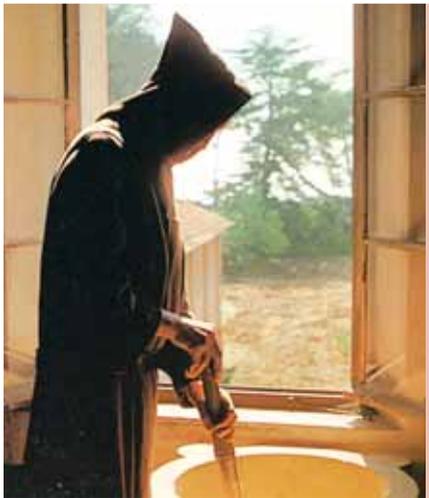


Holy island

An ancient order of monks on a tiny island in the Mediterranean is making an award-winning wine.

ROWENA CARR-ALLINSON drops in to meet the brothers of the *Abbaye de Lérins* ▶





I first heard about the wine-making monks of Île Saint-Honorat during dinner at the Michelin-starred Le Mas Candille in Mougins, near Cannes.

The sommelier was adamant that the monastery on the tiny island facing the Riviera hotspot was producing some of the area's best wine.

Apparently the island, which has been home to monks for 16 centuries, started making wine just 15 years ago. Pushing aside visions of *The Name of the Rose*, I decided to make the trip to see the moonlighting monks, who have seduced the sommeliers of legendary establishments such as the Hôtel Negresco in Nice, the Lutetia in Paris and even the Élysée Palace.

The monastery is an historic landmark which, during its 'Golden Age', the 5th and 6th centuries, was once home to Saint Maxime, Saint Vincent, British-born Benedict Biscop and even Ireland's Saint Patrick. It seems to have changed little since. Despite its enviable location in the bay of Cannes, it has remained a haven of peace and quiet where the study of God is paramount. No noise, no traffic, no pollution; this tiny island is one of four in the Îles de Lérins archipelago, alongside Sainte Marguerite and the Îlot Saint-Ferréol and Îlot de la Tradelière, the latter both uninhabited. It feels a million miles away from the hustle and bustle of La Croisette. On the day I visit, it is National Heritage Day and so busier than usual, but

it means the monastery has opened its doors to show off its treasures. It's the only time when the public can see its interior, as well as the enchanting exterior. Disembarking from the first ferry from Cannes are a handful of visitors – some Catholic pilgrims, some curious tourists – all coming for different reasons: the wine, the spiritual side or to see the historic landmarks.

Beauty and calm

The monastery, founded in 410 by Saint Honoratus, suffered numerous invasions and attacks – first from the Saracens, then from Genoese pirates – because of its strategic location. Solid fortifications built up until the 14th century and cannon ball ovens installed by Bonaparte still stand today.

Despite its turbulent history, I am instantly bewitched by the island's beauty and calm; the Mediterranean pine and palm trees mingle with oaks and eucalyptus. The cacti, agaves and aloe plants exude exoticism and the undergrowth is rich with myrtle, roses and honeysuckle.

As I walk towards the monastery, I get my first peek at the vineyards shielded by tall cypress trees, which we later find out act as windbreakers to protect the vines. The air is heavy with Mediterranean fragrances, and although it's early morning in September, you can sense the heat rising

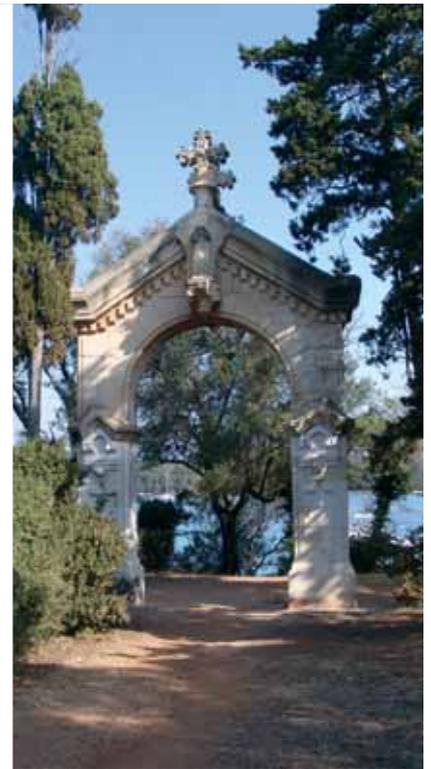
from the earth. The island may seem idyllic but the monks here follow Benedict's words: "They will truly be monks when they live from the work of their hands."

