'This book made me fall in love with France and its food all over again. With her friendly, irresistible writing, Carolyn takes you on a delicious trek through France, unravelling the mysteries of Gallic ingredients and sharing stories that reveal the diversity, history, quirks, magic and joys of culinary life … this is a book to learn, live and love!'
Alain Roux

'Carolyn Boyd serves a great feast of a French adventure, and the sweet smell of warm croissants is never far away. *Amuse Bouche* is wondrous, witty, delicious and fun. Every page made me hungry – so take my advice and pack your napkin!'
Raymond Blanc

'Charming, informative, written by an author with a deep knowledge of and love for France, this is part travelogue, part memoir and part recipe book. A wonderful guide to the culinary history of France'
Kate Mosse

'Comprehensive, hugely engaging and frequently a revelation, even for those of us who think we know the country – its produce, cuisine and traditions, its mores and manners. And its restaurants. I'm genuinely never crossing La Manche again without a copy of this glued to me'
Marina O'Loughlin

'The perfect, deliciously informed read for anyone missing France or dreaming of their first trip. Carolyn's deep love and knowledge of the country and its food culture shines through every page'
Trish Deseine

'Carolyn Boyd offers you a fun and fascinating guide to eating your way round France. When did you last dunk a rose biscuit into Champagne? Boyd serves up dozens of delicious dishes that will make your mouth water. The book is also jam-packed with fun French history tidbits'

Carol Drinkwater

'Witty, wild and wonderful ... a delicious dance round the glories of France at table region by region with an Englishwoman abroad who understands the happiness of *cervelle de Canut* and *tartiflette*'

Elisabeth Luard

'The most delicious combination of history, lore, legend and food, capturing the enormous diversity of French terroir and cuisine. From the *bistrots* of Paris to the *bouchons* of Lyon, she introduces us to French dining … Carolyn knows her Roscoff pink onions from her Roussillon artichokes and she imparts her great knowledge with enormous warmth. This modern guide is the sort of book you will keep by your bedside and in your kitchen too – it contains some wonderful recipes, which impart the true taste of France'

Debora Robertson

'A brilliantly written book that draws you into booking a trip and explore France even more'

James Martin

AMUSE BOUCHE

How to eat your way around France

BY CAROLYN BOYD

Profile Books

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HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

'Tell me what you eat, and I'll tell you what you are.'

– Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin

These are perhaps the most famous words ever written about what we choose to put on our plates. Yet give the renowned nineteenth-century gastronome's words a slight tweak – tell me what you eat, and I'll tell you *where* you are – and they could equally apply to France. For wherever you are in this great gastronomic nation, you can be sure there is a food that tells you a story about the place you are in. It's through these stories that I have fallen in love with France and come to appreciate how deeply food is woven through its society, how its people are brought together around the dining table and how it represents itself to the world.

The book is not a restaurant guide, though there are recommendations; nor is it a recipe book, though there are recipes and serving suggestions. It is a book that celebrates the joy of exploring France through its food and captures the many ways that dishes and ingredients came about, whether through the landscape and *terroir*, folklore and legends, in the kitchens of kings and peasants or as the innovations of modern chefs. From markets to bistros and *fromageries*, I hope it will help you know what to buy, what to order and what to eat – so that your taste

buds can be as enchanted by the regions' unique flavours as your other senses are spoiled by the landscape, art, culture and heritage for which France is also famous.

Throughout the country, bistro menus often feature the same standard dishes, but everywhere you go you'll also find dishes made with local ingredients that are easily overlooked – this book puts them at front and centre. If you are planning any kind of trip, whether a romantic weekend in Paris or a hedonistic month in Marseille, I hope these chapters will provide a starting point for planning your itineraries as well as a way to get to grips with the food culture (and etiquette) of your holiday spot.

I have loved France for as long as I can remember: family camping holidays opened my eyes to the joy of the croissant slathered in cool creamy butter and sweet strawberry jam, and the sting of the salt on my lips when eating a poolside *barquette de frites*. Discovering France, with its buzzing local markets and the whirl of black-clad waiters serving busy café terraces, implanted an early sense of wanderlust, which led to a career writing about exploring France and its food. The recommendations and experiences here have been gathered throughout my career, during which my travels have taken me to almost every part of the country and allowed me to dine in some of the best restaurants for every budget, as well as *tables d'hôtes*, *bars à vins* and picnic spots. I have talked to hundreds of producers, bakers, cooks and chefs to get a better understanding of their products and cuisines and how to enjoy them. I have peered into fields, donned hairnets and overalls to visit dairies, sloshed around fishing ports and estuary mudflats, tramped across farms and browsed dozens of markets with the aim of better understanding the many different foods on offer.

