French Impressions

The Loire Valley

George East

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About the Author

If anyone should know his onions about France and the French, it's George East. The former private detective, night club bouncer, publican and the planet's only professional bed tester has written ten books about our nearest Continental neighbours and their sometimes funny little ways. When not on the road or river, George lives with his wife Donella, four hens, Milly the sheepdog and a rabbit called Lunch in whatever part of France he is writing about.

Other books by George East

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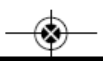

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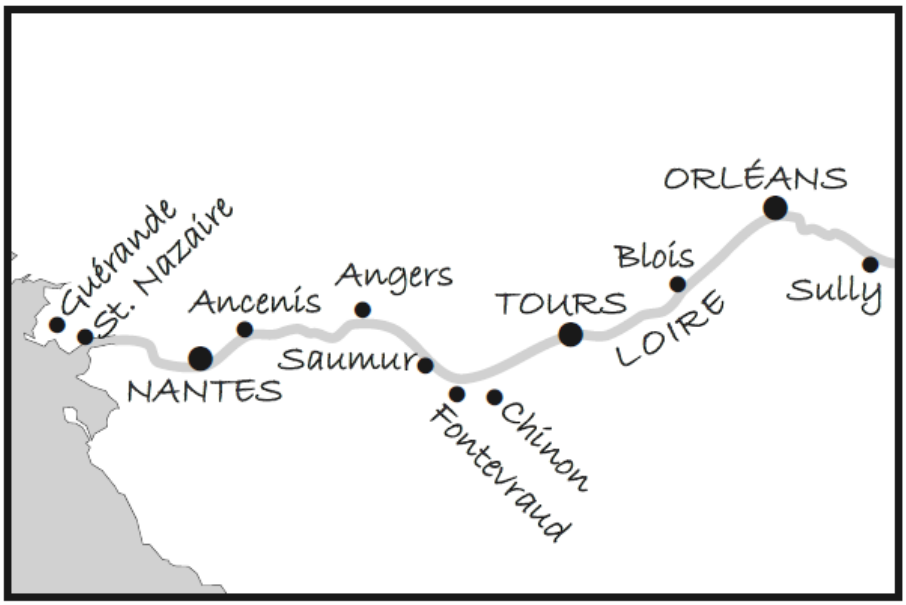
A nod of thanks must also be directed at the authors and publishers and creators of all the books and brochures and videos and websites I trawled through in the course of research, with a special mention in dispatches for Wikipedia. Yes, I know they get things wrong sometimes, but who doesn't. Besides, where else would you learn that the Jelly Bean Company of California uses a purée of Anjou pears for their Juicy Pear flavour?



The Valley of the Kings (more or less)

Like the Loire, this book meanders a bit on its way from start to finish. My excuse is that I was on a journey of exploration and discovery, not a carefully pre-planned route. The area covered in this book does not conform strictly to any official boundaries, but those keep changing, anyway.

Broadly, the bit of France in which we were interested comes within the region nowadays known as the Pays de la Loire. To some French people who know this part of France's history as holiday home territory for a long line of royals, the area is The Valley of the Kings. Other affectionate soubriquets include The Garden of France and The Cradle of the French Language. On the not-so-affectionate side, to the victims of some particularly savage restaurant and hotel owners, a more suitable name for the area is The We Saw You Coming.

About six million people visit this part of France every year, and there have been almost that number of books about what to see and do while in the area. The aim of this one was definitely not to show pretty pictures of castles or eulogise about the wines of the Loire. As the title suggests, our aim was to give an

impression of the landscape, history, culture, cuisine and people to be found in this bit of France. Just for fun, I've also included a layman's guide to the wines of the region and some typical Loirean recipes.

To try and get the full flavour of and do proper justice to the area, we lived not far from the banks of the Loire for a year. By the end of our journey through these pages, you will hopefully know a fair bit about the place and people and what I thought of them. You may not agree with some or all of my opinions, but that is what travel books like this one should be about, I reckon.

As to why we spend our time on the move through France and writing books like this one, the famed American rapper and MC Talib Kweli says that life without knowledge is death in disguise. Aristotle said that all men desire knowledge, and I reckon I need no better sponsors.

PS. Just to be contrary, we did the trip from the western end of the Loire against the flow, starting where it empties into the Atlantic. It used to be anyone's guess or opinion where the Loire Valley finishes to the east, but in 2000 UNESCO added a bit beyond Orléans and as far as Sully-sur-Loire, and awarded their definition of the Loire Valley a World Heritage Site ranking. They said the region deserved the award as it was an 'exceptional cultural landscape of great beauty, comprising historic cities and villages, great architectural monuments (like) the châteaux and lands that have been cultivated and shaped by interaction between local populations and their physical environment, particularly the Loire itself.'
Not wishing to be picky, but I would have thought any lands which have been cultivated would have to have been shaped by interaction between local populations and their physical environment. But I know what they meant, and their idea of where the Loire Valley ends and the rest of France carries on was good enough for us.

The River: a brief journey in time

As every French schoolboy used to know, the Loire is the longest river in France.

According to those who should know about these things, the Loire started its endless journey to the sea in the Pleistocene era.

From its source in the Cévennes mountains of the Ardeche department, the river flows north and west for 634 miles whilst draining a fifth of the country's land area into the Bay of Biscay.

Some independent (i.e. not French) authorities claim that the wine growers of the Loire owe their status and fortunes to Italy. They say it was the Romans who first planted vineyards along the banks to get a taste of home when they occupied the region in around 52 BC. Other authorities (i.e. French) say that this is nonsense as there were already vineyards flourishing along the Loire when the Romans arrived.

What is generally agreed is that the name of the river comes from *Liga* or *Liger*, which was contemporary Celtic for sediment or silt. From that ancient description comes the French definition for how they age some wines (*sur lie*), and also the British word 'lees' for what you get at the bottom of a barrel of traditionally-brewed beer. The modern river certainly lives up to its name and is now mostly un-navigable, though was a much-used trade highway for two thousand years.

The Phoenicians and Greeks used the river to ferry goods northwards, and the Vikings used it to sack Tours and take other people's goods without having to pay for them. Commercial and passenger traffic on the Loire increased until the 19th Century, when the coming of the railway offered a faster way to move people and things around.

As well as lots of vineyards, the Loire boasts loads of *châteaux.* There are more than three hundred on show along a relatively short stretch of the river, and almost all were built between the 10th and 20th centuries. Although we shall not be visiting many, it might be a good idea at this point to establish what the word means to us and the people who coined it. Often

claimed by Britons who have a home in France with more than six bedrooms, a *château* is really a grand holiday home or main residence of the local lord of the manor. They come in all shapes and sizes and were designed to show off the power and wealth of the people who had them built. Like some premier division footballers' homes and wives, many *châteaux* are a permanent reminder that having shedloads of money does not buy you good taste. A *château-fort* or *forteresse* like the brooding stronghold at Angers or Richard the Lionheart's favourite pad at Chinon is what we would call a proper-job castle.

The first Loire *châteaux* were built by royalty, hence the term Valley of the Kings, and they were aped by any Paris-based favourites at court who could afford the going rate. Many were made of the soft *tuffeau* limestone for which the area is noted, and which looks like and wears about as well as its soundalike bean curd creation.

Apart from amusing themselves by ravishing any available wenches and hunting, shooting and torturing local wildlife and peasantry, the *aristos* with holiday homes by the Loire would enjoy rides in pleasure boats along the royal river or, if they had a really flash place, in their own moats. They would also eat ever-increasingly imaginative (or some might say bizarre) fruits of field, sky and river, and that explains why many of what have become known as classic French dishes originated in the Loire Valley. All those jaded aristocratic palates with chefs fiercely competing to keep their jobs and heads is why someone was desperate enough to come up with the idea of cutting off and cooking the legs of frogs and throwing the rest away.

