


CHEESE
of the month



Vieux Boulogne

We're kicking off this series with, quite literally, a real humdinger! Sometimes also known as Sablé du Boulonnais, this soft cheese from the Pas de Calais has the dubious distinction of having been voted the world's smelliest cheese. It has been described variously as smelling like rotting vegetables, unwashed tomcat and a sumo wrestler's jockstrap. You get the picture?

The last real attempt to find the world's foulest smelling fromage was in 2004, when Cranfield University in England used an 'electronic nose' as well as a human olfactory panel to sniff out those with the strongest scent. French cheeses reigned supreme, with Vieux Boulogne taking top spot.

But those brave enough to try it are in for a pleasant surprise as its taste definitely doesn't match the strength of its aroma. In fact, some people can find it quite bland.

It's an artisan-made unpasteurised, unpressed cows' milk soft cheese predominantly from the famous Maître Fromager, Philippe Olivier, in Boulogne-sur-Mer.

Described as pré-salé (meaning 'salted meadow') its flavour is due to sea breezes blowing salt on to the pastures where the cows graze around Cap Gris-Nez and Cap Blanc-Nez, north of Boulogne.

Square-shaped with sides measuring 11cm, it's 4cm thick, weighs up to 500g and contains 45% fat. The moist, bright orange rind is washed regularly in a local beer from Saint-Léonard. The centre (paste) is ivory-coloured, soft and rubbery with small holes. Maturing time depends on the season and is between seven and nine weeks.

It's a young, modern cheese (revived in 1982) with a rich, mellow flavour and is best enjoyed with crusty bread and a good quality beer or full-bodied red wine.

Photo above: Vieux Boulogne. © www.lafromagerie.co.uk



**Fortress
Charente**

It's the Middle Ages and invasion forces and their warships are spotted on the horizon. How can they be stopped?

Port of La Rochelle. © WikiCommons/Pline

The Atlantic coast of Charente-Maritime has been of great strategic importance for hundreds of years. Forts, citadels and ramparts, built to withstand countless attacks, still dominate the mainland shore and its islands.

Many of the main structures date back to the 17th Century, when King Louis XIV ordered his military engineer Maréchal Vauban (see separate story) to improve existing defences and build new ones to protect important sites like La Rochelle and his dockyard and arsenal at Rochefort.

Some fortifications are open to the public while others aren't but can still be seen close up, and some visits involve a boat trip, but there are plenty left for confirmed landlubbers. Some are in a much better state of repair than others, but all still have a tale to tell.

A visit to any of them will help you discover some of the region's rich maritime heritage. And it's also great for firing up the imagination of youngsters, bringing to life those classroom history lessons. Let the DSM take you on a quick north-to-south tour.

Saint-Martin-de-Ré, Ile de Ré
Reckoned to be the largest new defensive fortification built under Louis XIV. Vauban rebuilt the citadel and made a new wall around the town large enough to shelter the island's entire population and enough supplies for 16,000 people to withstand a long siege. The fortifications were finished in record time (just five years) in 1702 and have survived many attacks to be in superb condition today. There are two means of access by land: the Porte de Toiras and the Porte des Campani. The citadel can be reached through just one door, the magnificent Porte Royale. It is one of 12 Vauban sites awarded UNESCO World Heritage Site status.

Website: www.saint-martin-de-re.net
Tel: 05 46 09 20 06.

Fort de la Prée
Also on the Ile de Ré, this 17th Century fort proved its worth in 1627 when the English laid siege to the as-yet uncompleted Saint-Martin-de-Ré and Fort de la Prée provided a safe harbour from which the French counter-attacked and forced the English to retreat. The fort hasn't changed much over the centuries. Bomb-proof shelters were built during the 19th

The man behind the work



Claude Vauban © Wiki commons/GeorgiusLXXXIX

Sébastien Le Prestre de Vauban (1633-1707) is considered one of the greatest ever military engineers. Responsible for the fortification of more than 160 sites in France alone, his major contribution to warfare was in his methods of attack, which revolutionised siege warfare.

During the 1688 siege of Philippsburg (now in Germany) he used a new technique known as ricochet fire. Cannons were sited to fire along a wall or covered way, with the round shot bouncing down the length of it, smashing guns and men as it went.

He became a trusted advisor to King Louis XIV, travelling all over France inspecting existing fortifications and identifying new sites to be fortified. In 1703 he was made a Maréchal (Marshal) de France.

Century and a powder magazine added and the Germans built a bunker inside the fort during WW2.