Even after visiting countless times, I still feel a frisson of excitement each time I arrive on French soil; my heart swells at seeing its varied landscape, at stepping into its shuttered *maisons*

and at tuning into the language, taking my first sip of a *kir*, or a bite of salt-flecked Breton butter on bread. As the most visited country in the world, France's allure and appeal has much to do with its variety; when it comes to choosing a holiday in France the options can be as wide-ranging as a trip to the Île de Ré in Nouvelle Aquitaine, where you can cycle through salt pans and order platters of oysters, or book a tour of the Luberon in Provence, where you'll wander enticing villages in the late afternoon before an aperitif of the local rosé on a sun-drenched restaurant terrace. In the Alps, meanwhile, you might gather around a fondue pot after skiing or hiking, while in Paris you will stroll the Haussmannian boulevards between galleries before a lunch of *steak-frites* in a classic bistro. Each region has its own unique charm, which is reflected in the local cuisine and food culture.

France has a long history of explorers in search of gastronomic bliss, but the most dedicated was surely Maurice Edmond Sailland, who became known as Curnonsky, the Prince of Gastronomes. Born in 1872, his early career saw him take on literary projects from satire to ghost-writing, before he became known as a food critic. In 1921, he started a gastronomic guidebook with his writing chum Marcel Rouff, titled *La France Gastronomique: Guide des merveilles culinaires et des bonnes auberges françaises* (Gastronomic France: A Guide to the culinary marvels and good inns of France). After seven years of exploring France, they completed twenty-eight volumes out of the intended thirty-two, which were designed to help people explore France in that new-fangled invention – the motor car. This was also the era of the Michelin Guide, which began to award stars in 1926, and was published with the aim of encouraging motorists to explore further afield (and thus wear out more tyres).

Today, Curnonsky's stamp of approval remains influential, and his name is associated with many famous dishes such as *crêmets d'Anjou* and *poulet Gaston Gérard*. He may even have

had a hand in popularising *tarte Tatin*. In 1929, he entrusted his friend Alain Bourguignon, then chef-director of L'Écu de France, a restaurant opposite Gare de l'Est in Paris, to map all the dishes mentioned in *La France Gastronomique*. The result is a fascinating diagram of the country's *terroir*, where ingredients, dishes, traditions and techniques only exist thanks to the individual conditions of the place. It proves that there are hundreds of regional specialities across L'Hexagone and just how enormous a task it was for Curnonsky to find them all.

Of course, in the intervening century, as globalisation has seen menus and eating habits become widely homogenised, many dishes have fallen out of favour in kitchens and many unique products are no longer grown. But despite the loss of dishes and traditions, France is full of people and communities who are proud of their heritage, devoutly protecting their product or methods, whether it is thanks to a local brotherhood or *confrérie* – a guild that exists to protect and celebrate a product or recipe – or other events and networks that also serve to protect jobs and help people make a living in rural locations, so they don't need to move away. Some of these are fascinating, community-led organisations, dedicated to celebrating and promoting dishes or products such as pink garlic, black pudding or scallops, with a story to tell. I will introduce you to the Global Brotherhood of the Knights of the Giant Omelette, the Onion Johnnies of Roscoff and the so-called Olympics of the Black Pudding. There are more official channels, too, that protect the geographic origin of a product, the Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée (AOC) in France and Appellation d'Origine Protégée (AOP) in the European Union.

Since the 'Gastronomic French Meal' was inscribed into the Unesco list of intangible heritage in 2010, regional French tourism authorities have been even more keen to champion their local cuisines and food cultures, making them easier to find. Though there have long been various *Routes des Vins*, there

are now also signposted discovery routes dedicated to showcasing the *terroir*, whether it's walnuts in the Dordogne Valley; cheese in the Pyrenees, Auvergne or Alps; or cider and apples in Normandy. Most of France's star chefs are great champions of their region's producers and ingredients. Whatever your budget, tastes and interests, I hope this book helps you gain a deeper understanding of French food and indeed of the country itself – and have some delightful, memorable meals along the way. After all, it was also Brillat-Savarin who said: 'The discovery of a new dish does more for the happiness of mankind than the discovery of a star'.

CHOOSING A RESTAURANT

It's easy to imagine sauntering into a town or village to take your pick of restaurants and have a fantastic meal anywhere, but it doesn't always happen. You will almost always have a better meal if you do your research and book a table in advance. The best places will be booked by locals, who know where they're guaranteed a good meal and excellent service, and it pays to follow their example. Reservations also help the restaurants plan too, particularly when chefs buy their produce at the morning market; if they know how many reservations they have that day they can much more accurately predict how much to buy.

