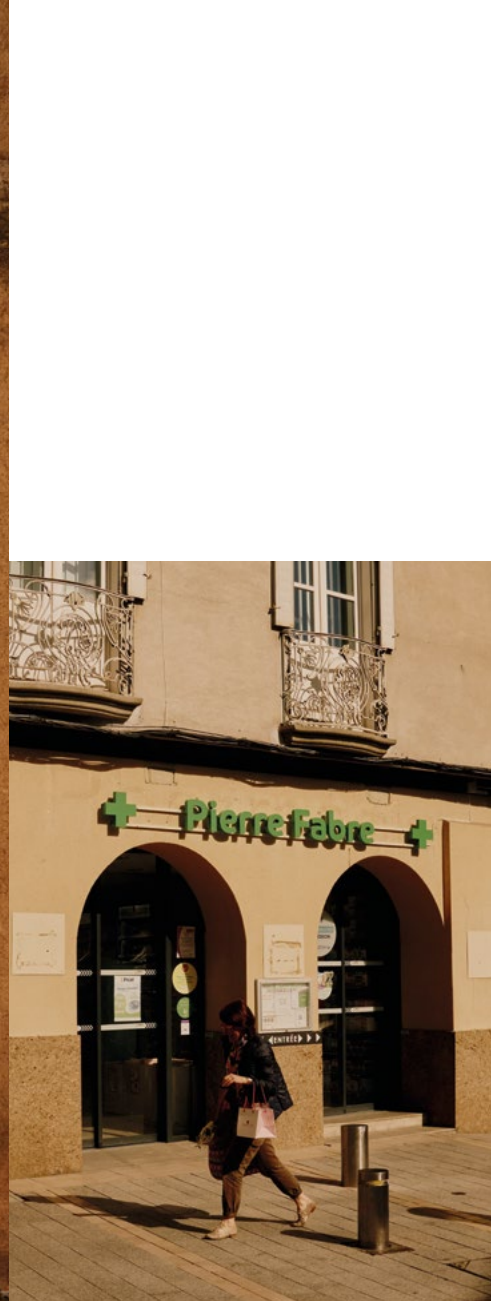
A scenic view of a river in Castres, France. On the left, there are multi-story buildings with balconies and a decorative wrought-iron fence. The river flows through the center, reflecting the sky and surrounding greenery. In the distance, a stone bridge with multiple arches spans the river. The background shows lush green trees and rolling hills under a clear sky.

Amid the deciduous woods of Occitanie in southern France you can find butcher's-broom, a plant that transformed the lives of the people in Castres, bringing with it not only a homeopathic remedy, but also helping a small-town rugby club to become the best in the country.

Pictures by Richard Johnson





Pierre Fabre was just 25 when he decided he needed his own business, a pharmacy, and, naturally, it would have to be in his home town of Castres, where he was born, where his dad had traded fabrics, and a place he loved.

It wasn't going to just be any old pharmacy, it was going to be a laboratory, where he would explore the use of natural products to help people. He had plentiful resources at hand, with the Tarn department, in the Occitanie region of southern France, rich and verdant. The grassy mountain region of the Massif Central was right on his doorstep, and the rivers that flowed through it, including two that crossed in his town – the Agout and Durenque – ensured everything needed for a pharmacist's larder was in plentiful supply.

The breakthrough was thanks to the roots of butcher's-broom, a local evergreen with bright red berries. It kickstarted an empire that, more than fifty years later, would end up developing everything from honey-rose throat lozenges to treatments that help cancer patients. It transcended France too, spreading to 116 countries, bringing in €2.83bn in 2023.

What's more, of the 9,600 global employees, more than 5,300 are based in France, with the majority very intentionally in Occitanie. "Pierre wanted to keep everything in Castres, it would have been logical to move to Paris or to Toulouse, but instead he kept all his factories or offices dotted around Tarn. He was providing jobs and looking after his region," explains Jeremy Davidson, the former Ireland and British & Irish Lions lock, now head coach of Castres Olympique. "The first product [using butcher's-broom] was a varicose vein cream which went worldwide and was the reason he became so successful.