For those interested, the three basic epochs of *châteaux* building were:
The Medieval from 1100-1300
Fifteenth Century Renaissance (1400-1600)
Baroque and Neoclassical from 1600-1800

More Fascinating Facts:

- The Loire gives its name to six *départements*, or what we would call counties. These are: Loire, Haute-Loire, Loire-Atlantique, Indre-et-Loire, Maine-et-Loire and Saone-et-Loire. There is also the Loir-et-Cher below Orléans, which for some reason prefers to live its life without the ‘e’.

- The static population of the Pays de la Loire is around three million. As reported earlier, double that number visit the Loire Valley each year.

- Although it may be divided into its own micro-climates, the general weather pattern to be found in the Loire Valley is considered the most pleasant in northern France. This is because it offers relatively modest extremes in temperature, a mild winter, and summers rarely exceeding 38 degrees Centigrade. All in all, you may think, not a bad place to live or visit.

The crepuscular sky is rent by a streak of golden fire, closely followed by an explosion which brings a host of stars tumbling from above.

I reckon that single rocket will have cost more than a day's wages for the person who lit it, unless he is the owner of the Disneyesque castle from which the firework rose like a doomed space shuttle. The neo-gothic *château* looks even more bizarre and out of place because it stands alongside a fairly modern convenience store and opposite a uni-sex hairdressers at the centre of this otherwise unremarkable village.

There follows a most spectacular display of how to waste a lot of money in a very short time, and I command our convoy of two removal lorries, a car and trailer and a moped to pull up to enjoy the show for free. Bastille Day is long past and the French are not usually big on firework displays in village settings, so it would be nice to think that the event has been put on by the commune to welcome the distinguished travel writer to the Loire Valley. This is hardly likely, as very few French people read books in English about their country. Mine are not available in the *lingua franca* as several French friends have said that my style of writing and certainly my use of language would be totally untranslatable into theirs, and cause much offence if it were.

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The mystery is solved, and the solution is satisfyingly bizarre, even for rural France. Our over-the-top Gothic castle is allegedly the holiday home of a very rich American demolition contractor who quite literally cleaned up after the 9/11 Twin Towers atrocity.

Given the way that facts can be sacrificed for the sake of a good story in any small community, this may or may not be true. For sure, the owners of the 19th-century retro-pile are Americans, and must be an enterprising couple. According to the owner of the local bar, as well as being a *residence secondaire*, the castle is the setting for an extremely imaginative business. The firework display we saw was the culmination of one of what the advertising material describes as fairytale weddings staged regularly at the *château*. Again according to my new source of local knowledge, couples from all over France spend tens of

thousands of euros renting the castle for a few days. This, as the bar owner observed dryly, could be longer than some of the marriages last when the lovebirds are faced with the bill.

Whatever the truth, it looks as if we have chosen a suitably unusual and interesting place in which to stay while I research and write my book about the Loire Valley.

We have rented a property in a hamlet of just three dwellings no more than a stroll from the village and in full sight of the castle's glittering spires. Our new home is an expensively and tastefully restored farmhouse, its large, formal and very immaculate gardens laid to lawn and planted with shrubs and a range of everyday and exotic flowers and trees. Looking at the billiard-table effect and spotless conditions on either side of our new home, it appears our neighbours are also keen gardeners who like order and neatness. And, perhaps, a little horticultural one-upmanship.

In contrast, the little island of urbanisation is surrounded by miles of gently undulating fields of wheat, sunflowers, maize and beef cattle. Beyond the swimming pool and through a gate is a soft fruit orchard, then a nascent vegetable patch and couple of acres of grassland, a large stew-pond and a patch of wild and overgrown woodland. This will keep us in touch with our idea of real country living, and I fancy my wife will spend more time working on the vegetable patch than the lawns.

So far in our wanderings around France, we have lived in a cottage in a small village, a water mill in the middle of the middle of nowhere and a manor house overlooking five thousand acres of marshlands. We paid a low price for this property, which may have been because it sat next door to a busy dog kennels. In my defence, I did not find out about the kennels until I had signed for the property, having viewed the ancient *manoir* after dark and while wearing rosé coloured glasses. Other owned or rented homes in France include a former alms house, a badly converted pigsty, a selection of boats and motor homes and a gaunt granite farmhouse in a hamlet half way up what counts as a mountain in Brittany.

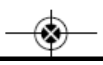
One of the benefits of moving around this gloriously diverse country is that we get to live in the sort of places which look great

in glossy magazines and which we could never afford to buy, even if we wanted to.

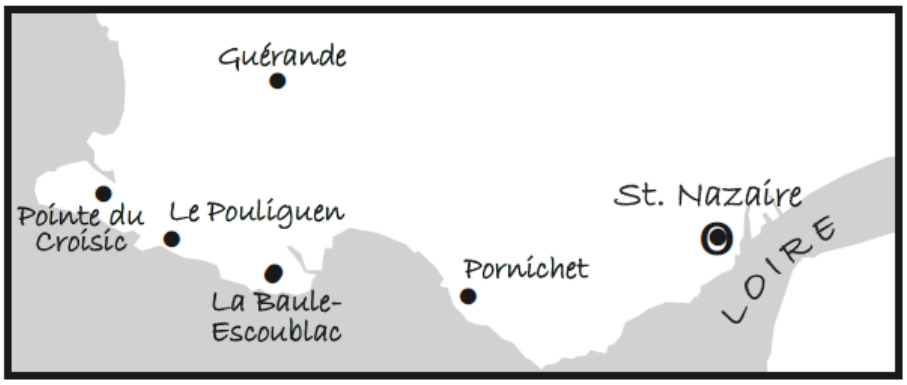
Apart from having to replace the disappearing kettle every move, one of the downsides of our peripatetic lifestyle has been the realisation that places which look stylish in glossy magazines are usually a pain to live in. In fact, the comfort rating is inevitably in inverse proportion to just how attractive the properties look in artfully staged and lit photos. Classic to this genre is, of course, the 'restored' water mill.

Unsurprisingly when you think of what they were for and where they have to be located, water mills are always damp and architecturally unsuitable for human habitation. This is why millers always had bent backs and arthritis. Because of the modern-day trend for leaving most of the milling machinery intact, climbing over a heavily-toothed giant cog to go to the toilet in the middle of the night can be a dangerous business. One advantage of rambling granite farmhouses with stone walls, slate floors and sitting rooms the size of a tennis court is that they are cool in summertime. The main disadvantage is that they are impossible to keep warm in the winter. It should not need any clarification as to why buying a manor house next to a thriving dog kennels is a bad idea at any time of year.

But all my bad decisions and cock-ups are a piffling price for doing what we want to do and living where we choose. Or that is what I think when the black dog of doubt and depression is not sniffing at my ankles and the latest replacement kettle has gone missing. Now we have arrived at our home for the next year, and it will take no more than a few days to unpack, settle in and find the kettle missing. The settling-in period can be a tense time, but we have grown to value the freedom and advantages of renting rather than owning the place we live in. This arrangement means we do not have to worry about someone building a dog kennels next door, or the need to install a new septic tank when the French government is looking for yet another way to raise lots more money to waste. We are also able to move on and see what life elsewhere in France is like when we have sated ourself with the current location. Of course, our lifestyle choice means we will never have a place to call home until it has the word 'care' in front



of it, but we like the anticipation of what is to come. Robert Louis Stevenson spent a bit of time on the move in France and it was he (amongst others) who said it is better to travel hopefully than arrive. I know what he meant, but we always delight in arriving to discover what a new part of this gloriously diverse if sometimes perverse country has to offer.



Guérande to St. Nazaire

It is the fag end of summer, so the riverside roads are comparatively quiet. When you think about how many Parisians visit the Loire Valley each year and how they drive, that will be a real bonus. Not only will our chances of survival increase, we will be able to motor along the tourist routes without the car behind trying to get into our boot.