Before trawling Google, ask your hosts for recommendations – even at the time of booking your accommodation. If you're staying somewhere small, a good host will be only too pleased to recommend *les bonnes adresses* and make sure your stay is enjoyable. While you're exploring, you can ask at wineries, or *épiceries fines*. The locals will know. Otherwise, use trusted websites. Some of my best meals have been those listed with a Bib Gourmand on Michelin, and one-star restaurants can

offer sublime meals often for a reasonable price (especially at lunchtime). You can also look on Gault Millau, another reviews site, or Lefooding.com. For casual dining, the Guide du Routard is the French equivalent of Lonely Planet; I have found both more reliable than Tripadvisor. The shifting sands of the hospitality industry mean that restaurants open and close often, and staff change, so while I've recommended many throughout the book, I have also mentioned the chefs by name so that – if they leave their current establishment – you should be able to find them in future.

ETIQUETTE IN SHOPS AND RESTAURANTS

While anglophones are most often taught that pleases and thank yous are the golden words for good manners, in France '*Bonjour*' is hello, please and thank you rolled into one. It is considered good manners to make eye contact and say '*Bonjour*' (or '*Bonsoir*' in the evening) before any other word. It breaks the ice, whether you're greeting a stallholder at the market, meeting a server in a restaurant, or you've just entered a shop.

When taking a table at a restaurant where you don't have a reservation, it is best to ask the server if there is a table available before you sit down (even if you can see there is) and be sure to ask for *la carte*, and not *le menu* – the latter means a set meal of two or three courses (or seven or eight or more at a fine dining restaurant) for a set price or *prix fixe*. You will often be asked if you want still or sparkling water, which relates to mineral water and will be billed; if you simply want tap water – an acceptable choice – then ask for *un carafe d'eau*. Bread can be an etiquette minefield; once you've ordered your meal, the server will bring you a basket of bread. Side plates don't tend to be used in more casual settings, so you can simply place the

bread on the tablecloth, tearing small bite-sized pieces off to eat slowly, rather than biting into the slice. You can also use the bread to mop up the sauce at the end of a meal.

If you have doubts about French restaurant etiquette, a good way to think about it is as if you were invited to someone's home; after all, this is how the art of hospitality began, and the French remain true to this idea. As a guest you would respect your host's *savoir-faire*, their skills and their ingredients, and you are paying to be welcomed in 'their house' as equal participants in the experience. Diners who adopt a superior attitude towards those working hard to provide a good service might not find the attitude is welcome. Of course, things can go wrong, and diners are perfectly within their rights to complain, but a courteous and polite conversation will often result in the problem being rectified swiftly.

DIETARY REQUIREMENTS

Vegetarian cuisine is becoming more commonplace throughout France, with restaurants often now offering at least one meat-free dish on their menus. Vegan options remain harder to find outside of the big cities. In general, it pays to understand more about the local styles of cuisine when choosing a destination. The dairy-heavy diet of Normandy and Brittany may be tricky for vegans, but vegetarians may do well for choice in the *galettes* of Brittany, where there are so many different toppings. Thankfully *crêperies* are not limited to the region; they can be found throughout France (though sometimes they're not as good). The Loire Valley and Western Loire regions are particularly proud of their heritage for high-quality vegetables, and in Provence the local cuisine is very much based on vegetables, especially the *Cuisine Nissarde* (see page 298, Provence, Vieux

Nice) and chickpea-based foods such as the street food *socca*, *la cade* and the side dish *panisses*. The Italian influence in Provence brings with it vegetable-based pasta dishes, and they're more likely to cook with olive oil in Provence than with butter, as in the north, or with the duck fat favoured in the south-west. Look to more international cuisines, too. The trend for the poke bowl – a Hawaiian salad and rice dish – can be a good option for vegans if ordered with tofu rather than salmon or chicken. Even for meat-eaters, the freshness and crunch of a poke bowl is a welcome break when you've been eating rich dishes for a few days.

Those navigating restaurant menus should know there is a knack to ordering: writer Stephen Clarke, a vegetarian who has long lived in Paris, once told me that you should not declare your vegetarianism to the server; they don't want to be bothered with your philosophy on food and animal-rearing, they simply need to know what to tell the kitchen. It's better to order from the menu with instructions to leave out the meat or fish, so a salad '*sans jambon*' or '*sans crevettes*'. Being used to making adaptations, as any good host is, they will make a note and hopefully bring a salad with no ham.

That said, these days, especially in Paris, there are highly likely to be one or two vegan or vegetarian items on a menu. To be able to choose from a whole vegan menu, it's better to identify the chefs who are passionate about this style of cuisine and book a table at one of their restaurants, which are growing in number. My friend Caroline is vegan and has lived in Paris for years, and her favourites include Le Potager de Charlotte, which was set up by brothers David and Adrien Valentin. They now have two restaurants and serve a plant-based menu that's mostly organic and gluten-free too.

