

FRANCE COOKING

Wendely Harvey prepares for her students' arrival
La Combe is a classic French country house (opposite)

FRENCH LESSONS

Take a cook's tour of south-western France.

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Dining alfresco



Ingredient line-up



La Combe's backyard bliss



Aprons at the ready



Sharing tasks

The weekly plan



“The melody of a busy kitchen and the thick smell of warming brioche signals breakfast”



Set to impress

AS MORNING ROUTINES go, this one is hard to beat: waking in a cloud of soft linen and throwing back the shutters to reveal an 18th-century courtyard. Across the freshly cut grass, the melody of a busy kitchen and the thick smell of warming brioche signals breakfast. A table is set with biscuit-brown striped linen and Limoges porcelain – signs that you are in the Dordogne, a heavenly region of south-west France.

Australian-born Wendely Harvey is weighing up the day's options for her guests, who are tucking into organic fig yoghurt, plump French peaches, hand-churned butter and homemade jams. Harvey and her husband Robert Cave-Rogers call this “school”, but our childhood lessons were never as seductive or as leisurely as this.

La Combe en Périgord is the only English-language cooking school in the Dordogne, the cradle of French gastronomy. From this region, ducks, foie gras, truffles, walnuts and hazelnuts are all produced and shipped to the world's best dining tables. When the French newspaper *Le Figaro* asked its readers: “Where is the best place to eat in France”, they nominated the Dordogne. Still, 80 per cent of visitors to English-language cooking schools in France head to Paris,

Normandy or Provence. Harvey and Cave-Rogers had a smarter idea. Intent on opening their own school, they went right to the heart of gastronomy and a romantic, emerald-green valley called La Vézère.

They opened La Combe, a French country house set in 12ha of garden near Les Eyzies-de-Tayac, in 1999. It immediately attracted world-class chefs including Australia's Stephanie Alexander, Maggie Beer, Di Holiugue and Damien Pignolet, who taught classes of no more than eight students. Word travelled and Harvey and Cave-Rogers expanded the teaching line-up with some European and American chefs.

They now enjoy an international reputation as celebrated hosts, whose week-long cooking programs immerse guests in their idyllic bucolic lifestyle as well as offer a series of unique experiences in the Dordogne – a region that is also known as the Périgord.

Harvey and Cave-Rogers's Périgord is a crammed itinerary of regional gems – many known only to insiders. Guests tiptoe in half-light through vast chalk caves where *champignons de Paris* grow. They dine at the top-end, Michelin-starred Le Vieux Logis in Trémolat, then drop down a notch to eat at the family table in a rustic farmhouse. Of course, this is a sublime experience as the farmers' wives here are ▶



Truffle hunting



Marking the spot



Tools of trade



“ It is a crammed itinerary of regional gems ... guests trek uphill to chateaux and underground to wine cellars or go on truffle hunts



Books for cooks

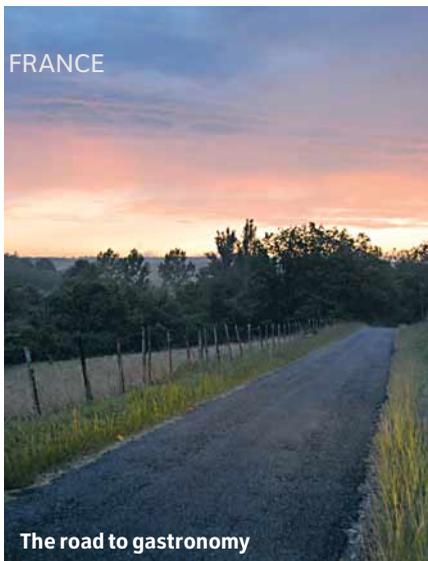
considered the true custodians of authentic regional cooking. There's a morning at one of the best outdoor markets in France, in the historic town of Sarlat-la-Canéda. Guests trek uphill to chateaux and underground to exemplary wine cellars or go on truffle hunts. From time to time they ignore food to visit landmarks like the 18th-century Eyrignac Manor Garden, an outstanding garden that has won the exulted Grand Prix de Jardins de France award.

When it comes time to get the knives out back at La Combe, the visiting chef sets the teaching menu but the theme is classic, south-western French cooking using locally sourced, regional food. On a typical day breakfast comes to a halt when Cave-Rogers steers guests to two cars. He and Harvey drive to a local farm to see a *découpage*, when the liver is removed from a fattened duck. Cooked later with guidance from Lora Brody, the top-notch American chef who is in residence, it is delicious, served with a little salad and a confit of onions.

Cave-Rogers has another private visit up his sleeve before lunch. The guests drop in on the last working, water-driven >



Le Vieux Logis



The road to gastronomy



La Petite Cabane sells typical Périgord linens



Chives in flower



Périgord table linen

“ They have all fallen for the French linen on the dining tables [at Le Vieux Logis] and Harvey adjusts the itinerary to take them shopping

walnut-pressing mill in France, the Moulin de la Tour at Sainte-Nathalène. The same family has owned this mill for more than 100 years and the younger generation continues to press oil in the steamy, fragrant rooms. “It’s organic,” says Madame Bordier, offering tastings and a little cooking tip – “drizzle it on grilled fish”.

A tapas-style lunch is slated for 1pm in a formal French garden under a trellised canopy of lime trees at Le Vieux Logis. Twelve small but exquisite courses later, students have discussed every dish, snapped pictures and made notes. “Let’s meet the chef,” says Cave-Rogers. His guests form a conga line to the kitchen to talk to Vincent Arnould. They have all fallen for the French linen on the dining tables and, sensing a desire to shop, Harvey adjusts the itinerary to take them to La Petite Cabane which has a bountiful selection of typical Périgord table linens.

