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PLACES

*The voyage of discovery is not in seeking
new landscapes but in having new eyes.*

—MARCEL PROUST

*Colorado men are we, from the peaks granite, from the
great sierras and the plateaus, from the mine and from the
gully, from the hunting trail we come. Pioneers! O Pioneers!*

—WALT WHITMAN

BECAUSE I AM A GEOGRAPHER, I cannot stop looking at, thinking about, or visiting places. Perhaps some kind of genetic disorder compels me to go to places, to study places, to compare places. Other geographers appear to share my malady, and they tend to use the word *place* with a whole collection of meanings non-geographers might not appreciate. We geographers see place as the interaction of all of a location's physical characteristics, including soils, vegetation, climate, and geology—much like an ecosystem except broader and of a much larger scale. We also think about place as the nexus of human occupation of and habitation on the land. In

this context, as characterized by *National Geographic* and others, place is “space endowed with human meaning.” Place may even be mythical or spiritual or psychological. I, like my geographic colleagues, see place in all these ways in our attempt to make sense of the world.

Even though I understand place through a trained geographer’s eyes, what follows is not a scholarly treatise on the subject. Rather, I offer in these pages a personal exploration of place, my attempt to endow meaning on two simultaneously diverse and yet, to my eyes, similar landscapes. Although this is not an academic study, I still see place and all its meanings and revelations as a geographer might—in this I am powerless to intervene.

The French use the word *milieu* to speak of place in the more inclusive way we geographers sometimes use. I like using *milieu* for at least two reasons. First, it is such a rich term in its complexity and its appropriateness as a geographic word. Second, because one of the places central to this book is in southern France, it just feels right to use this lyrical French term, which incorporates the physical setting of place with how people connect and sense a place.

The two places, or different milieux, in this book are perhaps what could be called *vernacular* or common landscapes and at the same time unique and special landscapes, depending on the viewer’s mind-set. I have chosen to reflect on these two spots on Earth for idiosyncratic reasons. My professional and personal lives are intertwined in these places and their landscapes. These two seemingly disparate dots on the world map are similar in so many ways (and dissimilar in a few). Some of these ways are subtle, some not, but the personal and professional convergence drew me in with an intriguing intensity. It was almost as if I was urged on by some internal voice to look more intimately at these

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places. I literally put aside all of my scholarly projects and dove in with head and heart to see where this would lead.

I hope my passion for the land and the people will come through in the book. Perhaps my look at the North Fork and the Coulon will spur you, the reader, to look at your own personal milieu with a new eye. I would also hope that the book will spur you to travel to places that may be special to you because of your own curiosity and for your own reasons. Maybe instead of motivating you to travel, the book will motivate you to become more intensely interested in your place in the world. As Wendell Berry might say, to become more deeply local. In either case, place is important and is part of who we are. Books about places serve as surrogates for going to those places, but my advice is to use this book as a motivator to instill within yourself a more insightful sense of where you are.

This book was born on an early autumn morning a few years ago. Carole and I had gone to Hotchkiss on a whim. The United States was about to invade Iraq. Our government was unhappy with our French “allies” because they would not cooperate with US intentions. Americans started doing silly things like calling French fries “Freedom fries.” One Sunday morning my wife and I read a story in the *Denver Post* that highlighted a particular inn and vineyard just outside Hotchkiss that were owned and operated by an Americanized Frenchman and his New York-born wife. Carole, whose mother had grown up in Marseille, is half French. We decided that this innkeeper could use our meager monetary and psychological support.

We stayed at the Leroux Creek Inn on that initial trip. I had just awakened the morning after our first night and walked into the inn’s communal hallway. I looked southward out the large, second-floor window, and the valley of the North Fork of the

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Gunnison River filled the landscape in front of me. The inn itself sits on Rogers Mesa with its mix of orchards, farm fields, pre-pubescent vineyards, and piñon-juniper woodlands; the large valley of the North Fork, which runs east-west, is down the hill to the south. Just to the north of the inn is the much bigger and higher Grand Mesa—purportedly the largest flattop mountain in the world. No one can prove or disprove this statement because there is no single definition of what a mountain is or how it is delineated, a point made in entertaining fashion in the film *The Englishman Who Went up a Hill and Came down a Mountain*. So the superlative remains as part of the milieu of this area of Colorado. Far to the south looms the plateau of Fruitland Mesa. Beyond this elevated landform, the main channel of the Gunnison River has carved the Black Canyon of the Gunnison (now home to Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park), a deep incision in the earth that is visible only if one stands very near the edge. Otherwise the plateau looks benign, just another run-of-the-mill piñon and juniper-covered upland of the American Southwest.

