



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



CHEESE of the month



Époisses de Bourgogne (AOC)

Thought to date back to the 1500s, it was probably first made by Cistercian monks in the Burgundy village of Époisses. It quickly became popular and was later to gain a big fan in the form of Napoléon, who is said to have been quite partial to it with a glass or two of Chambertin wine.

Its popularity continued up to the beginning of the 20th Century, but production had almost died out by the end of World War Two and it wasn't until 1956 that two farmers from Époisses, Robert and Simone Berthaut, revived it. Their farm in Bourgogne, Fromagerie Berthaut, currently makes all the fermier Époisses but there are also artisanal fromageries.

It's a smooth, pungent, washed-rind raw cow's milk cheese, with an aroma of marc (a spirit made from distilled wine pressings). It has a rich, orange-red rind which is washed in either white wine or marc – a job which was at one time allocated to orphans or other children dependent on public welfare. It is washed up to three times a week with gradually increasing quantities of marc.

The fine-textured pâte (everything inside the rind) melts in the mouth, with a mixture of salt, sweet, metallic and milky flavours. Maturation takes place in specified areas and lasts for at least four weeks, during which time the interior changes from smooth and creamy to a thick, goeey, spoonable texture. While the aroma can be quite smelly and a little off-putting, a well made fermier or artisan cheese, perfectly aged, will have a well rounded, balanced and complex flavour.

Granted Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée (AOC) status in 1991, the cheese must meet three main regulations: The coagulation of the milk for a period of 16 hours must be caused mainly by lactic acid. The curd should be roughly cut and must not be broken. And, after drainage, the cheese must be salted with dry salt.

Shaped like a Camembert, Époisses is packaged in small, round wooden boxes in several sizes. The large is usually 16-19cm in diameter, 3-4.5cm high and weighs 700-1100g, while the smaller version is 9.5-11.5cm x 3-4.5cm and weighs 250-350g. Fat content is 50% minimum and production is all year round. Brands to look out for include Berthaut, Gaugry or Germain.

It goes well with Trappist beer and white wines like Pouilly-Fuissé or a Sauternes. And, of course, a Marc de Bourgogne!

Photo above: wikicommons/Coyau



Delicious moules frites. © Wikicommons/Archangel12

Magical Mussels, from stake to plate...

There you are, in your favourite restaurant, with a huge bowl of succulent mussels simmering in a tasty sauce. Alongside is a pile of crispy chips and a basket of crusty bread. As you sit and watch the world go by, do you ever wonder how such a tasty treat made it on to your plate?

Legend has it that the organised harvesting of mussels is down to an Irish sailor shipwrecked off the Charente coast in 1235. Sole survivor of the disaster, Patrick Walton stretched out nets at low tide to catch fish. He noticed that mussels attached themselves to the wooden stakes on which his nets were stretched and that they grew more rapidly than those on the rocks on the shoreline; possibly due to the increased flow of nutrients getting to the mussels via the tides.

He also had the idea to plant his stakes in a line to harvest the mussels and so the first 'bouchot' was born.

Since then, mussel farming has developed throughout the species' range, namely the entire European coastal area. It began on the Atlantic coast with Mr Walton and the blue mussel (*Mytilus edulis*), followed by the Spanish Atlantic coast and the Mediterranean with the Mediterranean mussel (*Mytilus galloprovincialis*), which is reared as far as the Black Sea.

Different rearing techniques – bouchot culture, on-bottom culture and longline and suspended cultures (see opposite) – were perfected at the end of the 19th Century, when mussel farming was developed to provide a source of low-cost protein. The rest, as they say, is history.

The French mussel industry produces around 60,000 tonnes a year, with the moules de bouchot accounting for some 50,000 tonnes. Normandy is the main producing area, followed by Brittany, Charente-Maritime and the Mediterranean. But that production represents only around half of France's yearly consumption, leading to large imports from other parts of Europe.

Whichever production method is used, mussels are always farmed in areas rich in plankton. Mussels feed naturally on these micro-organisms by constantly filtering the sea water. From March to October, depending on the latitude, the mussel produces larvae that are carried by currents. In less than 72 hours, the larvae fatten and, since they can no longer float, try to attach themselves to various supports. Unlike oysters, they don't attach themselves directly to the support but use a byssal thread or 'beard'.

The most common means of collecting this larvae, or spat, is on a rope placed at a location chosen in terms of currents and availability of plankton. Between May and July, these ropes are collected and transferred to mussel farms.



Mussels growing on stakes

Rearing until harvest takes around a year and four main methods are used in European coastal areas:

On stakes, or bouchots. Rows of wooden stakes are driven into intertidal ground. Three to five metres of collecting rope or tubing filled with spat are wrapped around the stakes and attached. A net is then placed over the whole structure to keep the mussels from falling off as

they fatten up. They are harvested by manual or mechanical scraping to detach each clump of mussels from its wooden support. Harvesting begins as soon as the mussels reach the 40mm marketable length. Generally there are one or two rows of stakes spaced 25m apart, but the length of the rows and the number of stakes used depends on the regulations in each area. One stake of 4-7m long can produce between 25 and 60kg live weight of mussels per rearing cycle!

