



Where We Live... A look at what makes France so special

CHEESE of the month



Comté (AOC)

Also called Gruyère de Comté, this is the richest and most popular cheese in France, along with Beaufort. Consumed by 40% of the French population, it has the highest production figures of all French cheeses.

Traditionally, it is produced in the mountains of the Jura, where farmers bring their cows milk down to the fruitières, which are co-operatives. It takes 539 litres of milk – the daily production of 30 cows – to make one Comté cheese weighing 45kg.

It's a hard-pressed cooked cheese with a smooth, golden interior lightly scattered with medium-sized round holes, or eyes. A good Comté can be judged almost entirely by the size, shape and condition of these eyes, which are the result of careful affinage (maturation). They vary from the size of a pea to that of a small cherry. If the affinage is prolonged at low temperatures, no eyes form.

Affinage must take place within the AOC specified areas (Franche-Comté, eastern Bourgogne and parts of Lorraine, Champagne and the Rhône-Alpes) and needs 90 days from the date of production at below 19°C with a minimum humidity level of 92%. The cheeses are regularly wiped and rubbed with brine and the rind must be moist and treated with morge, a brine enriched with scrapings from old cheeses. Quality is strictly controlled and each year 5% of cheeses fail to pass the AOC tests.

Comté is graded on a scale of 1 to 20 and the minimum score for a pass is an average of above 12. Cheeses graded 15-20 have green casein labels and those with 12-15 have brick-red labels. Casein is the main protein in milk, precipitated into curd by the use of rennet. It is used to make some edible cheese labels, which are embedded in the crust. Rejected cheeses are sold as Gruyère.

The surface of the cheese is broad and flat with a moist, cool, grey, yellow and ochre rind. The inside is firm and supple and melts in the mouth, leaving a sweet taste. The salt is strong but balanced and the flavour has a nutty taste. Comté is a nourishing and versatile cheese. It is a good accompaniment to an apéritif or may be eaten in a salad, with fruit, in a sandwich, or cooked in a croque-monsieur or a fondue.

Photo above: © Wikimedia, Myrabella

Treasure Island



Gathering of shells, Noirmoutier.
©wikimedia, Sebastiaan ter Burg.



ÎLE DE NOIRMOUTIER

At just 20kms long and 7kms at its widest point, this island packs plenty of magic into its tiny frame. Nature, culture, beaches, water sports and great local produce all go into making Île de Noirmoutier a pint-sized pocket of pleasure.

And the action starts even before you set foot on the island. Your sat-nav will tell you it's the D948, but when you arrive you're faced with the unforgettable Passage du Gois. It's a 4.5km-long cobble-paved causeway connecting the island to Beauvoir-sur-Mer and attracts thousands of visitors every year who come to see the incoming and outgoing tides cover up and then reveal Le Gois.

With 50kms of beaches to choose from, you're sure to find your perfect one. Chill out, collect shellfish, stroll along quiet sand dunes or get the pulse racing with windsurfing, kayaking and land sailing. Several beaches have water wheelchairs (tiralos) for disabled visitors.

Salt marshes cover one-third of the island between the towns of Noirmoutier and L'Epine and they play a big part in the 200-year-old oyster farming industry. The island produces three types of oyster – Fine, Fines de claire and Special – and the way they are farmed gives them their own specific taste. The latter two are farmed in former salt marshes converted into oyster maturing pools.

The village of L'Herbaudière is built around the fishing port and the fish market tempts you with sole, line-caught bass, red mullet, lobster and crab. Try the famous Noirmoutier fish soup. The sheer quantity of fish gives it its rich flavour. Top it up with some crème fraîche or rouille and dive in.

Getting there

The Passage du Gois. Another way, apart from boat or breaststroke, is via the D38 at La Barre-de-Monts. But it's just another road bridge and nowhere near as much fun.

Getting around

Free shuttle buses from mid-July to end of August. Summer routes to the island's towns. Plenty of cycle paths and bike hire.

DON'T MISS

La Route du Sel: Explore the salt road by canoe. **Aquarium de Noirmoutier:** Home to 1000 animals and 200 different species. **Musée du Château de Noirmoutier:** Showcases the island's history. Fabulous views.