At that moment in 2003, though, my thoughts or vague impressions were focused on the near distance, on the young vineyard lovingly established by the inn's owners, Yvon Gros and Joanna Reckert. The vineyard is small, barely four acres, but the rows of vines marched away from the inn in perfect precision, the stems heavy with fruit. For an instant my sleep-addled brain found itself in Provence—not the glitzy Côte d'Azur on the French south coast but the rural farmlands and small hilltop villages of the Vaucluse and the Luberon of northern Provence. An instant later the mental fog lifted and I was back in western Colorado but wondering why the Provençal image had not flashed into my mind sooner. My geographer's sense of place—

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or places in this case—confused the two because they are so similar in an array of ways that were obvious once I really looked at the Hotchkiss landscape and the way people were using their small piece of the earth. That flash of sleepy insight set in motion my desire to chronicle these two complex, intricate, and intimate landscapes or places or milieux and share them with others through a geographer's eye and mind. What started out as a simple comparison of two like places in distant locations turned into a more complex and interesting task—a personal adventure, a phenomenological and experiential association with place. Much is similar between the two regions—the light, the valleys, the climate; and much is less so—the history, the geology, the physical makeup of villages. But the earth-bound feel of the land always comes through in both the North Fork and the Coulon.



Both of these places are political and cultural outliers. Neither place is central to the life of its society at large. Rural Provence might seem sophisticated to those from the McTowns of the United States, perhaps because we have been conditioned to view everything French as urbane. But to the French the Coulon area is not even a mere afterthought compared with Paris, Bordeaux, Lyon, or even the Côte d'Azur on the southern Provençal coast. It is a more blatant snub than a case of just being ignored. As an example, my mother-in-law would bristle whenever she was accused of having even the slightest Provençal accent. Similarly, Delta County, Colorado, is hardly a blip on the radar screen of the state's populous Front Range or in the halls of the legislature in Denver or for those whose image of Colorado is one of high mountains and skiing. Part of each place is wild, uncivilized,

