, Vaison-la-Romaine, Saint-Rémy, Aix-en-Provence and Salon de Provence.
Representing Provençal Food in Tourist Brochures and Postcards

It is extremely easy to get information about the markets themselves while travelling around in Provence; tourist offices provide a good range of free information and advice, which is important because most markets are held one day a week so timing is important. At Vaison-la-Romaine we picked up a brochure on the markets of the départements of Vaucluse, and Bouches-du-Rhône, entitled ‘Les Marchés en Provence: L’essentiel’. This brochure provides information on when the main markets are held and on the size of the market, so you know exactly what to expect. The major festivals too are listed; for example, wine festivals, truffle festivals and markets that are held on special holidays and feast days, such as the festival of Saint Andrew around the last weekend in November. So in other words, useful, strategic information is readily available.

Analysis of the general tourist brochures providing information on the cities, towns and the tourist sites of Provence all suggest the markets and cuisine are major attractions. Images of the markets and of specialist dishes and produce are frequently scattered throughout the maps of cities or tourist information guides. Food such as cheeses, bread and wine laid out in a rustic setting such as a field are very common, as are olive stalls and images of fresh olives still on the tree. Images of the markets generally focus on a bright offering of vegetables or a wider-angle shot with people walking around happily. Vineyards are popular images too. For instance, the fold out map of Vaison-la-Romaine has multiple images of vineyards and vines close-up, one with people on a horseback tour riding through a row of vines.

Postcards depicting the marketplaces are widely available in specialist tourist shops, tourist bureaus and general newsagents in the market towns [Fig. 29]. We found the markets of Aix-en-Provence to be a popular image in that town, both as one image amongst a general collection of scenes from around Aix, and as the sole postcard subject.

All of the postcards show the markets of Aix at their very best: images taken on a warm summer day, the sun shining and the stalls full of produce. In one postcard the stalls are full of fresh fruit and vegetables laid out on brightly coloured tablecloths of yellow and green, with prints of either sunflowers or lavender, under sun umbrellas. The stalls themselves offer zucchinis, capsicums of every colour, beans, fresh eggs and the famous melons of the region. All of the fresh produce is displayed in wooden boxes, perhaps emphasising the simplicity and rusticity of the market. Another postcard presents a montage of four market scenes, with a backdrop of a basket containing aubergine, garlic, capsicum and squash displayed in front of a plant with bright purple flowers. Yet another shows the flower market of Aix-en-Provence, with blooming pot plants and cut flowers for sale. The colours are spectacular against each other, and the camera angle is wide enough to capture the setting of the flower market, in a square surrounded by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century buildings.

Like the markets, Provençal cuisine is also a popular image for postcards. At Vaison-la-Romaine, we were able to purchase at the tourist bureau four postcards with images and recipes (in French and English) of a Provençal dish. For instance, we collected a recipe for ‘les pied-paquets à la Provençale’ (which
is essentially tripe and sheep hooves!) The image shows the meal ready for eating: it is served out on a table in the earthenware pot in which it was made, with a portion plated on a white dish. There is certainly a rustic feel to the overall presentation of the meal; the tablecloth is not unlike many that are available for purchase in tourist shops around Provence: olive green and yellow in colour, with decorations of local flowers. Some of the ingredients that went into this dish are also displayed on the table: brown onions, carrots, red tomatoes, parsley and most importantly wine are all displayed behind the meal. These postcards are most certainly intended to be collected rather than sent. The recipe in French and English for ‘le sauté d’agneau aux petits legumes’ on the writing side of the postcard is so detailed that there is no room to write anything other than the name and address of the recipient! On another postcard we collected the recipe for ‘la salade de chêvre au concombre’ (goat’s cheese and cucumber salad). The salad is once again laid out on a table, alongside garlic, cucumber and a little glass jar of olive oil. Unlike the previous image, the table is mostly bare, with what looks to be a tea towel covering a dark wooden table. The effect is to emphasise the simplicity of this meal.

The brochures and postcards offer a very definite visual impression of an imagined Provence. This is supported moreover by the accompanying written commentary, of which I will consider three examples. Firstly then, on the back of the aforementioned brochure ‘Les Marchés en Provence: L’essentiel’ the Syndicat des Commerçants des Marchés de Provence who were responsible for producing this brochure state the reasons for its publication in two separate paragraphs:

The markets of Provence, often imitated, never equalled, reside in a place of freedom and of friendliness that is altogether lacking in our time.