"Most of his medications were based on homeopathic thinking," adds Jeremy. "He had this idea of using plants to the best of their ability and used them for beauty, health and skincare products, and even fighting cancer – he made a cream that's one of the biggest in the world."

The importance of dermo-cosmetics to a rugby story might not be immediately obvious, but given we're meeting at the Stade Pierre-Fabre in Castres the clues are all there. "The reason Castres are where they are is because of Pierre Fabre," explains Jeremy. "In the late eighties, he came into the club, put money in, and helped make Castres sustainable."

"And before he died [in 2013, aged 87]," continues Jeremy, "he set up a foundation, and Pierre Fabre [the business] is in the foundation, and Castres Olympique is too, which means there will always be funding for the rugby club in the future. It's incredible really."

"He was a lovely man, quite reserved, a nice guy, very intelligent," he adds.

"As well as developing treatments for cancer, the company also does a lot of humanitarian work in Africa and Asia, it does a lot of good. Every year we visit the factories and offices, we get a presentation about Pierre Fabre and it kind of helps give you a purpose for the club and why we're here."

"I think our budget is eleventh or twelfth in the league," continues Jeremy, "but there's still capacity to fight to keep good players because Pierre Fabre is behind us."

This is Jeremy's third stint at Castres, following three years as a player and two seasons as forwards coach. Since the last time he left [2009], he's worked at Ulster, Aurillac, Bordeaux and, most recently Brive, leading them to promotion in 2022. It was the playing opportunity at Castres however, in 1998, that started it all. "It's a funny story actually," he begins. "I'd been injured – I did my knee – and wasn't playing for Ireland at that time, so Malcolm O'Kelly was starting at lock for Ireland; it was the year Ireland pushed France quite close in the Five Nations [losing 18-16 in Paris]. I think it was one of Warren Gatland's early games as coach actually, and Malcolm played well."

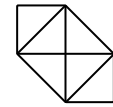
"Anyway," he continues, "Pierre-Yves Revol, the president of Castres [and still today], needed a lock so he got a journalist from *L'Equipe* to get in touch with Malcolm."

"Malcolm brought his mate – Ken O'Connell – who pretended to be his agent and they came over for a weekend, discussed a contract. He actually got a very good contract."

"They were just about to leave when Castres said, 'we're looking for a back rower as well', and Ken said, 'I'm a back row', to which they replied, 'we thought you were an agent?' 'Yeah, I'm an agent, but I'm also a player.' 'Are you any good?' 'I've played for Ireland twice'. And so they offered him a contract, and that was the best contract he'd ever had in his life and he was coming to Castres with Malcolm as well." >>

“Before he died [in 2013, aged 87], Pierre Fabre set up a foundation, and Castres Olympique is in the foundation, which means there will always be funding for the rugby club in the future. It's incredible.”





» However, when they arrived back in London, Malcolm's club London Irish reminded him he had a year to run on his contract and he was in fact going nowhere. As the agent, Ken was told by Castres to find another lock and, fearing his own French rugby dream was hanging in the balance, turned to Jeremy. "I'd studied French at university, so it made a lot of sense," says Jeremy. "I was 23, and even though it was only six months after a cruciate operation and my knee was still not right, they signed me anyway."

"I came here and fell in love with the place," recalls Jeremy. "The atmosphere around French rugby, the atmosphere at games, each town has its own identity and playing for that real identity feels a bit different to rugby elsewhere."

"Whenever you go out on that field, with that crowd, you feel as if you're a metre taller and you know you're going to win home games very easily. It's just incredible."

Castres were strong when he arrived, building momentum. "We were very good, we were first in the league," he says. "I was here for three years, and they reached quarter-final, quarter-final, semi-final in those seasons."

"I was still in contract when I left," he says of his departure in 2001, "but I had to leave before the play-offs because of the Lions tour [to Australia]. Back then, the Lions made France-based players join when the players first got together. After that tour though, the players [based in France] were allowed to finish the season [which ran longer than the English and Celtic leagues], but it used to be pretty strict."

