



A Nice time in Prov



Gary Gubbins with winemaker Florent Chave at the Irish-owned Domaine des Anges

Wine importer **Gary Gubbins** mixed duty with pleasure on a visit to the vibrant city of Nice, from where he took in a rugby match and a trip to nearby Provençal vineyards

One night many years ago, as the Celtic Tiger roared, Dionysus, the Greek God of wine, invaded my dreams. He told me I must give up the world of engineering and immerse myself in wine, both literally and professionally. I was half way there already, so I took his advice and opened Red Nose Wine in 2008.

It took me a little while to realise that Dionysus was also the God of ritual madness, and the yearly increases in the excise duty on wine we've suffered through have exposed me to this madness with a vengeance. To quote the Japanese filmmaker Akira Kurosawa: "In a mad world, only the mad are sane."

My 'new' job does, however, often take me on trips abroad where



Main picture: Nice on the Côte d'Azur is one of the Mediterranean's jewels; above: Château Margüil; below: the rolling vineyards of Domaine des Anges



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I am forced to meet lovely people who only want to feed me the best of food and bathe me in the finest of wine. I usually take these trips on my own, as there is a lot of mileage to cover and if you are not 'match fit', it can be tough on the social wine taster.

But on my latest trip, I was joined by a couple of tourists, my brother and an old friend. I don't know if it was the lure of my company or a vineyard road trip in the south of France that formed their desire to join me on my latest odyssey. The fact that Munster would be playing a European semi-final up the road in Marseille also undoubtedly helped.

We flew into Nice, a famous but sometimes misunderstood city on the French Riviera that I had the pleasure of living in as my 20s came to an end. When you trav-

el with two men of a certain age, it can be difficult to balance the cultural and historical charms of a great old city with the pulsating heartbeat of one of the most vibrant nightspots in Europe. I knew we were losing the cultural battle on the first afternoon, when a polite and refined request to pass the bottle of wine at lunch had blended into a demand for more mojitos at dinner.

Nice is one of the oldest cities in France, and with the help of a visionary young mayor, has transformed itself into one of the buzziest places anywhere in the world. The new 12-hectare park that runs from the Bonaparte/Garibaldi area all the way to the sea is an oasis in the city and a credit to the dedication of the French to beauty.

Nice is both a city and a small, ancient beach town. You can buy cheap, fresh fish from a hatch beside a Michelin-starred restaurant, while the ski slopes of the Alps are an hour and a half away. During April, you can ski in the morning and swim in the sea in the afternoon. It is so easy to get there (flights from Shannon, Cork and Dublin), and when you are there, it is so easy to get everywhere else.

We were based in the über-trendy Bonaparte area, which lies between the expansive, café-filled Place Garibaldi and the port, and which is also known as the Marais of the Riviera. This is a perfect area to base yourself as it is still very well priced compared to other areas of Nice, and while you mightn't be able to see the sea, you can hear it.

We stayed in a wonderful two-bedroom apartment called Bonaparte, booked with the excellent Nice Pebbles (if you book with them, use the code TSBP10 and get 10 per cent off bookings till the end of November).

During our stay, we ate in a number of fantastic restaurants that have been recommended to me by winemakers over the years. Just off rue Bonaparte near Place du Pin is an old Italian restaurant that is a Niçois institution – Aux Vieux Four on Rue Emmanuel Philibert, a must for pizza and pasta fans. Cheap as chips and family-owned for generations, it's a fantastic spot.

I didn't take my two travelling companions to La Réserve on Boulevard Franck Pilatte, as they were not worthy, but I have brought my wife there and it is a dream. My advice is to go for

lunch (€33 for three courses), as dinner can be a little bit pricey.

The food is only matched by the views – the very old building hangs over the cliffs looking out to sea. Book in advance and be sure to get a table for two on the balcony. I can still taste the langoustines I had there last year. Burn off the lunch by taking the stunning coastal walk to Villefranche and enjoy a well-earned coffee on the beach.

The next day we took off for the great city of Marseille, waving at Cannes, Juan-les-Pins and St Tropez as we passed them by on the Autoroute du Soleil. The rugby match did not go our way (Munster lost 24-16), but at least we had the next day, and a drive into Provence, to look forward to.

Our first stop was Domaine des Anges, an Irish-owned vineyard not far from Châteauneuf-du-Pape that sits on the top of a hill across from the majestic Mont Ventoux. It is an organic vineyard that is well known to readers of this paper, as their wines are a favourite of Tomas Clancy.

Our host, Monsieur Gay McGuinness from Kilkenny, took us for a glorious dinner in Bédoin, a village at the foot of Mont Ventoux. If you are a cyclist with a penchant for wine, this is the only

place to stay.

If you want to stay up on the hill, be surrounded by vines, speak French in the morning to Flor-ent the winemaker and listen to a Kilkenny man talk rubbish about hurling in the afternoon, then you would do a lot worse than book a house or apartment in Domaine des Anges itself. They even have a pool.

The next morning we said our goodbyes and made our way back to Nice through the incredibly scenic Luberon region. We passed Château Miraval on the way, but they were busy preparing for the owners' wedding, so we decided not to call on Brad and Angelina this time.

They don't allow visitors, I'm afraid, but if you call to Château Margüil up the road you will get a royal welcome and wines that are, in my view, as good as if not better than the Jolie-Pitts's.

These trips are rare, as they are investments in both time and money. However, they are necessary if you want to understand and relate to the passion of the people who make this region's wonderful wines. Whether you're a professional like me, or just a keen wine fan, you'll find lots to appeal to you in this glorious part of France.