

Vicky Bishop reports from... back home

24 Nov 2004 by JR

The top seven rides, more than seven top wines, Mr Inspirator and an amazing back-up team

We're back and adjusting slowly! Everyone keeps asking 'So where was your best ride, and what were your favourite wines?' So here are just a few of the highlights... and some well earned thank yous.

Sunday 28 April - Chavignol in the Loire. Following Didier Dagueneau's 4-wheel drive/off road directions we waved goodbye to Alphonse Mellot and the team at Bourgeois in Chavignol and Ros, Dromara, Lily and I struck out across country traversing vineyards and lanes, hills and bridges, not to mention a railway crossing to get back to Didier's stables at Moussard - and it only took two and a half hours! There the vines had only got green shoots and small leaves - by the time we left France most regions had finished flowering.

The impression that made the most impact was of being out in the open actually on Lily in a French vineyard - it sounds crazy - but I suppose I needed to pinch myself to realise it was now all for real - and there was more to come. Just incredible to think we were actually in France after all that planning and hard work - and there was plenty more of that to come too!

Wednesday 8 May - I returned to Château Puyguéraud for the first time since my 'stage' for the 1986 vintage - and took Lily too. After a very impressive tasting with Nicolas Thienpont and delicious lunch prepared by his sister, Bernadette, Philippa Soden and I tacked up the horses and had a wonderful scamper all around St Cibard and the neighbouring villages, cantering on vineyard verges, reminiscing and just lapping up this delightful part of Bordeaux.

Wednesday 15 May - Claire and I took the horses to Château de Paraza in the mean green mint machine and rode home along the Canal du Midi for three hours - bliss! We were starting to experience the southern heat but lunch was served in the elegant cool diningroom of the château itself, and our ride as shown by our host Monsieur Bernard Passerious was all in shade. The horses relaxed about the boats on the river very quickly and Dromara continued to practise her bank climbing skills - and Clare who was contemplating a beer at the next lock was rapidly brought back down to earth! It was so pretty, with dappled trees - a myriad shades of green and a constant gentle breeze.

Tuesday 21 May - this time Julia took Dromara and led the way into the incredible red interior up above St Jean de la Blacquièrre. I have only ever seen rock this colour around Ayers Rock in Australia before. Never did I think I would canter along a river bed this colour on Lily in the South of France! The rust-red rock gave way to scrub and green outcrops as we climbed to the top - what a perfect place for a picnic - maybe next time!

Sunday 26 May - Fairfax and I join the brothers Gonnet in the southern Rhône for an amazing tour of the Dentelles de Montmirail - just awesome, and Lily thinks so too! The picnic was something else (see the Rhône report) but well deserved after all that climbing - up and down. I never did confess before - I had to get my riding boots re-soled after this outing! I had wanted to stop in the pretty village of Gigondas but had no idea of what was to come. Those mountainous outcrops that towered over us and mad French cyclists dashing to and fro - it really is so much easier on a horse, and you can talk to them...

Friday 31 May - Fairfax Luxmoore and I left the plateau up above the vineyards of Condrieu and St Joseph behind for the Alpine landscape of the national park of Pilat. We entered another world as we all climbed (leading the horses) up Auberge de la Croix de St-Sabin - following closely on the heels of Jean-Marie, our expert guide. You can see for miles and it is deliciously still - a private land tucked away.

Tuesday 4 June - Abigail Morris mounted Dromara and led Lily and I around Savigny les Beaune and on up to the hill of Corton... Burgundy brought alive on horseback. Tractors, humans and helicopters at work: it is a busy time in these vineyards where village names are legendary.

Sunday 16 June - Jane Hunt arrived in Alsace just in time for a wonderful 50km ride led by Rémy Buccali through the forests opposite Turckheim and up across the fields to Wintzfelden where we stopped for lunch at the l'Arbre Vert. Later that afternoon we were mistaken for park rangers as Rémy was also wearing one of our team Great French Ride shirts!

Lily rather liked Alsace and said she would contemplate staying if offered the job...

Wednesday 26 June - Liz Price and I did the Côtes des Blancs on Lily and Dromara. Well where else do all good champagne-loving girls ride? We skirted the forest edge and looked down through the vines at just a few of those great names - le Mesnil-sur-Oger, Oger, Avize and Cramant. The sun shone and the vines glistened green and luxurious as we looked at the tiny buds which had just finished flowering and imagined what might be poured into a glass... from here... in years to come.

My tasting notes are volumes thick - but the highlights range from the sheer minerality of Château de Tracy's Pouilly Fumé and the complexity of Alphonse Mellot's Sancerre to Philippe Vatan's deep velvet red Saumur Champigny at Château du Hureau in the Loire.