Harvey and Cave-Rogers have a formidable provenance, which explains their search for excellence. Harvey has lived much of her life in the US, and was a former editorial director for Weldon Owen Publishers. She has commissioned hundreds of cookbooks, including the award-winning, 43-volume Williams-Sonoma Kitchen Library and Lifestyle series. Cave-Rogers has a background in marketing and has

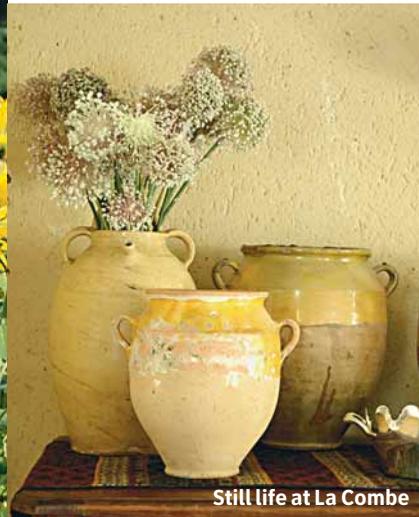
worked with two world-class hotels, the Mandarin Hong Kong and the Oriental Bangkok.

No surprise then that they restored La Combe with exacting attention to detail. The four large guest apartments occupy a former 18th-century stone barn. Each has its own entrance to the courtyard. They’re furnished with large, comfortable beds, lots of cushions, cane chairs, antique tables and pretty rugs. Bottled water and fresh roses are beside the bed, as well as waffle-cotton robes, fluffy towels and stylish magazines. The bathrooms are pure 21st century.

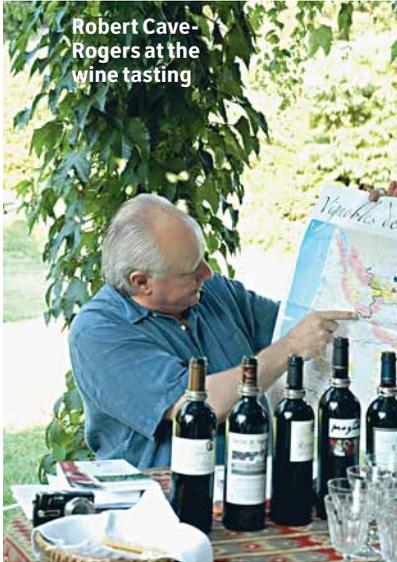
High above the dining terrace a swimming pool overlooks a kitchen garden with 20 pesticide-free herbs waiting for students’ scissors. Cooking workshops take place in the afternoon in the vast country kitchen with its stone walls, beamed ceiling and terracotta-tiled floor. The square, central table is laden with wire baskets and the day’s ingredients: farm eggs, vine-ripened tomatoes, fresh garlic bulbs – whatever is seasonal. Iron cooking pots of every size hang on the walls and a vast armoire holds wine glasses. Cave-Rogers pours a glass of his chosen house white for guests unpacking the market haul (artichokes, broad beans, asparagus); “Château Belingard Cuvée Blanche de Bosredon, a dry Bergerac,” he says. “Right next door to Bordeaux.” ➤



Sunflower field



Still life at La Combe



Robert Cave-Rogers at the wine tasting



Grilled figs



Lunch at Le Vieux Logis

“ On arrival some guests don't know a frying pan from a saucepan. But it becomes an even playing field very quickly

In a week, guests will cook three three-course meals, including spring pea soup with minted crème fraîche, herb-crusted lamb with truffled mashed potatoes, coq au vin, cassoulet, duck breasts, onion confit and some heavenly chocolate desserts served with armagnac ice-cream. Lora Brody, a chef who empowers her students with confidence, hands out recipes and La Combe aprons, and guides them through preparations. The cooking is relaxed but concentrated. “This is my third visit to La Combe,” says American Cappy Feuer, an accomplished home cook who is brushing mushrooms (never wash is the rule). “The French still have the reputation [for cooking]. And Wendely and Robert do one of the nicest things imaginable, they bring people together around food. And they have the patience of saints, even when a student sets more than the cognac on fire.”

The main house is ideal for relaxing as well as dining. Guests can choose to swim, play golf, canoe or cycle on the bikes provided. A vast stone fireplace is the focus of the drawing room, which is furnished with deep sofas, a library of 300 cookbooks and even more CDs.

This room comes alive in the evening when the cooking preparations are complete, guests have changed and are ready to enjoy the dinner they prepared. Cave-Rogers offers

aperitifs such as home-made walnut liqueur and chooses wine from the cellar. It's convivial, with conversation ranging from etiquette to how to choose a ripe melon and match a wine to foie gras. By 10pm guests who aren't ready to call it a day play board games by the fire or watch DVDs.

“On arrival some guests don't know a frying pan from a saucepan,” Harvey says. “But it becomes an even playing field very quickly.” Both she and Cave-Rogers have a relaxed charm that makes each guest feel they are the favourite at a country house party. They also leave a little wiser. “I look back and I'm amazed at what I've learnt,” says Feuer. “I just keep coming back for the friendship and the learning.”

La Combe en Périgord is 560km from Paris, with regional airports at Bordeaux (144km), Bergerac and Périgueux (both 40km). The high-speed train from Paris takes 2 hours 20 minutes to Angoulême, where guests are met by Cave-Rogers. Cooking schools take place from April to November. For the full program and booking information, visit www.lacombe-perigord.com

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