

The good things in life

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23/02/2011

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AT HOME

A FRENCH AFFAIR

Living the dream in Provence



Amanda Taylor-Ace sits at one of her alfresco dining areas with a selection of French regional food and wine. PICTURES: BABICHE MARTENS

AT HOME NATALIE EVANS-FREKE

LUST FOR LIFE

Amanda Taylor-Ace had a dream and, through the sheer force of her personality, made it her reality, upping sticks and creating a most enviable life in France

For a year I had been hearing rumours about a New Zealand woman who had ditched drinking flat whites in Devonport and headed to the south of France with hopes of creating a more, well, exciting life. To find out if there was any truth in these rumours, I decided to track her down. And so it was I found myself 40 minutes' drive from Avignon on the slopes of St Maximin — a lazy village of fortified rocks that gazes gently down upon local Côte de Rhône vines. "Welcome, welcome. Champagne or rosé?" From her cheerful first sentence, Amanda Taylor-Ace, a former Auckland restaurateur, proved herself a wonderful reader of minds and over the next few days would continue to meet our every whim — many we didn't know we had. "Let me show you around, darlings. Bring your glasses." Taylor-Ace is in love with all things French: food, wine, men, language and a culture that is recognised globally for celebrating woman. This last bit, she says, was

monumental in her exodus from New Zealand. "Even as an older woman here, you are treated like a fascinating, interesting person. Gorgeous young Frenchmen like being with older women. Whereas in New Zealand, once you turn 50, my friends believe, you often become invisible. "Frenchmen find me a refreshing change compared to the French girls that watch what they eat and drink and perhaps don't enjoy life as much as I do. They have a saying about me that is 'je mange la vie' — I eat life." There is most certainly nothing invisible about Taylor-Ace — she oozes with passion and a wonderful feminine energy. And it was this passion and energy that saw her, 12 years ago, put her plan into place. She fell in love with and invested in two picturesque 18th-century stone houses in this Provencal hillside town, and transformed them into two self-catering homes. With a total of nine bedrooms between the houses, she hosts a steady flow of guests



Amanda Taylor-Ace's 18th century property in St Maximin includes a pool area and outdoor dining and the interiors are filled with French antiques and other local finds.



—mainly from New Zealand and Australia — throughout the year. Appropriately, Taylor-Ace named her business 'Joie de Vivre' — the joy of living — the ethos by which she lives her life.

Joined at the stony seams, the homes are everything you could dream of. The main house — wittily named "Maison de Maitresse" (the house of the mistress, as opposed to the traditionally named "Maison de Maitre") — has at its centre an imposing, yet elegant, staircase. Climbing its way through the building, it passes classic French antiques, charming wall hangings and airy windows, which look out over the pretty, surrounding countryside. Antique fabrics clothe the beds and sofas to create a romantic luxury in the bedrooms, while found local treasures are placed throughout the house. Altogether, it creates an elegant sense of rustic chic.

In the kitchen downstairs, the theme is traditional country with red and white details. At its heart stands a huge professional stove from which Taylor-Ace holds cooking classes throughout the European summer. Described as a 10-day culinary feast, visitors from around the world come to learn how to cook French cuisine from a host of local chefs hand-picked by Taylor-Ace. So popular are these courses, they are booked out well in advance.

Outside, two terraces overlook a huge and long table "if it could speak" would have tales to tell of the many alfresco meals that have been held around it. In the backyard, a fountain is another interesting detail. This, laughs Taylor-Ace, was squeezed into her convertible and driven back from Italy. "That fountain nearly cost a girlfriend a seat in the car, but in the end we all managed to fit."

Taylor-Ace has built her own private boudoir away from guests, in the cellar. It is a wonderful irony that a woman who has been engaged seven times sleeps under a bedspread made of "very old and very expensive" wedding dresses. There is never a dull moment when you are in Taylor-Ace's company. She will organise walking tours to visit uplifting sunflower

fields, old Roman ruins (there is 2000-year-old aqueduct just five minutes away), escargot farms, vineyards and more.

By the Saturday, as we dawdle through the historic stone arches of the nearby medieval town of Uzès, I am starting to see why such a drastic lifestyle change can end up being so worthwhile. As we pick up jars of fresh pates and bags of pastries, Taylor-Ace admits to pouring champagne and dancing with her grandchildren rather than knitting their cardigans and pinching their cheeks. "When they're old enough to go to nightclubs, drink wine and go on world trips, it will be me they remember."

It is statements like these that have turned Taylor-Ace into a mini-celebrity in the area. The woman who once smuggled an ocelot into Canada has a kind of honesty and vivacity for lift that has led to people coming back in droves year after year to visit. It's unsurprising that she has had two books written about her by Australia author Anne Rickard: one aptly named *Ooh La La! A French Romp* and the other *Three in A Bed*, which details their mischievous travels through Greece together, along with Rickard's husband.

While enthused by her nature, I am also inspired by her courage. Looking around, it could be easy to see her as someone who got lucky. But, in her own words: "I worked damn hard to get to this point." And it seems to have paid off. The lifestyle affords her the chance to spend three months in New Zealand over summer.

In the short time I have spent with her, she has me privately questioning the choices I am making in my life. And I don't think it is just me who had been led down her garden path of dreams. A flick through the guestbook reveals just how much Taylor-Ace's joie de vivre has rubbed off on other people's lives.

To find out more, go to www.joiedevivre-urimltd.com. Viva photographer Babiche Martens flies direct to France with Cathay Pacific which flies daily from Auckland to Paris via Hong Kong. For details of special fares to Paris, go to www.cathaypacific.co.nz

