



A noble manor house, added to over the centuries, sits in the heart of the Altavès estate, sheltered by magnificent plane trees (facing page)

An easy-going formality

Mas Altavès, Provence, France

Louisa Jones finds perfect harmony in a private garden among the broad fields of lowland Provence

Photographs by Clive Nichols

ALTAVÈS, a country estate south of Avignon in deepest Provence, is an island of greenery among fields of sunflowers, succulent vegetables and golden wheat growing on land irrigated since Roman times. On the horizon rise the silver crags of the Alpilles hills, often painted by Vincent van Gogh. For 25 years, this property has been the home of Emile Garcin, an estate agent of international repute. He was born in nearby Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, and has seen this pleasant countryside evolve from comfortable obscurity to jet-set celebrity. He feels that farming is the key to its continuing authenticity: as long as the land is productive, the way of life associated with it for centuries will continue to prosper.

This beautiful property surrounds a noble manor house, the kind of estate—much more than a farm, but less grand than a *château*—inhabited by landed gentry in Mediterranean Europe for many years. Nearby stands a famous example, where

‘Monsieur Garcin claims that Altavès chose him’

local poet Frédéric Mistral (who won the Nobel Prize in 1904) spent his childhood. In his memoirs, Mistral described the seasonal round of ploughing, sowing, shearing, mowing, feeding the silk worms, harvesting wheat, threshing, wine-making and olive picking as ‘a life forever hard but forever independent and serene’. Altavès once shared in all these activities.

First built in the 17th century, it was remodelled in the 18th and mid 19th centuries, when the present gardens were also laid out. These included the staggered plane trees, whose magnificent canopy, pruned high and wide, still provides cool summer shade, golden autumn colour and

a tracery of branches against the wind-swept sky in winter. Underneath, evergreen shrubberies of *Viburnum tinus*, box and other broadleaf evergreens are carefully layered, their upper reaches repeating the flowing lines of the tree crowns. The outer hedging has informal gaps in several places, allowing vistas onto the working fields beyond. Like many such old properties, this one has a dense stand of trees protecting its north and east sides, a mix of evergreen oaks and maritime pines shading wild box and viburnum. Secret paths offer shaded walks towards clearings that shelter a vast bird cage, a Wendy house and an archery range. To the south-west, a sequence of partially walled rooms encloses a parterre-labyrinth, a pool and an elegant potager. The original working farmyard and winery and a newly planted orchard mark the property’s western boundary.

M. Garcin claims that Altavès chose him, rather than the other way round. Living at the time in the home of French designer



Jacques Grange, he kept collecting unsuitable furniture that turned out to fit the new house exactly, once he had discovered it. The day he moved in, he became vegetarian—a commitment to an ethos that informs every detail of this place. He continues to enjoy the independence and serenity praised by Mistral, but finds his inspiration also in Asian philosophy. For, in spite of its generous scale, this green garden is very Zen. ‘There is in life,’ says M. Garcin, ‘what you see and what is invisible. For me, what cannot be explained counts as much as what is obvious to the eye.’

This is perhaps why he has found affinities with artist Marc Nucera, whose wooden sculpture now graces a fountain near the house, and whose pruning keeps perspectives in elegant balance. The peacefulness of the place owes much to a perfect harmony between open and closed, empty and full spaces, long and often crossed perspectives. But although this easy-going formality sums up a traditional way of life characteristic of the region, it also equals the finest works of design that proliferate all around, often on properties that M. Garcin has sold. The garden’s soft minimalism has a contemporary appeal.

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The estate at Altavès was long abandoned when M. Garcin took it on, but the structure was sound. He says today that he really understood what he had acquired after visiting the 19th-century gardens at Lake Como, where planting is also layered and where each tree has its own place. Here, as there, gardens are made for year-round enjoyment. Most of the Mediterranean shrubs are fragrant and many are winter-flowering: rosemary, *laurustinus*, *Photinia serrulata*. Colours are soft variations on green, or the greys and beiges of the bark of a plane tree. Some leaves are shiny—those of a row of cycads brought out in summer—and others absorb light.

Traditional *château* parks are essentially green, with colourful highlights throughout the year, provided by wisteria or a Judas tree. Instead of these, Altavès has its roses, notably a soft pink, beautifully scented bloom named Emile Garcin. This was developed by the owner’s friend Sophie de Brignac and the Guillot nurseries

Above right The parterre looks out over the distant Alpilles range. *Right* The pool house features a pretty mosaic fountain





Edible abundance: the kitchen garden's raised beds are generously edged with walls of local stone, and criss-crossed with paths—one of which runs under a tunnel of vines

(founded in 1829), and presented at the Courson plant fair near Paris in May 2009. Warm colours also light up the swimming-pool area, which is surrounded by local brick walls incorporating turquoise and yellow mosaics, and decked with pots.

The much-loved potager also adds its changing tapestries. This walled vegetable garden provides beauty as well as nourishment—food is important to M. Garcin. Year-round elegance and fruitfulness is an ideal that dates back to Roman times. The surrounding fields, 99 acres, are part of the estate, let to a tenant farmer whose only instructions are never

to set up plastic greenhouses on the land.

Why does the country life of Provence attract so many people today? M. Garcin feels that some places have a special presence, a weight of experience that, in this place, also has something to do with the quality of its light. This is a country that lives by light, wrote another Provençal writer, Alphonse Daudet, also residing nearby at the time. But also by shade, by form and space, by colour and its absence, by both the visible and the invisible. *'Mediterranean Landscape Art'* by Louisa Jones will be published by Thames and Hudson next year