Day 3:
What would Provence be with its historical monuments, landscapes, food, but without wine? The Côtes du Rhône wines with the famous villages of Châteauneuf-du-Pape, Gigondas, Vacqueyras, etc... are right here in Northern Provence.

I know that for new world wine drinkers French wine labels may seem obscure. Grape varietal is not what matters to us, “terroir” is, and that’s our “mot du jour”. “Terroir” comes from the word “La terre”= ground, earth... because no matter what grape varietal you plant, the ground will shape its characteristics. The concept of “terroir” encompasses the soil, but also the local climate, and the art of the wine maker. You would not want to listen to a symphony having only the brass instruments and skipping the wind and string instruments? Same with wine, you need all these factors to make a specific wine.

In addition, many French wine regions are known for blend wines and not single varietal wine. That’s the case of our famous Pope’s wine: 13 grape varietals are allowed in the making of Châteauneuf-du-Pape; nine for red Châteauneuf (black grenache, syrah, mourvèdre, cinsault, counoise, muscardin, vaccarèse, terret) and five for white Châteauneuf (rousanne, clairette, bourboulenc, picpoul, picardan). Don’t tell me you did not know there was white Châteauneuf-du-Pape? One of my favorite wines...

So of course this makes it difficult for Merlot, Cab, Chardonnay fans to understand French wines. Most French people have a mental wine map in their head (see photos). That’s a basic map though. Each wine region is then divided into small regions, divided into smaller regions (think opening Russian dolls...). Some are the size of a village, like Séguret –what we are drinking today with our Provençal picnic), and some the size of just a wine plot! Taste, taste and taste more: it helps
learn the map! And of course match the local wine with the local food, that's the best definition of « Terroir ».

So what are we having for lunch to day to go with our local Côtes-du-Rhône wine? The weather is fine, blue sky, slight breeze (not that crazy Mistral wind): let’s have a “pique-nique”! “Taboulé”, saucisson, “tarte aux légumes” (a colorful vegetable tart), “caillette” (typical pork and spinach meatball), fougasse (typical bread from Provence), fresh “salade verte” drizzled with olive oil, a goat and ewe cheese tray (no cow cheese in the south), and Strawberry panna cotta for dessert....

Miam Miam..
La rencontre: Let’s meet Denis today.

He keeps alive two symbols of Provençal culture: olive oil and “santons”. All countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea grow olives. Provence has a small but distinctive production of olive oil. Like wine, oil can be tasted, and when you enjoy your olive oil back at home it always brings back travel memories... Denis selects and promotes local olive oils, but his main passion is making “santons”. In the local language “santon” means “little saint”, the small painted or dressed clay figures people put on their Nativity scene around Christmas. In Provence the typical characters are obviously present to welcome baby Jesus (Mary, Joseph, the donkey, etc...), but the Nativity also takes on a completely different dimension and, as Denis explains, the whole village comes to see a newborn here. That means the miller, the baker, the herbalist, the old couple, the fisherman, etc..
Denis creates his own "santons" based on real people of his village. These are passed on from one generation to the next. Part of his job is to give life to these figures and to repair them so they can be passed on!

Do you have original “santon” pictures to share?

Before we leave Provence, let's talk about its language. We pretty much all speak the same way in France. There is a renewal for regional languages, languages that the government tried (managed) to crush down in the 1920s, but we all speak French now (unlike in 1789, by the time of the French Revolution, when only about 10% of the population spoke French!). In Provence, they have their own regional language that you see on many street signs, but in addition locals do not speak French the way we speak it just north of Provence. They have a singing accent that tells non-Provençal people that they are in Provence, a bit like a southern twang.

If you speak some French, here is how Provençal would sound different:

Pain → [Paing]
Vin → [Ving]

But I love how this woman recites a poem talking about accents, with her southern accent! (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Mp5AqfaRVg )