Website: www.uk.ile-noirmoutier.com



Port Joinville, Ile De Yeu: ©Wikimedia, Peyot



Château d'Oleron, Ile d'Oleron: © Sarah Berry

Whitewashed houses with terracotta roofs and gardens bursting with hollyhocks. Picturesque villages, forests and vineyards. Waterways with brightly coloured oyster boats. All set next to the sun-drenched beaches of the Atlantic coast. And just a short boat trip – or even a short walk – away. Welcome to Paradise.

ÎLE DE YEU

Concentrated in just 23 square kilometres is a wide diversity of landscapes. Long, sandy beaches and dunes, coniferous woodland, wild coastline, barren moors and marsh and 'bocage' countryside.

Known for many years as the first tuna fishing port of the Atlantic coast, the island still has an active fishing industry and the local fleet unloads its catch at the fish auction (the last on an island in France): sea bass, monkfish, hake, sole, yellowfin tuna etc, plus various kinds of shellfish.

South of the island, the wild coast spreads from Pointe du But to Pointe des Corbeaux. Heathland strewn with dolmens and standing stones and awe-inspiring rocky headlands giving great views, plus sheltered coves and sandy beaches. After the Pointe des Corbeaux, the transition is stunning as you come upon the dune coast. One beach leading into another, forests of pines overlooking the dunes and then a land of marshes with its many protected birds, like the marsh harrier. A coastline that resembles that of the Vendée, which is not surprising as you can see it from the Île de Yeu on a fine day.

More than 760 species of wild flowers means there's all year round colour. Sixteen types of orchid – some extremely rare – bloom from March to September. The coast, marshes and wetlands provide nesting and resting habitat for almost 300 bird species. Migrating seabirds like skuas and razorbills cross the island in the autumn, while in winter shorebirds or waders choose the long, sandy beaches for feeding.

Getting there

By ferry from Port Fromentine, La Barre de Monts (30-45 minutes, year round www.compagnie-yeu-continent.fr) and Saint Gilles Croix de Vie (60 minutes, April-September www.compagnievendee.com).

Getting around

Cycling is an ideal way and renting a bike is as easy as the environmentally-friendly roads signs that guide you. On foot there is the GR80 hiking trail, or perhaps the ID Bus? Try a horse-drawn carriage, a boat trip or even a helicopter tour. Check them out via the tourist office.

DON'T MISS

Le Vieux Château: Uncover the story of military architecture and the island's old way of life. **La Citadelle:** A fortress, then a state prison and then a barracks. Marshal of France Philippe Pétain was jailed there from 1945-1951. **Port Joinville:** The island capital bustles with life all year round. Stroll through the maze of alleys or sit at a quayside café and watch the world go by.

Website: www.yeu-island.com

ÎLE D'OLERON

France's second largest island after Corsica, Oléron is 30kms long end-to-end and just 6kms wide. Less well known than its neighbour, the Île de Ré, its countryside is perfect for gentle exploration on foot or by bike. Picturesque villages, forests, vineyards, waterways with brightly coloured oyster boats and oyster sheds – and more beaches than you can shake a bucket and spade at.

With fishing a major island industry, the port towns are busy places. La Cotinière is the biggest, while for oysters head to Saint-Trojan-les-Bains. A good trip is to cycle or drive the Route des Huitres along the coast north-west from Le Château d'Oléron and see how Marennes-Oléron oysters – arguably the best in France – are cultivated in former salt pans. Tasting is a must.

On the south-west coast, a huge sandy beach stretches from Plage de Vert-Bois down to the island's southern tip. It's backed by pine trees and dunes and can be good for surfing. On the north-east coast near Boyardville, Plage des Saumonards is reached through pine woods and sand dunes. For family beaches head to the east of the island as they are more protected from the Atlantic surf.

Getting there

By road bridge (free) from Bourcefranc-le-Chapus on the mainland. Ferries from La Rochelle (<http://www.en.inter-iles.com>) or Marennes, as well as Bourcefranc-le-Chapus.

Getting around

Dump the car if you can. Cycling is easy from one of the many rental shops. For a more leisurely journey jump aboard Le P'tit Train, famous for running on chip oil, on a 12kms route along the sandy beaches and nearby pine forests.

DON'T MISS

Port des Salines: Learn about the once all-important salt production. **Phare de Chassiron lighthouse:** On the island's northern tip. The oldest lighthouse in the region, it is 46 metres high and you can climb the 224 steps for a magnificent view. **La Cotinière:** For a meal in one of the busy restaurants and to stock up at the gleaming seafood stalls on the quayside and in the covered market.