A place of encounters and exchanges, it perpetuates the tradition of ancestral commerce that withstands and adapts itself to different forms of distribution. It is today an essential means of supplying fresh and healthy products that we invite you to discover and to share.

Another brochure distributed by the ‘Bouches-du-Rhône, La Provence’ tourist organization describes the markets of Tarascon-en-Provence in this way:

An opportunity for new encounters and discoveries, the Provençal market truly enchants the senses. The wines of Provence, fruity rosés and heady reds are found cheek-by-jowl with bottles of olive oil, green or black olives, anis-flavoured “fougasses” or “pompes à huile” and cheese flavoured with thyme or rosemary… Every Tuesday, Tarascon sets out its market stalls. Visitors will discover the very Provençal gastronomy, the authenticity of the land and the variety of its products. (p. 9)

Lastly, the brochure entitled, ‘Bienvenue, Aix en Provence: Source D’Inspiration’ provides the following description of Provençal cuisine:

To eat in Provence is to taste the sun. Provençal food is generous, positive and fragrant, full of colour and varied aromas, with mouth-watering flavours. This cuisine, both authentic and sensual, has earned its reputation. Provençal cooks use simple, fresh produce, adding herbs from the hills – thyme, oregano, savory, rosemary and the southern ‘farioulette’ – to enhance sea foods, lamb, game, goat’s cheeses and an infinite variety of vegetables. (p. 79)
These brochures all share the general themes of community, historicity, authenticity, and the connection between fresh food, good living and health. What I would like to do now is discuss the four themes outlined above in more detail and with reference to a number of further brochures that we collected on our travels throughout Provence.

The tourist brochures depict the market as a place that is not just about the buying and selling of produce, but that has a larger sense of community. The above brochures present an image of a united community that gather together on market day; ‘Every Tuesday, Tarascon sets out its market stalls’ (‘Tarascon-en-Provence’, p. 9). We are told that it is the entire town that is involved in setting out the market stalls, rather than any particular individuals. Furthermore there is a ritualistic aspect to the market: as the town gathers at the same time each week and together, as one united group, the market is produced.

The general information brochure ‘Les Marchés en Provence: L’essentiel’ also presents a united community involved in the markets, but they are not exclusive and welcome visitors, using the phrase ‘we invite you to discover and to share’. The larger market community invites you, the outsider, to join them and explore their market, offering the possibility of finding communal ideals of freedom and friendship.

The image is one of community, and not of economic activity. The association of effortless prosperity and easy human interaction recalls the classical image of the ‘Golden Age’. This image, it might be added, has always been closely associated with the pastoral and idyllic. It is these old ideas, long established in Mediterranean imaginings of country life, which are reproduced, with particular local inflections, in the prevailing image of Provence.

Provence is portrayed consistently in tourist imagery as simple and idyllic. As the ‘Les Marchés en Provence: L’essentiel’ brochure points out, something is lacking in today’s society that the markets of Provence can provide: a place where people can engage in an ancient tradition. There is a sense that, in visiting the market, you can return to something that has been lost: it is a renaissance. This evocation of the past, however, paradoxically takes the form of a denial of historicity, or at the least a telescoping of history. There is no sense that this is a constructed landscape, defined by waves of migration and colonization, by changes in agricultural practice, or by the introduction of new plants and animals to provide the ingredients in what has become the cuisine of Provence. The past, as evoked in the Provençal idyll, is the simple, unified past of myth rather than the complex and contested past of history.

Associated with this telescoping of the past is the ritual-like description of the Provençal markets; terms such as ‘tradition’ and ‘ancestral’ are common. The olive oil of Provence is described as ‘pressed olives, the fruit of ancient trees’. (‘The Traveller’s Guide: Bouches-du-Rhône’, p. 69). Provence is somehow a pocket of France untouched by modernity. Indeed, when we were walking around the market at Saint-Rémy we were struck by the deserted supermarket located in the middle of the market [Fig. 30]. When we passed there was no-one inside and the teller was sitting at the till without any customers. Perhaps this is because the supermarkets represent globalization and mass
consumption, whereas the markets are a reflection of the region of Provence, selling local produce, the products of local traditions.

