



# A Land of Cows



by Mick Austin


France is undoubtedly a land of cows. Estimates vary but of the more than 20 million in the country 85% is represented by just five breeds – Prim’Holstein, Charolaise, Normande, Montbéliarde and Limousine. Many are raised for beef, many for milk (no surprise given all that cheese!) and some for both. Some, like the Prim’Holstein and Charolaise, can be found almost everywhere. Others, like the Bordelaise and Maraîchine, are regarded as conservation breeds.


**D**o you know your Aubrac from your Blonde d’Aquitaine, or your Parthenaise from your Tarentaise? Here are just a few of the many French cattle breeds. See how many you can spot the next time you travel down a country lane. A whey you go!



**Abondance**  Hails from the northern Alps in Haute-Savoie and is a champion of difficult terrain. About 80% of Abondance milk is used to produce Appellation d’Origine Contrôlée (AOC) cheeses such as Reblochon, Abondance, Tome des Bauges and Beaufort, along with Tomme de Savoie and Emmental de Savoie.

**Aubrac**  Named after the mountain range in Aveyron with a history dating back to the Middle Ages when it was looked after by the monks of the Abbey of Aubrac. Only a few dairy lines are kept today, helping in the manufacture of Laguiole cheese.

**Aure et Saint-Girons**   A breed developed in the Mid-Pyrenees by crossbreeding Aure (a draught oxen used to haul timber) and St Girons (a dairy cattle used to make Bethmale cheese). Also known as Casta. Pretty rare to spot, but you never know.



**Bazadaise**  An ancient working breed, it’s now a nursing breed specialising in the production of high-quality meat. Gets its name from its native home region of Bazas, in the Gironde. Originally a draft breed, it’s now mainly used to produce suckling veal and young bulls. Has a reputation for fine-flavoured, well-marbled meat.

**Blonde d’Aquitaine**  One of the champions of beef cows. Created in 1962 by combining the three branches of south-western French Blonde breeds and has quickly progressed from a regional to an international breed. The Label Rouge ‘Bœuf Blonde d’Aquitaine’ came in 1992 to promote sales of lean, tasty Blonde meat.

**Bordelaise**   A dairy breed from the Bordeaux region that spread to neighbouring areas from where it was used to provide Bordeaux city with fresh milk and butter. Today it’s also used for its meat.

## KEY

 Dairy  
 Mixed

 Beef  
 Under conservation



Abondance  
© Walpole



Aubrac  
© Jesmade



Aure et Saint-Girons  
© Eponimm



Bazadaise  
© Henry Salomé



Blonde d’Aquitaine  
© Myrabelle



Bordelaise © RR De Facto

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**Brune** 🟡 Also known as the French Brown. First brought into France in the 17th Century, today south-west France and the Chatillonnais region around Yonne and Aube are the areas it is most prevalent. Its excellent milk is used to make the high-quality AOC Epoisses cheese.

**Charolaise** 🟢 The leading French beef breed, this hefty beast is one of the easiest to spot in the field. But if you can't see one then just visit almost any butcher's shop! It produces more milk than any other specialised beef breed, meaning male calves can gain at least 1200g a day in live weight. Originally from Saône-et-Loire, north of Lyon, it's now found all over France and around 70 countries worldwide.

**Ferrandaise** 🟡🔴 Traditionally bred in the Puy-de-Dôme department of the Auvergne, this dual-purpose breed is now used for beef production and cheeses like Saint-Nectaire and Fourme d'Ambert.

**Froment du Léon** 🟡🔴 Consider yourself lucky if you spot one of this little-known and rare breed originally from the Cotes d'Armor in Brittany. It provides a very fatty milk rich in carotene (the pigment found in carrots) that gives its butter a rich, golden colour.

**Gasconne** 🟢 The stocky Gasconne, native to the steep hillsides and mountainous slopes of the Pyrenees, is renowned for its ability to cope with poor weather and terrain and the quality of its meat. Essentially used to produce weaned calves that are sold for fattening after summering on the high-altitude pastures, the Gasconne is equally able to make optimal use of richer rations under lowland systems

**Jersiaise** 🟡 Probably originated from the Normandy/Brittany area and today rated in the top three dairy breeds in the world. Its milk is known for its quality and it is particularly rich in protein and minerals. The purity of the breed on the island of Jersey is maintained by a ban on imports that has been in force for more than 150 years.