Having started making liqueurs with the island's indigenous plants, the monks were inspired to make wine, planting chardonnay clairette grapes for the white wine, and both syrah mourvèdre and pinot noir for the reds.

The abbot Don Vladimir Gaudrat, who is in charge, is a realist despite living in this somewhat surreal haven. With just seven hectares to work with, he says they had to get it right: "We are the only ones to make wine – other monasteries in France make cheese and such, but working is part of our lives and we have to make a living! When we started making wine, we knew the number of vines was so small that we had to make an expensive wine, and therefore it had to be good," he laughs.

"And, although the point is not being famous, it had to become well-known. It was a necessity for us. Our luck was that the image of monks making wine is intriguing, which helped generate interest. And, of course, this is a region a lot of people travel through."

One of the brothers, Frère Marie, has the necessary qualifications and the abbot admits they have a secret weapon: "We have advisers including chefs Jacques Chibois and Christian Willer as well as Jean Lenoir who put together the *Le Nez Du Vin*



ABOVE: The peaceful island of Saint-Honorat is just a boat ride from Cannes

book. He mentored us to make the wine. And locally there are chefs and sommeliers who help us out.”

The ground’s clay and limestone mix, together with the maritime influences and insular microclimate, all contribute to give the grapes a special flavour. The 2005 cuvée Saint-Honorat which is made up of syrah and mourvèdre oozes exotic aromas from blackberry to truffle and spices. As for its sister, the cuvée Saint-Sauveur, the fruity flavours tend towards cherry and there’s almost a hint of chocolate mingling within. The saying goes that the wines here are like the monks: ‘humble and generous’.

A clever mix

White wine fans should try the award-winning cuvée Saint-Césaire. The 2005 *millésimé* is a clever mix of exotic fruit with hints of pineapple and coconut and traces of almonds. Christian Willer, chef at the prestigious Palme d’Or in Cannes recommends it with his seabass dish.

The vineyards are organic and the monks manage the entire process by hand. Yet producing 35,000 bottles a year isn’t enough, the busy monks also produce jams, lavender oils, honey and liqueurs. In fact, they are considering putting their 400 olive trees back to work too. The amber liqueur Lerina has been a house speciality since 1890, based on a mix of 44 herbs, and is distilled in a copper still before being left to mature in oak barrels for seven or

eight years. Recent recipes include the popular lemon-based Lerincello and the Mandamarc, a tangerine-based *eau de vie*, all managed by brother Giancarlo.

The 25 resident monks are joined by students for the busy harvesting season in late August through to September, and indeed the island offers retreats throughout the year for believers who can join in with the monks’ daily life in the heart of the ancient Benedictine cloisters.

Although much of the chapel, refectory and cloisters remain unchanged, later 19th-century additions include two accommodation wings, a library, infirmary and kitchens, and a second wing which is where visitors stay. The daily routine is based around seven daily prayers and manual work.

It’s an early start at 4am with mornings “devoted to praying and finding God. It’s a way of showing that it’s the most important thing for us,” adds the abbot “and, our spirit is freer then”. During the harvest, they start even earlier: “We adapt ourselves to the necessities of life,” he says, and laughs: “As opposed to what most people think, life in the monastery is actually active and busy but it’s not compulsory. I don’t think everyone can physically get up so early!”

The later half of the morning is spent working, followed by another mass and lunch when the monks eat in silence. The abbot quips “a lot of our lives is spent in

silence,” which might explain his readiness to chat. After lunch there is time for a siesta, another prayer and back to work before dinner, a general meeting and a last prayer at 8pm.

If visiting for a day, the abbot recommends the trip in spring or autumn: “April, May, June and September or October is when the island is at its most beautiful.”

Far from being blasé, the abbot knows how lucky he is to live here: “We do notice how beautiful it is every day. My favourite spot is near the fortified monastery during the autumn because of the beautiful sunsets there, and if not, the western end of the island with its beautiful views and sunsets on the Esterel side. Even after 25 years we don’t get bored. Used to it? Yes, but never bored.” 🍷

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**Abbaye de Lérins
île de Lérins
06400 Cannes**

You can visit the church, museum and fortified monastery on the island.

Accommodation and spiritual retreats are available. For more information see www.abbayedelerins.com or call (Fr) 4 92 99 54 00.