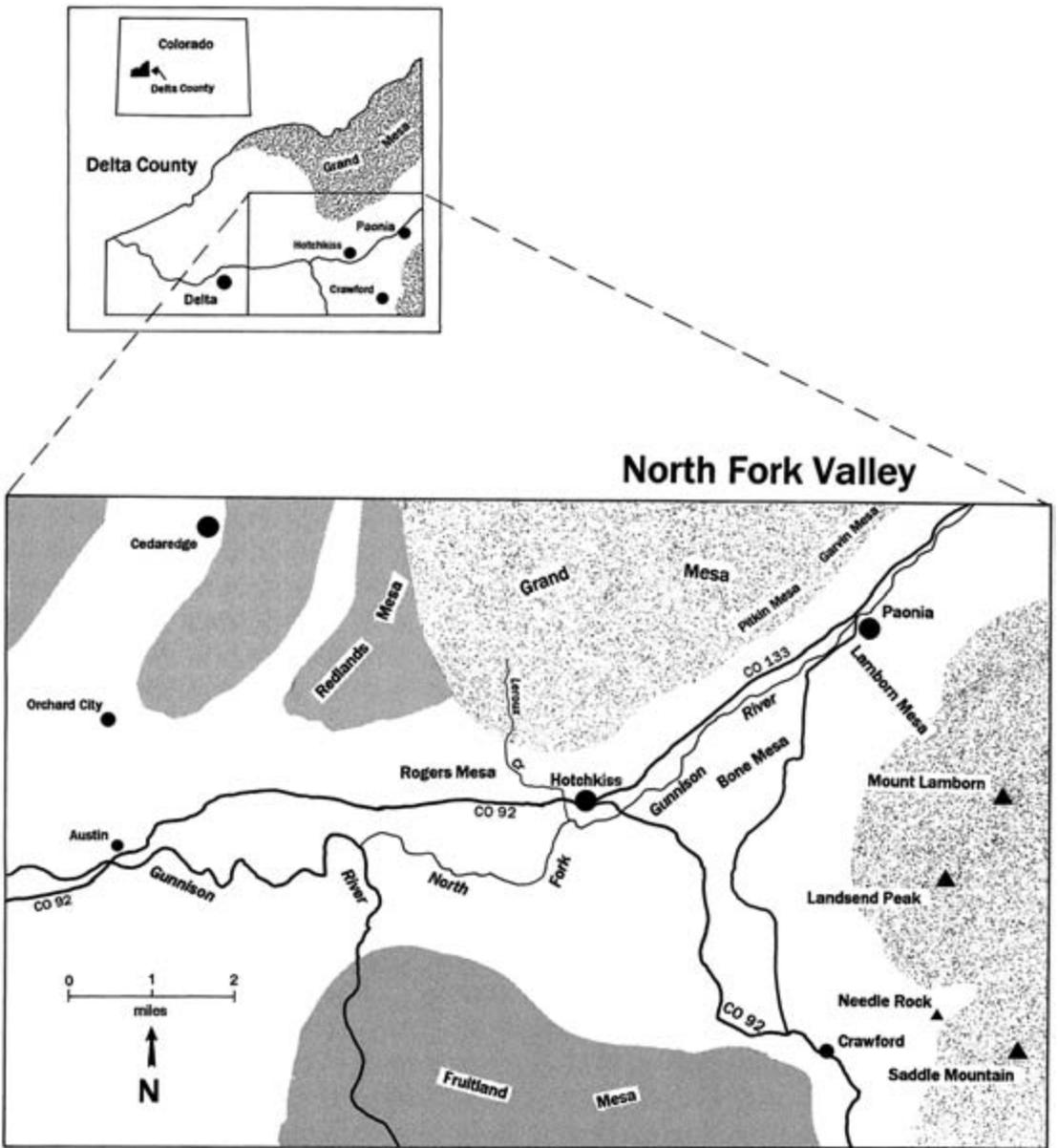
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and in some cases brutal, at least during winter when the two seem far from the comforts of paved roads and cozy habitation. The highlands of the Vaucluse and the Luberon, as well as their counterparts, the Grand Mesa and the West Elks, can be as rugged and isolated as anyplace in France or the lower forty-eight states.

Many aspects of place affect us on a personal level; most of them are common characteristics geographers use to look at a region's land and people in an attempt to evoke the soul of a place. The first foundation of place, and the one I will start with, is the physical setting and how it influences what people do on the land. In subsequent chapters, villages, food, wine, special characteristics, and other components of place will be covered in turn. As a geographer and a traveler, I have found that my geographer's eye has made my journeys more interesting and arresting.

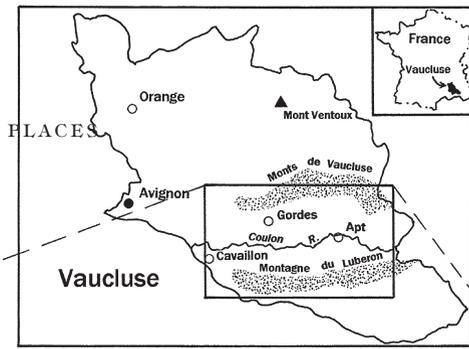
One of the most peculiar and special similarities between the two places discussed here is the quality of the light. This is especially true in the summer and fall when the sky is clear, when even the distant hills seem near enough to touch if only we reached out. The landscapes are writ large, and the open, hemispheric skies pull in those faraway elements to make expansive and intimate places at once. The quality of the light in Colorado comes from a combination of nearly arid air and high elevation. Very little light is scattered, so haze levels are low and the tones of the "blue" sky are a deep cyan color. This is especially true if we look to the northern sky in the Colorado high country—a searing, deep, unique cobalt blue is a sure sign we are somewhere above 6,000 feet and away from urban pollution.