Paris empties and the French generally take their main break of the year during the month of August. Being France, that is also when some owners of bars and restaurants and hotels in holiday areas take their *conges* or annual leave. Most French people prefer to holiday in their own country as they know just what a varied and attractive place it is. This is why they can be so rude and unwelcoming to foreign visitors, as they know we are going to keep coming whatever sort of welcome we do not get. A statistic which you need to roll around your mouth to get the full flavour and implication of is that more people from other countries come to France on holiday each year than live here.

Another interesting statistic is that there are 36,000 towns in France, which is more than any other European country. The figure is a bit of a cheat, as France has no cities, and even Paris is officially a town, but it still gives a good idea of the basic structure of French society. Apart from Paris and other major conurbations, all small French towns are the same in different

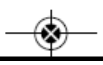
ways. The starting point of our journey along the Loire valley is, however, something else.

Nowadays, Guérande is to be found in the Loire-Atlantique department. Not so long ago and before the departments were jiggered about to suit political ends, it was part of the Duchy of Brittany. In Breton, the town's name means 'white land', and the great sea marshes surrounding Guérande are famed for the quality of the salt taken from them. If you are the sort of person who thinks things must be better if they are dearer, you can buy *fleur de sel* in a fancy-dan container at roughly the same price by weight as finely-cut diamonds. Or you may choose to buy a small stash at the roadside from a furtive-looking bloke in pulled-down hat, turned-up collar and sunglasses.

Salt has been valued greatly since at least the Bronze Age. It could and has been said that civilization was founded on salt because preserving food opened up the means of travel. It is a common misconception that Roman soldiers were paid in salt and that it is where we get the word 'salary'. In fact, they were paid in money so they could buy salt instead of dodgy wine or a brief acquaintance with a working girl along the Appian Way.

The value placed on this simple flavour-enhancer is further demonstrated by the way we have long said that someone is worth or not worth their salt. Until fairly recent times, posh people lounged around at table beyond and above the salt cellar. The rest of us sat below it, reminding us of our relative places in life. Wars have been fought over salt and it was attributed with all sorts of miraculous life-enhancing powers until an over-abundance gave those who like to tell us how to live an excuse to demonise it.

The *gabelle* was a much-hated French tax on salt which ran from the end of the 13th to the close of the 18th century. During a long period of that time and for reasons into which I will not go, there was no salt tax in Brittany. This accounts for the sophisticated salt-smuggling operations set up in the region, and possibly why you will see the bloke with the turned-up collar and sunglasses sitting in the lay-by. He is not actually doing anything illegal, just enjoying his heritage and history by offering cut-price wraps of the finest unadulterated white powder.



Apart from being one of the best-preserved medieval walled towns in Europe, Guérande can now add to its list of credits that it is one of the few places in which I could fancy settling down. Although it has its share of shops selling tatty souvenirs, the town avoids the in-your-face commercialism of Mont St. Michel or Carcassonne. The occasional plastic halberd or *Ye Olde Crêpe House* are somehow neutralised by the everyday aspects of the inner town. Despite the odd car or motorbike roaring by, though, the feel of history is everywhere, and the proud Breton heritage is evidenced right down to the manhole covers forged in the design of the circular Celtic triskele.

Guérande is also the home of one of the few public toilets in France I know of which boasts a plentiful and regular supply of toilet paper. In all, a nice, comfortable place to live and visit, and not at all flash or patronising. Just your everyday lovingly-preserved, medieval, fortified and walled French coastal town…

Croísic

The Pointe du Croisic is about as far as you can go westward in the Loire-Atlantique department without falling into the sea. Croisic itself is a former fishing port, but the remaining commercial vessels mostly jostle for mooring space with gin palaces and floating maisonettes.

I do not know the ratio, but there seem to be more restaurants per head of population here than anywhere else in France I have visited. Another unusual observation is that a number of the people eating on the quayside seem to have only one arm and leg apiece. At first I thought there must be a holiday centre for the severely handicapped nearby, then looked in an estate agent's window and all became clear. An apartment overlooking the sea at Croisic would cost an arm and a leg. One overlooking the port itself would take at least another limb.

Apart from limb-counting, a popular tourist attraction at Croisic is a fish market where you can see the day's catch auctioned, and also the miraculous process by which a single fish can tentuple in price during its journey from the sea to the table of a restaurant a hundred yards away.

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We take the road southwards along the Grand Coast. After the conspicuous consumption at Croisic, the stark naturalness of the melted rocks and crashing seas along the Côte Sauvage come as clean-cut relief.

Seeing a monstrous cannon pointing out to sea, we pull off the road at the Blockhaus, which turns out to be a giant concrete redoubt built with stereotypical wartime German thoroughness and scale. At a much later date, someone almost certainly not German created a most unlikely *trompe d'oeil* by painting delicate doors and windows and frothy curtains on one slabbed and pitted side.

I hear a shout, turn and see a young boy shinning up the barrel of the huge WWII gun. His mother warns him not to damage it, and I realise the family are German. The youngster obeys the command, dismounts and follows her down the beach to the sea. The father stays behind to look thoughtfully at the blockhouse, and I wonder if he is reflecting on what sins his grandfather's generation made flesh here and elsewhere in Europe, or what a good job the builders made of the project.

Le Pouleguen

Another long and glittering coastal strip of chrome and glass and then we reach Le Pouleguen, where the pleasingly weathered houses look as if they have been in place for more than a few months.

In the front garden of one attractively understated and sea-blown villa, an equally weathered elderly couple sit in their front garden and quarrel companionably with the easy skill of much practice. In contrast, a young man pumped up with the arrogance and confidence of youth screams to a halt in the middle of the road in an open-top sports car. The traffic tailback builds, but there is not a single protest as we all watch an almost impossibly beautiful girl sashay slowly from the pavement. Her legs are so long that she is able to step into the car without opening the passenger door. Her consort lifts his sunglasses and looks round

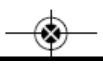
full circle to check he has a sufficiently large and attentive audience, then blasts off with a whiff of *Chanel pour Homme* and burnt rubber. The old couple look at each other and smile before returning to their bickering. It would be impossible for the youngsters in the car to realise that they - if they make it - will one day be like the old people, and that is probably for the best.

We and the queue behind get under way without a murmur of protest. Perhaps the drivers are on holiday and feeling in a benevolent mood, or perhaps they are still under the spell of the beautiful young girl. Perhaps it is just that they are being tolerant of the hold-up in a way that British drivers would not because they know they will commit the same sort of transgression later in the day. One of the very few things I like about French driving attitudes and habits is, against common perception and excepting big towns like Paris, motorists are generally very light on horns and remonstration with other drivers. They may act like completely thoughtless, selfish lunatics, but don't seem to object when others do the same.

La Baule-Escoublac

We reach La Baule-Escoublac and pause to marvel at the longest beach in Europe. We also wonder how they know, and if there are squads of men with very long measuring tapes on permanent standby to check out the ever-shifting sands and maintain the title. The size of the beach may account for why the original village was buried during a storm in 1799 and had to be re-built further inland. Tourist literature says that the bay is regarded as the most beautiful in Europe, but it does not add who did the regarding or if they had asked any other bay-owners to contest the title.

After debating whether there possibly could be more stars in the firmament than grains of sand on just this one beach, we head towards Pornichet alongside an arcade and gift shop-lined promenade which calls Blackpool to mind rather than north-western coastal France. That is not a sound comparison, as there is a very low count of fat people and a complete absence of ice cream vans, fish and chip shops, candy floss and winkle stalls.



