

By Steve Werblow

Gardians ride on

French horsemen maintain colorful traditions in the Rhône wetlands

A dozen riders splash through the marsh, spacing out their compact, white horses to form a picket a half-mile long. A horseman breaks from the line, herding a string of rangy bulls at a full gallop. The group forms a wedge that pushes the bulls through bunch-grass and ankle-deep water towards a chute in the trees. There, another dozen volunteers hunker down beside the concrete chute or lie still atop a 25-foot-long cattle truck made of thick planks butt-ed up tight enough to hold water.

Final push. Thirty yards from the truck, the bulls, horses, and riders take a breather, carefully appraising each other. Then the final push is on. Riders yell, hooves pound, manes fly, and six bulls charge into the back of the truck. The steel doors clang like the gate of a dungeon. The wranglers on top of the truck spring to their feet and balance on wooden planks, dropping ropes into the cargo bay to snare the bulls' horns and lash them firmly to the roof beams.

The truck pulls out to a local arena, where the bulls will face off against fleet-footed bull-fighters in a unique contest—a *course Camarguaise*, in which the young men will pluck ribbons off the bulls' horns and foreheads and run for all their worth to jump out of the ring.

Long tradition. The riders walk their horses back to their trailers, planning for lunch and a glass of local wine. They brush the pure white coats that distinguish the local horse of the Camargue, the marshy delta of France's Rhône River where hard-charging traditions live on in the sturdy, little horses, the feisty fighting bulls, and the rugged riders who call themselves the *gardians*.

Jacques Mailhan, the bull owner who led the riders, is a proud *gardian*. With about 5,000 acres of rice, grain, and pasture and a *manade*,

► **Large photo:** Gardians round up fighting bulls in the *marais*, or marsh, of the Camargue in southern France.

► **Above inset:** Raoul Mailhan prepares for the 500-year-old procession of gardians, or Camargue cowboys, in Arles.





►Above: In a Camarguaise bullfight, the fighters—called *raseteurs*—snatch ribbons from the bulls, then leap to safety. ►Left: A *raseteur* grabs for the *cocarde*, the ribbon on a bull's forehead—and the prize with the highest bonus.

or herd, of 500 bulls and horses, he is both an agricultural and civic leader. Pushing 60, he has the bearing and gravity of a man's man. Big, broad, and quiet, with a little limp in his step and a twinkle in his eye, he's passionate about the *gardian* heritage, the challenging landscape, and the future of local agriculture.

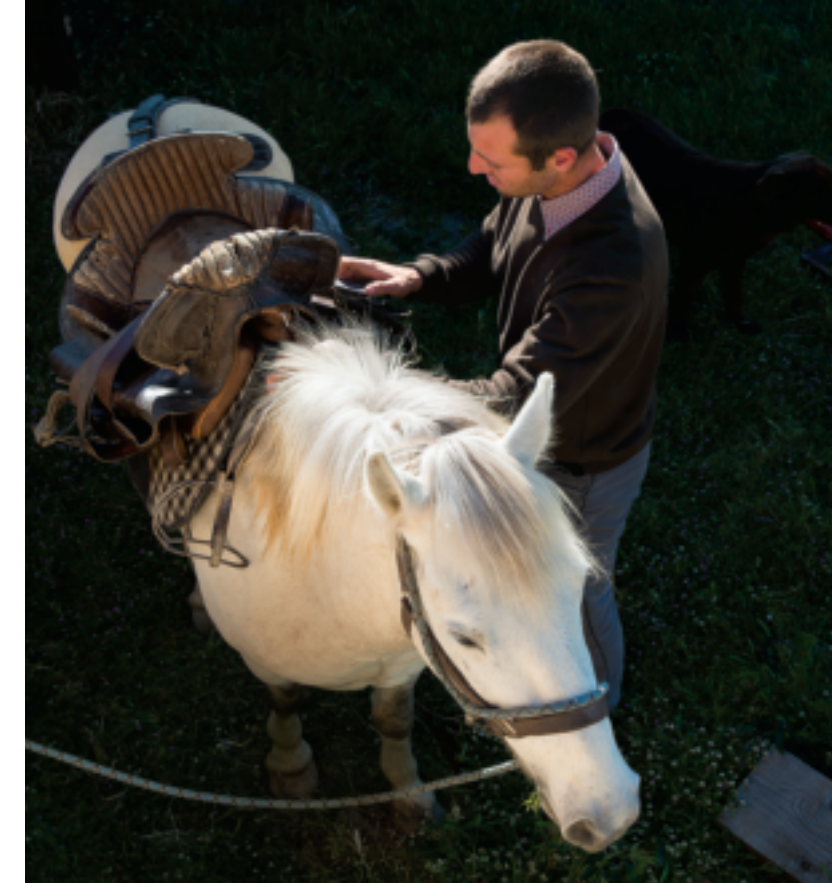
Mailhan and his brother Pascal are among 150 *manadiers*, professional Camargue cattlemen. They have a couple of hired men, but rely on volunteers to handle bulls for the fight season.