Gluten-free diets are becoming increasingly common across France, and often products that are naturally gluten-free (rather than having been adapted) are advertised as such. These include

buckwheat *galettes* in Brittany, macarons nationwide, *socca* in Nice and many other tasty products. Most supermarkets now have a gluten-free section, usually close to the organic (*'bio'*) products. Most restaurant servers are well versed in explaining items on the menu that contain gluten or other allergens when they're not marked. There is a burgeoning gluten-free (and often dairy-free) *pâtisserie* scene; I've found some excellent *pâtisseries* in Paris, Strasbourg, Lyon and Marseille. However, because it is quite a trendy choice, those who suffer from coeliac disease should explain clearly that it is an allergy and that cross-contamination would have a serious impact. Dairy-free diets or dairy allergies can be more difficult to accommodate, particularly in the north of the country where butter is so highly prized, though the burgeoning vegan scene is changing this. Since 2014, European law has meant that restaurants are obliged to state if any of their foods contain one of the fourteen allergens listed in legislation; this means some menus show them, but you might also have to ask.

NOTES ON RECIPES

For all the recipes in the book, I have used metric measurements and centigrade for oven temperatures, based on a fan oven. Where I have included seasonings, I have used sea salt and black pepper. In most of the recipes that demand flour, I have also tested them with gluten-free flour (e.g. Doves Farm brand) to ensure they work for coeliacs.

WHAT IS TERROIR?

While the French language is peppered with English words where no French one exists, this is the perfect case of the

opposite. *Terroir* refers to the specific combination of conditions in which a product grows; every place in the world is unique in terms of its topography, its geography, its climate and soil type. Though it is most often used in reference to wines, it is equally important for foods.

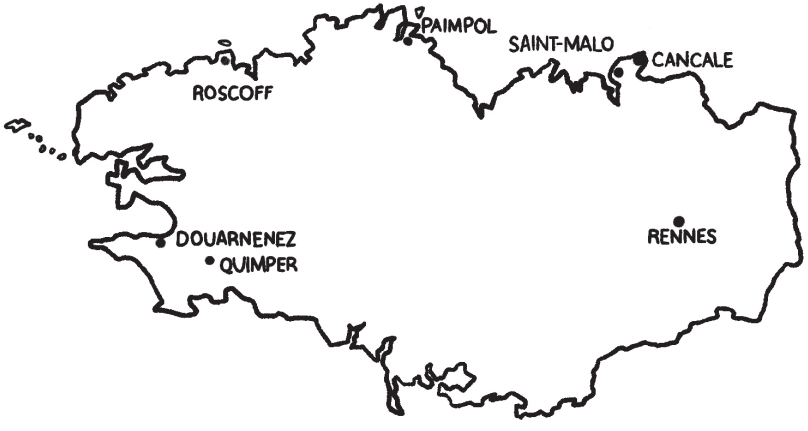
ACRONYMS GALORE

French gastronomy is peppered with acronyms and these are the ones that are most useful to know: AOC stands for Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée, which means that the product – be it fruit, wine, cheese, meat, or even one special type of hay – is grown or produced in a certain geographical area, where the *terroir* is key to the product's flavour. Techniques and methods, often centuries old, are also considered by the Institut National de l'Origine et de la Qualité (INAO), as it awards the designations. It was originally established in 1935 to protect the French wine and brandy industries from imposter products and it works the same for all products today.

The European Union recognised that every country within its community had such products and, to bring them together under one designation, it established its own labels for foods and wines. In French this is called the Appellation d'Origine Protégée (AOP) and in English it is Protected Designation of Origin (PDO). The first step to gaining an AOP is to have an AOC.

Another label that is often used to denote quality is the Indication Géographique Protegée (IGP) or in English the Protected Geographical Indication (PGI). This European label indicates that a product has been produced, developed or processed in a particular place, so it protects the know-how of its producers. As producers wish to differentiate themselves from mass-produced or ultra-processed foods, they are keen to have

proof that their foods are speciality items made locally or traditionally, and so the list of protected products continues to grow. Throughout the book, I have used the French acronym, rather than the English, as this is what you will see on labels in France. Products that hold the Label Rouge have complied with certain standards of quality that have been set by producers and approved by the Ministry for Agriculture and Fisheries and the Ministry for Consumer Affairs, on the recommendations of the INAO. Another mark of quality to look out for concerns the artisans themselves: the Meilleur Ouvrier de France (MOF) is awarded to chefs, bakers and craftspeople from a huge range of industries including embroidery, woodwork and even dentistry. The competition has its participants complete a task using specific materials in an allocated time period and it is an extremely pressurised process in which few succeed. You can recognise chefs, bakers, cheesemakers, for example, from the *tricolore* collar on their white jackets. It is the most prestigious award you can win and those who hold it hold it for life.


PAIMPOL
SAINT-MALO
CANCALE
ROSCOFF
DOUARNENEZ
QUIMPER
RENNES

Chapter One

BRITTANY

Despite being one of France's most food-loving regions, Brittany is often overlooked for more famously foodie areas such as Burgundy or Provence, but this far western region is where I've consistently had my best meals. With 2,700 kilometres of coastline, fish and seafood are abundant in Brittany, and in many places you can swig back oysters just metres from where they are grown, or dine on fish beside the harbour where it was landed. Seaweed also has a long history in Breton diets, and the different varieties are celebrated on menus. Meanwhile, salt takes pride of place in the Breton diet; the salt pans at Guérande, now part of Pays de la Loire, allowed the region's salted butter to attain its godly status; and it is here that salted butter caramel first started its journey to worldwide fame.