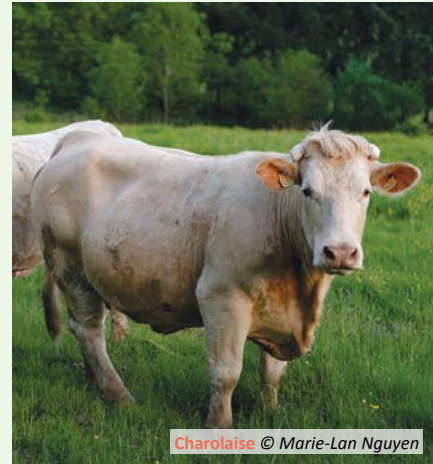
**Limousine** 🟢 Often described as 'rustic' this is one of France's oldest and most exported breeds, now present in more than 80 countries worldwide. The silhouette of this ancient breed has often been compared to cattle painted in the famous Lascaux caves near Montignac, in the Dordogne, which date back more than 25,000 years.

**Maraîchine** 🟡🔴 Native of the French Atlantic coast in a marshland area running estuary-to-estuary from the Loire to the Gironde, this breed was reintroduced to the region as a conservation measure.

**Mirandaise** 🟢🔴 The Mirandaise is the traditional native Gascon breed from the Gers. The beef is known locally as 'Nacrés de Gascogne'.



Brune © Daniel Schwen



Charolaise © Marie-Lan Nguyen



Ferrandaise © Cyrille Bernizet



Froment du Léon © Eponimm



Gasconne © Père Igor



Jersiaise © Bart Laridon



Limousine © Jacme31



Maraîchine © Eponimm



Mirandaise © Eponimm



Montbéliarde © Vincent Anciaux

**Montbéliarde** From the Montbéliarde region of Franche-Comté, it currently ranks second French dairy breed in terms of numbers after the Prim'Holstein. And it's the French passion for cheese that keeps the Montbéliarde so popular, with Comté the most obvious along with Emmental, Gruyère and Vacherin.



Normande © Stanzilla



Prim Holstein © / Ben23

**Normande** Instantly recognisable if only from the pictures on boxes of Camembert – although the Normande is more often brown and white than black and white. Third French dairy breed in terms of numbers, it is present in almost every department. Milk is also used in the production of Pont l'Évêque and Livarot cheeses. Also highly valued for its meat.



Parthenaise © Eponimm

**Parthenaise** Originally used to produce both milk and draft bulls from the area around Poitiers but its numbers plummeted in the 1970s-80s due to competition from specialised dairy breeds. A genetic improvement programme turned the breed towards specialised beef production. The quality Label Rouge 'La Parthenaise' was obtained in 2006.

**Prim'Holstein or Holstein** A champion of cows. It quickly adapted to the conditions of factory farming and can be seen in farms all over the country. In fact the Holstein is the No1 milk producer in the world and accounts for 30% of French national cattle stock and 60% of French national dairy stock and produces 80% of all milk collected in France. A real milk factory, the best Holsteins can produce 11,000kgs per year, compared to an average of around 8,500kgs.



Rouge des Prés © Eponimm



Salers © B Navez

**Rouge des Prés** Today's Rouge des Prés traces back to crossbreeding between the hardy dairy-based Mancelle cattle and the beef-based Durham. It originated from NW France, which even today has 90% of Rouge des Prés flock numbers. Long known as the Maine Anjou until the term became sidelined for the beef protected AOC in 2004.



Simmental française © Richard Bartz



Tarentaise © Cyrille Bernizet

**Salers** Horns big enough to make other cows jealous! An ancient breed native to Cantal in the Auvergne, the Salers is prized for its milk, producing cheeses like Cantal, Blue d'Auvergne, Saint-Nectaire, Fourme d'Ambert and, of course, Salers. Its red, marbled meat is also much appreciated.

**Simmental française** Although originally established in eastern France, it has spread across the rest of the country, especially the Massif Central and the Aveyron where it produces virtually all the dairy input to AOC Laguiole cheese.



Villard-de-Lans © Alrom



Vosgienne © Eponimm

**Tarentaise** Mainly found in the Alps and Massif Central, it is valued for its high-fat milk which is used to make cheeses like Emmental, Tomme de Savoie and Beaufort. It's often also used as a 'seasonal worker' in ski resorts to maintain the sloping meadows in the summer months!

**Villard-de-Lans** Native to the Lans mountains in Vercors in the Rhone-Alps, its fat-rich milk is ideal for producing cheeses like the AOC Bleu du Vercors-Sassenage.

**Vosgienne** No confusion about where this one comes from. The Vosges and down the eastern side of France. And often seen with a large bell round its neck. Excellent milk for cheese production, especially Munster.

**What a load of bull**  
*I've always thought French cows look content with their life and sometimes even pretty, but it's never occurred to me to use an online dating website! It's true. The site at [www.trouverlebontaireau.com](http://www.trouverlebontaireau.com) ('find the right bull') has been set up to help French farmers find the perfect mate for their cows and so increase their herds. The site looks just like a traditional dating site except all the profiles are of bulls.*

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