Website: www.fort-la-pree.com
Tel: 05 46 09 73 33 ~ 06 87 21 90 29

Towers of La Rochelle

The port towers and some of the seaward defences are sadly the only remains of a formidable programme of fortifications started in 1372 and their medieval silhouette remains the emblem of the city today.

The Tour St-Nichola was completed around 1376 and used for both defence and residential purposes, with separate passageways to avoid soldiers and residents meeting. It was occasionally used as a prison between the 16th and 18th centuries. Its 37-metre high rooftop terrace provides great views over the old port, Fort Boyard and the Antioche sound (the strait between the islands of Oléron, Ré and Aix).

The Tour de la Chaîne was built between 1382 and 1390 and was 34 metres high (now only 20 metres) with a conically-shaped roof. Until 1472 it was the residence of the harbourmaster, who levied taxes from ships using the port. He controlled the chain mechanism which enabled the port to be closed upon the orders of the

mayor. The tower was destroyed by an explosion during the Fronde (an uprising against the French monarchy before Louis XIV came of age) when it was being used as a powder store and remained open to the elements for the next 300 years.

The 55-metre high Tour de la Lanterne is visible from most of the Antioche sound. It was used as a prison from the 16th Century, with both sailors and privateers held captive. Over the years prisoners engraved some 600 graffiti inscriptions on the tower's soft stone walls. The tower was made into a military prison in 1820 and it held two of the famous Four Sergeants, who were suspected of preparing a coup d'état, arrested in La Rochelle and executed in Paris in 1822.

Website: www.monuments-nationaux.fr
Tel: 05 46 34 11 81.

Ile d'Aix

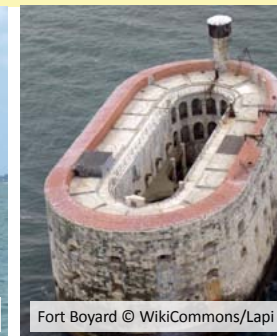
In a strategic position at the mouth of the Charente estuary between Fouras on the mainland and Ile d'Oléron. Three fortifications for the price of one here with Fort de la Rade (1690), the well preserved Fort Liédot (1810) and the town defences (1850). There's also a Napoleonic museum on the island as this was the last place in France he visited before being exiled. Aix can be reached only by ferry from the



Fort Lupin. © WikiCommons/Pep.per



Fort Enet © WikiCommons/PatrickDespoix



Fort Boyard © WikiCommons/Lapi



Fort de l'Isle Madame. © WikiCommons/Pep.per



Fouras © WikiCommons/PatrickDespoix



Fort Louvois. © Aeroclub Perigieux



Saint Martin-de-Ré © Wikipedia/AlainPep.per

Pointe de la Fumée near Fouras. You visit the island on foot, by bike or on board a horse-drawn carriage.

Website: www.rochefort-ocean.com
Tel: 05 46 83 01 82.

Fort Énet

Situated between the Pointe de la Fumée and the Ile d'Aix, it was built in the 19th Century to help protect the arsenal at Rochefort and was eventually converted into a prison. It can be visited on foot at low tide.

Website: www.histoierochefort.com

Fort Boyard

Vauban deemed this fort impossible to build (telling Louis XIV "Your Majesty, it would be easier to seize the moon with your teeth than to attempt such an undertaking in such a place") but its construction was nonetheless later ordered by Napoleon I. When you realise the fort lies on an artificial rock formation set up on a sandbar you can see why it was such a challenge. The fort is oval-shaped, 120 metres long and 48 metres wide with walls 20 metres high. The ground floor provided stores and living quarters and the floor above carried the gun emplacements. It was briefly used as a military prison before being abandoned at the start of the 20th Century. It slowly deteriorated until, in 1950, it was made a listed building. You can take a guided 'circle'

cruise on a boat departing from Boyardville on the Ile d'Oléron.

Website: www.oleron-island.com/

Fouras

Fouras has had a castle since at least the 11th Century, when the local lords used to tax ships entering the Charente estuary. Stand on the top of the donjon and you can see the islands of Madame, Oléron and Aix. The fort was declassified from military use at the beginning of the 20th Century and later became a national monument. The donjon now houses a listed Musée de France, where ten rooms show off the town's history.

Website: www.musee-fouras.fr
Tel: 05 46 84 15 23.

Fort de l'Isle Madame

Built at the beginning of the 18th Century as another fortification to help defend the arsenal at Rochefort, it sits at the entrance to the Charente river. It is accessible by way of the village of Port-des-Barques, but only on foot at low tide on a natural sand and shingle pathway called the Passe aux Boeufs, which is covered by the sea twice a day.