Also missing are any hotels. Instead, there is row after row of imaginatively sculpted apartment blocks, most of them decades younger than the people thronging around them. Nobody can compete with the French when putting style over substance or practicality when it comes to architecture, which is perhaps why the German blockhouse looked so solid and pragmatic. One of the apartment buildings curves up talon-like from its base to almost a sharp point five storeys higher. The number of flats in the block could have been doubled if they had not gone for the extreme look-at-me factor, and the resultant additional cost for owners to bear probably explains why so many limbless people are sunning themselves on the balconies.

While we wait at a crossing to the beach, I consider the curious fact that elderly French men are one of the few species of humanity who can get away with and look so inoffensive in short trousers. Perhaps it is because of some particular structure of the Gallic leg or how it ages, or just that they spend a lot of time in shorts. This ruling does not apply to French men in the fortyish age group, who should not be allowed by law to show their complete lack of sartorial sensibility. I suppose the effect is magnified because, unlike most Britons who opt for seaside wear, these mid-life crisis candidates actually believe they are being cool and stylish. A much-favoured combo amongst this species anywhere in France is short long trousers and luridly-coloured shoes with socks. The irony is that the wearers think the overall effect of such a gap between trouser hem and sock is *a la mode*, rather than just making them look like Jethro Clampett of *Beverly Hillbillies* fame.

As I adjust my sunglasses, a flash of gold catches my eye and it seems for a moment as if Elvis is indeed alive and living in or at least passing through Pornichet. If it is he, The King of Rock ‘n’ Roll has obviously gone through a considerable degree of cosmetic surgery and even a gender re-assignment, but the girth, hairstyle and outfit are unmistakable. The gold lamé suit lacks the mini-cloak, but is otherwise identical to the outfits of the Vegas Years. Even the lead attaching the figure to the poodle which I note has the same pompadour quiff as its owner is golden and a-sparkle with diamanté. The exotic figure sees me

watching, and the toss of the head and curl of the upper lip in acknowledgment reinforces the eerie resemblance. The elderly lady proceeds across the crossing with magnificent disdain, and clearly does not give a fig for what I or anyone else thinks she looks like. It says something that she and her outfit do not stand out in the parade of clashing colours and styles.

Pornichet

Ask the average Briton of more than fifty years to name any French film, and the odds are that he or she will come up with *Monsieur Hulot's Holiday*. The classic 1953 Jacques Tati movie was filmed near Pornichet, and to prove it there is a street in St-Marc named after the once most famous bicyclist in all France.

St. Nazaire

This is the first big town on our journey from the Bay of Biscay to Orléans, and at first sight is not a welcoming or particularly eye-pleasing place. To be fair, we sneaked up on it from the coastal road, and, after the glitz and prosperity of the holiday resorts, our new surroundings were bound to be a sharp contrast.

Although it still makes more ships than many of its major competitors, St. Nazaire felt more like a dying industrial town as we drove past dilapidated factory buildings, rusting cranes and railway lines to nowhere. Then came rubbish-strewn streets, dark doorways and dark faces drawing gloomily on cigarettes as their owners stood statue-still and watched cars and time pass by.

Generally I like the seamy feel of any place where commerce by water has been going on for a while, but to me there seemed no depth of history or hope for the future in this town. The jumble of ugly concrete buildings and skimpy shopping malls made it feel as if it had been purpose-built as a docks with no more than a nod to the need for places to sustain and serve the people working there. In fact, human habitation in this area goes back a long way, and a prehistoric burial mound to the west of the town proves it. Other claims to distinction include the road bridge which spans a mile across the Loire, while the nearby

Grand Brière nature reserve of marsh and moorland is proudly claimed as the second-largest swamp in all France.

Like Nantes, St. Nazaire was once part of Brittany, and still is as far as many resentful Bretons are concerned. For those Brets with the necessary levels of suspension of disbelief, hard evidence for the town's cultural heritage is that it was visited by Brutus of Troy, who everyone knows was the founder of the Breton race.

Whatever its origins, St. Nazaire developed over the centuries as a fishing and ship-building centre, and, nearer to our time, Queen Mary II was built here. The town now has that awkward-sized population of around fifty thousand, though we only saw a handful of people slinking around the windblown streets of the port area. In a place of that size one would expect a centre or heart to the town, but, beyond a grid-shaped layout of shops and more anonymous concrete buildings, we failed to find it. Later, we discovered why there seemed no evidence of any pre-war buildings or thoughtful structure to the town.

Despite having Trojan Brutus as a founding father and the exemplary size of its swamps, St. Nazaire is probably better known for its role as a base for German U-Boats after the French surrender in June 1940. Like the Blockhaus on the coast, the submarine pens are a fine example of wartime German policy that bigger and more intimidating is always better; you only have to stand and look up at the vast slabs of reinforced concrete to get a feel of how the conviction that they were the destined master race led them on to such excesses. 'Inappropriate' is not a word of which I am fond, but it fits exactly when you find avant-garde artwork and leisure outlets where once the wolves of the sea took on fuel and provisions and rested under massive shelter.

Along with the submarine pens, St. Nazaire is known amongst military historians as the setting for Operation Chariot, one of the most audacious and imaginative seaborne raids of World War Two. By the beginning of 1942, the mighty German battleship *Tirpitz* was in the Baltic but thought to be heading for the North Atlantic. It had been the prime target for the Allies and survived a number of bombing attacks. The ship posed a huge

threat to convoys if it entered the area, and the only dry dock with facilities to handle a warship of that size was St. Nazaire.

Seemingly straight from a *Boy's Own* magazine, a daring plan to ram the dry dock gates with a ship loaded with high explosives was hatched. After the deed was done the crew would then hopefully escape, and the delayed-action bombs would disable or even destroy the gates.

In the early hours of the 28th of March and accompanied by a number of fast attack vessels packed with commandos, HMS Campbeltown rammed the gates. The commanding officer ordered the boat to be scuttled and his men to make their way to safety. The charges detonated at noon, killing forty German officers and four hundred men.

Of the eighteen British boats taking part, only four returned. More than one hundred and forty commandos and naval personnel gave their lives to the mission, and five VCs and a host of other medals were awarded for outstanding gallantry. Because of the operation, the giant dry dock was put out of action for the remainder of the war. Most importantly, the awesome *Tirpitz* was denied a safe haven in the North Atlantic.

Other actions in the town were not to be so successful. Because of the threat to Allied Atlantic convoy shipping, the submarine pens at St. Nazaire were a constant target for raids and bombing, though not even the largest contemporary bombs could penetrate the 30ft thick reinforced concrete roofing. In near-desperation, the RAF planned a firestorm incendiary raid in 1943 and leaflets were dropped to warn the townspeople. On the day, the town was razed to the ground but the pens remained intact and under Nazi control until the last day of World War Two.

Fascinating fact: One third of all cruise ships are built in the giant *Chantiers de l'Atlantique* yard at St. Nazaire. Also constructed there was the then largest, longest, tallest and most expensive passenger ship. The Queen Mary II carries 2,620 passengers and cost around four hundred million quid to put in the water.

*Saint Nazaire: Operation Chariot-1942 is by James G Dorrian and intended for use by armchair and real visitors to the port. ISBN 1844153347, price £12.99.

Another Fascinating fact: 25 percent of the country's Little Tern population lives on and off the banks of the Loire.

Food & Drink

Being where it is, it is not surprising that this end of the Loire is big on fresh and sea water fish and other edibles. The gravette is a sweet, flat oyster, while the baby *Alien* chest-bursting lookalike lamproie is an eel-type fish usually cooked in walnut oil. The official definition of 'lamprey' is any primitive sea or freshwater fish with a sucking mouth and rasping teeth but no jaw, which reminds me of several estate agents and journalists I know. Famously, it was a surfeit of lampreys which did for Henry I, although a lesser known or celebrated fact is that he holds the record for the most illegitimate children of any English king. Another local delicacy is Friture de la Loire, which are small fish deep fried and eaten whole, whitebait-style. Carp with sorrel is another dish associated with this end of the Loire.