In Provence, on the other hand, the humidity is higher and the elevations are lower, so there must be an alternative expla-

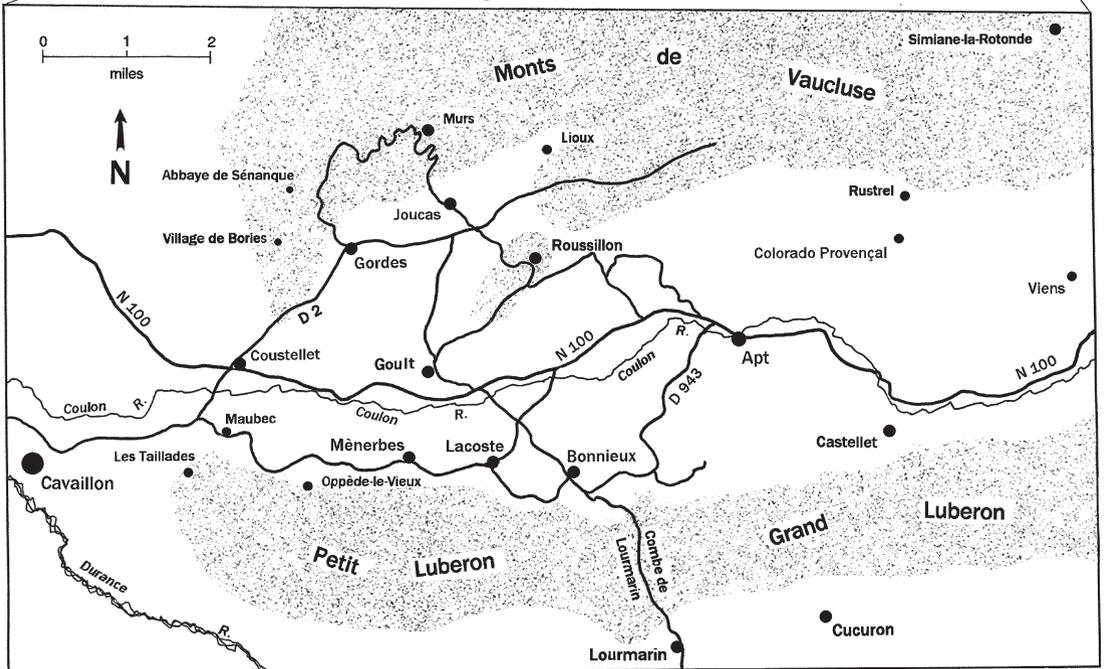


Map of the North Fork Valley of the Gunnison River, Colorado.

nation. The famous French impressionist painter Paul Cézanne saw the mix of intense sun and the vibrant patchwork of colors of the land that created intense and warm models for his art.



Coulon Valley



Map of the Coulon Valley in the Vaucluse, Provence, France.

In fact Provence's brilliant sun was too intense for Cézanne and his contemporaries during the heat of midday. They did most of their work in the early morning and evening light. Light was not the only reason Cézanne came to Provence, though. He purposely chose to move back to this rural, provincial part of

France. Author Nina Maria Athanassoglou-Kallmyer talks about Cézanne and many of his contemporaries in the late nineteenth century and their common move away from Paris: “[This self-exile] thus reenacted a practice common among contemporary artists forsaking the capital for one of the many preindustrial, unspoiled ‘elsewheres.’” Cézanne was looking for what he and other impressionists felt was the authentic artistic milieu provided by the natural environment (especially the light), as well as wanting to retrieve the traditions and cultures lost in the cosmopolitan world of big cities.

The skies of Provence and Colorado do look remarkably alike when the cold, fresh, and strong mistral wind coming down the Rhône Valley blows the haze away or the strong up-valley/down-valley winds follow the course of the North Fork to clear the air. At those moments Provence has the sharp edges and clean lines found in western Colorado. These skies of brittle blue go a long way toward making these two places examples of the “elsewheres” Athanassoglou-Kallmyer describes.

