

A Fête, IN SÈTE

CELEBRATING THE ESCALE À SÈTE WITH FORTANT

by Lana Bortolot

WHEN THE LEGENDARY SOUTHERN FRANCE WINERY FORTANT made the decision to relaunch its brand by purchasing and revitalizing the historic Skalli wine cellar in the picturesque port town of Sète, it needed to make a grand statement. Given the location, turning to the sea was a natural step to celebrate Fortant.

Known as the Venice of Languedoc for its colorful buildings of uniform height lining the canal, Sète defines itself by water: from the historic Canal du Midi, the 150-mile waterway that winds through the Languedoc (Sète is its eastern starting point) to the Iberian Sea. Not only a major port city, Sète is a major center of water jousting—an unusual form of sword fighting between costumed jousters on boats found mainly in France, but also in Germany and Switzerland.

But perhaps the city's most famous water event is the Escale à Sète, a 350-year-old tradition of historic ships sailing into the harbor and docking for a four-day festival, held every two years in March. This year, more than 150 historic ships lined the harbor, and the seaport filled with costumed performers, music, street food and exhibitions, including water jousting. The event attracts an estimated 250,000 attendees.

Fortant signed up as the official wine of the festival, with wine flowing at receptions and from restaurants throughout the seaside town. Fortant also hosted a party at sea with a group of 10 European wine retailers on the Portuguese *Santa Maria Manuela*, one of 17 tall ships that sailed in from Barcelona and participated in the grand parade, accompanied by traditional maritime musicians. This year, the grand entrance included ships from the Czech Republic, Russia, Italy, Spain and France.

“Fortant was born in Sète and has a strong maritime heritage: One of the symbols of the winery is a lighthouse,” said Laurent Sauvage, head winemaker for Fortant. “Those values are totally in coherence with the Escale à Sète.”

My trip aboard the Tall Ship sailing from Barcelona to Sète was smooth, with the crew entering the harbor on Tuesday morning, and we were greeted by street musicians at the quai as the city was setting up for the festivities to come. The evening's VIP party onboard the docked ship included a cooking demonstration by “Greenstronomie” Chef Jean-Luc Rabanel, whose restaurant in Arles has been awarded two Michelin stars, lending a little glitter to the otherwise sleepy seaport. ■ **cr**

For more, visit www.facebook.com/fortant

(background) Sète, home to the Escale à Sète, is a water-centric town in the south of France.



As we depart Barcelona, headed to Sète, the Second Mate surveys the horizon.



As we pulled into the harbor at Sète, we were greeted by a bevy of musicians and performers, all celebrating the South of France's wine, cuisine and culture, with Fortant at the helm.



The captain guides our ship into the harbor at Sète, after three days of sea travel.



PHOTO COURTESY OF FORTANT

PHOTO: STEFANI PINTO

PHOTO: STEFANI PINTO

PHOTOS: LANA BORTOLOTT

PHOTOS: LANA BORTOLOTT

PHOTOS: LANA BORTOLOTT