Jeremy had studied European Business Studies, learning French in Brest as part of the course, so he adapted well to his new life. "Castres were one of the big clubs, I enjoyed the style of rugby, the weather obviously, and the French lifestyle."

He was soon made captain. "The first time was difficult because there's guys in the team maybe 36 years of age and I'm 23 and the captain of Castres," he admits. "I was just lucky that I was probably playing well at that time, I took a lead role and, you know, being captain here meant an awful lot to me."

Given Toulouse is a short drive east, rugby-mad areas aren't in short supply, but Jeremy believes Castres is different. "It's indescribable," he says, "everyone knows who you are, but it's not like other French towns where you know,

they're looking at you, and come and talk to you. They're very respectful here."

"Even though they know who you are, they'll keep their distance and respect your private place, which doesn't happen elsewhere. And they're always behind the team, good or bad results."

After Jeremy left Castres the first time around, he returned to his home-town side Ulster, but it lasted just two seasons, with injury curtailing his career. "I never thought I'd coach - business was going to be my future, that's why I studied," he says, "But my [playing] career got cut short at 28 [the recurring knee injury to blame] and my club Dungannon asked me to be director of rugby, which I didn't want to do at first."

"When I first went out on the pitch, I was on crutches," he says of his coaching debut. "The session started at 6.30pm and it went on until 9pm, but I hadn't felt the time pass. Sharing my knowledge gave me such a buzz, I just thought 'this is class.'"

Castres would give him a chance as forwards coach in 2009, with the call of Ulster coming two years later, just as it had done during his playing days.

When he rejoined Castres last term as head coach, they were at the wrong end of the Top 14, having reached the final just a year before, losing 29-10 to a Zach Mercer-inspired Montpellier. "They've had ups and downs," he says, "but over the past ten years or so they've probably been one of the most successful clubs in France because they've been to four finals [2013, 2014, 2018 and 2022, winning two] and punched above their weight, but that's what Castres do."

"There was a lot more pressure coming back," he admits, "because I was only forwards coach in the past, but now I was head coach and they were near the bottom of league, struggling against relegation."

"I love this club so it's more than a job," continues Jeremy, "it means a lot to me, and I didn't want to be the person who was here when Castres got relegated. We ended up winning seven out of nine and didn't go down."

Given Castres are one of only three sides to have avoided relegation since 1989, joined by Toulouse and Clermont, the pressure was on. "I knew we could do better," he says. "I don't think it's a millstone [the record of not being relegated], because I don't think this club deserves to get relegated; you need a more ambitious take at Castres than to be looking at the bottom of the league." »

"Over the past ten years or so they've probably been one of the most successful clubs in France because they've been to four finals and punched above their weight, but that's what Castres do."







» When we visit Stade Pierre-Fabre, La Rochelle are in town and Castres are pushing for the top-six. In front of a sell-out crowd, 12,300, the European champions, smarting from defeat to Leinster a week before, are beaten 25-24.

Castres are anything but star-studded. In this year's Six Nations, there was only one Castres player, hooker Gaëtan Barlot, who also started against La Rochelle, and the overseas players are not exactly galacticos. All Black centre Jack Goodhue is perhaps the biggest name in a squad that includes three-cap Fijian wing Filipo Nakosi, Wales-England prop Henry Thomas and 45-cap Uruguayan scrum-half Santiago Arata.

But Castres have never really been about the big names: one of their greats might have 41 caps for his country, and also captained them, but it's his club game that brought the glory, with an 18-year stint from 2002 to 2020 bringing with it two Boucliers [de Brennus, the gargantuan shield given to Top 14 champions] to go with the three club championships, he won back home in Uruguay. Today, Rodrigo Capó Ortega is head of public relations at the club. "I was signed as a medical joker, just for three months," says Rodrigo, "but I ended up staying and playing 416 matches."