Then there was that bottle of 1982 Château d'Angludet waiting for us at dinner the first night with Diana Sichel - mature elegant claret you can only dream about. For youthful elegance the 2001 Château Palmer is definitely a front runner. Bernadette's lunch was brought alive by the citrus zest of Les Charmes Godard 2001 in St Cibard - just so right with those Asian flavours she sneaked in! Château Coutet 2001 was simply Barsac at its best - fresh lifted marmalade and apricot aromas that make you want to wish the years away so you can pull a cork and just see what the next chapter of its life would be like.

Cuvée Etienne Gonnet 1999 from Domaine Font de Michelle went down in the annals of history at Sunday lunch in Bedarides. I certainly saw Gigondas in a whole new light at Vieux Telegraphe when we tasted their Domaine les Pallieres 2000.

Now thanks to Alain Parret I am trying to convince all my friends that you should have Condrieu and not Sauvignon Blanc with asparagus - well he convinced me with his Les Ceps du Nebadon 2001 - and 2000!

I was lucky enough to taste two extraordinary white wines in Burgundy - Clos Blanc de Vougeot 2001 from cask at Domaine de la Vougerie, and Beaune Clos des Mouches 1995 Drouhin from Jasper Morris's kitchen table. Totally different wines but both made an amazing impact on my experiences there - with lingering finishes in a class of their own.

In Alsace Riesling is king but for me Pinot Gris is stepping pretty close on its heels - I am a real fan. Those from the Brandt vineyard produced by the Cave Turckheim are unquestionably up there. As was the Clos Windsbuhl 2000 from Zind Humbrecht with its gunflint and smoky bacon flavours. The sheer minerality expressed by the Riesling from the Hengst vineyard by Jos Meyer has quietly been filed in my Alsace memory bank - I hope!

Tasting Pol Roger's delicious Blanc de Blancs with all its nutty richness reminded me of my first visit there very much in working mode - this time we were giggling about Eole escaping from the famous mobile fencing! Then there was that first sip of La Grande Dame after coming through those wonderful wrought-iron gates at Verzy on Lily - what a wonderful champagne to celebrate a most amazing tour - and we had achieved it!

I would never have achieved anything if it had not been for my back-up team - but before I mention them I should say a word of thanks to Mr Inspirator - Tony Hawks, who wrote 'Travels Round Ireland with a Fridge' who stirred up something inside me. It was time to get off the 'merrygoround of life' and do something about my love of France, horses and wine - and I guess The Great French Ride was my way of getting out there.

None of this could have been achieved without our two central characters: Lily and Dromara. A huge vote of thanks must go to Ros Stace for trusting me with her beloved Irish chestnut mare for none weeks, and to Dromara herself for looking after all those visiting riders - and for never once batting an eyelid about going into the mean green mint machine.

Well, Lily was the star, and she has had plenty written about her so I will keep this short. She has been photographed more times than most Hollywood stars - and she is still just Lily (or sometimes teased as the Racing Ferret!) hugely trusting, very good looking and faintly eccentric - my great friend.

We couldn't have completed our 8000km tour without the mint green mean machine - our very smart horse box supplied by George Smith Horseboxes. Then there were my trusty drivers to whom a huge vote of thanks must go for being patient with me, trusting my map reading and coping with 'just one more tasting', and fitting in around each other - sometimes with only 24 hours notice. They are Ben Attlee, Fairfax Luxmoore of www.horse-drawn.co.uk and John Seymour of Equine Support Services.

Also a very big thank you to P&O for getting us to France and back so smoothly.

Feeding the horses was crucial and here I must thank Saracen Feeds for supplying their new Enduro 100 (which the girls loved!), to Toomers Feeds for the remainder of their fodder - and to Anglo Overseas who did a brilliant job in delivering it to our seven bases around France.

We managed to keep up with our well groomed horses thanks to Suzanne Flygare at Team MB Polo who sponsored all our smart shirts and jackets - and the not-so-frequently-needed waterproofs!

To Hildon Water for providing us with the very best of English - in its sporty version of course!

To Wiltshire Tracklements for all their delicious produce that was so greatly appreciated by some of the best wine makers in France.

Back at home base in Wiltshire - Roger and his team at Manor Farm Stud and all they did to prepare the horses for this epic journey, and my mother for letting her diningroom become a combined tack room and central ops base for mailing sponsors.

In London - Yvonne May for continually pushing The Great French Ride under the noses of the British press and keeping them focused.

To Steven Morris our brilliant photographer - for providing just some of the best records of the whole journey - capturing special, funny and beautiful moments.

To Edward Berry for keeping my spirits strong and being a huge support - mostly on the other end of my mobile - and for making an appearance in Chablis!

Finally to all my friends and those in the wine trade - here and in France, New Zealand and Australia who have chosen to support this extraordinary adventure which hopefully will help to change the lives of many.

Together we have all worked to support:

- WaterAid
- The Fortune Centre of Riding, and
- The Wine & Spirit Benevolent Society.

Thank you.