The brochures depict Provençal cuisine as the intertwining of old ways of living, health, good lifestyle and simplicity. The markets, we are told, are ‘an essential means of supplying fresh and healthy products’ (‘Les Marchés en Provence: L’essentiel’); they are the ‘fruit of the earth, sunshine and water’. (‘The Traveller’s Guide: Bouches-du-Rhône, p. 68). Furthermore, ‘Provençal cooks use simple, fresh produce’ (‘Bienvenue, Aix en Provence: Source D’Inspiration’, p. 79).

Direct reference to the link between Provence and good health is no more apparent than in the ‘The Traveller’s Guide: Bouches-du-Rhône’, in a section describing the natural parks and habitats of Provence. Here there is a little information box describing the medicinal properties of the local herbs, entitled, ‘the magic herbs of Provence’. It tells us: ‘the herbs of Provence save our lives every day, if only in preserving us from the banality of international cuisine. And they smell so good’ (p. 74).

The question of authenticity is of central concern in the promotion of Provençal cuisine: two of the tourist brochures use the word ‘authentic’ and the other refers to the markets of Provence as ‘often imitated, never equalled’ (‘Les Marchés en Provence: L’essentiel’). The implication is that the markets of Provence cannot be replicated, that they are authentic. However, there are slightly different definitions of what is meant by ‘authentic’ in the brochures. The Aix-en-Provence brochure refers to Provençal cuisine as having earned a reputation of being authentic and that the source of this authenticity is socially and community oriented. The exact phrase used is: ‘this cuisine, both authentic and sensual, has earned its reputation’. (‘Bienvenue, Aix en Provence: Source D’Inspiration’, p. 79). In comparison the Tarascon-en-Provence brochure refers to ‘authenticity of the land’; the reference relates directly to Provençal cuisine offering something unique because of its landscape and climate. This is echoed in ‘The Traveller’s Guide: Bouches-du-Rhône’, which says: ‘the cuisine of the Bouches-du-Rhône is above all Provençal, fruit of the earth, sunshine and water’ (p. 68). In both instances the markets and cuisine of Provence emerge as socially and historically unique, suggesting that such an authentic experience can only occur within the boundaries of Provence.

**Place, Tourism, Provence**

The traveller consumes images of Provence and Provençal markets and cuisines; the tourist offices, and indeed the brochures that they give out as guides, encourage travellers to get to know a place through interaction with its history, landscape and culture. However, it is always, as I have argued, a specific construction. Whether it follows then that this creates a disparity between the ‘tourist Provence’ and the ‘real Provence’ is difficult to ascertain; the question of authenticity of experience for the tourist is an excessively loaded topic and one that cannot be done justice in the space available here. The typical Marseille dish of bouillabaisse provides a tangible way of exploring some of these issues.
Consuming Bouillabaisse: Fish Markets in Marseille

At the side of the city of Marseille’s tourist map, entitled ‘Marseille à chacun son plan’, was an advertisement for a restaurant called Miramar that had the catchphrase ‘authentic bouillabaisse’. I wondered exactly what this meant and thought it a good opportunity to explore the idea of authenticity further by looking at a case-study of this famous Marseille dish. Moreover, a case-study of bouillabaisse provides an opportunity to explore connections and pathways that a tourist might experience from the fish markets to the fish restaurants of Marseille.

Bouillabaisse from Marseille has quite a reputation in international culinary circles and is considered the signature dish of Provence. It is essentially a fish soup using fresh fish pieces, especially monkfish and seafood like prawns, olive oil and tomatoes, and is meant to be eaten ‘with fingers, bread and gusto’ (Leslie Forbes, A Taste of Provence, 1987). The name figuratively means ‘messed up’ and it was traditional fare for fisher people and townspeople. However, nowadays bouillabaisse is what could be referred to as a culinary contradiction: from the nineteenth century the dish underwent gentrification and bouillabaisse was transformed. Chefs working in the upmarket hotels along the coast wanted to serve the very best quality produce to their rich, international clientele, and so bouillabaisse became much more complicated in its preparation. Saffron was added to it, and only the finest fish and seafood was used. There was a move away from its rustic, Provençal origins.

