

Pink perfection

Think you know your garlic? Wait until you've tried l'Ail Rose de Lautrec. **Gillian Thornton** heads to the Tarn department of Occitanie for a taste



PINK GARLIC AT THE MARKET

Garlic – an iconic ingredient synonymous with French cuisine. Just a few cloves go a long way in flavouring sauces, stews and salad dressings. But there is garlic and then there is l'Ail Rose de Lautrec – the Pink Garlic of Lautrec – a product with a sweet, subtle flavour that is unique to a small area in the Tarn department of southwest France.

Less than one hour by car from Toulouse, the perched community of Lautrec is classified among the elite band of Plus Beaux Villages de France, an association that currently numbers 180 members. With its many artisan boutiques, half-timbered houses and a charming hilltop windmill – still grinding flour for the local bakery – Lautrec has plenty to offer. But many visitors also come to discover the famous Pink Garlic of Lautrec, holder of France's coveted Label Rouge status since 1966 and internationally protected by IGP status since 1996.

Legend has it that a medieval pedlar from Italy paid for his meal at a local inn called l'Oustallarié with pretty pink pods from his homeland. The hotelier planted them and they flourished in the local soil and climate – and their popularity soon spread. Today there are around 140 producers in this closely controlled area of the Tarn, some of them continuing generations of family tradition, others new to cultivation.

To find out more, I have come to meet Jean-François Tournier at his family farm within sight of Lautrec's historic windmill and church. Jean-François spent 25 years as President of the Syndicat de l'Ail Rose de Lautrec, helping to structure and promote local production, and although now semi-retired, he is still closely involved in the industry, not just in the farm itself, but also through the Syndicat. "We farm 28 hectares here of which just three hectares are pink garlic," he says. "The rest is for barley, wheat



THE VIEW OF LAUTREC AS SEEN FROM THE VILLAGE'S WINDMILL



L'AIL ROSE DE LAUTREC IS FINISHED BY HAND AND PLAID INTO A MANOUILLE, AS DEMONSTRATED HERE BY JEAN-FRANÇOIS TOURNIER, WHOSE FAMILY FARM IS IN SIGHT OF THE VILLAGE'S PICTURESQUE WINDMILL

“Bulbs are dried for at least two weeks before the stalks, roots and skin are removed by hand”



ABOVE AND RIGHT: THE 17TH-CENTURY MOULIN DE LA SALETTE IN LAUTREC; A TRADITIONAL MANOUILLE OF PINK GARLIC

and sunflowers, but those three hectares of garlic make up 70% of our income. Other producers average around 2.5 hectares.” Stringent criteria must be respected to meet Label Rouge standards, Ail Rose being one of the first products in France to gain this coveted status. Planted by machine during December and January in the clay-limestone soil, only five varieties of bulb are allowed and only on land respecting a minimum of three years of crop rotation.

At the mercy of the elements

Late May and early June bring the labour-intensive job of *despoulinage* when the stalk of each plant is cut by hand to promote the fattening of the bulb. Harvest follows in late June or early July by machine, launching a chain of manual tasks before the garlic is ready for market. Bulbs are dried for at least two weeks before the stalks, roots and outer layers of skin are removed by hand to leave a neatly trimmed bulb with a pink hue. Jean-François demonstrates how individual bulbs are woven together by their stiff stems into large bunches called *manouilles*. Like most kinds of farming, the production of l’Ail Rose is at the mercy of the elements. For Jean-François, 25 minutes of bad weather in May 2025 wiped out his entire crop: just days before the flower stems were to be cut, a violent hailstorm swept through the Tournier farm, flattening the leaves that nourish the bulbs. He shows me videos on his phone of

huge hailstones piled up like snowdrifts outside the barn door and across the fields. Happily for the industry, the hailstones fell in a narrow corridor and many farms were relatively unharmed, leaving enough produce for the Fête de l’Ail, which takes place on the first Friday and Saturday in August. This is when the sweet smell of garlic permeates the village as people watch cookery



CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT: THOMAS MASSOUTIER AND LYDIA DARASSE AT L’OC-XALIS; GARLIC ICE CREAM ACCOMPANIES DESSERT; PINK GARLIC SOUP SERVED AT L’OC-XALIS



demonstrations, buy local produce and crafts, and meet new friends and old over food, wine and music at open-air tables. Watch out for the giant *manouille* of pink garlic! Over lunch at L’oc-xalis, a stylish restaurant in the heart of the village, I sample Lautrec’s signature product. Here Lydia Darasse and Thomas Massoutier have created a gastronomic menu where many – but not all – of the dishes feature the signature local flavour. After a delicious amuse-bouche, I tuck into cream of pink garlic soup with black garlic oil. This *ail noir* is made from Pink Garlic bulbs that have been slow-roasted until the insides turn soft and smoky. To follow, braised ham melts in the mouth, accompanied by creamed endives and a dainty jug of delicate pink garlic sauce. And to finish? Rum-soaked cake accompanied by orange marmalade, chocolate sauce and... what else but a scoop of subtly-flavoured pink garlic ice cream? Delicious. As I leave Lautrec, I spot several devastated fields, the leaves brown, the bulbs rotting in the soil. It has been a bad year for many farmers, but mercifully a rare one and I think of Jean-François’ parting words to me. “I was born on this farm and every day, I look across at the windmill and the church spire in Lautrec and I feel lucky,” he told me. “Yes, it has been a tough year, but I’ve always been passionate about farming and my local community. I have my children, my grandchildren and the Festival Committee. Life could be a great deal worse!” **ToF** www.tourisme-tarn.com/uk



Lautrec Pink Garlic soup

- INGREDIENTS
- 2 L chicken stock
 - 65 g Lautrec Pink Garlic
 - Salt
 - Pepper
 - 260 g vermicelli
 - 2 tbsp mayonnaise

- METHOD
- 1 Bring the chicken stock to the boil.
 - 2 Peel the Lautrec Pink Garlic. To make

- peeling easier, soak the garlic cloves in water for a few minutes first.
 - 3 Crush the Lautrec Pink Garlic and add to the stock.
 - 4 Add salt and pepper to taste.
 - 5 Stir and cook for 15 minutes.
 - 6 Add the vermicelli.
 - 7 As soon as it boils, turn off the heat and cover.
 - 8 Take the equivalent of 3 to 4 ladles of stock and leave to cool.
 - 9 Add the mayonnaise, stirring gently until smooth.
 - 10 Stir gently into the soup.
 - 11 Serve hot.
- To enjoy this recipe in the Tarn, visit **Hostellerie des Lauriers** (hostelleriedeslauriers.fr) in Villeneuve-sur- Tarn, or **Le jardin du clocher** (le-jardin-du-clocher.jimdosite.com) in Lautrec. Recipe courtesy of **Tarn Tourism:** www.tourisme-tarn.com.