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THE GANNET

the eaux stratagem

Two restaurants in the south of France are making waves with their consummate seafood

Gannets are birds with voracious appetites for seafood, and they have no happier hunting ground than the south of France, especially around the Etang de Thau, the huge lagoon a few kilometres east of Béziers that yields around 13,000 tonnes of oysters a year.

The finest bivalves are to be found at Tarbouriech Le St Barth, a lovely little shack of a restaurant on the Etang's shore, near Marseillan. Thanks to an innovative method of hoisting the oysters in and out of the water to mimic the effects of tides, Tarbouriech oysters

are the fattest, sweetest, meatiest you will ever eat. You can sample them, as I did, with a chilled bottle of white Faugères from Domaine des Prés Lasses, gazing out over the oyster beds, or you can find them on the menus of some of France's greatest restaurants: Alain Ducasse, Guy Savoy and Yannick Alléno are all Tarbouriech devotees.

With the oysters dispatched, as well as a terrific brasucade – a mound of slow-

cooked mussels in a richly savoury sauce – and a surprisingly spicy tielle sétoise (a kind of octopus pasty from nearby Sète), my search for great seafood continued inland, on the other side of Béziers at handsome Château Les Carrasses. Here, chef Valère Diochet constructs dishes of consummate style amid the glorious surroundings

of the château's orchards and vineyards.

Crisp-charred tentacles of rock octopus [pictured] are scattered with

Crisp tentacles of rock octopus are scattered with sesame

sesame and poppy seeds, shavings of sweet onion adding a gentle bite, a little pot of silky-smooth guacamole alongside; marinated sardines are paired with the freshest green asparagus, an egg-yolk dressing adding a sunny lustre. A crisp, dry bottle of Rocaille Blanc, made by Laurent Bonfils in nearby La Clape, is the perfect accompaniment.

Daurade – sea bream – is a splendid piece of fish, perfectly cooked, crisp-skinned and flaking at the mere wave of a fork. Diochet has the confidence and the humility to leave great ingredients to speak for themselves: the bream is dressed just with its pan juices, a few drops of olive oil, some fine, waxy potatoes and an artful scattering of chervil.

His sharp eye for top-notch produce is also evident in a dessert of roasted Roussillon apricots: their flesh fragrant and sweet, charred needles of rosemary – an inspired touch – adding a pleasantly herbal scent of the *garrigue*, and an almond purée lending the dish a rich, marzipan-like savour.

The smarter restaurants in this part of the world are often a disappointment – too cheffy by half, with otherwise blameless ingredients traduced by jellies, foams and drizzles – but not at Château Les Carrasses, where the fruits of both land and sea are treated with utmost respect by a chef who knows his oignons. Valère Diochet is not a chef who fishes for compliments, but he certainly knows how to complement a fish. **BILL KNOTT**

CHATEAU LES CARRASSES, ROUTE DE CAPESTANG, 34130 QUARANTE (+334-6700 0067; LESCARRASSES.COM).
TARBOURIECH LE ST BARTH, CHEMIN DES DOMAINES, 34340 MARSEILLAN (+334-9943 9758; LESTBARTH.COM).