In Marseille there are a variety of places where you can buy fish; however, the two main marketplaces are the famous Quai des Belges on the Vieux Port (Old Port), and the market at the Place des Capucins. The Vieux Port is the centre of Marseille. The layout of the town draws you towards the Vieux Port: Marseille’s old buildings are located around the port itself and it is here that the tourist office is located [Fig. 31]. The historic buildings surrounding the port are testimony to the importance of the fishing industry and of seafaring to Marseille; near the entrance to the Vieux Port you can visit the thirteenth-century Saint-Laurent Church where fishermen and seafarers prayed before heading out to sea, or to give thanks for a good catch and a safe return. Certainly images of the port and docked boats are well utilised in tourist industry brochures; the tourist map of Marseille ‘Marseille à chacun son plan’ contains no less than nine images of the port, not to mention a further seven contained in advertising material surrounding the map itself.

It must be said that Marseille is not a pretty town, unlike many other towns that we visited. However, the fish and seafood market at the Quai des Belges is a wonder. We strolled around looking at the fish with interest (and sometimes with amazement at what was actually eaten!) [Fig. 32, Fig. 33]. The fish are mostly still alive and sitting in a small amount of salt water. Every now and then a fish flaps and water is sprayed all over the place, much to the delight of the many children who walk around these markets. Amongst the more unusual varieties of seafood are sea urchins (oursin violet); from a lady selling the urchins we learn that the edible part is the roe inside the shell [Fig. 34]. The number of very small fish for sale was a bit of a surprise for us, however, we soon learn that fish referred to as ‘petits poissons de roche’ are used for the broth bases of dishes such as bouillabaisse and Niçois fish soup. Octopus (poulpe) is a common sight, as is the slithery conger eel [Fig. 35]. Sole is very
common, and you frequently hear ‘Sole! Sole Sole!’ shouted out by the fishmongers. It is an extraordinary looking flat fish [Fig. 36].

The stalls themselves back onto the waterfront, where the boats that caught the very fish on sale are moored. We watched one fisherman offload his catch directly onto a stall waiting for him on the Quai. It is evidence of the freshness of the produce on offer here that you can see the boat and the fishing equipment that was used to make the catch. Walking around the market you are aware of the smell of the dock: that typical boat smell of diesel mixed with boat paints, salt and fish. There are no large boats in this area of the port, nor are there very grand operations. The boats are small, manoeuvrable and family run. Even though the connection between the stall and the boat that floats behind it is obvious, the stall itself frequently displays the name of the boat [Fig. 37, Fig. 38]. Some of these look like car number plates and it is perhaps testimony of the quality of the fish that a name is so proudly displayed.

The other marketplace where you can buy fish is in the streets around the Place des Capucins, a very short walk from the docks. This market is equally interesting in terms of the visual images and the sounds of the fish sellers [Fig. 39]. However, we were struck by the origins of these fish and seafood products. There are prawns from Madagascar, the Indian Ocean and Senegal [Fig. 40]. We found some mussels from Spain [Fig. 41]. Comparison with the market of the Quai des Belges is marked: here the seafood is mostly frozen, cheaper in price, long dead and placed upon ice for sale. However, the fish at the Place des Capucins looked perfect and unblemished, compared to the rough looking fish that had just been taken off the boat at the Quai. In terms of a tourist experience then, the Quai des Belges felt like it was a little bit more authentic, a point to which I will return.

In the brochures on Marseille, the tourist is invited both to explore these fish markets and to eat the famous bouillabaisse; in the tourist brochure ‘The Traveller’s Guide: Bouches-du-Rhône’ bouillabaisse is mentioned several times and an image of the dish is provided. The caption for the image reads: ‘Sumptuous bouillabaisse, essence of the Mediterranean, issue of the diversity of the underwater world’ (p. 69). While this sentence is a lovely little linguistic puzzle, singing the praises of bouillabaisse is certainly the purpose. Walking around Marseille one is encouraged to sample this dish: most of the restaurants around the port specialise and promote it, for instance ‘bouillabaisse’ is often written in neon flashing lights in front of restaurants.

