

## Day 11 – Wine, Friendship, and a Perfect Day in the Aude

Saturday, November 15, 2025 – Beautiful weather, almost felt like spring

The day began with breakfast overlooking the citadelle — a view that never gets old — and with the company of James and Safran, Gwen and James' gentle dog, who made her morning rounds as if to wish us well. After this calm start, we boarded the bus, where Denis greeted us, and within minutes we were on the road toward Pennautier.

Just outside Carcassonne, Pennautier is a village often called the “Versailles of Languedoc,” thanks to its grand 17th-century château built under Louis XIII's reign. This is where we were headed: Château Auzias, a family-run wine estate with deep roots in the region.

We were welcomed like old friends by Maxime and Anastasia, and their baby Raphaël — the youngest member of the Auzias family. With warmth and generosity, they shared the story of the domaine: a property with centuries of history, yet firmly turned toward the future.

Our visit began with a walk through the vineyards, bathed in the soft November light. Maxime explained the French wine classifications — AOC (Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée), the strictest and most prestigious designation, protecting tradition and terroir; IGP (Indication Géographique Protégée), which allows more creativity and flexibility; and Vin de France, the broadest category. He spoke passionately about the challenges of viticulture in the age of climate change and the innovative projects the estate is pursuing — experimenting with grape varieties and irrigation methods to ensure a sustainable future for winemaking in this corner of Languedoc.

From there, we headed to the cuverie, the winery's heart. Surrounded by the scent of fermenting grapes, Maxime revealed the secrets of winemaking: the pressing of the grapes, the two fermentation processes (alcoholic and malolactic), and the careful decisions that go into making whites, rosés, and reds. We even saw the bottling line, where the final product is made ready for tables around the world.

Then came the highlight of the morning: a hands-on blending workshop in the bright and elegant Orangerie. Guided by Anastasia, we first tasted four different wines, learning to recognize their structure, tannins, and aromas. Then, like apprentice winemakers, we experimented with our own blends — adjusting percentages, debating flavor profiles, and laughing as we discovered our inner oenologists.

Once our creations were complete, we carried our glasses out into the garden, where we relaxed under the sun while Anastasia prepared lunch. Soon we were gathered around the table for a simple but delicious meal: grilled sausage with rice and seasonal vegetables, finished with a rustic apple tart — proof that food doesn't have to be fancy to be perfect when shared in good company, with good wine.

After heartfelt goodbyes (and a promise to return someday), Denis drove us back to Carcassonne. The afternoon was free: some wandered the cobbled streets of the citadelle one last time, others explored the Bastide Saint-Louis or simply enjoyed a well-earned nap.

Tomorrow, Lyon awaits — but tonight, we fell asleep with the sense that we had spent a day not just tasting wine, but tasting life itself.