Another reason I confused the two places on that autumn morning is that, in terms of the land as well as the sky, they look remarkably alike. For example, each valley is drained by a locally important river running from east to west. In the case of Hotchkiss and Paonia, it is the North Fork of the Gunnison River. Although this river is a mere “fork” of another, larger stream, it is a significant waterway for this semiarid western slope of Colorado. The North Fork rises high in the West Elk Mountains, where several modest creeks merge just south of Paonia Reservoir about twenty miles northeast of Hotchkiss. In spring the North Fork roars with water levels up to or above the channel banks. In the late fall, on the other hand, one can wade across the boulder-strewn bed without getting his or her



The North Fork of the Gunnison River as it flows past Paonia on the way to its junction with the main Gunnison River at Delta.



The smaller, but no less vivid, Coulon River from the Pont Julien at the eastern end of the Coulon Valley.

thighs wet. The North Fork merges with the main channel of the Gunnison River at Delta, about twenty miles west of Hotchkiss. The Gunnison itself joins with the famous Colorado River (formerly known as the Grand River) another thirty miles west, at Grand Junction.

The Provençal waterway that mimics this Colorado river has two names, neither of which I have been able to determine as official. East of the market town of Apt, it rises from the eastern end of the Monts de Vaucluse as le Calavan Rivière. After it flows through Apt, the local name changes to le Coulon Rivière. This might be a subtle indication of how the French (and rural Americans) view their landscapes as locally owned and not co-opted by the central government mapping agencies. One might not even notice the Coulon in midsummer because there is so little water in it. During my first crossing, I wondered what small stream this was and where the valley's major river flowed. As I drove farther across the valley bottom, I realized that this little stream was the Coulon. But as in all Mediterranean climate areas, although dry and sandy during the long, hot summer months, the riverbed fills rapidly in the wet winter and following snowmelt in early spring. Le Coulon empties into le Durance Rivière and then into the major river of southern France, the Rhône, just south of Avignon.

The valley floors of both places are vibrant agricultural areas, irrigated in the dry summer seasons by waters from the main rivers and side streams flowing from the higher elevations to the north and south or from wells drilled deep into ancient aquifers. Provence in particular has a mature farming culture that goes back hundreds, even thousands, of years. The landscape reflects this loving and intimate care over the centuries. The North Fork of the Gunnison is also a blossoming agricultural area but with

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a much shorter farming history that is barely 100 years old, first domesticated by the “Anglos” who settled there in the nineteenth century. The North Fork is a less intensively cropped land with large hay fields intermingled with small farms, orchards, and the more recent burgeoning vineyards. In nearby areas indigenous peoples have grown crops over the last 1,000 years or so, but no one has found much evidence of this ancient farming in the North Fork Valley today. The most famous of these ancient farmlands in western Colorado are now in Mesa Verde National Park, a little over 100 miles to the southwest. Although families have farmed the North Fork Valley for generations, I still see this landscape as a quickly adapting adolescent trying to figure out what it wants to do when it grows up. The Provençal landscape, however, changes just rapidly enough to remain interesting. There are places, for example, where old vines have withered and died from lack of attention, poor land for vineyards, or poor viticultural practices. Other fields have been planted only recently amid cherry trees or apricot groves. But mostly the vines are old, the trees mature, and the fields well tended.

Although the two areas have their share of bucolic landscapes, they are both working family farm regions, with all that entails. In each place I have seen ramshackle buildings, tractors clogging the narrow country roads, cars up on blocks, and rusting farm machinery in the yards—the latter provide storehouses of replacement parts for some future exigency.



When I am looking at either place, especially in the early morning or late evening light with the sun’s slanting rays and long shadows, there are two things I cannot help but notice. Both

