

MEETING OF MINDS

Laura Rysman REPORTING FROM *Corsica*: Rocky but relaxed, this French-administered, Italian-influenced Mediterranean island is undergoing an awakening. Artisanal industries and unspoilt beaches – along with new transport connections – are bringing a grande armée of inquisitive Europeans to the home of Napoleon Bonaparte. PHOTOGRAPHER *Alex Cretey Systemans*



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An island of rugged cliffs, Corsica is an overgrown marvel, a haven of white sandy beaches hugging bright blue seas. Other Mediterranean coastlines – the Côte d’Azur, Costa Smeralda, Versilia – may be overrun with beach clubs and rows of lounge-chairs but Corsica still retains some of its undomesticated wilds – and has devised a sustainable approach to development.

Corsica’s population of just over 300,000 is concentrated in its handful of cities, particularly in Ajaccio, the island’s capital. Here, pastel-coloured cafés are

proudly named after Corsica’s native son Napoleon Bonaparte; the bakeries prepare fragrant baguettes and the boules courts are bustling. Thanks to a regular regime of flights and direct ferries from Nice and Marseille, Ajaccio has always been well-connected to the French mainland; now, air connections from London, Brussels and Geneva are also opening it up to the rest of Europe. “We’ve been obliged to take a step forward,” says Ajaccio mayor Laurent Marcangeli. “There’s more confidence about everything today.”

At Ajaccio's Les Mouettes hotel, a pink 19th century château by the water's edge, owner Jean-Baptiste Pieri believes in careful growth that maintains the island's character. "I want to preserve the Corsican way, which is partly French, partly Italian," he says sitting under a palm tree by the pool. After five centuries under Genoa's rule, in 1769 Corsica became a territory of France and it still bears the imprint of both powers. The Corsican language, a blend of the Italian dialects of Genoese and Sardinian – with a smattering of French words that have crept in over the ages – is a telltale sign of its distinct history, a hybrid identity that is also evident in the region's food where *poulet rôti*, *pastis* and pizza are all on offer.

Chefs and producers, though, are devising ways to bring the region's cuisine up-to-date. "There's a new consciousness about winemaking first of all," says Julien Innocenzi, the co-owner of Ajaccio's Le Cave du Cardinal wine shop. In the past few decades, a territory that once produced mass quantities of low-quality wine rediscovered its indigenous grapes. "The young generation is taking over family estates or



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This spread:
1. Sunset views of Ajaccio Bay from Hotel Les Mouettes, Argelès-sur-Mer
2. Seafood at Bonifacio Harbour
3. Ferris wheel, Ajaccio



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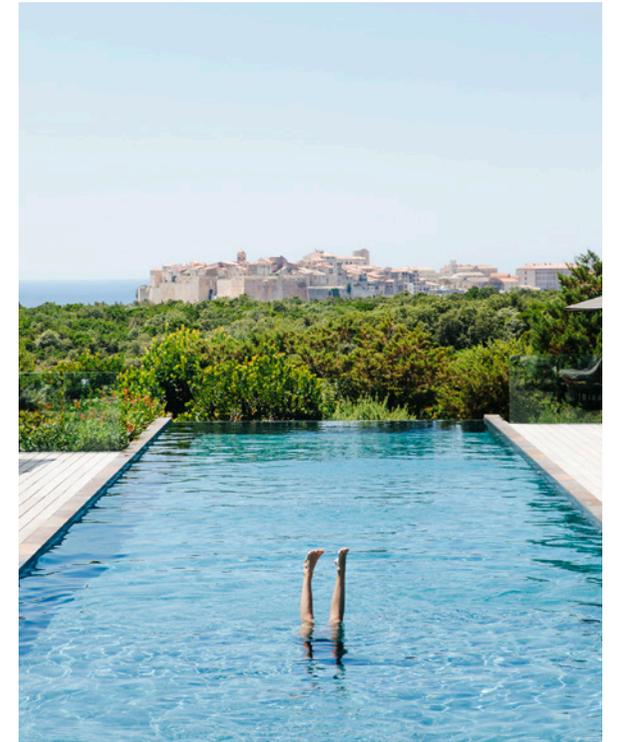
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4. Hotel Le Maquis, Porticcio
5. Pool at the Hotel Version Maquis Citadelle, Bonifacio
6. Waiter at Paillotte Tahiti beach café, Ajaccio
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1. Sausage and cheese at Ajaccio's food market
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5. Maora Beach, Bonifacio

Politics and tourism

Corsica is at a crossroads: the four-decades-old separatist movement agreed a ceasefire in 2014 and the détente is stimulating an influx of tourists, as well as restaurant and hotel construction. Yet new government measures promoted by Gilles Simeoni (the moderate autonomist who is now regional president) will protect some of the most pristine stretches, and locals are chiming in to promote a model of development that avoids the mistakes made by other Med locations.



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starting their own vineyard. They're experimenting with ways to take better care of the land," he says.