Website: www.oleron-island.com





Ars en Ré, Île de Ré © David Brennan

ÎLE DE RÉ

It's hard to believe La Rochelle is just a half-hour's drive from this pretty little island of whitewashed houses with their terracotta roofs and green and blue shutters and gardens bursting with hollyhocks. The countryside – a mixture of vineyards, marshes and salt pans – is equally striking, while the beaches are plentiful and unspoilt. In fact the island was used to film some scenes from *The Longest Day*, the classic film about the D-Day landings.

Popular with French holidaymakers, the fashionable Île de Ré is also a foodie heaven, with markets seemingly every morning in every village during the summer months. Great local produce like oysters, strawberries and samphire. The island is renowned for its production of oysters and fleur de sel salt.

A visit to the Les Sauniers salt farmers' co-operative at Ars-en-Re (<http://www.sel-de-mer.com/>) lets you discover the journey of the sea salt after its harvest. Another guided tour in English is to the Huitrière de Ré oyster farm, also at Ars-en-Ré, where you'll be taken through the history of oyster farming on the island. Oh, and tasting as well, of course.

Or if you fancy horse riding why not try Ecuries du Moulin Moreau (<http://www.moulin-moreau.com/>) a riding school situated on the Atlantic coastline catering for all shapes and sizes (people that is) all year round. They even organise stag and hen parties!

Getting there

By car via a 3kms toll bridge, but it's free for cyclists and pedestrians. By bus from the SNCF railway station at La Rochelle and a service to all villages on the island throughout the year. By boat to Ars, La Flotte and Saint Martin from La Rochelle and La Tranche-sur-Mer (<http://www.en.inter-iles.com>).

Getting around

There are 100kms of cycle paths and plenty of places from which to hire bikes. Cycland, at La Couarde-sur-Mer, has nine locations across the island with an impressive range of bikes and they're on hand in case of punctures and breakdowns.

DON'T MISS

St-Martin-de-Ré: The pretty, fortified island capital with its chic harbour (the centre of activity at night) and quiet cobbled back streets.

Website: www.holidays-iledere.co.uk



The Lighthouses of Ile d'Aix: © wikimedia, Patrick Despoix

ÎLE D'AIX

Shaped like a croissant, three kilometres long, just 700 metres wide and a maximum of nine metres above sea level, this island can be summed up in one word: quaint. No motorised vehicles allowed and you can cycle round the island in under an hour and walk it briskly in around two hours.

Most of the 200 permanent residents live in the island's only village inside impressive fortifications built by the renowned military engineer Vauban on the orders of Napoleon, who spent his last days on French soil in the governor's house before his exile. The house is now a museum on Napoleonic history and his bedroom remains as it was during his stay there.

The only real island in the Charente-Maritime has vineyards, forests and a varied selection of beaches, with good swimming off the west coast and sandy coves in the north.

Getting there

Frequent ferries from Pointe de la Fumée at Fouras-les-Bains, taking around 30 minutes (<http://service-maritime-iledaix.com>). And from La Rochelle, Saint-Martin-de Ré, Boyardville and Saint-Denis (Oléron island) and La Tranche-sur-Mer (<http://www.en.inter-iles.com>).

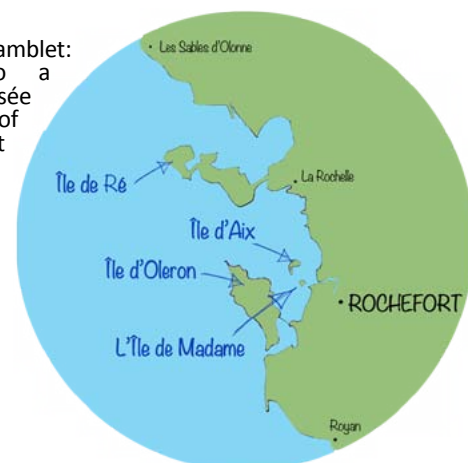
Getting around

Er, by bike of course! But you can also arrange a ferry trip plus horse and carriage tour and lunch for around €50. There's also a guided tour in a mini tourist train on wheels.

DON'T MISS

The Battery de Jamblet: Now converted into a museography. The Musée de la Nacre: Mother of Pearl museum. Fort Liedot: Guided visits in the summer.

