

# what's new in...

## MONTPELLIER, FRANCE

by Sylvie Bigar

**Y**ou've been to Paris many times, St. Tropez without Brigitte Bardot is a bore, and Brittany is, well, rainy. There is, however, a town much favored by the French though little known to others. Hop on a connecting flight from Paris or on the TGV and head south to Montpellier, balmy capital of the Languedoc-Roussillon region, to discover secret abbeys, hip eateries, and earthy wines. Nestled between Marseilles and Perpignan, and a two-hour drive from the Spanish border, the city lies only six miles from the Mediterranean Sea. It boasts a gorgeous old town, one of the oldest universities in Europe (Université Montpellier whose medical school was founded in the 13th century), and a slew of new cafés and restaurants. Today, Montpellier is one of France's youngest cities with a large and dynamic GLBT community.

For art lovers visiting Montpellier, the **Musée Fabre** (39 Boulevard Bonne-Nouvelle. Tel: 011-33-04-67-14-83-00. [www.montpellier-agglo.com](http://www.montpellier-agglo.com)) is an absolute must. After a four-year overhaul, this now truly modern institution blends both the historic and contemporary, and features one of France's largest art collections outside Paris. The exhibit space has tripled, and light, both natural and artificial, has been architecturally molded to enhance each room and period. In the front courtyard, a minimalist mosaic of marble stripes created by French conceptual artist Daniel Buren welcomes visitors. New acquisitions include 20 pieces by contemporary artist Pierre Soulages housed in its own wing, a huge glass "cube," as well as masterpieces by Courbet and Bazille. The growing permanent collection counts such masters as Rubens, Poussin, and Matisse among many others.

**A**fter filling up your soul, cater to your palate while still at the museum at **Jardins des Sens** (39 Boulevard Bonne-Nouvelle. Tel: 011-33-04-67-58-97-78. [www.jardindessens.com](http://www.jardindessens.com)), the new, beautifully designed restaurant created by twin



chef brothers Jacques and Laurent Pourcel. Request a table on the elegant mahogany deck where you can watch the sunset play hide and seek on the black and white stripes of the Buren pathway while choosing from an array of Mediterranean small plates, each seeming more delicious than the last.

The Pourcel twins' name has gone global with eateries in Paris, Tokyo, and Bangkok to name a few, but they are most famous for their starred restaurant and boutique hotel in Montpellier, **Le Jardin des Sens** (11 avenue Saint-Lazare. Tel: 011-33-04-99-58-38-38. [www.jardindessens.com](http://www.jardindessens.com)), an oasis of beauty and calm in a residential part of town. Their typical Languedocienne cuisine allies land and sea with strong Spanish and Provençal influences.

For creative, market-inspired fare at more affordable prices, visit chef/owner Laurent Paufert's hip **L'artichaut** (15 bis rue St. Firmin. Tel: 011-33-04-67-67-91-86) in the old town close to Saint-Pierre, the towering fort-like, 16th-century cathedral. The luminous design of the space matches the artistic offerings on the plates. Inspired by the proximity of Spain, Paufert mixes traditional cooking methods such as "a la plancha" with the best seafood the Mediterranean has to offer. The small

menu changes every week.

On the magnificent Place St. Roch, the new **Kinoa** (6 Rue des Soeurs Noires. Tel: 011-33-04-67-15-34-38) is an elegant, contemporary restaurant all decked in a symphony of light grey and white, dotted with Philippe Starck furniture. Wonderful traditional cuisine made with lightness in mind will delight you as will the view of the ancient St. Roch Church just in front of the restaurant. When the weather is warm, bask in the beauty all around you and enjoy both the cuisine and people watching from an outside table.

In Antigone, the modern neighborhood built by Catalan architect Ricardo Bofill across town, partners Marianne and Laetizia have opened **Le Lérot** (14, Place Nombre d'Or. Tel: 011-33-04-67-64-85-78), a very reasonable, bright, and inviting self-service eatery offering fresh salads, assiettes gourmandes, and creative sandwiches. Try the refined smoked salmon sandwich and leave some space for the lemon meringue tart or the chocolate cake. At night, make sure to visit **Le Vieux Four** (59, Rue Aiguillerie. Tel: 011-33-04-67-60-55-95. [www.levieuxfour.fr](http://www.levieuxfour.fr)), where Christophe Reveil and Jean-Michel Viguier have taken over an old, 19th-century bakery. Within these ancient walls, Jean-Michel runs the kitchen, preparing luscious grilled meats while Christophe plays caring host. They are known for serving some of the best food in town, and their Thai salad followed by a mouth-watering L'entrecote de boeuf is the perfect combination. End in sweetness with a thick slab of apple tarte tatin served with dulce de leche ice cream.

**Y**ou can find the hub of gay life in Montpellier on Place du Marché aux Fleurs where the **Café de la Mer** (5, Place Marché aux Fleurs. Tel: 011-33-04-67-60-79-65) has become a true GLBT central. It is run by Michel Bonté who, ten years ago, courageously launched the first openly gay establishment in the area. Today, the brasserie has become an insti-

Photo: Celine Escolano

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Photo: Milushkina Anastasiya

### PEDALING AROUND PARIS

Many of Europe's big cities are coming up with green solutions that facilitate seeing the sights while not leaving behind the world's largest carbon footprint when you do. Paris is leading the way with the new **Velib** system of city-provided bicycles. Available 24 hours a day, there is a fleet of several thousand bicycles with automatic safety features (like fore and aft lights that come on as soon as you begin pedaling, and non-slip auto gear changers). A one-day, seven-day, or annual access card is swiped at one of 750 self-serve kiosks attached to bike racks throughout the City of Lights, and you pedal away. The best innovation is that the bike can be returned at any kiosk citywide, so you needn't return to the point of pickup. [www.en.velib.paris.fr](http://www.en.velib.paris.fr)



—Andrew Mersmann

tution as well as a symbol for tolerance and freedom. Order a glass of local Minervois wine and watch the action. The staff is very friendly and will gladly give you tips on things to do and see.