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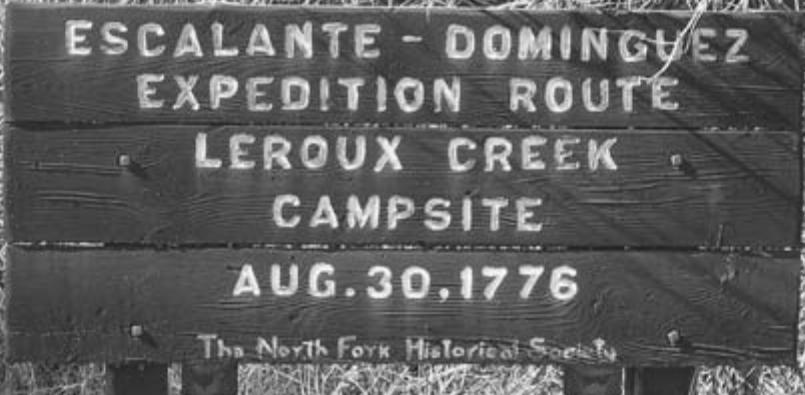
places are lands of intricate complexity, and they both have the palpable character of land that has been in use for countless generations. In the case of the Coulon, human artifacts litter the land. In the North Fork, people have used the land for thousands of years but have left their human artifacts only during the last 200 years or so. They are both what I might call grounded palimpsests—places where cultures and history are multilayered and superimposed. This is especially true of Provence. The name *Provence* comes from the Latin word *provincia*, coined by Caesar as the Roman legions moved up the Rhône Valley from the city the Greeks established at the site of what is now Marseille. There are cultures layered upon other layers from the Greeks, Romans, Goths, Franks, Vandals, Saracens, the Provençal, and the modern French, to name the most well-known.

At times these layers are so subtle that they are hard to peel apart. As an example, the ruins of the infamous Château du Marquis de Sade are nearly seamless with the rest of the village of Lacoste. The stonework of the village matches the stonework of the chateau, and the village and the chateau share the steep slopes that lead up to the latter. Many of the currently occupied buildings in the town and the chateau were built at the same time, in the tenth century. The fields that now surround the hill of Lacoste have been tended for centuries. There is little in evidence here that shows that the Romans or Greeks were in the area, but only a few miles east sit the wonders of Roman architecture in Orange and Avignon.

The Golden Triangle of Hotchkiss, Paonia, and Crawford in the North Fork Valley has its own long history of human occupation and use, but that history has been less intense and its settlement much more sparse, so it differs from the intense nature of Coulon's human occupation. Little physical evidence

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exists concerning who occupied (or at least traveled through) this land prior to the last few centuries. The Ancestral Puebloans (Anasazi) populated the lands to the south and west in places such as Mesa Verde, Hovenweep, and deep into New Mexico. But there is little to no evidence that they came as far north as the North Fork Valley. There is a substantial oral history narrative by



This sign is a nearly forgotten reminder of the Dominguez-Escalante expedition that came through the North Fork Valley in 1776, long before Anglo settlement changed the land to the present bucolic setting.

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Native Americans such as the Utes who have been in the valley for several centuries. The written record, however, only begins with the migration and exploration of Europeans who moved there in the late nineteenth century. A major exception was the Dominguez-Escalante expedition, which came through the area in 1776 on its ill-advised mission to find an easy land route from Santa Fe to California. As far as the specifics of settlement, Enos Hotchkiss and Sam Wade first brought fruit trees to the North Fork of the Gunnison in 1881 and 1882. This was the beginning of the land homesteading of the fertile valley of the North Fork and the orchard culture that still exists today.

Except for a few buildings that date back to the late nineteenth century, little in Hotchkiss's built environment is recognizable from its past. Generally, the remnants that do exist date from the early to mid-twentieth century, although things are changing fairly rapidly. Some of the changes in the town reflect a shifting economy, such as the old house that is now an art gallery. Others are indicators of the diverse ethnicity there and in the rest of the United States, such as the Middle Eastern restaurant on the main street. But what is most visible is the move to take the ubiquitous pasture of the valley bottom and create small, organic "farms" on two to three acres of land. After spending a considerable amount of time in the valley, I began to see these small vegetable and flower operations interspersed with orchards and newly planted vineyards. Even some of the lower-elevation piñon-juniper woodlands are being cleared for grapevines and organic vegetables.

