

Lifestyle

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A mural by French street artist Popay adorns the side of a building in Vigo, northwestern Spain. — AFP



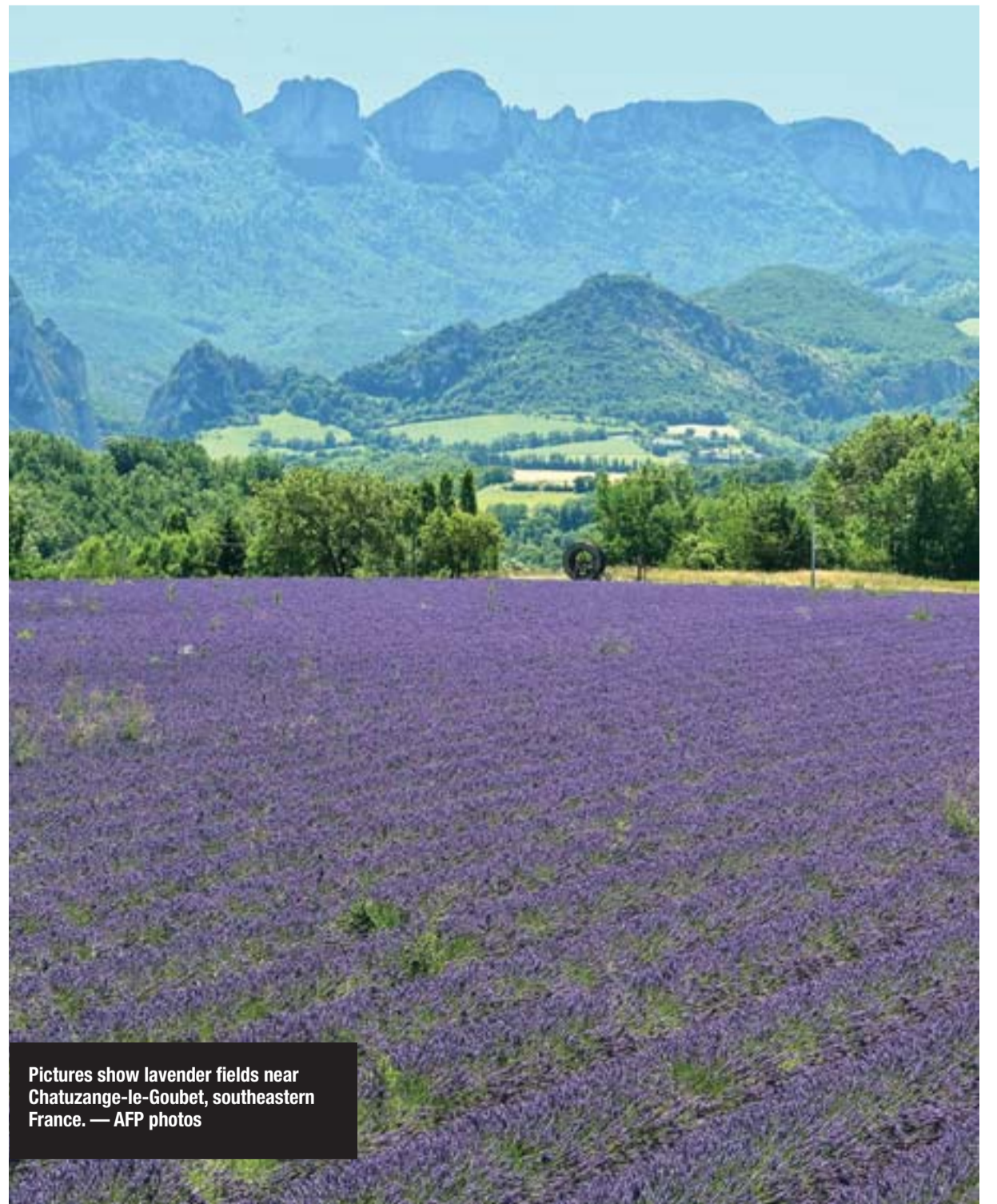
Lavender BACK IN FASHION WITH FRENCH FARMERS

Working its way across a purple-green field in southern France, a claw-fitted tractor harvests plants of lavender destined to become essential oil as a traditional sector stages a modest comeback. "They are slightly grey because they are starting to wilt, it is the best point for the quantity and quality of essential oils," explains Vincent Jamonet who runs the operation in the Drome region of southeastern France. The plants are fed into a hopper and taken to a nearby distillery.

Also nearby, fields of lavandin, a hybrid variety that provides greater quantity and resists bacteria, soak up the sun against a muted backdrop of the Vercors mountain range. The scent of Lavandin resembles that of camphor, which is not a sweet-smelling as lavender. The Jamonet family have planted 100 hectares (250 acres) of aromatic plants, one-fifth of which are organic. They hope to extend their crop surface to 150 hectares in the future.

One motivation is to improve regional biodiversity, another is that "revenues are a little better than with crops like corn, wheat or barley," Jamonet says. Thanks to the increasing popularity of aromatherapies, French lavender is staging a comeback from years of decline brought on by bacterial infestations. Perfume plants that can also be used in cosmetics, medicines and household products "are the only crop in France whose surface is increasing," notes Laurent Quadrio of the regional Drome agriculture organization.

They still represent a tiny fraction of the country's millions of hectares of cultivated land, but have expanded from 2010 to 2016 by around 40 percent to 53,000 hectares (130,000 acres), while cropland in general is being nibbled away by spreading urban areas. The number of producers has grown from 1,000 to around 1,400 and France now also has 120 distilleries. "It's a sector where you can earn a living, and where young farmers can get started," says Alain Aubanel, head of the Cihel federation that follows essential oil production.



Pictures show lavender fields near Chatuzange-le-Goubet, southeastern France. — AFP photos

Bulgarian challenge

Oil from lavender destined for perfumes, aromatherapy and cosmetics sells for around 100 to 150 euros (\$110-\$170) a kilo, while lavandin, used in detergents and soaps, sold last year for 28-40 euros, which was nonetheless a rise of 20 percent from the previous year and 30 percent over the past five years, Aubanel says. However, France now has to contend with Bulgaria, which became the world leader in traditional lavender production last year and is aiming for a record crop in 2019, he notes.

With Bulgaria aiming to produce 600 tonnes this year, double its output in 2018, it will surpass French production by five times. Instead of trying to compete on volume or cost, French farmers are aiming to produce a higher quality product. "A modest wine from the Ardeche region is not the same as a great Bordeaux," Aubanel says by way of analogy. "The big French companies, Dior, Chanel, Guerlain, L'Occitane, L'Oreal, Yves Rocher all buy French lavender," he adds. — AFP