

## Regional spotlight: Pays de la Loire

Fish, seafood and rustic pâtés are just some of the gastronomic delights on offer in the Loire Valley

**A** fertile land of vineyards, fruit orchards and lush pastures at the heart of which runs the mighty Loire, Pays de la Loire boasts gastronomy that is rich in fresh wholesome produce.

Freshwater fish are a regular feature on the menu, and the famous *beurre blanc* sauce that can be found as an accompaniment to fish in restaurants all over France has its roots in the banks of the Loire.

Seafood is also a highlight of the food on offer here, as the west of the region borders the Atlantic Ocean: mussels are traditionally raised on posts in the Baie de l'Aiguillon; distinctively coloured 'Vendée Atlantic' oysters are harvested in the Port du Bec and sardines and anchovies are fished at St-Gilles-Croix-de-Vie and La Turballe.

The sea is the source of another of the region's famous specialities: *fleur de sel*, a fine or sometimes coarse salt that is harvested from the salt marshes of the west coast. It is sometimes mixed with spices and is highly rated by chefs in France and beyond. A lesser-known delicacy is *salicorne*, a plant that grows in salt marshes, which can be eaten raw,

pickled or sautéed.

Pork inspires one of the region's best-known specialities: *rillettes* from Sarthe. This is a type of coarse pâté that is often served on a slice of rustic bread. Another regional favourite are *rillauds d'Anjou*, pieces of pork belly that are often served with creamy, white beans known as *mogettes de Vendée*.

The free-range chickens from Challans and Loué are known for their tender and delicious meat, and Vendée is known for its delectable ham.

For those with a sweet tooth, there is plenty of choice including the hard-boiled sweets, *berlingots nantais*, and *quernons d'ardoise*, caramelised pralines with almonds and hazelnuts, coated with blue chocolate from Anjou. This part of France is also known for its biscuits including the shortbreads from Retz and Sablé-sur-Sarthe and the famous Petit Beurre LU biscuit from Nantes.



ON THE MENU NEXT MONTH...  
... WILD GARLIC SALMON EN PAPILOTTE  
We share the recipe for this delicious fish dish and explore the food and wines of Alsace.



### What to drink...

Master of Wine **Richard Hemming** explores the wines of the Loire Valley

**G**rapevines have grown alongside the banks of the Loire for centuries. The river stretches for hundreds of kilometres before reaching the Atlantic, providing a wide variety of climates and soil types for viticulture. As a result, the styles of wine produced in the Loire can be very different indeed.

Starting at the coast are the vineyards of Muscadet. For decades, this crisp white has been a favourite for British wine drinkers, but it started falling out of fashion when New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc became all the rage. With its crisp citric fruit, refreshing acidity and a salty tanginess, Muscadet is well overdue a comeback. The best wines are aged for at least six months in contact with the yeast left over from

fermentation – look for *sur lie* – on the label.

Moving inland, the Anjou and Touraine districts are famous as the home of Chenin Blanc. This variety is often made in a semi-sweet style, of which the best known is probably Vouvray *demi-sec*. Their ripe stone fruit and honeyed flavours are a really great match for spicy food.

Following the river brings you to two of France's most celebrated wine appellations: Sancerre and Pouilly-Fumé. These wines are the original Sauvignon Blancs, and they have a distinctive flinty flavour that is much prized among wine lovers.

As summer comes closer, it's worth stocking up on the Loire Valley's quintessentially refreshing whites. Here are three recommendations.



**Les Dix du Pallet  
2010 Muscadet  
£9.99 Majestic**

Good Muscadet can improve in bottle for years. This 2010 is a great example, made by 10 local growers. With age, it has gained a fleshy texture and a lovely floral scent. Discounted from £15, this must be one of France's best buys.



**Château Moncontour,  
Demi-Sec 2014 Vouvray  
£9.99 Marks & Spencer**

Modern and refreshing, this delicious Vouvray is made by one of the region's most reliable producers. The subtle sweetness is extremely well balanced with bright apple fruit, spice and a honeyed finish. Try this with lightly spiced cuisine.



**Domaine Cailbourdin,  
Boisfleury 2014  
Pouilly-Fumé  
£11.95 The Wine Society**

Famous names in wine never come cheap, but classic examples such as this are worth every penny. From the excellent 2014 vintage, this is 100% Sauvignon Blanc with subtle but persistent citrus fruit – a wine to savour.