We tried bouillabaisse at one of the many restaurants that serves it in the area around Rue Saint-Saëns. It was quite an experience: the soup is an extremely strong fish flavoured broth, with at least three pieces of different fish and some vegetables such as potato and celery. This is served with croutons and a rouille (spiced mayonnaise) which you can add if you so choose [Fig. 42].

However, while we were eating our bouillabaisse we did wonder whether this was considered to be “authentic bouillabaisse”, and what exactly the criteria for inauthentic bouillabaisse might consist of. We also wondered whether any parallels could be found between ‘authentic bouillabaisse’ and the two main fish markets of Marseille, with their very different fish for sale.
While we dined on bouillabaisse in a restaurant on the Rue Saint-Saëns we asked our waiter whether many people in Marseille still eat this dish, and whether it was similar to the one in front of us now. He looked offended and said ‘yes, of course!’ The following day we spoke to a local restaurateur; he does not sell bouillabaisse at his restaurant but was keen to point out that a majority of restaurants in Marseille do not sell what he considers to be authentic bouillabaisse. In fact, he went so far as to call it ‘gangster bouillabaisse’! What is served in the tourist restaurants, he explained, was a watered down version. True bouillabaisse, like that eaten on special occasions at home, was very expensive to make because traditionally it consisted of many varieties of fish in large quantities. Rather, the tourist restaurants use fish and seafood caught in foreign waters because they are cheaper, and being frozen, can be stored more easily and for longer periods. He said that you could not make an authentic bouillabaisse at home for less than €40 for a family, and in a restaurant you would need to pay more than €50 each. At the restaurants around the Vieux Port we found that there was an enormous price range, from €20 to €100, with the cheaper prices in the tourist-oriented areas around Rue Saint-Saëns [Fig. 43, Fig. 44, Fig. 45]. We asked several people walking around the Rue Saint-Saëns their thoughts about the bouillabaisse on offer here; a couple of tourists said that they were keen to try bouillabaisse but that they had found it to be very expensive. Another couple said that they did not worry about the price so long as it was good quality bouillabaisse.

Thoughts towards a Conclusion: Being in the World

It is plausible then to suggest that tourists visiting Provence emerge with a sense of Provence as a place (as experienced through cuisine) that is quite different from that of the local people. For instance, it would seem that there is a disparity between the bouillabaisse on offer at many of the cheaper tourist-oriented restaurants, and that of the upmarket restaurants or even that which is served in family homes in the next neighbourhood. However, this being said, the experiences are no less real. Perhaps the authenticity of bouillabaisse does not actually matter: the traveller is still engaging in a series of unfamiliar situations. The place is unfamiliar and although the cuisine may come with a certain degree of expectation, and the experience may be mediated through brochures, the overall experience of eating Provençal cuisine is unique in terms of setting, choices on the menu, communicating in French, choosing from amongst unheard of wines, even down to the process of converting the cost into your own currency at the conclusion to your meal. There is a wonderful feeling of alienation that comes with this experience, ‘authentic’ or not.

Whether it is your first visit to a market or the umpteenth time you have gone to the same market like the little old lady at Saint-Rémy, they are new and intriguing places that the traveller must negotiate; they evolve and are far from stagnant, despite their depiction as steeped in tradition and history. The markets of Provence, as pointed out in the tourist brochures, are places of ‘encounters and discoveries’, (‘Tarascon-en-Provence’, p. 9) and ‘encounters and exchanges’ (‘Les Marchés en Provence: L’essentiel’). For many travellers it is a chance to encounter for a short time the cuisine that has made the region so famous, and to buy produce at the markets, regardless of whether the chances of cooking with them are limited by the logistics of travel.
Certainly, as has been shown in this essay, the traveller’s experiences are filtered through several different media. Yet, while there is a particular expectation that the brochures help to cultivate when a traveller visits a marketplace or tries bouillabaisse, the desire to find out about and to visit these places is really the key. So although an awareness of the history of Provence, for instance its links with the Mediterranean or its “touristic image”, arms travellers with the tools to work it out for themselves, they will inevitably be immersed in new terrains and new cuisines. Beyond the specifics of what is being explored, it is perhaps the traveller’s act of engaging with the place, in this example through its cuisine, which is most important. This is the act of being in the world: having the desire to explore different places and cultures, in this instance through food.

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