One of my favorite things about the Hotchkiss area that is now visible and that has occurred for centuries in the Provence region is the complexity of the landscapes. Land use in each area looks like a patchwork quilt. There is a similarity in their diverse



A typical scene looking over large forest areas of piñon-juniper woodland in the uplands above the North Fork.

uses—both places have fertile valley soils developed from deposits of material that has eroded from the hills to the north and south. These soils are often deep and easily worked, and they produce verdant crops if water is available during the growing season. The uplands in both places are covered with drought-resistant plants. When I look at these hills from a distance, I can barely tell the difference between those of Provence and those above Hotchkiss and Paonia. During my years in Colorado, I have developed the knack of recognizing specific forest types from afar; but I cannot distinguish the forms, colors, and structure of these two landscapes. The piñon-juniper, Gambel oak,



The Vaucluse garrigue has semiarid-adapted vegetation similar to the piñon-juniper woodland, including pines and junipers of various other species. The area's cliffs and mountains are even more rugged than the mesas and mountains above the North Fork.

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and serviceberry of the mesas above Hotchkiss are replaced in Provence by the Aleppo pine, green oak, and English holly; and the searing summer sun and cold winter winds are at least as intense in Provence as they are in Colorado.



But neither of these places is merely a bucolic setting for some quaint, nostalgic ideal. These are both places, milieux, of contrast, contradiction, and complexity. Although the valleys are often lush, at least where irrigation water is available, there is a much less civilized, even brutal beauty to the bordering uplands. High above the North Fork Valley, for example, rises the Grand Mesa, which was forged from the molten inferno of volcanic lava (basalt) flows. We can barely imagine the sight of this flowing rock unless we go to the island of Hawaii during one of its many eruptions. The lava is now a cold, frozen fossil of once liquid rock, and the slopes are now steep.

The Vaucluse parallels these rugged and intense landscapes. The rock of the uplands is limestone, not basalt, but the evidence of past geologic violence is still frozen in time here as well. All one needs to do is look at the Cliffs of Lioux (called the Falaise de la Madeleine by the locals), for example. These cliffs are over 2,000 feet (700 meters) long and 330 feet (100 meters) high and were abruptly created during a violent collision between two tectonic plates around 35 million years ago.



When one visits either the Vaucluse of southern France or the Golden Triangle of western Colorado, he or she cannot help but

notice how warm it is during the parched summer months, with the intense sunshine and few shading clouds. One day in Apt after a leisurely outdoor lunch (sitting in the shade, of course), we returned to a car that had an inside temperature of 130° F. The only people who do not dart from shady spot to shady spot along the streets of a Provençal town are sweaty tourists (English most likely—at least according to Noël Coward) who do not have the sense to get out of the midday sun. Everyone eats their prodigious lunches outside on patios. But there is always a battle for the shady tables or at least for a seat near one of the ubiquitous misters at Provençal patio cafés that squirt diners with cooling water that evaporates quickly and lowers their spiraling body temperature.

Travel in winter in either of the two valleys can provide a broad spectrum of possible experiences. In both the North Fork and the Coulon, the cool, crisp winter days can be a refreshing and invigorating antithesis to the oven-like summers. Cool breezes, little snow, clear skies, and the promise of another tomorrow are typical. But the spectrum has another side as well. The North Fork can be inundated by heavy snow, strong winds, and icy roads for days on end. In the Coulon the nemesis that is always lurking in the winter is the mistral. The cold, hurricane-force winds roar down the Rhône into Provence from the high Alps. Provence is renowned in France for these ferocious, cold winds, which can lower temperatures by 30° F in fifteen minutes, last for days, and make life miserable for everyone and everything—including the grapevines. While driving through the vineyard areas in the Coulon Valley on one of my early trips to the area, I could not figure out why all the grapevines were only four or five feet tall. They looked like some kind of midget variety compared with vines I had seen in many other parts of

the world, including Hotchkiss. I subsequently learned that they are pruned and trained especially so the mistral will not rip them from the ground. Taller vines could not withstand days of the 60-mile-per-hour (100-kilometer-per-hour) winds attained by this usually unwelcome winter visitor.