Next door, **Le Heaven** (1, Rue Delpech. Tel: 011-33-04-67-60-44-18) is an attractive new bar that tends to get hot and sweaty early in the evening.

If you have a car, or know someone who does, it is also worth driving a few miles outside of town to check out **La Villa Rouge** (Route de Palavas. Tel: 011-33-4-67-06-52-15), one the best gay clubs in the region. All dolled up in red, the disco caters to every taste with weekly themed soirées, a discreet backroom, and for the hungry, a good restaurant, **La Cuisine**.

In the summer, there's no need to pack your bathing suit if you decide to visit **Villeneuve-les-Maguelones-Plage**, one of the most gay-friendly beaches along the



Chefs Jacques and Laurent Pourcel

Mediterranean coast. You can borrow a bicycle at the TAM booth in front of the train station and head to the sea. Once on the beach, look for the rainbow flag. Close to the magnificent beach, you'll find an abbey, dating from the 12th century, surrounded by classic gardens.

**W**hen choosing accommodations, a favorite among the many moderately priced boutique hotels is **Hôtel Le Guilhem** (18, Rue Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Tel: 011-33-04-67-60-67-67. [www.leguilhem.com](http://www.leguilhem.com)). Hidden on a narrow street in the heart of the old town, it is steps from the Jardin des Plantes, the oldest botanical garden in France. The hotel occupies a 16th-century building overseeing ancient secret gardens and the stunning towers of the Medical School. Each room is uniquely decorated in Provençal motif. Even though the lovely breakfast, served on a tray and brought to you on the terrace, is plentiful, don't miss **Claude Lo Monaco** (8 rue Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Tel: 011-33-04-67-60-707), a fragrant old-fashioned bakery next door.

For a more economical (but very romantic) address, follow the towering 18th-century aqueduct to **Les Arceaux** (7 Boulevard Arceaux. Tel: 011-33-04-67-58-56-48. [www.hoteldesarceaux.com](http://www.hoteldesarceaux.com)), about a 15-minute walk from the old town. Again, history surrounds you as this pink baroque mansion has served as a hotel since the early 1900s. On Tuesdays and Saturdays, an open-air market under the aqueduct will delight both gourmet and bargain seekers.

If you decide to rent a car, stay at **The Lodge** (4 route de Palavas. Tel: 011-33-04-67-06-10-20. [www.lodge.fr](http://www.lodge.fr)) in the village of Lattes, a short drive from the center of

town. Run by Philippe and his partner Patrice, the lovely property is a romantic destination with two restaurants and a heated pool. The Villa Rouge nightclub is nearby.

**F**or shoppers, there are marvelous possibilities in Montpellier dependent only on your budget and the size of your suitcase. Show your love and stop at **Ollivert** (1 rue Draperie Saint-Firmin. Tel: 011-33-04-67-66-34-37), an unusual florist in the old town. Olivier, the artist/owner, works only with white flowers and has created a magical boutique featuring a symphony of green and whites.

Hidden within the Musée Fabre, check out **Sauramps** (39 Boulevard Bonne-Nouvelle. Tel: 011-33-04-67-63-91-46. [www.sauramps.com](http://www.sauramps.com)), the new artsy bookstore, and if you don't find what you are looking for, head to the main branch on Place de la Comédie. It is one of the last independently owned bookstores of this magnitude in France. For English language books, magazines, and even a true latte, go to **Book In Bar** (8 Rue du Bras de Fer. Tel: 011-33-04-67-66-22-90. [www.bookinbar.com](http://www.bookinbar.com)), a lovely space with a friendly crowd.

For unique decorating ideas and jewelry, visit Olivier Bardou in his gorgeous 16th-century boutique **Espace de la Luce** (2 rue Saint Come. Tel: 011-33-04-67-06-90-75). Under ancient arches, Bardou has created an exhibit space where he sells objects he finds in Scandinavia or Japan. It is impossible to leave empty handed.

In the **Polygone** mall (Allée Jules Milhau. Tel: 011-33-04-67-99-41-60. [www.polygone.com](http://www.polygone.com)), on the way to Antigone, you will find numerous clothing stores. There are few chains stores here, most boutiques are independently owned and offer sprinkles of glam, je ne sais quoi, French-style.

Whether on a romantic journey or a single's quest, Montpellier offers many options for the GLBT traveler. Its Mediterranean climate and cultural treasures make it an ideal spot not only in the hot summers, but also throughout the year. If you need help, or just advice, contact Hussein Bourgi, one of the pillars of gay Montpellier and the founder of the local Gay Pride. You can reach him at [Collectifcontrelhomophobie@hotmail.com](mailto:Collectifcontrelhomophobie@hotmail.com)

For more information on Montpellier, visit [www.sunfrance.com](http://www.sunfrance.com) or [www.montpellier-agglo.com](http://www.montpellier-agglo.com) ■