Other dishes and products grew from Brittany's seafaring history, either coming to Breton shores from abroad, or thriving thanks to a market found across the Channel, as with the vegetables of northern Finistère. Inland, cows graze on the rain-washed pastures, and give the region its heavenly butter. The land here is also ideal for the ever-growing number of artisanal cheese producers. Buckwheat is one of Brittany's

staple products and is used in *galettes*, breads and pastries, whisky and beer.

Among the great champions of local produce are chefs such as Loïc Le Bail in Roscoff, Nicolas Conraux in Plouider and Philippe Brun in Porspoder; and near the Crozon peninsula, Olivier Bellin. East of Rennes, at La Table des Pères, chef Jérôme Jouadé sources his produce within twenty kilometres of the restaurant. In Cancale, Hugo Roellinger inherits his father Olivier's culinary talent for using the flavours of the Emerald Coast, while the family's Épices Roellinger spice stores are an Aladdin's cave of flavours inspired by Saint-Malo's history of sailors on the spice route.

ROSCOFF PINK ONIONS, BRITTANY

Picture a Frenchman. Does a beret, a striped jersey, a bicycle and a string of onions spring to mind? On the occasions I've shared the stereotypical image of a Frenchman with Parisians or those from beyond Brittany, they've been baffled as to why the British see the French this way. They've never heard of Roscoff, let alone their onions. And don't the Brits realise France is the home of fine wines, *haute cuisine* and Michelin stars?

The story behind this widely held national stereotype begins in the small harbour town of Roscoff. In the early nineteenth century, poverty drove hundreds and then thousands of men across the channel to sell, door-to-door, the gentle pink onions that flourished in northern Finistère. For more than 150 years, the 'Onion Johnnies', so-called because so many were called 'Jean' (or Jean-Christophe, Jean-Claude, etc.), were the only contact the British had with the French, or in fact any foreigner. That such a tiny town could spawn an industry that stretched as far as the Orkneys is a wonder.

Today's Roscoff is a delight: climb up to the tiny white

Chapelle Sainte-Barbe, where once the Johnnies' families waved them off, and view the colourful fishing boats lined up in the harbour; wander the cobbled streets and gaze up to the ornate belfry of the Notre-Dame de Croaz-Batz church. The tiny museum, La Maison des Johnnies, tells their history and stories of the Anglo-French friendships that developed and the shipwrecks that robbed so many of their lives.

The onions and their history are celebrated each August at an annual festival, when the harbour front is filled with festivities, including onion string-plaiting competitions and traditional Breton dancing with lace bonnets galore. In the festival's food tents you'll see bubbling cauldrons of onion confit, which is slapped on to a sausage before being wrapped in a *galette* or a buckwheat pancake (see page 39, Galette-Saucisse, Rennes). There is a parade, for which the Brotherhood of the Pink Onion don their smart black and magenta costumes, and walk with the Association of Onion Johnnies – berets, striped shirts, onion-laden bicycles – and fellow brotherhoods from the area.

While other food-lovers might have a favourite cheese, or get impassioned by a particular pastry, I admit to being something of an evangelist for Roscoff onions. I always stock up with a few strings each time we pass through the town. They're hard to find in Britain now (blame Brexit) so it's best to get over there for your own supply; look out for the official label with a cartoon pink onion on it.

I tend to use them sliced finely in salads or omelettes; if you use them in stews and sauces they bring a softness of flavour you don't find with white onions. And that pink hue really shines when you pickle them, turning the vinegar magenta.

Loïc Le Bail is head chef at one of the best restaurants in town at the Hotel Brittany, and is a key member of the Brotherhood of the Pink Onion. He uses Roscoff's onions in all sorts of dishes, including a dessert – delicate little sweet onion meringues, which he serves with a grapefruit sorbet. His onion

confit is excellent with cheese, and making your own confit is a good idea for making a string last longer.

ARTICHOKES, SAINT-POL-DE-LÉON

There's one sight in in the fields around Roscoff and Saint-Pol-de-Léon that always fills me with awe: a field full of purple globe artichokes. Surrounded by a skirt of jagged leaves, their knobbly heads stand to attention and line up like a tribe of spiky aliens. When we've driven past them, I've almost expected them to start marching after us like a bunch of rabid triffids.

For the uninitiated, eating an entire steamed globe artichoke can be just as terrifying. When I first tried this dish, it was only thanks to my sympathetic hosts that I learned to peel off the leaves, dip them into a melted butter sauce, and pull the frond through my clenched teeth so the flesh would catch on my bottom teeth. I slurped them down, each leaf getting meatier as I reached the succulent heart, eager to defeat this other-worldly vegetable and complete the exotic eating ritual.