Rain and snow in both places can be intense yet sporadic and often leave impressions from which memories are forged. While at another small town located along the Coulon Valley floor, during one week in July we experienced a series of afternoon thunderstorms on consecutive days that blackened the sky, cooled temperatures, and dropped a small amount of rain. For six or seven days in a row, we could have set our watches by the consistent timing of the storms. We were told by the locals that this was very uncommon for a summer week. I tend to believe them, although when people tell me the bad weather I am experiencing wherever I am is unusual, I rarely trust their objectivity. I believe the Provençal in this case, however, because of one dinnertime scramble. During the summer in all of Provence there is an unwritten rule that one eats every meal outside. Even with the thunderstorms, the rain almost always passes in time for restaurants to dry the chairs and tables quickly right before dinner—a serendipity aided by the fact that we always ate late (at least by Colorado standards). One evening the thunderstorms continued unabated and intensely. Everyone ate at the same time at the inn, as is common in many small French restaurants, so we all waited for the storm to pass, but it only did so late in the night. At the last possible second before dinner was to be served, all the restaurant staff—including waiters, chef, sous chef, and bus person—rushed out, cleared the tables of their cutlery, and set up dinner inside. A friendly buzz in the restaurant during the meal belied the adventurous nature of indoor eating at this time of



Typical irrigation ditch coming off the North Fork. Much of the North Fork land is flood-irrigated. The rest of the water comes from wells.



Portable irrigation sprinkler used throughout the Vaucluse.

year. If this had been a usual occurrence, the good-natured thrill of having defeated the weather gods, shared by staff and diners alike, would probably not have occurred.

Climate is a collection and averaging of the often quite varied weather that occurs in a place, and these two places probably have weather as varied as one will find most anywhere. What this means, obviously, is that if you are a farmer or a viticulturalist, you cannot depend on the temperature to remain docile or the rain to fall. Little can be done about the temperature, but clever humans have learned to augment the rain quite efficiently. Both places practice extensive irrigation, although the North Fork and western Colorado rely much more heavily on irrigation than does Provence.

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This is the case in part because in most wine appellations in France, strict wine production rules prohibit the irrigation of grapevines. This ensures a “natural” product and probably also ensures ulcers for the viticulturalist. In the Côtes du Luberon appellation, however, because of the vagaries of climate, grape growers can irrigate until Bastille Day (July 14). This date appears to have been chosen more for symbolism than as a result of any careful climate analysis. Nonetheless, irrigation is an acceptable practice here as opposed to many other appellations in France. Other crops are also irrigated, but they do not share the strict regulations regarding when, where, and how much water to apply.

In the North Fork nearly every crop needs to be irrigated, including grapes, and no comparable regulations prohibit vineyard irrigation. Some irrigation is from center-pivot irrigation sprinklers and some from movable pipes, both of which draw water from underground aquifers. Most farmers and ranchers in this area, however, use surface water running through canals and acequias that get their water from the Grand Mesa and other surrounding mountains. Skill is required to align the grapevines or other crops so the running water flows down the rows and wets each plant equitably. Irrigation in the North Fork Valley is literally the lifeblood of farming and ranching. Without it this place would look much more like a true desert than a quilt of vibrant fields and vineyards.

Despite human efforts to mitigate climate through artificial means such as irrigation, wild swings in weather are normal for both the Coulon and North Fork Valleys. I seldom expect to find poetic allusions in Chamber of Commerce propaganda, but the Hotchkiss chamber’s website surprised me with an apt and lyrical phrase when it stated that in the North Fork Valley dur-

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ing March and April, “winter dances with spring.” What an elegant way to say that the seasons ebb and flow from the gorgeous to the annoying or even brutal and back again. One morning dawns a beautiful spring day, and by nightfall there are six inches of snow on the ground. Fortunately, by the next day the snow is probably gone, and the crocuses have again emerged from under their white blanket.

Luckily for both regions, the gorgeous weather in any season far outweighs the brutal. Winter days are often spectacular; fall weather, with its rich colors, is the best; spring is welcomed with great expectation and enthusiasm; and summer’s heat and sun ripen the grapes and make the melons sweet.



Each of us carries our own ideas, prejudices, and understanding of a place—particularly the place we call home. When we go somewhere new, we experience that new place through the tinted glasses of our past experience. Maybe my own glasses have been colored by my forty-plus-year love affair with Colorado, but I see and feel many similarities, albeit with some significant differences, between the landscapes of the Hotchkiss area in western Colorado and the Vaucluse/Luberon region in Provence. These similarities and differences are what make individual landscapes interesting, what give them meaning to the person experiencing them.