

France



A chateau that has George Michael singing its praises must be beyond most pockets, right? Wrong, says **Liz Edwards**

Domaine chance

The first comment in the guest book is from someone who's clearly had a fabulous time here at Le Domaine de Foncaudière. He brims with enthusiastic appreciation of the location, the food and drink, and the hospitality — a return visit sounds like a dead cert. It's signed, "George Michael".

Now I'm not one for seeking out celebrity haunts, and when I arranged my visit to this chateau in the heart of the sleepy Dordogne I didn't even know that the immaculately goateed star had beaten me to it. But his glowing recommendation did underline one of the many attractions of this chateau — that it's within reach of celebs and plebs alike.

If you do happen to be rich and famous, or just plain rich, you can blow a good few grand on hiring the whole estate — two luxurious suites in the chateau itself and four cottages in the grounds sleep up to 30 people. But if, like me, your holiday budget is less offshore bank, more piggy bank, you can rent one of the self-catering cottages individu-

Man for all seasonings... Vlado (right) is the chef at Le Domaine de Foncaudière (left) and also runs cookery courses

ally, and still have full use of the château's facilities.

Driving along undulating country lanes through lush woods, we first catch sight of the Domaine across a valley. It's a beautiful place, a hamlet of 18th-century stone buildings surrounded by 100 acres of fields and forests. The Dutch owner, Marcel, welcomes us into the main manor house with its hefty walls and steep sloping roofs. Through the library is the impressive lounge, and we flop happily on to the large sofa.

Marcel is more hands-on host than hands-off owner, and he begins to tell us some of Foncaudière's history — he's done his research into the ducs who built their 1750s home on the site of a 14th-century castle. Meanwhile, his friend Vlado emerges from the kitchen bearing carafes of local wine and platters of canapés. A big, exuberant Serb who spends summers cheffing and running culinary courses at Foncaudière, he's rustled up slivers of bread loaded with duck pate and foie gras, truffle and mushroom vol au vents, and *fritons de canard* (duck scratchings, but they taste much better than the translation suggests). The welcome is overwhelming, and although the similarities with my south London flat are pretty much nil, I feel right at home.

Marcel tears us away from our snacks to show us round outside — besides the pool, several barns and some gorgeous views over the grounds,



there are the cottages, carefully converted from their original roles as bakery, estate office and stables.

Each has its own garden area, and inside they're beautiful — comfortable modern furniture complements oak beams, terracotta floors and (of course) open fireplaces. They're fantastically well-equipped, too — bathrooms are luxurious, there's satellite TV and stereos, and the kitchen utensils extend to champagne flutes and oyster shuckers. Again, I realise with a sigh, these homes from home are better than my own.

We've decided against self-catering tonight in favour of Vlado's services, and true to

earlier form, he spoils us rotten. Wonderful bergerac wines accompany salmon tartare with truffle oil, strawberry and monbazillac sorbet, braised foie gras served with asparagus and raspberries, local cheeses, and strawberries dressed with balsamic vinegar and fresh basil. It reads, and tastes, like the menu of a top restaurant, but Vlado remains modest. "My philosophy is: don't complicate your life — keep it simple. I just use fresh, seasonal, local ingredients."

We don't plan to be quite so adventurous in our ingredient-gathering — the local market will do nicely, and Marcel and Vlado point us in the direction of Bergerac. It's a pretty medieval town complete with half-timbered houses, museums about the former port's wine and tobacco trades, and a suitably big-nosed statue of Cyrano de. But we're here to shop. Between Les Halles and the church-side market, there's a great choice of local produce.

Some stalls sell leafy lettuces, plump artichokes and almost indecently large spears of asparagus; elsewhere there's home-made honey, cheeses, wild strawberries, tapenade, preserved truffles and foie gras. The resulting lunch on the château's terrace is very tasty; the local rosé and spring sunshine encour-

age us to linger, admiring the formal garden and neighbouring orchards.

Foncaudière is the perfect place to loll around — but we're also in a prime location for sightseeing, so the following day we stir our stumps. Marcel has told us that, thanks to the hundred years war, the Dordogne has France's highest concentration of châteaux; following the course of the river, we spot plenty of cone-shaped roofs.

Castelnaud, our first destination, is not a château of the handsome variety, rather a hulking fortress on the banks of the Dordogne, housing a museum of medieval warfare. But besides the boys' toys, it also boasts the kind of sweeping views you'd expect from a defensive stronghold. Across the river on a high spur, we can see the château of Marqueyssac. If Castelnaud is all about war, then Marqueyssac is about peace. Its shady gardens contain 35 acres of box, pruned to echo the contours of the surrounding hills.

We follow Marcel's recommendations to visit the medieval citadel of Sarlat, try wine tastings from the local vineyards and indulge in more of that lolling. "We don't want to offer just a cottage or a room," says Marcel. "We offer an experience." And what an experience. Unlike at Club Tropicana, the drinks aren't free, but fun and sunshine? There's enough for everyone.

Way to go

►►► **Getting there:** Abercrombie & Kent Chapters (0845 0700618, akchapters.com) offers one week's self-catering in a Foncaudière cottage, sleeping four or six, from £322pp, including BA flights to Bordeaux. Accommodation-only costs from £210pp; Ryanair (0871 2460000, ryanair.com) flies to Bergerac from £37.02. Hiring the whole estate costs from £8,295 per week for up to 20 people excluding flights, plus £315 per additional guest. Hiring Vlado to cook breakfast, lunch and dinner for 10 costs £785 per day.

►►► **Further information:** Maison de la France (09068 244123, franceguide.com),



foncaudiere.com.
Country code: 0033.
Flight time: Heathrow-Bordeaux: 1hr, 35mins.
Time difference: +1hr.
£1= 1.44 euros.