It's said that artichokes were introduced to France by Catherine de' Medici in the sixteenth century, and they are loved throughout the country. In Provence, they tend to use the smaller *artichauts violets*, and they are served finely sliced in a true *salade niçoise* or braised for a *barigoule*; near Lyon you might find yourself chomping on their sister thistle the cardoon, while in the far south-west the narrower purple Roussillon artichoke appears in markets as early as March (it's sunnier down there). In Saint-Pol-de-Léon there are many different varieties, including the *petit violet*, the widely cultivated Camus, and the big purple Cardinal. They're celebrated by the vivid-green-cloaked Brotherhood of the Breton Artichoke, who host the Fête de l'Artichaut each July. The *confrérie* even has its own little museum, La Maison de l'Artichaut. In the centre of Saint-Pol-de-Léon, at

the sophisticated La Pomme d'Api, chef Jérémie Le Calvez uses artichokes in all kinds of ways, including serving the leaves of the *petit violet* to dip into a *crémeux d'artichaut* made with the Camus artichoke.

Around the corner, at Dans la Grand' Rue, they serve *artichauts farcis à la Bretonne*, stuffed with all kinds of different fillings. Try a seafood one with mussels and seafood sauce; or *farci coté Argoat* (Argoat is the word for inland Brittany, compared to 'Armor', the coast), with *andouille*, lardons, apple and a cider-cream sauce. The bonus of these dishes is that you get to pick off and eat the outer leaves as well as the filling.

VEGETABLES, NORTHERN FINISTÈRE

The gentle climate of north Finistère is perfect for growing veg; whether it's giant leaves concealing colourful cauliflower or frilly cabbages and wispy fennel, the fields brim with produce that is nurtured by market gardeners and dedicated farmers. Back in the 1950s, however, life here wasn't quite so rosy. Brittany was a remote outpost with poor roads and no easy routes to Paris. The rural community was at the mercy of merchants from the capital to set the prices for their produce, and after a bumper crop in 1958 prices plummeted, leaving farmers with piles of produce they couldn't sell. Relations with the traders from Paris took a nosedive, and under the leadership of pig farmer Alexis Gourvennec the local farmers revolted, installing road blockages and striking long into 1959. Over the course of the next ten years, as a result of the farmers' protests, a deep-water port was installed at Roscoff. It promised to be a boon for shipping operators to sell across the Channel; yet none came.

In January 1972, Britain signed up to join the Common Market and Gourvennec and his fellow farmers decided to take matters into their own hands once again. They raised

the money to charter their own ship and it set sail in January 1973, filled with cauliflowers, onions and other produce bound for the tables of British homes. That shipping company later became Brittany Ferries.

While their boats are now more focused on transporting holidaymakers, their beginnings were all about food; still now they source the produce for their restaurants from those farmers working those very fields where it all began. Market gardeners grow some 141 different vegetables on farms from Brest to Saint-Malo and sell them via the Prince de Bretagne cooperative. This abundance, together with the area's fish, seafood and pork, means that chefs and cooks are absolutely spoiled by the flavours they can bring to a plate. One dish that sticks firmly in my mind was at Hôtel le Castel Ac'h, at Plouguerneau, where chef David Royer presents a menu titled Promenade dans les Abers ('a walk in the river inlets'). One of his dishes includes a dark green vegetable mayonnaise, which I scooped up with a fat langoustine. It was so good, I unwittingly let out a tiny yelp.

OYSTERS, CANCALE

You never forget your first oyster. While some people don't ever venture past that first one, finding the texture hard to swallow, others can't get enough of their briny aroma. I'm firmly in the latter camp, ever since swigging back my first one amid the ornate Belle Époque decor of the Café de la Paix in Paris as a newly engaged thirty-something. Swept up in the aphrodisiac moment, I picked up the silver-shelled mollusc from the towering seafood platter and gulped it back. In an instant, I was virtually whisked away from central Paris to a far-flung beach where the salt stung my nostrils and the wind tousled my hair. I was hooked. Fast-forward a few years and we were trying them again at Cancale's beachfront oyster market, but this time

I was trying not to drop the plate as I bounced my baby girl on my other knee. That's the trouble with romance, it adds junior travel companions to the party.