"They're really fond of moving the bulls and riding in the country," Mailhan says as his wife translates. "In the spring and summer, we keep their horses in the paddock. In exchange, it really helps us. If it were just us, Jean Claude, and Pascal, it would be very difficult."

Claire Mailhan, Jacques' wife, adds that diversification—including guest cottages, wheat and rice farming, and explaining the *gardian* culture to French tour groups—keeps the lights on in the family's 900-year-old home.

"Each activity is not sufficient," Claire points out. "The tourism and the other activities allow us to maintain the cattle."

Not long afterwards, a tour group pulls up



in a bus from Paris. Jacques gets on his horse and shows the group the working symbol of the *gardian*, a seven-foot stick crowned with a shallow steel trident. *Gardians* use the trident to prod bulls, or to trip them and bring them under control. Behind Mailhan, a group of riders lines up their mounts and files into the farm's little *course Camarguaise* arena for some show-and-tell and a bit of vital discovery.

Testing ground. The riders, ranging in age from their 20s to their 60s, demonstrate a classic *gardian* game of keep-away, galloping fast and turning hard in a spirited effort to grab a bouquet of flowers. Mailhan wrangler Clement Borrelly wrestles a bull to the ground.

Then a budding generation of *raseteurs*

►Top: Clement Borrelly saddles his Camargue horse, a small working breed renowned for smarts and hardiness. ►Above: Riders organize an *abrivado*, controlling bulls in a wedge of horses.



►Above: Arlesian women celebrate the Gardian Festival on May 1 in a parade of exquisite, antique French fashions.

marches into the ring. Muscular young men in their teens and 20s, they are students of the art of the *course Camarguaise* at a nearby school. Today's bulls are yearlings, and their horns are capped with metal balls for safety. The *raseteurs* will grab for the ribbons and practice their skills, and Mailhan will analyze his new crop of bulls for up-and-coming stars.

A young *raseteur* slowly approaches a bull. They lock eyes. The boy charges the bull, snags a bow from the animal's forehead with a comb-like *crochet* in his palm, and runs. The toe of his sneaker catches a two-by-four in the inner arena wall and he launches himself over the wooden barrier, landing splat on the eight-foot outer wall like Spider-Man. Other *raseteurs* try distracting the bull by feinting at him from around the arena, but he stays focused on the runner. He leaps, jumps the inner wall, and flops back into the ring. Both show promise.

In the *course Camarguaise*, both man and

beast can become celebrities. Manade Mailhan's superstar bull, Rami, enjoyed a 19-year career in the ring, and rests in peace beneath a massive monument outside the house. Mailhan is always looking for the next Rami.

"He has to be beautiful, he has to be intelligent, he has to know how to find the good place in the arena over the men, and he has to be impressive," Mailhan explains. "We expect him to anticipate the action, to start before the men, to get to the fence before the men."

A good bull helps the whole string earn contracts—and premiums—as breeders jockey to supply bulls to 900 *courses* every season.

"When it's a star like Rami or St. Remois,

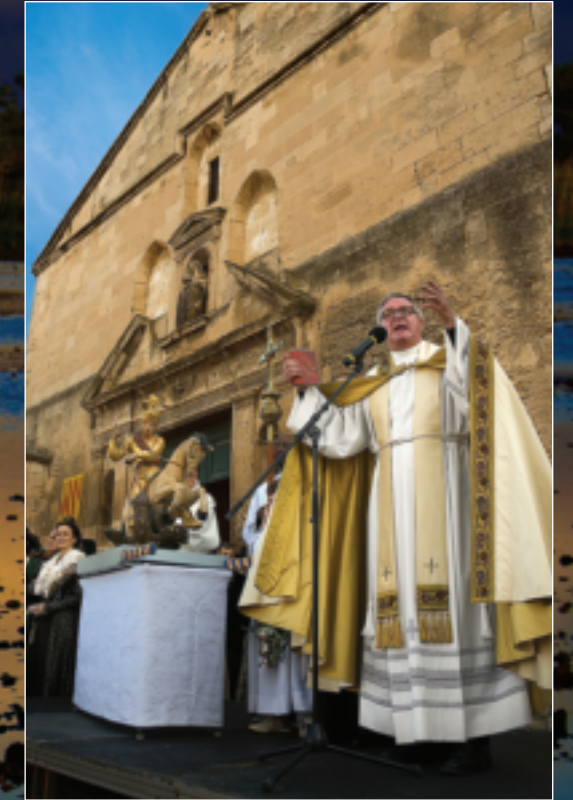
►Large photo: Rice has grown in the Camargue since the 13th century. Modern production began during World War II, when France invited workers from Indochina to tend the fields. ►Right: Paella hints at the region's proximity to Spain. ►Far right: Lovely Camarguaise princess Julie Mailhan spent two hours preparing for the Gardian Festival.