If you want to see why Henry had such a crush on eels, you might wish to try this classic lamprey stew:

Matelote d'anguille

Ingredients

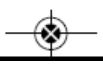
900g of eel, skinned and cut into chunks of around 3cm
3 tbsp brandy
8 pitted and chopped prunes
4 tbsp oil
2 tbsp butter
1 bottle of red cooking wine
30g butter
1 dessert spoon plain flour
2 chopped garlic cloves
1 large and finely chopped onion
1 large leek, also finely chopped
100g of button mushrooms, quartered
1 bouquet garni
Some seasoning
Watercress for garnish

Method

Heat the oil and butter in a heavy-based pan and, when foaming, add the eel chunks and fry till golden.
Add the red wine and prunes and bouquet garni and bring the mixture to boil.
Flame the brandy in a ladle and then pour over the eel. As soon as the flames die down, put a lid on the pan, reduce the heat and leave to cook gently for 25 minutes.
In the meantime, add the remaining oil to a pan and fry the onion, garlic and leeks till soft (about six minutes). Then add the mushrooms and continue cooking for another few minutes.
Now mix the flour and remaining butter into a smooth paste before whisking into the eel pan. When all is smooth, add the mushrooms and onion mixture.
Bring to the boil and cook until a smooth and thick texture has been achieved, then turn out on to a dish and garnish with watercress.
Serve with boiled or mashed potato and cabbage and a bottle of Gros Plant from down the road.

Sablé biscuits with gooseberry fool

As ever in French culinary matters, there is no shortage of claimants to the invention of this classic Gallic shortcake. Some say it was dreamed up in Caen (Normandy), while others protest that it is a Breton speciality. According to the compulsive letter-writing Marquise de Sévigné, the biscuits were first created in 1670 in Sablé-sur-Sarthe in the Pays de la Loire. The name of the town might seem a clincher, but you have to remember that 'sandy' refers to the texture rather than origin. Wherever they come from, this is a simple way of making a very tasty biscuit which goes well with lots of things as a dessert.



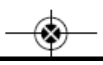
Ingredients (for around two dozen biscuits)

Two egg yolks at room temperature
Two cups all-purpose flour
Three teaspoons baking powder
An eighth of a teaspoon of finely ground fleur-de-sel (if you want to be expensively authentic)
A quarter cup of sugar
Six tablespoons of superfine sugar
180 grams of unsalted butter
One teaspoon of vanilla extract
Two drops of almond extract

Method

Preheat your oven to 410 degrees Fahrenheit.
Beat the eggs in a bowl with the quarter cup of sugar for around 5 minutes.
Add the vanilla and almond extracts.
In another bowl, combine the flour, salt and baking powder.
Cream the butter with the superfine sugar, getting maximum air into the butter.
Mix dry and wet ingredients.
Put a sheet of parchment paper on a baking tray.
Spread the mixture on to the paper and add another sheet on top.
Put in your refrigerator for half an hour.
Cut the biscuit mix into shapes with moulds or a knife.
Bake the biscuits for ten minutes.

The origin of the word ‘fool’ when associated with desserts is almost as hotly disputed as the origins of the sandy shortcake. ‘Foole’ is first mentioned as a dessert in the 16th century, and the word is thought to derive from the old French verb fouler, which related to crushing or pressing grapes.



Ingredients

400 grams of gooseberries
100g of caster sugar
75ml water
300ml double cream

Method

Put the gooseberries, sugar and water into a pan and bring to the boil.

Simmer until the fruit is soft.

Cook while stirring until nearly all the liquid has evaporated.

Pass through a fine sieve and allow to cool.

Whip the cream until stiff.

Fold the whipped cream into the gooseberry purée.

Say Cheese

The Loire Valley can be a very agricultural place; as well as wine grapes and *châteaux*, the area also grows lots of cows and not a few goats. This accounts for the number and variety of cheeses in the area. Found at the start of our journey and the end of the Loire's, Galette du Paludier ('Cake/Pebble of the Salt Farmer') gets its distinctive flavour from being ripened on a bed of salicorne. What we call samphire is an aquatic plant allegedly found in this region only in the shallow salty waters of Noirmoutier in the Vendée and Guérande.

Wine whine

This book will not be a particularly detailed or even enthusiastic guide to the fine wines of the Loire Valley. That has already been done better than I could ever do, and anyway I know little about the intricacies, lores, laws and snobbery surrounding the juice of the grape. This attitude does not stop me enjoying more than my fair share of reasonably priced wine, and by reasonable I mean

the cheaper the better if it tastes good to my thankfully uneducated palate.

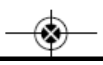
I know how 'philistine' is spelled, but it has always fazed me why so many otherwise logical people think that the more something costs the better it must be. Likewise, it is totally illogical and simply cannot be true that the rarer (and thus most costly) things are, the better they will taste. Unless there is a world-wide conspiracy to keep the tastiest foodstuffs thin on or in the ground, how could it be that there are a million everyday mushrooms for every truffle, and we coincidentally find (or are told to find) the taste of a truffle shaving infinitely superior and so worth more than solid gold, ounce for ounce? In the same way, why is it that wines which take longer to produce are said to taste so much better than those which are ready for consumption more quickly? And what exactly makes a bottle of 1978 Domaine de la Romanée-Conti Montrachet worth ten thousand times the price of a bottle of your averagely most enjoyable house wine?

The whole proposition becomes ever more risible when you think that the most expensive bottles of wine are usually not fit for the purpose for which they were made, as they are undrinkable. Like pork loins, they are no more than a commodity.

Having said all that, it must be that some things are naturally better than others and should cost more, and this book is a good example.

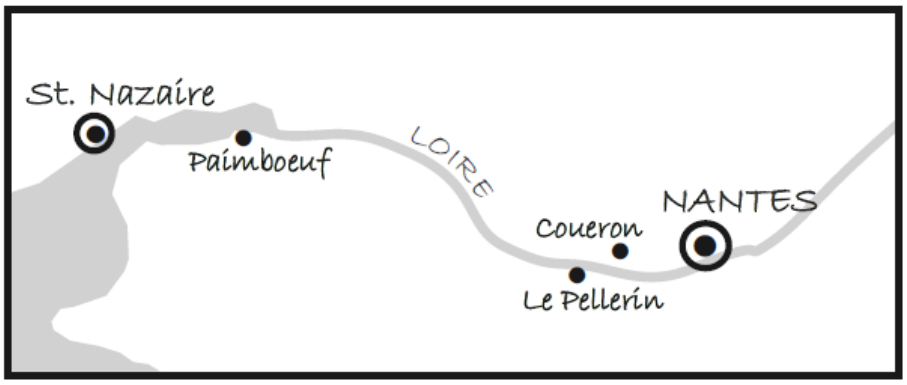
One thing is for sure, and that is that the Loire valley has a long and respectable history for wine making. It is thought the Romans planted vineyards here in their spare time from occupying and subduing Gaul. By the Middle Ages, wines from the Loire were thought far superior to those from Bordeaux.

The micro-climates along the Loire Valley makes it about as far north (apart from Champagne) as the French say you can grow wine grapes, and it is believed that nearly 200,000 acres of vines flourish in the valley. For the statistically minded or anoraks, there are 87 *appellations** and for the purposes of this book, the bit of the river we are covering can be divided rather untidily into types of grape and the wine they make. We shall meet and sample each as we go.



Gros Plant du Pays Nantais is a white wine *appellation* which marks the northwesternmost point of France's vineyards. The growing area for this light, crispy wine covers ninety communes from the south-west of Nantes to the edge of the Atlantic. Wine snobs say the wine produced here is inferior and thin. Locals and broad-minded people say it goes very well with seafood, which is just fine given its location.