Cancale is France's oyster capital. At high tide, you might wonder why; there's nothing to see and the calm emerald sea laps gently to shore. At low tide, though, all is revealed: the vast area of oyster-growing racks stretches half a mile into the sea and, beyond them, the triangular shape of Mont Saint-Michel pricks the horizon. Oyster-farmer-turned-guide Inga Smyczynski (Ostreika Tours) offers an excellent tour of the oyster beds, which will help you understand the hard work that goes into producing them, as tractors trundle past bound for the furthest beds. If you are there at low tide, you get a sense of the sandy, muddy world where *ostréiculteurs* must work with the tides and in all the elements, sludging around in the muddy sand in waist-high waders. Among their many tasks, each netted sack must be turned and tapped (so the oysters don't attach themselves to the grid of the net) several times. The whole process makes you realise why oysters are so prized and so expensive. Inga finishes her tour with a *dégustation*, a tasting, of a platter bought from one of the blue-striped canopied stalls. As we perched on the rocks, she showed me how to smear a knifeful of seaweed butter on top, Breton-style, rather than the traditional squeeze of lemon. Her advice was to chew them a little before swallowing to truly appreciate their briny flavour. The custom is then to chuck the shells on the beach, where they help steady the gloopy clay sand.

Cancale has a long history of oyster farming; it was the Romans who first brought them to the Breton coast. Later, Louis XIV had them transported to Versailles after developing a penchant for them and by the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, they were a huge industry. Back then, the scene at Cancale would have been incredible: a fleet of some 200 white-sailed ships called *les bisquines* would ply the bay, dredging the sea

floor for what we call flat or Belon oysters now. These would then be dumped on the sand in piles up to two metres high and sorted by the fishermen's wives, working on the wet sand in their long dresses and wooden clogs. In a good year, 10,000 tons of oysters were landed. Unsurprisingly, overfishing harmed the ecosystem and the supply dwindled. Even though a law was introduced that forbade fishing between October and April (the months with 'r' in them), the damage was done.

In 1858, production took off again with a more scooped-shape shell (*l'huître creuse*), introduced from Portugal, but in 1963 a glacial winter hit northern Europe and temperatures dropped to minus 16°C on the Breton coast and froze the sea. Some 80 per cent of the flat Belon oysters were killed off. Disease continued to affect production of the Portuguese oysters into the 1970s, so producers introduced the Pacific oyster from Japan, and this is still the breed we eat today. They're able to be produced all year round, too, so the old saying not to eat them with an 'r' in the month doesn't matter so much. Save that rule for the Belon oysters, which are stronger and more bitter in flavour: these are collected by hand from the sea floor. Some of them are so big, weighing up to a kilo, you can see how they earned their nickname, *pied de cheval* (horse's hoof), and they can cost up to €7 each or up to €20 in Paris. Buying them can be confusing, but once you remember the number relates to the size, a menu becomes easier to understand. No. 5 are the smallest, No. 1 the biggest and most expensive. Belon oysters are large, so you might see No. 0 or No. 00 where they are available.

While Pacific oysters are the breed we eat now, their flavour will really depend on where they're grown. If you eat oysters on any of France's other coastlines, they will taste slightly different – just as wine tastes different depending on its *terroir* – depending on the water temperature, the sea's salt content and the plankton they consume. Marennes-Oléron oysters from

Charente-Maritime are particularly prized, but I love them wherever I've tried them (except perhaps the Alps – that was a lesson learned). We once stumbled on a tiny little oyster cabin on the Île aux Moines, in Brittany's Gulf of Morbihan. At 11 a.m. we paused our bike ride, took a seat under the sun umbrella and shared a dozen along with a glass of chilled Muscadet while the kids sipped Orangina and poked at the ice. In Cap Ferret, we wandered through the ramshackle cabins at L'Herbe to an oyster bar where we scoffed them under a Robinson Crusoe-esque wicker sun-shade; and on Île de Noirmoutier we bought a platter at Chez P'tit Louis among the oyster fishers' cabins.

STRAWBERRIES, PLOUGASTEL-DAOULAS

Not wishing to denigrate our frequent family car-boot picnics, but car parks have not tended to be the places where any of my gastronomic epiphanies have occurred. That said, I knew we were in for a treat when we tore off the plastic wrap on a huge carton of strawberries in the car park of the Ty Néol farm shop just outside the small town of Plougastel-Daoulas in Finistère. As we each bit into a fat, glossy *gariguette*, our eyes grew wide – their sweetness was beyond any strawberry we'd ever tasted.

Strawberries thrive on this little peninsula south of Brest, thanks to its microclimate. Before the eighteenth century, its fields grew linen for the cloth trade, but in 1714 a marine engineer called Amédée-François Frézier went off to explore Chile on behalf of King Louis XIV. There he discovered the local crop of white strawberries in the town of Concepción, which shared many of the geographical characteristics of Plougastel. Frézier brought some plants back, which botanists crossed with the variety of white 'Virginia' strawberry that had been brought to France from Canada by Jacques Cartier, to create a species called the 'pineapple strawberry'. They planted them around

the jagged coastline around Plougastel and, bam, a new industry was born.