Website: www.holidays-fortboyard.co.uk
Tel: 05 46 84 87 47.

Fort Lupin

Also known as Fort de la Charente, it sits on the southern bank of the Charente river midway between the mouth of the river and the first bend it makes on its way towards Rochefort. An ideal spot as its guns could fire at ships as they entered the river and then again at the rear of any that got past. A good example of the design of a series of forts built by Vauban along the French coast. The fort is privately owned and open to the public at certain times throughout the year, but you can still have a good look round all of the outside – preferably at low tide!

Website: www.visit-poitou-charentes.com
Tel: 05 46 84 24 29.

Château d'Oléron

The first fortifications were built in the 10th Century but it wasn't until the 12th Century that Eleanor of Aquitaine ordered a castle to be built. Today the fortifications are in surprisingly good condition. The citadel has been restored on two occasions: the first after the bombardments of WW2 and the second in 1988 to repair the damage caused by it being abandoned since 1970. Tour highlights include the arsenal and the underground chapel.

Website: www.oleron-island.com
Tel: 05 46 85 65 23.

Brouage

This fortified town is 3km inland, between the Charente and Seudre rivers. Today it sits in the middle of marshland but was originally built on the shore of the Gulf of Saintonge – now silted up – when the sea reached inland as far as Broue and Saint Sornin. It remains one of the best preserved strongholds in the region. It was demilitarised in 1885 but there is still a barracks, powder magazine, forge and food hall to visit.

Website: www.hiers-brouage-tourisme.fr
Tel: 05 46 85 19 16.

Fort Louvois

Also known as Fort Chapus, this semi-circular, horseshoe-shaped fort is the little brother of Fort Boyard. A must-see site, it was another fortification built under the guidance of Vauban and today is in remarkably good condition. It was built between 1691 and 1694 to protect Rochefort's naval dockyard by catching enemy ships in a crossfire with the guns at the Oléron citadel 3kms away. It was badly damaged in WW2 by German shells from Oléron and taken over by the local town of Bourcefranc in 1960 and then restored. The barracks, keep and powder magazine are now museum rooms.

Website: www.fort-louvois.eu
Tel: 05 46 85 23 22.

Next month: Death, destruction and dragons, a space odyssey... and more cheese!

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DID YOU KNOW ?

A Frenchman invented the dustbin. Few heroes of French history are as obscure as Eugène-René Poubelle, yet not one has as many monuments named in his memory.

Born in Caen in 1831, Poubelle studied law at university and went on to become a highly respected public figure. In 1884, when préfet in Paris, he decreed that all Parisian landlords must provide covered containers of between 40 and 120 litres for their tenants' rubbish.

With incredible foresight into recycling, he ordered each household to have three rubbish bins – one for general household waste, a second for paper and fabric and a third for glass, crockery... and oyster shells!



Clean Up Week © Wikicommons/ConradPoirer

Despite some initial resistance from landlords resenting having to pay for and supervise the bins and traditional rag-and-bone men envisaging a threat to their living, the scheme was a success. Even ornamental cast-iron dustbins began to appear in Paris.

Parisians started to name their boxes after Poubelle and even the newspaper 'Le Figaro' called them Boîtes Poubelle. The boxes deteriorated fairly quickly but the principle survived. Dustbins and their collection did not become commonplace until the end of World War Two, but by then the word poubelle had become common usage in the French language.



On this month

April 24 1792:

One night during the French Revolution Captain Claude-Joseph Rouget de Lisle pens a jaunty ditty called 'Chant de guerre de l'armée du Rhin' (War Song of the Army of the Rhine). Because of its popularity with volunteer army units from Marseille, the anthem is renamed 'La Marseillaise.' With its ability to rouse a mob, it was repeatedly banned before being adopted as the French National Anthem in 1879.

April 28, 1887:

What is believed to be the world's first official car race is held over a 20km course from the Pont de Neuilly in Paris to Versailles. It takes an hour and 14 minutes to complete and is won by Georges Bouton and the Count de Dion, of the De Dion-Bouton company, on a steam-driven quadricycle. Their victory was no great surprise, however, as they were the only competitors to turn up!

April 16, 1850:

Marie Grosholz dies. Arrested during the French Revolution along with her friend Joséphine de Beauharnais (who later married Napoleon), she escaped the guillotine after offering to make wax death masks of some of the most famous victims, including Marie Antionette and Robespierre. She later married a chap called Tussaud and took her new-found skills to London.



Mme Tussaud age 42.