As with wine, the island's time-honoured delicacies – its tangy, earthy cheeses, pungent charcuterie and olive oils – are attracting entrepreneurs keen to try their hand at reinvigorating regional traditions. Sisters Emilie and Marie-Claire Le Goff run Maison Camedda in Ajaccio's seaside downtown; for the last five years they've been handcrafting buttery Corsican *canistrelli* biscuits using the region's honey, white wine and hazelnuts. Up in the island's remote, mountainous interior, where sparse villages of granite and limestone houses recall a bygone past, farm hotel A Pignata has become a destination for its top-notch Corsican cuisine. The beloved in-house restaurant serves charcuterie that owner

1. Manager of the Hôtel du Centre Nautique, Bonifacio
2. The baroque-style Church of Sainte Marie-Majeure, Calvi
3. Chez Ange's cave-like bar, Bonifacio
4. Bonifacio's World War I monument
5. Bar at Paillote Moorea, Ajaccio



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Antoine de Rocca-Serra makes from pigs he raises nearby along with vegetables grown by his brother Jean-Baptiste. Guests enjoy the isolated serenity of the hotel's surroundings and its sweeping views of the jagged peaks. "Everyone wants to build hotels by the sea but the mountains are about real tranquillity," says De Rocca-Serra.

Yet beyond the placid mountains some of Corsica's seaside remains almost equally pristine. Heading south on the winding oleander-lined road that leads to Bonifacio, beaches such as Cupabia and Erbaju endure as calm refuges. "It's what you think of when you dream of beaches," says a sunbather immersing his feet in the surf. Here the coves' chalk-pale sand surrounds blue waters, with shallow waves so crystalline that the sun refracts into rainbows on the seabed below. The coast is enveloped in the resinous perfume of the maquis, with its low brush of cardoon, spindly grasses and the occasional white sea daffodil.

In Bonifacio, other aromas are in the air. Walk down the narrow alleyways of the historical centre and the fresh sea breeze is cut by the musk of charcuterie curing in antique cellars, a smell perhaps unchanged for hundreds of years. The Mediterranean bay, now filled with yachts, sits below a commanding ninth-century citadel: a colossal but graceful relic that long protected the island from invaders – but today is just another beacon for Corsica's new wave of visitors. — (M)

▶ DIRECTORY

STAY: Le Maquis, Porticcio: Opened in 1949, this small family-run hotel mixes Grand Tour-style luxury, Corsican rusticity and a grandmotherly collection of antiques. The cosy, secluded destination features two pools, a spa, a tennis court and a private beach cove. Beauty is in the details, from the gilded china and sterling silver tableware to the heirloom brass water fountain. lemaquis.com

STAY: Hotel Version Maquis Citadelle Bonifacio: Bonifacio's first five-star hotel is a cluster of 14 private cabins around a pool located atop a cliff. Newly built and thoroughly modern, the design getaway is furnished with pieces by French companies such as Kettal and Roche-Bobois. hotelversionmaquis.com

LUNCH: Le Cabanon, Ajaccio: An unassuming pavement restaurant serving Ajaccio's best food, Le Cabanon is run by chef Nadine Micheli and her husband Loic Terrier, the waiter, sommelier and fisherman, who provides the fresh catch. Micheli's signature dish – monkfish liver with peppers – is a rare delicacy; most fishermen keep that part for themselves. [4 Boulevard Danièle Casanova](http://4BoulevardDanièleCasanova)

DINNER: Ciccio, Bonifacio: On a narrow alleyway, Ciccio offers delights from pastries to exceptionally re-imagined Corsican dishes by chef Gerald Larrieu. Locally sourced sea urchin, prawns and white truffles are paired with regional wines and served in a dining room with the snug feel of a wood cabin. ciccio-bonifacio.com

DINNER: Da Passano, Bonifacio: Among Bonifacio's many waterfront restaurants, Da Passano serves innovative island recipes. Small plates by chef Régis Mesnager are made for

sharing. The modern interior designed by architect Patrice Gardera, a collaborator of Philippe Starck, forms a dramatic backdrop. For a wide selection of top Corsican products, try the *épicerie*. da-passano.com

DRINK: Chez Ange, Bonifacio: In the butcher's formerly owned by his grandfather, Ange Viel has arranged his antique prints and flea market treasures to create this old-fashioned bar. Service is purposefully slow, the wine glasses are vintage and the atmosphere is of a literary café. Relax while Viel recounts some lesser-known chronicles of the island. [3 Rue de la Loggia](http://3RuedeLaLoggia)

SHOP: Aux Pt't Bonifaciens, Bonifacio: Filled with the perfumes of Corsica, Aux P'tits Bonifaciens opened seven years ago proffering soaps and scents made from the island's honey, olive oil, milk and other ingredients, plus the essential oils that are one of the island's most renowned products – immortelle flowers, orange blossoms, rosemary and more. "We want to use scents to recount the story of Bonifacio," says owner Laure Claireau. [65 Quai Jérôme Comparetti](http://65QuaiJeromeComparetti)

SHOP: Mer et Découvertes, Bonifacio: An Aladdin's cave of maritime antiques, this fascinating shop was opened by collector Patrice Arend in 1990 to purvey rarities from ships that sailed centuries ago. Among the relics are captain's chairs, telescopes and globes of the known world. meretdecouvertes.com

SPORT: Capo Surf Club, Ajaccio: From a pair of straw huts, the club offers board rentals and lessons in surfing, along with kayaks, outrigger canoes and seafront Pilates classes. Mare e Surf, the Pietrosella location, is situated on a calmer stretch of water; Capo di Feno has the most sought-after waves for surfing. caposurfclub.com