* *Basically, a wine appellation d'origine contrôlée defines a designated grape-growing area controlled by governmental and usually local rules and regulations. The aim of the system in France and other countries is to stimulate the production of the best quality wine. The appellation name on a bottle is meant to give the buyer reassurance of what lies inside, and conveniently allows the seller to charge more for it.*



St. Nazaire to Nantes

I have been reading about an Englishwoman who woke up one morning to find herself speaking with a French accent. Not suddenly being able to speak French, that is, but not being able to help herself from sounding like a French person speaking English. The newspaper report also related the strange cases of a Devon woman who suddenly began talking with a Chinese accent, a Newcastle lass whose Geordie twang changed to a Jamaican drawl, and a television news announcer whose normally cut-glass Home Counties accent suddenly converted to a broad Scottish burr.

The article said there were only sixty known cases of Foreign Accent Syndrome worldwide, but I know of thousands in France alone. It is also a very common occurrence wherever Britons make a home in a country which is so thoughtless as to use a language other than English. In fact, the faux-French accent is usually not malicious or patronising, but used by a type of Brit who genuinely wants to help natives understand what he or she is saying in English. So, in a bar and even with a French friend who they know speaks perfect English, the user would ask: 'What is eet zat yew wud laike to dreenk?'

The other manifestation of Deliberately Speaking Your Own Language With A Foreign Accent Syndrome is when the speaker re-arranges the words to the order in which they believe the hearer would prefer them. So 'Can you tell me the way to the

post office, please?' becomes 'Issit zat yew kno ze way to ze office of the Post, silvery plate?'

This of course hinders rather than helps the French person on the receiving end, but I think it is a genuine attempt to communicate. In contrast, if you ask the average Frenchman something in his own tongue, he will reply in French at the speed he would use to a fellow countryman. Or even faster. This is despite or perhaps *because* they know you are a foreigner from the moment you open your mouth. In some cases, the more you frown and shake your head and repeat the question, the more machine-gun like their response will become. I do not know why this happens, but it does, and there must be something dark underlying the thought process. Ironically, Brits are derided by the chattering classes for speaking loudly and slowly in English when addressing a foreigner, though this is clearly the most helpful thing to do.

I bring up the subject of making oneself understood in a foreign land as the situation at our local garage is even more than usually confusing and demanding.

The owner is a Cambodian widow who speaks no English and only the little French her Burgundian husband taught her. Her only employee is a neighbour, who works the pumps and acts as translator. The problem is that the neighbour is a Bulgarian lady who has picked up a smattering of Cambodian, but is shaky in French and even more so in English. Just going in for a tank of diesel is a challenging but rewarding experience, and another reason we so like living in France. I wonder how many Brits know the Bulgarian and Cambodian as well as the French for 'Do you know your windscreen wipers need changing?'

Paimboeuf

We have picked up where we left off on our journey along the Loire, and crossed the St. Nazaire bridge from north to south.

Curiously, although the distance between the banks is much less than a mile, it is as if we have been transported to a deeper, richer and much more southerly part of France. On the northern

side we left concrete and granite and greyness; on this side, neat white bungalows with bright red roofs are the commonest housing unit. We are clearly approaching wine territory, and there is a feeling of being in Bordeaux rather than the borders of Brittany, especially when the sun makes an appearance. The oil refineries and other processing plants along the banks help make this part of the Loire a little-known route for tourists, but we find the contrasts interesting.

At the village of Paimboeuf, the terraces of clean-cut houses in pastel shades, neat port area and miniature lighthouse evoke New England rather than the Pays de la Loire. When young, Jules Verne sneaked aboard a boat at Nantes to see the world, but got only as far as Paimbouef before he was discovered and chucked off. I have at least something in common with the great author, as when I was young I too tried to run away to sea. Because I mistakenly stowed away on board an Isle of Wight ferry rather than the banana boat alongside, I only got as far as Ryde pierhead.

Le Pellerin

We have run out of road. I am navigating and did not notice on my map the thin blue line bisecting and blocking our route to Nantes. In my defence, I point out that the course of the Loire was easy to miss at that scale. Rather sniffily, my wife reminds me that I got the 'map' free from a tourist office, and it is really no more than a pictorial guide to the attractions of this part of the Valley.

As I consider the best plan of action, a car pulls up behind and I wonder if we have led the driver astray because he was lost and thought we knew where we were going. A battered van and another couple of vehicles arrive behind him, and the horns on all begin blaring. I know we are in France and motorists hate to queue, but surely they do not expect me to drive into the river to get out of their way? As I practise the appropriate shoulder-shrug for 'Nothing I can do about it, mate', a large boat pulls out from the far bank and heads our way. As it gains leeway, there is

a resounding moan from its foghorn which almost drowns out the combined battery of hooters.

More motorists arrive and join in the fun, while a group of cyclists pulls up at the jetty and begin frantically pinging their bells. Small children in a school bus cheer and wave encouragement, dogs bark and seagulls screech as the ferry docks and there is a free-for-all to be first on board. That includes the drivers behind us, and a man on a quad bike actually drives into the river to get round us to claim pride of place.

While all this is happening, the captain and his mate stand on the bridge comparing notes and pointing out particularly creative and daring manoeuvres. Then a man in a high-visibility jacket and with a pair of what look like ping-pong bats in his hand appears on deck. As my wife observes, he is either there to take charge and further confuse the situation, or is the Entertainments Officer heading for the games room.

Somehow, we and three other cars, a lorry, the school bus, covey of cyclists, the battered van, the quad bike and a boat on a trailer squeeze on board and the ferry chugs across the Loire to the outskirts of Nantes. We stay in the car, not because we do not want to get out, but because it is such a tight squeeze we cannot open any of the doors.

Coueron

As we approach the outskirts of Nantes, my wife orders me to stop, then blindfolds and gags me and puts on the central locking. I know why she has done it, and it is for my own good. Otherwise I might not be able to resist the temptation to buy a wheelbarrow without a wheel, or a single frogman's flipper.

The reason for the restraints is that we are approaching a busy and obviously very big boot sale.

It has taken a while, but the French are now as keen as Brits to walk around and look at a lot of unwanted household tat and then buy something just because it is cheap. They have always loved street markets, but now the idea of the *vide grenier* (empty loft) has really caught on. As usual, we got our timing wrong, as we started organizing these sort of events twenty years ago in

rural Normandy when we owned a water mill called the Mill of the Flea. It was not so much that I thought the idea would catch on in our isolated location, but I could not resist setting up an event called The Flea Market.

Predictably, our venture was not a raging success. Normans rarely throw anything away, so believe that all their old rubbish is worth a fortune. Also, I had used the term 'boot sale' at a meeting of our regular Jolly Boys' Club in the village bar, and a number of members took me at my literal word and arrived with nothing but their old boots for sale.

Later we tried running stalls at *braderies* or *vide greniers* in big towns, but my wife got fed up with me spending more on other people's stuff than she made by selling ours. Typically, I would wander off in search of a second-hand sickle and come back with an incomplete Complete Works of William Shakespeare in Breton. Now I am a recovering bradoholic, she has declared an exclusion order barring me from coming within a half mile of any of these functions.

Nantes

Nantes is the capital of the Pays de la Loire region, and the various officials and bodies responsible seem to disagree violently as to how many people live there. According to a grudging consensus, the urban population of a tad over 280,000 and the metropolitan total of 800,000 makes Nantes the sixth largest town in France. Obviously scratching around for something sexy to say about it, Time magazine described Nantes as the 'most liveable' city in Europe. All cities are by definition liveable in, though many people might say they would rather live in Nantes than, say, Norwich. Nantes is twinned with Cardiff, and you can make your own mind up as to which place might be more 'liveable'.

Along with so many other places on or near water (excluding Cardiff), Nantes has also been tagged as the Venice of the West. It has a fairly plausible claim because it is on the delta of the Loire, Erdre and Sèvre. A final and, if true, mind-numbingly unique claim for the town is that it is said to occupy the exact

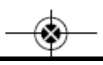
centre of the Earth's land hemisphere. As with the liveability award, what that means or how they found out is of interesting conjecture.