Website: www.iledaix.fr





Carrelets on Ile Madame © wikimedia, JLPC



Passe aux Boeufs, Ile Madame © wikimedia, Pep.per

L'ÎLE MADAME

This tiny little island of just 75 hectares, the smallest in Charente-Maritime, is only accessible at low tide by way of the Passe aux Boeufs, a natural pathway consisting of sand and shingle which is covered by the sea twice a day.

Apparently the island was named after Anne Rohan de Soubise, a mistress of Louis XIV who gave the name Madame to all that he owned, and it has just one all-year-round inhabitant. Probably not a salesman, then...

Oyster farming and aquaculture are to be found on the island's western side and salt is harvested from the salt marshes. Shore fishing is popular and numerous carrelets (small fishing huts with nets) are dotted around. A stroll around the island reveals its wild coastline. Buildings are few and far between but are dominated by a redoute, a small defensive fort built at the beginning of the 18th Century against the English.

Getting there

From Port-des-Barques, near Rochefort. By foot or breaststroke.

Getting around

Enjoy the natural quiet and go by foot with a rucksack, bucket and fishing net.

DON'T MISS

The view: You can clearly see Fouras, Aix island, Port-des-Barque, Fort Boyard, the bridge to Ré island and La Rochelle. Amazing.

Website: www.en-charente-maritime.com/tourisme/idees-vacances/littoral-iles/ile-madame



DID YOU KNOW ?

The first aerial crossing of the English Channel was made by a Frenchman, and in doing so he managed to deliver the world's first airmail letter in the process.

In 1784, balloonist Jean-Pierre-François Blanchard made his first ascent, having been inspired by a demonstration by the Montgolfier brothers. A year later he and American physician John Jeffries, who funded the attempt, set their sights on the Channel.



Very much in the spirit of the age, a contract was said to have been drawn up between them in which Jeffries pledged to jump from the balloon should it be necessary to reduce the weight carried. But Blanchard tried to wriggle out of the contract and claim all the glory for himself by wearing a belt weighted with lead to try and fool Jeffries into jumping from the balloon when it wouldn't lift!

The trip from Dover was to be a hair-raising affair. As the basket sank towards the waves they were forced to throw everything they could overboard, even a sack of mail. Things got so desperate it's claimed they even stripped to their underwear and urinated overboard to lose a few more ounces!

The pair finally reached France after a two-and-a-half hour flight with that first airmail letter, as Jeffries had decided to keep one in his pocket.

Blanchard went on to make the first balloon flights in Germany, Poland and America and died in 1809 when he fell 50 feet from his balloon over The Hague after having a heart attack.

Ever the showman, Blanchard also tested a parachute by dropping a dog in a basket from a balloon. A giant step forward in aviation history, perhaps, but a giant step back in establishing the dog as man's best friend!



On this month

August 26, 1346: During the 100 Years War, King Edward III's English army crushes a French force under King Phillip VI at the Battle of Crecy, in Normandy. The battle, regarded as one of the most decisive in history, saw an early use of the deadly longbow by the English.

August 21, 1911: La Gioconda – better known as the Mona Lisa, the most famous painting in the world – is stolen from the Louvre, in Paris. It was recovered two years later from Italy. The thief was Vincenzo Perruggia, an Italian petty criminal who believed the masterpiece had been stolen from Italy by the French. France had, in fact, acquired it when Francois I bought it after artist Leonardo da Vinci's death in 1516 for today's equivalent of around £9million.



Charles De Gaulle in a Citroen DS

August 22, 1962: President Charles De Gaulle survives one of several assassination attempts against him thanks to the performance of the presidential car, the sleek, aerodynamic Citroen DS19, known as La Deesse (The Goddess). It featured a hydropneumatic suspension system that Citroen

would become known for, which automatically adjusted the height of the car to keep it level and enable the driver to maintain control more easily. As the presidential Citroen sped through Paris, 12 gunmen opened fire with a hail of bullets, killing two motor cycle bodyguards, shattering the car's rear window and puncturing all four tyres. The car went into a front wheel skid but the chauffeur managed to control it and escape, all thanks to the car's superior suspension system. De Gaulle and his wife were unhurt..

Mick Austin is a freelance journalist based in the Pays-de-la-Loire. He has had his work published in several expat magazines and newspapers and has also written the Mayenne Tourist Board's only English-language brochure. He also runs a gîte business at www.gitfortwo.com.