Born in Montevideo, his mum was a diplomat, which meant he moved to Chile – where he first played rugby, aged four – then back to Uruguay, to Argentina, then back to Uruguay, playing for Carrasco Polo Club, the most successful club side in the country, with 28 championships. He started playing for the national side when he was eighteen, and it was during a tour with Uruguay to Wales that he first had an opportunity in France. "Pablo Lemoine – the 48-cap ex-Bristol prop – was playing for Stade Francais at the time, and we were about to tour Wales and he told me there was a team in France looking for a lock, so I should pack plenty of stuff as I might not go back," explains Rodrigo. "After the tour, I went to Paris with him, but nothing materialised, so I came back to Uruguay. A month later he called again to say Millau [a small side in Occitanie] were interested and I came back, played for them, and then signed for Castres."

Two decades with the same side is impressive, even with one that exudes the family ethos in a way that Castres does. "Money helps you to live, but it doesn't make you happy," says Rodrigo, "you can go to another team but you have to start

from zero. You don't know if your family is going to like the new town, you don't know if everything is going to be okay with your coach, but in Castres I found my balance.

"We are a little town but we have a big heart," he continues, "alone you arrive faster, but together you go further."

"If a person is available to be part of the team, the egos need to stay outside," he says, discussing the club's recruitment policy. "The number one is the team and even though we have some big players, some names, these players have a very nice humility about them, that is what made them perfect to be part of the team."

Those principles have seen the club continually defy the odds, not only in 2018 against the well-moneyed Montpellier, but even more famously in 2013 against Toulon. "In a match it's eighty minutes, 23 persons against 23 persons and the best on that day wins," says Rodrigo. "When we went out to warm up, it was a moment to enjoy, just a beautiful setting, with a lot of people, but after that, we had to put ourselves in a big bubble, to be focused."

"Everyone had to do their bit, and when you play like a team and you give 100 per cent, these things can happen."

South African Rory Kockott, whose picture adorns several walls at Stade Pierre-Fabre, had scored in the first-half to give Castres an unlikely 10-3 half-time lead over a side Toulon side featuring Jonny Wilkinson. "When we scored that try at the end of the first half, it gave us a huge injection of motivation, it was then, 'okay, now we have forty minutes to realise our dream, so let's go and take this', and we did."

The 19-14 win came just months before Pierre Fabre passed away. "I'm very happy we won in 2013, that we could give Pierre the Bouclier, that he could touch it, before he died, it was a very nice gift for him."

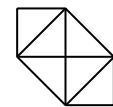
"It was a very, very big thing and he was someone who gave a lot to the town. He was a very nice person," continues Rodrigo, "a very simple person, who showed humility, respect – the people of Castres are a lot like Pierre."

The second title, in 2018 meant even more. "It was better because I realised my last dream as a rugby player to bring a Bouclier to Castres as captain," he says.

When he eventually retired in 2020, aged 39, he did so grateful for the career »

“When we scored that try at the end of the first half, it gave us huge motivation, it was then, ‘okay, now we have forty minutes to realise our dream, so let’s go and take this.’”





» he had. “One thing I always said to myself every morning when I played professional rugby,” says Rodrigo. “I said to myself, ‘I’m going to play with a ball, play rugby, for a job’. And every weekend for eighty minutes, all of my problems in my life would just go away. I was so lucky to have been able to do that.”

Castres is a town packed with character. Its ‘Little Venice’ centrepiece sees tall, timber-framed townhouses, painted every colour and shade, line the river, giving it a distinct feel, brought to life in a once yearly Venetian carnival. Other claims to fame include being the home to the largest collection of Goya works – around 600 – in France, and also the local granite, which is peppered throughout, strengthening a town whose name literally means ‘fortified place’.

Head just east of Castres though, and granite almost takes on a natural art form. The Sidobre is a granite plateau 5.3 km long, 6.6 km wide – although largely covered in forest, the granite pops up, forming statues which, with a squinted eye, might look like a deer or a pigeon, but most impressive is one akin to a giant mushroom, albeit with the top perched precariously on a stalk that looks far too narrow. That it’s 780 tonnes, about the size of 65 French buses, is enough to make anyone think twice about standing under it.

Castres’ rugby granite comes in the form of the infamous 79-year-old Gérard Cholley, who won 31 caps for France in the front row, and has a handshake that crunches bones in greeting. In the past, he’s been given every moniker a battle-hardened prop could wish for, including one writer describing him as the most frightening French player of all time, but today he’s just a rugby-loving man full of life and continually laughing at stories of the past. “Before I played my first match, I had never seen a game on television, I had never touched a ball,” he says. “Because I was born in the east of France [Fontaine-lès-Luxeuil] where rugby wasn’t a thing, but in my last year of military service I came to Castres.