we can ask more money for his appearance," Mailhan says. "All the organizers want to have this bull. We can make some deals—he will come this day, but while you are waiting, you will take this one, this one, and this one."

After the *course*, the riders, *raseteurs*, and guests head back to the ranch house for heaping plates of seafood paella and wine. The guests chatter excitedly. Jacques Mailhan visits the *raseteurs* to congratulate them. They're dressed like rap stars in their track suits, but have the deferential manners of well-behaved Boy Scouts at a church supper.

Each one is dreaming of the big-time. Of their name in the newspaper every week. Of racking up bonus prizes for each ribbon. In their minds, they are masters of perhaps the most macho sport on earth. Cadenas Joachim, the group's senior competitor, sums it up: "These men are rare. It is prestige."



►Above: At the 12th century Notre Dame de la Major, a priest blesses gardians' horses in the Provençal language.

The big-time doesn't get any bigger than the Gardian Festival in Arles every May 1. The festival's *course Camarguaise* brings the best riders and *raseteurs* to the birthplace of French bullfighting, the city where the first *course Camarguaise* was held in 1402. Imagine the World Series played in Cooperstown, with the National Finals Rodeo after the seventh-inning, all preceded by the gala red carpet pageantry of Oscar Night in Hollywood.

Bulls and bounty. Arles is a slightly gritty city painted the sunny colors of mustard, butter, and avocado. It's been the gateway to the delta since it was established by Julius Caesar, and feasts on the bounty of the Camargue's farms—rice, wheat, wine, and a bull-meat stew called *Gardienne de Taureaux*.

Every May Day, the Ancient Brotherhood of Gardians converges on Arles to celebrate its traditions. Long-time Arlesians and Camar-



►Above: Jacques Mailhan is a gardian leader and dedicated guardian of agriculture in the Camargue. ►Right: Elaborate wrought-iron stirrups evolved in the tough conditions of the Camargue.

guaise dress in handmade 18th and 19th century costumes. There are acres of silk, miles of ribbon, and thousands upon thousands of pearl-headed pins. Women spend hours doing their hair and getting into their dresses; their men burst with color as they don patterned shirts and bright ties to match their partners.

This is not a reenactment or a show for tourists, emphasizes Francine Riou, assistant director of the Arles Bureau of Tourism.

"Of course, there will be tourists there, but it's a day for the people of Arles," Riou says. "It has been 500 years that the Confreres de Gardians meet for this festival."

Parade. After a priest blesses the horses in Provençal (a local, Latin-based tongue that was the language of medieval troubadours), the *gardians* parade into the Arles colosseum, a restored Roman hippodrome.

In the arena, *gardians* show off their skills. Mounted mobs grapple over bouquets. Cantering riders snatch oranges off of silver plates held high by dazzling women in silk and lace. Horsemen trip bulls with their tridents.

But the finest test of the riders—and their determined Camargue horses—is the *abrivado*, a stylized reenactment of herding a string

►Above: Raoul Mailhan spent months on U.S. ranches observing riding styles, bull shows, and marketing tactics.

of bulls to the arena. (Picture a dozen cutting horses working shoulder to shoulder.) The real stars of the show are the Camargue women, who call themselves *Amazones de Gardians*. Riding side-saddle in taffeta dresses and lace bonnets, these farm women form up around four anxious bulls, tighten into a perfect wedge, and march their captives calmly around the colosseum in a spectacular display of skill.

It's all part of the rich heritage Jacques Mailhan's son Raoul is committed to protecting. It won't be easy. Camargue farmers struggle with low margins and high taxes. Rich outsiders turn ranches into vacation homes. Uniform bull breeding standards are still pending. And though the Camargue horse has loyal fans, Raoul wants to promote its qualities more aggressively.

Preserving the *gardian* way of life will require looking forward as well as to the past.

"We have to make the tradition evolve, but also be true to the tradition," Raoul says. ■



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