On ropes. Mainly in Spain and the Mediterranean. The mussels are attached to ropes suspended vertically in the water from a fixed or floating structure. This method is suitable for seas with weak tides, like the Mediterranean Sea, but has been introduced into the Atlantic Ocean. The mussels are harvested by raising the ropes out of the water and removing the clumps.



Mussels growing on ropes

On trestles. Mussels are grown in some areas by using the same technique as for oysters, in mesh bags on trestles set up on intertidal ground, or directly on the ground.

On plots or by spreading. Generally used in the Netherlands. The spats are spread over plots in shallow water, generally in bays or sheltered areas, and they attach to the ground. They are harvested by dredging.

MOULES FRITES UNDER THREAT.

Your bowl of moules frites – the French equivalent of fish and chips – could become a rare treat as France’s main producing region, the Atlantic coast, has been threatened by the mysterious mass deaths of the mighty mollusc.

The crisis started last November and production in key growing areas plummeted by around 90%, forcing restaurants to import mussels from other European countries including Spain, the Netherlands and Ireland. Scientists suspect the mussels are being ravaged by the bacterium *Vibrio splendidus* but can’t explain why so many of the shellfish are dying. Many shellfish producers blame pollution or a rise in water temperature.

It’s the second time in two years that French mussels have been under such serious threat. In 2014, French producers dumped hundred of tonnes of dead mussels outside the Préfecture in La Rochelle, demanding government action. This time the authorities were quick to promise help, with cash, grants and interest-free loans to help clean up and re-stock mussel farms.

AMAZING MUSSEL FACTS

- Mussels feed entirely on plankton and to do this they can filter up to 65 litres of water per day.
- Their size varies with the season. They are largest and fleshiest in October and smallest in March.
- Ounce for ounce, mussel meat contains more protein than beef stock, much less fat, many more mineral nutrients and a quarter of the calories.
- Its arch enemy is the dog whelk, which bores a hole through its shell and sucks out the soft parts.
- The byssal threads are so adhesive they can even cling to Teflon. Scientists have been trying to develop a mussel-based adhesive for use in eye surgery.
- Mussels are beneficial to the beauty industry. The shellfish contains chitin, which can be used to produce moisturisers and haircare products.



DID YOU KNOW ?

The sign for the well-known Paris metro station Montparnasse-Bienvenüe doesn’t actually have anything to do with welcoming you to the station.



Bienvenüe, who lost his left arm in a construction accident, outside the entrance to Monceau station.

The station was named after Fulgence Bienvenüe (note the unusual diaeresis over the u), a Breton engineer and creator of the Paris metro. Born in 1852 the 13th child of a notary from Uzel, he came up with the crazy idea of building, as he put it, “a metropolitan railway to facilitate travel within Paris.” While Bienvenüe didn’t invent the underground railway – that had already been built in London – he was the driving force behind the Parisian project and for 35 years presided over its development.

The aim was to open the metro in time for the 1900 Universal Exhibition, so the streets of Paris were ripped up, much to the disgruntlement of many residents, and opposition was widespread. By April 1900 it was almost complete, but the exhibition opened without it because an omnibus strike sparked fears that too many people would try to use the metro. Line One was finally opened to the public on July 19, carrying anonymous passengers alongside a few journalists.

The metro quickly became popular with Parisians and the pugnacious Bienvenüe continued his project, overcoming setbacks, failures and catastrophes such as the 1903 fire at Couronnes, which killed 84 people. The later construction of Line Four under the Seine was hailed as a great feat of engineering.

Bienvenüe died in August 1936, aged 84, and is buried at the Père Lachaise cemetery in eastern Paris. Preoccupied by the funeral of famous aviator Louis Blériot the previous day, newspapers devoted just a few lines to Bienvenüe’s death, yet this man revolutionised the everyday life of Parisians.

SEPTEMBER

On this month

September 1, 1715: King Louis XIV, the Sun King, dies four days short of his 77th birthday. He had ruled since he was four and had transformed the monarchy. He ushered in a golden age of art and literature, presided over the dazzling court at Versailles and established France as the dominant power on the Continent.

September 14, 1927: Famed ballet dancer Isadora Duncan is killed in a freak accident in Nice when her enormously-long scarf gets tangled in the rear wheels of the sports car in which she was travelling. The scarf wound itself round the car’s axle, tightened around her neck and dragged her onto the cobbled street and strangled her. She died instantly.

September 15, 1916: Tanks are first used in combat during the Allied offensive at the Battle of the Somme in World War One. There had originally been 50 but the 30-ton machines couldn’t cope with the churned-up ground and 14 either broke down or got stuck. Regardless of that, a new era of warfare had begun.

September 28, 1066: The Norman Conquest of England begins as Duke William of Normandy lands at Pevensey. William the Conqueror defeats King Harold at the Battle of Hastings and claims the ultimate prize, the throne of England.