“I found myself at the club headquarters at the time and they asked me if I played rugby and told me I needed to come see a match.

“I went along, and the reserve team only had fourteen players, so they gave me boots, and I played. I was an athlete in good physical condition, I had been in the marine commandos, and during that match, there was a fight. Well, I knew how to do that. I told myself, ‘this is the sport for me.’”

It didn’t take long for word to spread of Gerard. “The president heard about it that evening, that there was an extraordinary military guy, and then, the second week, I played in the first team against Lourdes, the French champions.”

He started in the second row, and perhaps still unsure exactly which forms of physicality the rules allowed, he was sent off. “At that time, there were many fights,” he explains succinctly.

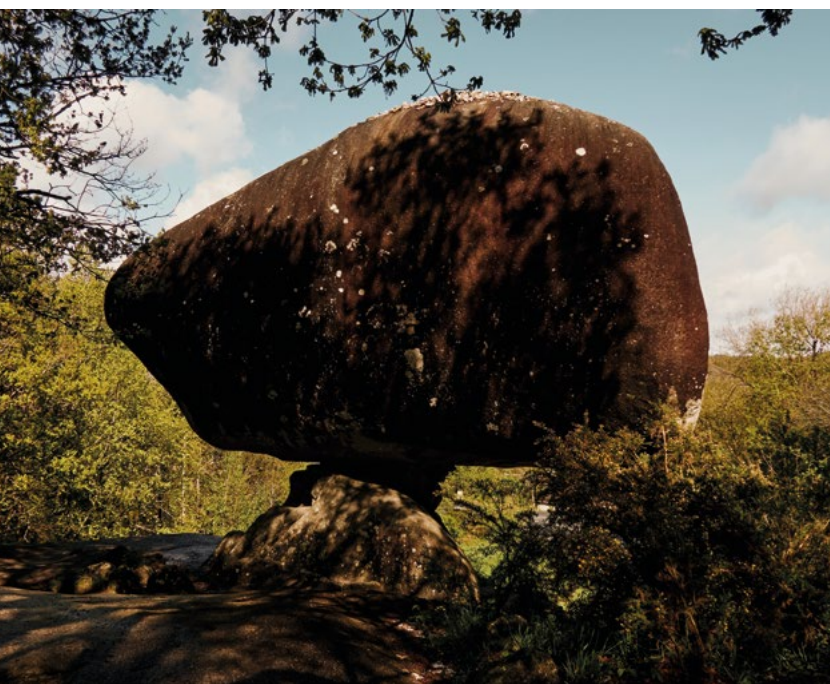
As part of the fabric of Castres, he followed his military life with forty years in the labs of Pierre Fabre, but such was his impact on the rugby team, as the cornerstone in every sense, when eventually he retired, nobody could – or dared – replace him. “In the changing rooms I always sat in the same seat, and when I left, for a year, nobody would sit in that seat.

“This club is my life,” he says, repeating, “my life, it’s everything. Here, on this field, there have been the greatest players of international rugby. I had my testimonial here and there was Gareth Edwards, Phil Bennett, JPR Williams, Fergus Slattery, and more.”

What does rugby mean to the town? “There are no words for that; when people hear of Castres, it’s because there is a great rugby team.”

Surrounded by beauty, mountains and valleys thickly rugged in forest, coupled with the farmers-market trappings of rural French life, the town isn’t so bad either. “Sometimes, players cry when they come to Castres,” concludes Rodrigo, who’s rejoined us before we leave. “They think, ‘oh my, it’s a little town what are we going to do?’, but they cry more when they have to leave because they have made so many memories in and out of rugby, they’ve done big things, and seen very beautiful things in this town.”

Story by Alex Mead



“Sometimes, players cry when they come to Castres. They think, ‘oh my, it’s a little town what are we going to do?’, but they cry more when they have to leave.”

