



# Good things come in cheese

If you're a fan of *fromage*, why not let your taste buds be your guide to finding your new home? Join **Paola Westbeek** on a cheese tour from Normandy to Occitanie

It is no secret that the French love cheese. In fact, in the 16th century, Renaissance humanist François Rabelais proclaimed that together with wine and bread, cheese was part of the 'holy trinity' of the French table. And not much has changed today.

On average, each person in France feasts on roughly 27.2 kilos of cheese annually. The country boasts approximately 1,200 varieties (45 are AOP-

certified) which can be divided into seven categories: goat's cheese, hard, semi-hard, white mould, blue, red rind and fresh.

From fruity to earthy and from unctuous to firm, in every corner of the country, farmers produce artisanal cheeses that are part of the region's rich culinary heritage and are waiting to be savoured. Here are four cheeses you need to know about - and why their regions are worth discovering, too.

PHOTOS © CALVADOS TOURISME; D. DUVA'S CRT NORMANDIE

**Above:** Cows are a permanent fixture on the Normandy landscape

## Wine PAIRING

### NEUFCHÂTEL

The rich texture and delicate lactic tang of Neufchâtel begs for a fleshy white wine with a fine acidity. Think an elegant Rully from the Côte Chalonnaise. For a palate-cleansing contrast, splurge on a Champagne Blanc de Blancs Brut made exclusively from the chardonnay grape

### NEUFCHÂTEL

There's no better place to start a cheese tour than in Normandy. Known for its impressive island abbey of Mont St-Michel, pretty fishing villages, coastal cliffs and vibrant green pastures scattered with apple trees and robust Normande cattle, this north-western land of butter and cream produces some of the country's richest cheeses.

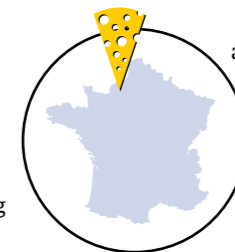
Trumping the list of dairy indulgences is Neufchâtel, a white mould cheese (*fromage à croûte fleurie*) with a history that can be traced back to the 11th century when it was first made in the area around the town of Neufchâtel-en-Bray in the Seine-Maritime department.

Though the cheese comes in six different shapes, the heart-shaped variety is the most popular, and, not surprisingly, the product of a romantic tale. It is said that during the Hundred Years' War, Norman farmer girls moulded the cheese into a heart and gave it to English soldiers as a token of their love.

And there is a whole lot to love about this exceptionally creamy cheese! Neufchâtel can be matured for anywhere from 10 days to six months and has a fat content of approximately 45%.

When young, the cheese has a gentle saline zing and milky aromas, while older cheeses boast more robust notes of nuts and mushrooms.

Rouen, Normandy's medieval capital



and a great place to sample the region's cuisine, is 50 kilometres to the south-west of Neufchâtel-en-Bray. Spoil yourself at Michelin-starred restaurants or feast on rustic dishes of tripe and *andouillette* at the many bistros

and brasseries. After a good meal, breathe in the city's rich history by taking a stroll while admiring the more than 2,000 half-timbered houses or visiting places such as Place du Vieux Marché where heroine Jeanne d'Arc was burned at the stake in 1431. The Église Jeanne d'Arc, designed by Louis Arretche, was erected in her memory in 1979.

Located just an hour from Rouen is Giverny, a rural gem on the right bank of the Seine made famous by the father of Impressionism, Claude Monet. Shortly after moving there in 1883, he wrote a letter to art critic Théodore Duret, exclaiming: "I am in ecstasy. Giverny is a splendid place for me." The pink house with green shutters and distinguished gardens is Normandy's second most popular tourist destination after the aforementioned Mont St-Michel.

Not only is Normandy known for its dairy, it is also a paradise for seafood lovers who can revel in towering *fruits de mers* platters at beachside towns such as Dieppe and Deauville. [▶](#)

#### Average house price

**Seine-Maritime: €154,000**

**Neufchâtel-en-Bray: €107,100**



**SAINTE-MAURE DE TOURAINE**

To the south-east of Normandy, our cheese tour continues in Centre-Val de Loire, a regal region characterised by magnificent Renaissance castles, romantic gardens and a winemaking history that blossomed in the hands of monks and nobility. The region also happens to be the cradle of France's goat's cheese production.

One of the oldest *chèvres* is Sainte-Maure de Touraine, an AOP-certified cheese named after its native town in Indre-et-Loire. The cheese's history dates back to the 8th century when the Moors introduced goat breeding to the area between Poitiers and Tours.

Arab women who remained in France after the Battle of Tours in 732, taught the locals how to make different goat's cheeses, including the log-shaped Sainte-Maure de Touraine. With its dense, chalky paste and subtle acidity, the cheese has remained a favourite throughout the centuries and was even hailed as the region's most famous goat's cheese by Honoré de Balzac in the notes for his novel *La Rabouilleuse* (1842): "Le plus connu reste celui du Sainte-Maure."



**Average house price**  
**Indre-et-Loire: €172,900**  
**Ste-Maure de Touraine: €111,000**

On the first weekend in June, Ste-Maure de Touraine holds its annual cheese fair (*foire aux fromages*) in the *centre-ville*. With cheese-tasting competitions, live music and markets offering cheese and other regional delicacies, it is the perfect opportunity to learn more about the cheese while mingling with locals.

Approximately half an hour to the north of Ste-Maure de Touraine is Tours, Centre-Val de Loire's largest city and an ideal base for discovering the Loire Valley's 70,000 hectares of vineyards. Sit down for a drink at one of the many inviting terraces on Place Plumereau (a lively medieval square in the heart of Vieux Tours) or escape the hustle and bustle at the Jardin Botanique, which was founded in 1843.