As well as Jules Verne, famous sons and daughters of Nantes include a twelve-times water ski-ing world champion, and Miss France 1992.

Unless it runs through your house at times of flood, having a river passing through or near where you live is nearly always a good thing. Early trade and commerce was done by sea and river, which is why so many great cities and capitals are on big rivers and near the sea. For me there is also the feeling that you are on a liquid road, and a much more pleasant one to look at than a normal highway. I can't see people paying as much for houses overlooking the Great North Road as they do for those sitting beside the Kennet and Avon canal. Nantes is a good example of a place which would not be as big and important and appealing were it a highway rather than the Loire going through it. Having said that, and as its history and commerce and prosperity are so inextricably linked to and dependent on the river, Nantes would probably not exist without the Loire.

For past visits, we have travelled nose-to-tail with thousands of others on the Nantes ring road, which was clearly devised and built and signposted at huge cost and effort to confuse and drive mad all non-Nantais. Because we have broken the rules and sneaked up on the town by the ferry boat route, we have seen another side of Nantes, and find it much more attractive than the ultra-modern shopping centre and glass towers co-habiting uncomfortably with the ancient buildings and castle.

Approached from the west, the riverside area is a very agreeable place and does not have the big-town indifference and self-importance of the centre. People even walk more slowly, and most of those sitting outside the bars and restaurants have both arms and legs, so property prices must be lower in this less trendy part of the town. The odd derelict or defiantly rusting merchant vessel sits at ease on stilts or river, and what looks like a permanent funfair is going full throttle on the far bank as we pass.



There are also some cracking new buildings sprouting from the water margin. I am not usually a fan of the sort of pretentious French architectural approach which sacrifices all other considerations like practicality or taste by trying to reflect a building's purpose in its shape and layout. The ferryport terminal at Cherbourg is a fine example, shaped as it is like an upturned boat. Here on the riverside at Nantes, steel and glass and imagination have been used mainly for the best practical and aesthetic results. We have stopped off at and stayed at this town many times, so my entrancement is not an infatuation. This part of Nantes is another of those few places where I could see myself living and not wanting to escape from every day.

But, like all big, important and old towns, Nantes has a dark side to its past, and the river played its part. During the Terror, the grimly ironically-named Committee for Public Safety found the guillotine too time and labour intensive, so simply chained thousands of counter-revolutionaries (or people they did not like) together and loaded them on barges which were taken out to the centre of the river and sunk.

The town was also a centre of France's slave trading activities. Gunpowder and calico and other goods were shipped to West Africa and traded for slaves, who were then transported in horrendous conditions to the West Indies. There, they would be bartered for coffee, sugar and tobacco. This grisly trading triangle explains why there were so many sweet factories along the banks of the Loire in the Nantes area, and why the Nantais are said to be so sweet-toothed. The trade in human beings ceased in 1794 when slavery was abolished in the French colonies. The practice was re-introduced by Napoleon in 1802, and finally outlawed in 1848.

Nowadays, Nantes is a thriving and sophisticated town which exudes self-confidence. Given its murky past, if it were human, I would liken it to Alain Delon playing a handsome but ageing gangster who has gone straight and invested a lot of his ill-gotten gains into legitimate activities and cosmetic and regenerative surgery.

Depending on which figures for the population you choose to believe, there are said to be more French people living and

working in Greater London than live in the town of Nantes. To me, this statistic provides another indicator of the French character and psyche. While Peter Mayle made a fortune and spawned a thousand memoirs by expats living in France, I have yet to find a single book about the small adventures of a Frenchman spending a year in Penge while encountering all sorts of loveable if bizarre English characters with quaint foreign tastes and attitudes.

Food & Drink

Beurre blanc

Amongst other things, Nantes is famed as the birthplace of the ubiquitous *beurre blanc*, said like so many great discoveries of the table to have been made by accident. According to culinary legend, the serendipitous event occurred when famed chef Clémence Lefeuvre was preparing a *béarnaise* sauce to anoint a pike dish at her restaurant on the banks of the Loire and just upriver from Nantes. The story has it that she forgot to add the tarragon and eggs, and *voila*, a great new sauce was born. When the lady died in 1932, the prime minister is said to have said it was a time for national mourning. Perhaps the same will happen when the great Delia Smith leaves us. When white wine is used rather than vinegar it should be local Muscadet, and when cream is added it becomes *beurre Nantais.*

The delicate nature of *beurre blanc* or the above variations means it suits freshwater fish. Sea Bass is permissible, however, and here's a favourite local recipe:

Sea bass with beurre blanc and asparagus

To make the beurre blanc Nantes-style you will need:

3 or 4 shallots very finely chopped
One cup of Sèvre-et-Maine Muscadet
2 tablespoons court bouillon
Some salt and pepper
A whole pound of the very best quality butter
Some fresh cream.
Lemon juice

For the rest of the dish you will need, as the name suggests, some asparagus and a sea bass.

Method

Put the wine and shallots into a saucepan, reduce to half a cup, then add the cream and reduce again to a sauce consistency.
When the sauce coats the back of a spoon nicely, remove from heat and add the butter in small dollops.
Season with the salt and pepper and lemon juice.
Set the pan aside to keep warm while you prepare the fish.
Now take your bass, trimming off the spiky fins and scraping off the scales. Make two or three slashes each side, then dress the fish with butter and season inside before putting under a pre-heated grill for fifteen minutes each side or thereabouts, depending on size of the fish and the heat of the grill.
Meanwhile, cut off the hard ends of the asparagus and steam until soft.
Season and toss in butter then add to the fish, which should then be anointed with the beurre blanc.

Another speciality of Nantes and a legacy of the sugar refineries built along the banks in the days of the slavery triangle are berlingots. These are hard sugar sweets roughly in the shape of a pyramid (or tetrahedron if you want to be technical), with flavours ranging across the board and including aniseed, blackcurrant, lemon and coffee. In 1780 a small confectionery shop is recorded as selling the sweets, the recipe invented by a Madame Couet.

Nantes also has its very own biscuit, the *Petit Beurre*. There can't be a single French person or even regular visitor to France who has not tasted this basic but classic biscuit, created in 1886 by Nantes biscuiteer, Louis Lefèvre. The sentimental Louis was married to a lady with the maiden name of Utile, and had their joint initials stamped on every biscuit. Nowadays the factory knocks out more than one *billion* LU biscuits a year, each with the distinctive little 'dog ear' on each corner. Tradition dictates that a true LU connoisseur will eat the ears first.

Gateaux Nantais

Further evidence of the sweet-toothedness of the people of Nantes are these little tipsy cakes. The inclusion of rum is another nod to the town's murky history of West Indian connections.

Ingredients

150 grams of granulated sugar
125 grams of salted butter
100 grams of almond powder
40 grams of flour
1 teaspoon of baking powder
100g of powdered/confectioner's sugar
Three eggs
Some rum

Method

Preheat your oven to 175 degrees C.
Work the butter and sugar and then add the almond powder.
Add the flour, baking powder and a shot of rum.
Mix well and then pour into moulds.
Bake for around twenty minutes, monitoring all the while.
Sprinkle the top of the cakes with more rum, then allow to cool for ten minutes before turning out of the moulds.
Mix the powdered sugar with rum and water (or more rum) until it is of spooning consistency.
Spread over the cakes and add another couple of drops of rum for luck.

Local Cheeses

A favourite in this part of the Loire Valley is Curé Nantais, a strong cheese from the Loire-Atlantique department which gets its name from being invented in a Nantes vineyard by a priest of passage. It is made today in nearby Pornic.

