

Limoux. Une étude affectueuse.

Limoux. A loving study.

by Katya Hvass

Sitting comfortably in a valley between the hills with the river Aude in its bosom is the town of Limoux.

Living in a shadow of its older brother – Carcassonne, it seems happy to maintain its relative anonymity. There might not be many books written about it, but those who need to know – do and appreciate it for what it is - a place that knows its worth, unassuming, and true to Life.

It is humble, easy-going, straightforward and upfront... Self-aware, but not self-conscious, earnest, perhaps, a little thoughtful at times...

With the best of all worlds in its vicinity, it is perfectly positioned equidistant from the riches of Toulouse, snowy peaks of the Pyrenees, sandy expanse of the beaches and airy vastness of the sea. Around it are landscapes and flora as glorious and diverse as can be – the rich array of hills and valleys, forests and fields, rivers and lakes.

It is of perfect size - not too big, not too small, not too quiet, or too overwhelming, but just busy enough for a brief encounter with the world on one's own terms, to absorb its energy and lift the spirits. Cozy and comfortable, it is like a beloved object that we no longer notice, but could not be without.

Its streets are filled with hues of grey and beige, with a little pink here and there, reflecting the gently changing light of passing days and seasons. Understated and simple, the colours of Limoux are precious all the same to those who take time to notice.

Its central square is its heart that beats fast, energised by the spirit of its humans. When the quiet night falls, it longs for the loud brightness and hum of the day to come back and start all over again – for years and centuries on end.

Its old stones reveal its story and wounds, having seen it all and then some more - the unholy terrors of crusades, the unease of religious divisions, the rumble of invader boots, the hidden fire of Resistance.

As its protective walls fell and rose, through floods and famine, Black Death and Black Prince - it surrendered and then regrouped, again and again, healing its wounds and carrying on as it always does – with quiet wisdom and resolve, with its unselfconscious dignity.

On a clear day the spires of its churches reach for the sky above so blue, the Heaven itself feels closer to Earth. As we walk its streets, the gargoyles of St. Martin's are keeping their watchful eye on us with the air of weary, centuries-long bemusement.

The spirit of Cathars lives on - the honest, inclusive wisdom of welcoming God in our hearts, with no need for church hierarchy or constraints of church buildings – anywhere, even in nature, with the whole world around us as our temple, no judgement, demands or conditions attached.

Every year it awakes from its winter slumber by the explosion, which is its Carnival – a vortex of colours, vibrations and sounds, whimsical masks and endless confetti that fill its streets for weeks on end, as if the town wants it to stay with it forever, never quite ready to let go.

We join in - physically - step by step, first – reluctantly and then completely and with child-like defiance, becoming one with the town, its streets, and crowds, fully immersed in a shared deep and rhythmic trance-like state.

Through changeable fates of trades and industries over the years, the winemaking remained its true strength, with the precious pearls of sun-kissed grapes transformed into the luminescent sparkle, which is Blanquette, its life force.

The Sun is expected to make its appearance here 300 days a year, but often misses its appointment with the town. The winds of Razès are always on schedule blowing harsh and cold and coming suddenly from all directions at once. They feel unsettling, but also - rejuvenating, as if keeping one's soul on its toes. Limoux is often spared - a quiet oasis in the valley faithfully protected by the warm embrace of its hills.

The tale of Limoux will not be complete without an ode to Aude. A moody shapeshifter along its entire length, it arrives in Limoux dignified and relaxed, tamed by the town's embankments and framed by the trio of its bridges - the youthful-looking Roman Pont Vieux, deceptively named Pont Neuf and the child of last century Pont de Fer.

The river rebels and shows its temper sometimes by filling the riverbed to the brim, but only occasionally. The rest of the time the town and the river are able to co-exist peacefully, harmoniously, and respectfully.

Whether it is in tranquil halls of Musée Petiet, in the bustle of the Market, the leafy coolness of Ile de Sournies or the happy hum of Café du Commerce, we all have our special little corner of Limoux, as it has a special corner in its heart for each and every one of us – never treating anyone like a stranger.

It welcomes us all, in its simple, unhurried way, whatever reason we might have for being here and for however long we choose to stay – whether an hour or a lifetime - and we say our quiet "thank you" in return every time, knowing that we will be back very soon...

Good night, Limoux, and au revoir...