By the 1930s, the Plougastel peninsula was producing a quarter of France's strawberry harvest – up to 6,000 tons. New varieties and techniques came and went and, when the *gariguette* came along in the 1970s, they never looked back. While the strawberry season is always much anticipated across France, I've never tasted ones as good as those in our car park feast. Chefs have told me that those grown in soil rather than in hydroponic systems are the best-tasting, so visiting a producer's farm is worth the detour if you want to find your own big punnet.

Down the hill from the farm, the sleepy little town of Plougastel has the quiet Musée de la Fraise, which tells the history of Plougastel's strawberries and of Frézier, who, despite being an impressive case of nominative determinism, didn't give his name to the 'fraise' – the word comes from the Latin *fragoria*. The museum also shows elements of typical Breton history, such as the *lits-clos* – cupboard-like beds that kept people snug at night and allowed bedridden grannies to stay close to the dinner table. You can also learn about the Plougastel custom for *en masse* marriage ceremonies (up to fifty marriages in one day), complete with colourful embroidered costumes and much revelry. These days, the colourful Breton costumes are saved for the Fête de la Fraise each June. There is much traditional Breton dancing, strawberry tastings, a parade with carnival floats and a big meal to finish it all off.

ANDOUILLE DE GUÉMENÉ, GUÉMENÉ-SUR-SCORFF

Nothing can quite prepare you for the sight of the hundreds of sinister black phalluses that dangle from the ceiling of the Maison de l'Andouille. Set in the remote village of

Guémené-sur-Scorff, in the heart of Brittany, the small shop's entire ceiling is dense with these black tripe sausages hanging down. Measuring 60cm in length, 3–5cm in diameter and comprising 15–25 layers of pig intestines, these salted sausages are made by first putting each tube inside the other, then curing with high-quality salt from nearby Guérande (see page 178, Fleur de Sel, Gros Sel, Centre-Val de Loire and Pays de la Loire). This is followed by two days of smoking over beech wood before the sausages are dried for either three weeks – for the lighter version – or nine months for the black version. When you cut a slice of either, the interior looks like the inside of a tree trunk. The *andouille* draws fans from across France and the world because, it turns out, they're actually really tasty. But only, I hasten to add, when you find the ones that are well produced.

I admit it was with some trepidation that I made the journey to the village to see what the fuss was about. A few days before, I ordered a *galette* topped with *l'andouille de Guémené*, apples and onions. It was one of their 'specials' and called Le Surcouf – named after one of Saint-Malo's heroes, Robert Surcouf, who, it turned out, wasn't actually a very nice chap (slave trader, raider and ransacker). When the *galette* arrived, it had three slices of *andouille* with their concentric rings pushed out to form little anaemic cones. I took my first bite and, as I chewed it, I found it wasn't dissimilar to a mouthful of rubber bands. I wondered if the *crêperie* had chosen their most revolting ingredient to represent their dastardly villain, but no, Surcouf is still very much lauded – his statue stands on the old town walls. How on earth was I going to interview a proud producer about something so grim?

When I arrived at the Maison de l'Andouille on a drizzly Saturday lunchtime I sat with owner Benoît Rivalan outside the front door. He told me about how his wife's grandfather first started producing the *andouille* as one of many enterprises in

1972. Their online delivery service saves fans a journey, but still they come in droves to see the remarkable shop and buy their wares, a fact that is even more remarkable when you realise there's little else to see or do for miles around. Even the little village of Guémené-sur-Scorff seems rather forgotten, despite it being labelled a 'Petite Cité de Caractère'.

The *andouille*'s origins are foggy; apart from a mention in a 1776 almanac, there isn't much to go on, but it's undoubtedly linked to the Bretons' tradition of breeding pigs, which were easy to fatten up with scraps and leftovers in the traditionally self-sufficient households. Rivalan told me he thought the *andouilles* were born of practicality and that often the main problem with *andouille* is the risk that they split when cooking, so some clever soul thought to add more layers. 'Like socks!' said Rivalan.

By the time we'd finished talking and he'd nipped inside to bring out a plate of sliced *andouille* for me to try, the queue of customers was out the door. Expecting the worst, I cautiously took a nibble of the three-week-aged *andouille* and was taken aback. It was good, like a top-quality ham, salty, tender. The black-skinned, nine-month-aged version was even tastier: smoky, nutty and moreish even. Nothing like rubber bands. I was converted and took away a vacuum-packed *andouille* to eat at home.

When it comes to serving it *chez vous*, it's ideal for a charcuterie board, alongside other cold meats, while in its signature dish it's served sliced in rounds with puréed potato, though you'll also see it in quiches, *galettes* and incorporated in local cheeses. So how do you know you're getting the good stuff? The trick is to look for 'Andouille de Guémené de Rivalan-Quidu' on the label or menu. There are a few other producers taking pride in its production (Rivalan mentioned Maison Levesque, also in Guémené, Le Porc du Breuil in nearby Cléguérec, and Maison Peron in Melrand), but for a truly eye-widening sight,