



Taste the DIFFERENCE

Paola Westbeek explains how the produce of the Périgord region makes it one of France's gourmet paradises

Périgord charms visitors with its medieval villages, cultural heritage and varied natural beauty. This natural region and historic province of south-west France roughly corresponds to the Dordogne *département*. This is the land where sparkling rivers meander past rugged limestone plateaux and castles crown hills of vineyards and sunflowers. The region's postcard-worthy splendour, however, is only part of what makes it so appealing. Its culinary bounty includes lamb, sun-drenched fruits, goat's cheeses, cèpes, walnuts, chestnuts, poultry and revered gastronomic icons such as black truffles and foie gras. It's no wonder Henri IV once exclaimed, "Great food and wines – Périgord is paradise on earth!"

Succulent strawberries

Come summer, stroll through the region's colourful markets, from Nontron in the north to Monpazier in the south, and one of the products that will likely tempt you most is *la fraise du Périgord*. Strawberries have been cultivated in Périgord since the late 19th century and received IGP (*Indication Géographique Protégée*) certification in 2004. Today, eight varieties with pretty names such as Charlotte, Flair and FAVORI are grown by about 200 producers throughout the *département*.

Though the strawberries are best enjoyed fresh (a *barquette*, or punnet, will not survive my morning market trip), these edible jewels can be used in all kinds of recipes. You can purée them into a refreshing soup, use them to garnish crisp pavlovas, scatter them over salads and even marinate them in red wine with vanilla, lime zest and a splash of balsamic

vinegar. Regional restaurants use Périgord strawberries in the most creative dishes. Didier Casaguana of Michelin-starred restaurant Les Fresques in Monestier chops them into a tartare topped with blue lobster and foie gras. In Bergerac, François Granger of Pâtisserie François makes a *macaronade* (delicate almond tart) covered with pistachio cream and a layer of fresh strawberries.

Aromatic walnuts

While butter is the preferred cooking fat in the north and in southern Mediterranean regions they'll reach for a bottle of olive oil, in the south-west cooks choose either goose fat or walnut oil. According to archaeological finds, the region's Cro-Magnon people were already eating walnuts 17,000 years ago. In the early Middle Ages, walnut oil was considered as precious as gold and even used to pay taxes. Other European countries soon took interest in the fragrant oil, and by the 17th century it was being exported to Great Britain, Germany and the Netherlands.

Today, four varieties of walnuts are produced in 303 *communes* in Périgord: the Marbot and Franquette (which are harvested from mid-September and taste delicious fresh) and the Corne and Grandejan (harvested as of



Above: The distinctive ivory-coloured walnuts

Left: Market day in Périgueux

Below: Cabécou, the soft goat's cheese

October and sold dried). Fresh walnuts have an ivory colour and slightly bitter taste. They are wonderful with a *plateau de fromages*. The dried version can be blitzed in a food processor to make a delicious crumb topping for chicken and fish. I especially enjoy them toasted, roughly chopped and sprinkled over a *salade périgourdine* with *gésiers* (duck gizzards) and thinly sliced *magret fumé* (smoked duck breast).

Small quantities of Périgord walnuts are also produced in the *départements* of Lot, Corrèze, Charente, Aveyron and Lot-et-Garonne. Those looking for culinary inspiration can book a table at one of the many restaurants along the Route de la Noix. At Des Idées à la Noix in Domme, a medieval village perched on a cliff overlooking the Dordogne, you can savour a slice of their traditional walnut cake (a family recipe since 1915) or you may prefer to opt for a crêpe with *magret*, walnuts and Cabécou cheese.

Velvety goat's cheese

Cabécou du Périgord is a soft, creamy goat's cheese with a butter-coloured rind and mild lactic tang. I first tried it in a classic *salade de chèvre chaud* at one of the summer *marchés des producteurs*, a celebration of regional flavours with dishes prepared on the spot by dedicated producers. I watched as the farmer himself artfully wrapped the small discs of cheese (each one weighs about 35 grams) in bacon and quickly grilled them. As soon as the cheese began to ooze out of the crisp bacon, he placed it on a bed of fresh lettuce and proudly finished his creation with a drizzle of honey. This was simplicity at its best, and with a crusty baguette and a bottle of sauvignon blanc to accompany it, it was a memorable start to our picnic lunch.

There are many varieties of cabécou cheese (the word means 'little goat'), but the authentic Cabécou du Périgord is made with milk produced in





Above: Périgord lamb with garlic at La Tour des Vents

Dordogne. The region is home to roughly 140 breeders.

Many gladly open their doors to those who want to learn more about cheesemaking or buy Cabécou straight from the farm, so be on the lookout for signs reading ‘*bienvenue à la ferme*’ or ‘*vente directe*’.

Tender lamb

Périgord may be known as the kingdom of duck and geese, but lamb is also part of its gastronomic repertoire. The sheep are sustainably raised on slopes called ‘*picadies*’, and after at least 60 days of breastfeeding, the lambs are fed a rich diet of local grains. The breeding method results in meltingly tender meat appreciated by the region’s top chefs.



Above: Sheep are sustainably reared in Périgord

At Le Vin’Quatre, located in the heart of Bergerac, chef Charlie Ray uses fresh regional produce to create classic dishes with a modern twist. Originally from Colchester, Essex, he moved to France in 2013 and took over the restaurant in 2016 with his partner Mélanie Legrand. One of the products often found on Le Vin’Quatre’s seasonal menu is *l’agneau du Périgord*. “There are many ways to use lamb,” says Charlie. “In winter, we serve lamb shanks with cauliflower and couscous, and come spring it’s *filet d’agneau* with pea purée, feta and mint arancini, pak choi and white wine sauce.”

Just 10 kilometres south in Monbazillac you’ll find La Tour des Vents, a Michelin-starred restaurant that also works magic with Périgord’s excellent produce. I once enjoyed tender lamb’s ribs, served perfectly rosé and infused with candied garlic. Chef Damien Fagette’s culinary artistry and the exceptional views over the lush, green countryside left no room for doubt – Périgord is one of France’s most enchanting (and delectable!) regions! ♥

MUST-VISIT GOURMET CELEBRATIONS

LA FÊTE DE LA FRAISE

Visit Vergt (Périgord’s strawberry capital) on the third Sunday in May and feast on all things strawberry, including a slice of the traditional (giant!) *tarte aux fraises*. In between tasting, shop for treasures at the flea market while enjoying live music. Make sure to head to the covered market hall at 12.30pm to enjoy a glass of Monbazillac à la Fraise du Périgord!

LA FÊTE DE LA NOIX

Every first Sunday in October, the village of Saillac holds its annual walnut festival. Taste special walnut menus and have a chance to meet producers who are happy to share their best gourmet tips.

LA FÊTE DE LA TRUFFE

In mid-January, Sarlat pays homage to the region’s iconic black truffles during a lively two-day festival that allows you to learn more about the gourmet tubers and experience their exceptional taste. Stroll through the truffle market on Place de la Liberté, join in on cooking workshops, and don’t forget to sample the famous ‘*croustous*’, appetisers with truffle and foie gras.

During truffle season (end of November until February), special truffle markets are held in towns throughout the region, including Sarlat, Périgueux and Bergerac.

LE MARCHÉ AU GRAS

Duck and goose products are an emblematic part of Périgord’s cuisine. From November through mid-March, visit the traditional *marchés au gras* for everything from fresh foie gras to duck legs and goose fat (you’ll never sauté your potatoes in oil or butter again!). The markets are held in Périgueux, Sarlat, Excideuil, Thiviers, Ribérac and Saint-Astier.