

# Encore Provence

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After trying--what folly!--to live in other places, Peter Mayle is back in his beloved Provence. He celebrates his homecoming by sharing with us a whole new feast of adventures, discoveries, hilarities, and culinary treats, liberally seasoned with a joyous mix of Gallic characters. The pauses for refreshment include an unforgettable meal in a converted gas station, a rendezvous with the very best bouillabaisse, and visits to eventful weekly markets.

But there is life after lunch, and we also discover a school for noses in Haute Provence, a gardener who grows black tomatoes, the secret of the oversexed butcher, a celebration of Alouine (Halloween) Provence-style, and the genetic effects of two thousand years of foie gras. There is a memorable tour of Marseille, a comprehensive lesson on olive oil, a search for the perfect cork-screw, and invaluable recommendations for splendid local cheeses, wines, honey, bread, country restaurants, and off-the-beaten-track places to stay.

Never has Peter Mayle written with more unabashed pleasure about his heaven on earth. "Provence, again?" one may think, seeing Peter Mayle's latest effort. "Has the man nothing better to do than promote a region that's already overhyped and overpriced? Can't he turn his eye to a place that needs a touristic boost, like Bulgaria?"

However, there are reasons to plunge into the third Provençal book by Englishman Mayle, formerly a Madison Avenue copywriter whose bestselling *A Year in Provence* made the area a must-see for tourists and helped to quadruple real estate prices there. After four years in Long Island, Mayle has returned to France with continuing adoration.

Mayle discloses a world missed by tourists, be it the questions dry cleaners ask about wine stains or the mysterious murder of a small-town butcher given to making housewives happy with more than his displayed meat. He also incorporates guide-like tips--listing markets, cheese makers, and the essential how-tos of perfume sniffing and olive-oil tasting. What's more, this book gives a peek into the life of a bestselling writer. The role is not always an enviable one.

Mayle no longer fits into life in America--the vocabulary alone is enough to throw him off--yet in Provence, he is regarded as little more than a moneyed foreigner. Speared by the British press, he laments, "One of my crimes is to have encouraged people to visit the region ... far too many people ... and people of the wrong sort," an accusation that he denies.

And Mayle comes off as positively defensive in his attack of former New York Times food critic Ruth Reichl, who wrote that she was disappointed in the region. The title alone of chapter 3 hints at the sarcastic stabbings to follow: "New York Times Restaurant Critic Makes Astonishing Discovery: Provence Never Existed." Page after page, he roasts Reichl on the spit, creating a hissing Ruth Rotisserie that's most unbecoming from someone of his stature.

What most causes him to sputter is Reichl's admission that she "had been dreaming of a Provence that never existed."

"Where had I been living all these years?" writes the man who's helped to perpetrate the illusion of a land that is nothing but lavender fields, sunflowers swaying in the breeze, and fascinating characters every millimeter. "The Provence that Daudet, Giono, Ford Madox Ford, Lawrence Durrell and M.F.K. Fisher knew and wrote about--the Provence that I know--doesn't exist.... It's a sunny figment of our imagination, a romanticized fantasy."

Maybe. Having recently visited Provence, I agree with Reichl's critical assessment. Therein lies Mayle's ultimate charm. Crack open a bottle of Chateauneuf du Pape, delve into Encore Provence, and voil! : it may be better than actually being there. --Melissa Rossi  
"Delightful, amusing, and appealing." -New York Time Book Review

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⚡ ⚡ ⚡ ⚡ ⚡ . The hor- write his own material . sorts in Grant's clever use of legal terms ror genre is surprisingly varied , as these ... Although older readers - familiar with Sandra Boynton ( WORKMAN / THOMAS ALLEN ) the tricks , tropes , and red ..."