No trip to Centre-Val de Loire would be complete without a stop in Orléans, the department's historic capital. Located on the banks of the Loire river, the city is an architectural wonder with everything from medieval houses to magnificent boulevards lined with stately Renaissance buildings.

Culture abounds at museums such as the Musée des Beaux Arts, while noteworthy landmarks, among them the jaw-droppingly beautiful Ste-Croix cathedral, give the city grace and elegance.



**WINE PAIRING**

**SAINTE-MAURE DE TOURAINE**

Stay regional and opt for a crisp vouvray sec from the Touraine wine district. The cheese's salty flavours and mildly acidic aromas also make it a superb combination with a minerally sauvignon blanc such as the Menetou-Salon Clos du Pressoir 2015



Vouvray vineyards

PHOTOS © HANS WESTBEEK; PAOLA WESTBEEK

A view of Peyrat-le-Château



**WINE PAIRING**

**LA TRAPPE D'ÉCHOURNAC**

Food writer Gerrit Jan advises: "While a nice oaked chardonnay would certainly do it justice, my somewhat whimsical recommendation would be to serve it with a glass of good farmhouse cider, especially in summer. Apple and walnut – how can you go wrong? Also, after a copious meal, cider is so much lighter and more refreshing than wine!"



The Viaduc de Busseau

PHOTOS © TOURISME CREUSE; SUD-OUEST; LUC LAURET

**LA TRAPPE D'ÉCHOURNAC**

South of Centre-Val de Loire, we travel to Nouvelle-Aquitaine (France's largest region) for a taste of La Trappe d'Échourgnac, a semi-hard cheese first made in 1868 by monks at the Abbaye d'Échourgnac in Dordogne. When Cistercian nuns took over the abbey in 1923, renaming it Notre-Dame de Bonne Espérance, they carried forward the cheese-making tradition. It wasn't until 1999, however, that they had the ingenious idea of ageing the cheese in walnut liqueur from Périgord. Dutch food writer and author Gerrit Jan Groothedde, who lives north-east of Dordogne in the department of

Haute-Vienne, discovered La Trappe d'Échourgnac at his favourite cheese shop in Limoges:

"Every time we go there, they have at least one or two cheeses they insist we must try. La Trappe d'Échourgnac is beautifully creamy with a structure slightly reminiscent of Gouda and an overwhelming aroma of walnut. It's just about the best cheese we've stumbled upon anywhere."

Gerrit Jan and his girlfriend Greet have been happily living in the small village of Peyrat-le-Château since May 2018. "We are surrounded by the most beautiful countryside abounding with birds and wildlife, in what is one of the most thinly populated areas of Western Europe," he says. "There's green wherever you look and it's stunningly quiet."



Gerrit Jan points out that neighbouring departments offer plenty to see and do: "In Creuse, do not miss the breathtaking Viaduc de Busseau, a train viaduct from the mid-19th century in Eiffel style and still in use, almost 60 metres high and 320 metres long. The nearby restaurant Le Viaduc offers a great view. While there, do also visit the quaint village of Moutier-d'Ahun as well as the old tapestry town of Aubusson. Somewhat further out are charming Ussel and bustling Brive in Corrèze, both well worth a visit. The latter not least because of its great offering of restaurants. However, one of the best things you can do here is just drive out into the countryside and let the ever-changing views surprise you – as we still do today!"

**Average house price**  
**Dordogne: €120,000**

**WINE PAIRING**

**ROQUEFORT**

This boldly aromatic cheese is fantastic with sweet dessert wines. A classic pairing is Sauternes, but equally exciting (and much more affordable) is to look east of Bordeaux for one of the many ambrosial treasures of the Bergerac wine region. With hints of apricot and quince, the silky Saussignac Vendanges d'Autrefois 2015 would be an excellent choice



**ROQUEFORT**

Our tour culminates in Occitanie, or more specifically, in Roquefort-sur-Soulzon, a small village of approximately 700 inhabitants and home to one of the world's most famous blue cheeses. Though it is believed that Roquefort has been made since Roman times, we first find mention of the cheese in the 11th century in records of a monastery in Conques.

Made from ewe's milk (specifically from the Lacaune breed), Roquefort has a moist, crumbly texture and sharp, earthy flavours. Law dictates

that the cheese must be aged for at least three months in the natural cellars of Roquefort-sur-Soulzon's Mont Combalou, which can be visited daily except from 25 December to 1 January. Roquefort was the first French cheese to be granted AOC certification in 1925.

Roquefort-sur-Soulzon is in Aveyron, one of Occitanie's 13 departments. A bit further south is Aude, a department known for its Mediterranean climate, 50 kilometres of coastline and Cathar castles dating as far back as the 11th century. In the quiet village of Azille, tucked away

in the Minervois wine region, we meet Angela and Matthew Saunders. The British couple have been running a successful wine tour business since 2015 ([tastedulanguedocwinetours.com](http://tastedulanguedocwinetours.com)).

"We offer full day tours focusing on the wines of Languedoc as well as the food, culture and beautiful landscape here," says Angela. It isn't just the wine, however, that attracted them to the region, or the fact that the glorious weather means their children can spend plenty of time outdoors. The surroundings are quite impressive, too.

"Azille is 10 minutes from the

UNESCO-listed Canal du Midi and 30 minutes from beautiful Carcassonne famed for its medieval citadel, Cité de Carcassonne. Out towards the beach, Le Salin de Gruissan is a natural salt lake with the most fantastic bright pink colour," Angela adds.

With cheeses that are just as diverse and enticing as the country's landscape, it isn't any wonder that most French people enjoy their *fromage* almost every day. And we can't think of a better way to enjoy *la vie française!* <sup>LF</sup>

**Average house price**  
**Aveyron: €106,100**



Roquefort-sur-Soulzon

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