Bondary au Foin is a soft cow's milk cheese with a tangy flavour resulting from curing in hay. Chabichou Fermier is a strong goat's cheese which comes in the shape of a cone. Cremet is a mildly creamy cow's milk cheese often eaten as a dessert with jam or fruit. Olivet Bleu is, as the name suggests, a blue cheese which comes wrapped in the leaves of the plane tree.

Nantes' most local cheese is often used to grace all sorts of dishes, and this one confirms what a sweet tooth the Nantais have. I suppose you could use another variety of soft cheese if they do not stock Curé Nantais down your way:

Curé Nantais ice cream

Ingredients

200g Curé Nantais cheese
4 large egg yolks
1 cup each of full milk and demi-cream
200g sugar

Method

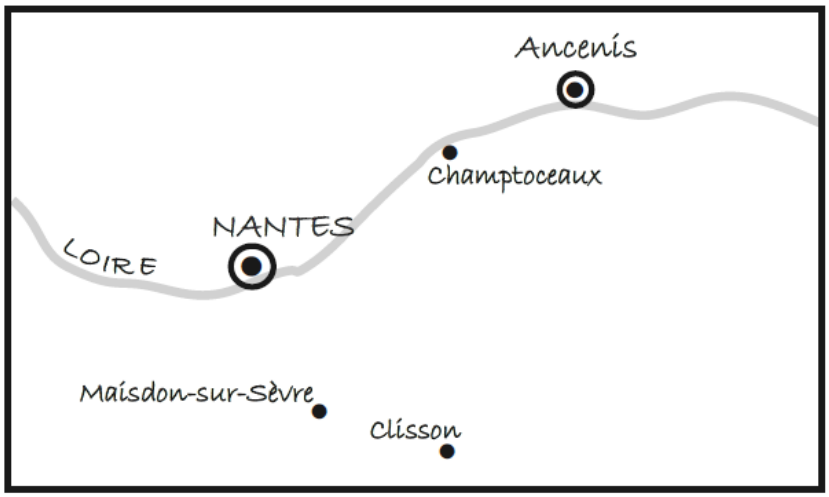
Remove the rind from the cheese and cut into small cubes.
Heat the milk/cream mixture and the cheese together in a saucepan on medium heat.
In a bowl, whisk the eggs yolks and sugar until well blended.
When the cheese has melted and the milk mixture has come to the boil, pour over the eggs and sugar blend.
Whisk or stir constantly, and when the liquid is fully incorporated, return to the saucepan.
Cook over medium to low heat until the mixture is thick enough to coat the back of a spoon.
Strain your nascent Curé Nantais ice cream into another bowl, and chill until cool enough to put into an ice cream maker/freezer. If you have not got one, they come in a variety of prices and may use hand or motor churning. In this case, you generally get what you pay for in quality of machine. Given

our rate of consumption of home-made ice cream, we have never regretted investing in a top-of-the range model.

Drink

The Nantes area is claimed to be the most prolific wine producer in all France, having 750 growers. There are 15,000 hectares of vines just in the Nantes area, and a wine trail to be followed. Though vine-growing is said to precede the arrival of the Romans in this part of France, the terrible winter of 1709 caused the very sea to freeze and destroyed all the vineyards at this end of the Loire. The whole area was re-planted, using a new variety of grape.

Fascinating Factette: One in every 702,203 Americans has the given name of Nantes. This means there are currently 443 people who would respond to ' Hey Nantes, how's it hangin', man?' in the USA, with the total added to by four each year.



Nantes to Ancenis

The poet Robert Frost noted that good fences make good neighbours. We have generally found that the best neighbours are no neighbours.

Our preference for isolation is not because we are particularly misanthropic, just that we selfishly prefer to be away from other people when not seeking company. Going by the comparative prices of un-neighboured rural properties in Britain, a lot of people share our preference. As my wife points out, given my behaviour and noise levels, we are also doing other people a favour by not living next door to them.

But I am also the sort of contradictory person who likes complete isolation and quietude where I live, but a big and noisy centre of civilization more or less down the road for when I crave noise and bustle and the weft and warp of humanity in all its variety. This immensely privileged situation and location is still possible to achieve in France without being a gazillionaire, which is another reason we so enjoy living here.

In our current location, however, we have neighbours close-by on either side of our temporary home. So far, it seems that they have far more to fear from our proximity than we of theirs. On one side is a pleasant English couple of around our age, while

the only other dwelling in the hamlet is home to the deputy mayor of our commune.

Although worth more than a few status points on the social scale, living cheek-to-cheek with such an important member of the community can be a mixed blessing. On one hand you can be fairly sure the roads, services and verges around your home will be well-tended, but it can make knocking up an undeclared extension or just having a bonfire out of season a risky business.

In this case, I think we have been spectacularly lucky to find ourselves next door to Jean-Marie and his attractive wife Celine. He is clearly a cultured man with a huge appetite for knowledge for its own sake. He also has a very dry turn of humour. As we shook hands over the garden fence, he said that he came from a small village near Brussels, so, like me, knows what it is like to be a foreigner. Another huge bonus is that, though not of the region, JM has made a hobby of learning about and testing the food and drink of the Pays de la Loire. He has offered to share that knowledge, and to be my guide and mentor on our journey along the Loire. This evening was to be our first taste of his enthusiasm for the food, drink and customs of this part of France.

Arriving respectably late with flowers for the hostess, we found a typical *apéro* getting under way. Taking its name from the same root as *aperitif*, this is a very civilized and pragmatic arrangement which is officially drinks with snacks, but can also develop into a full-blown fiesta if things get interesting. In whatever form, the *apéro* works so well because everyone gets lots to drink and interesting things to eat without having to sit and stay at table while trying to be nice to the people on either side of them. The buffet format also allows the hosts to circulate and not worry about tending to and dishing up courses, and to withdraw the bottles and food bowls subtly when they want to get rid of their visitors.

Not unusually, the guests included a former Foreign Legionnaire. As in England where there are more claimants to have seen action with the Special Air Service than there have been members of that regiment, it is not uncommon here for at least one guest at any drinks party to claim to be an ex-Legionnaire. He, or in extreme cases she, will tell dramatic tales

of adventures in exotic places, especially after being revved up by a few glasses of *pastis* or local moonshine liquor. As with the SAS, the secretive nature of these type of organizations make it hard to check up on those who say they were in them, and finding out by challenging them to demonstrate how to kill a man with one finger is not always a good idea when drink has been flowing.

JM says Henry is the real deal, and he certainly looks the part. He is of middle height and nearly as wide as he is tall, has a neck which almost forms a straight line with his shoulders, a shock of closely-cropped grey hair and a huge walrus moustache only partially covering an interesting-looking scar.

Tonight, the excuse for the gathering was Henry's 67th birthday. His wife is stunningly attractive, and around 30 years younger than he. As we got to know each other over a glass of JM's DIY apple brandy, I tried telling him the old gag about the elderly man who goes for a check-up after marrying a beautiful woman much younger than he. 'You do realise,' says the doctor, 'that too much sexual activity could be fatal?' 'That's a pity' replies the old man, '…but if she dies, she dies.' The joke seemed not to work well in French, and the former Legionnaire looked like a man deciding whether he has been insulted, and if so, what retribution would be appropriate. Drinking up, I made my excuses and moved away to strike up a conversation with a more friendly-looking English Setter.

An hour later found us heading for home, laden down with samples of local cheeses and a bottle of Henry's home-made *eau-de-vie*. He has promised to show me how to make our own firewater when the fruit in our orchard is ripe. In response, I invited him and JM to a tasting of last season's elderflower champagne and blackberry and apple wine. As an example of all that was best about British buffet food as well as home-made wine, there would be pickled, curried and even Scotched eggs, cold haggis and a modest selection of English cheeses. To enhance the visual appeal, some of the hard cheeses would be cut into little cubes and stuck on sticks with cocktail onions.

As my wife pointed out as I went through my plans for the *Table d'Anglais*, the former French Foreign Legionnaire could