

# FRENCH CUISINE BY REGION

French cuisine has distinctive regional flavours, with the produce, climate and traditional way of life of each region influencing the dishes featured on menus across the country.

Our guide lists some of the more traditional recipes from each region, the cheeses you are likely to find on the cheese board, and the best wines.

At the end of each section we also recommend some of our favourite hotel-restaurants, places where we have enjoyed delicious meals showcasing the best of the local cuisine.

• Nord Pas de Calais & Picardy • Normandy • Brittany • Loire • Champagne • Alsace • Burgundy • Dordogne • Auvergne • Jura & Savoie • Provence • Languedoc-Roussillon & Midi-Pyrénées • Pays Basque

## NORD PAS DE CALAIS & PICARDY

**CUISINE:** The traditional cuisine of the north tends to be quite hearty, with the forests of the Ardennes providing game such as venison and wild boar. Flemish influences are clear - it is common to come across *carbonnade* (beef cooked in beer with onions and spices), *hochepot* (stew made of beef, pork, mutton and oxtail with vegetables), *caudière* (seafish stew with mussels and onions) and *veau flamande* (veal braised with dried apricots, prunes and raisins). Despite the proximity to the sea, surprisingly little fish and seafood is found on menus inland.

**CHEESES:** Northern cow's milk cheeses tend to be strong and fruity with a pungent smell. Maroilles is supple and tangy with a brown rind. It is often mixed with herbs and pepper and shaped into cones to make boulette d'Avesnes, or aged and then mashed with herbs to make fromage fort de Béthune. Abbaye de Mont des Cats is pale yellow in appearance and mild-tasting.

## NORMANDY

**CUISINE:** The region is renowned for its apples and dairy produce. Traditional dishes invariably feature creamy sauces laced with apples, cider or calvados, such as *filet mignon de porc normande* (pork tenderloin cooked with apples and onions in cider and served with caramelised apple rings). The proximity of the sea means that fish and seafood feature commonly on menus. Look out for *moules à la normande* (mussels in a cream and white wine sauce) and *sole normande* (Dover sole poached in cider and cream with shrimps). There are also some good meats. The lamb and mutton from the Cherbourg Peninsula are rated very highly, as are the *andouilles* from Vire (smoked and cooked pork and tripe sausage, usually served cold as a starter).

**CHEESES:** The brown and white Normandy cows produce the world-famous Camembert and Pont l'Évêque cheeses, as well as many others.



## BRITTANY

**CUISINE:** Given that Brittany tends to set itself apart from the rest of France, it is surprising that it does not have its own distinctive style of cooking that sets it apart from other French cuisine. The only true Breton speciality is the pancake. *Crêperies* are a common sight, offering an imaginative range of savoury and sweet pancakes (*galettes* and *crêpes*, respectively). The other regional dish is *cotriade*, a fish stew traditionally made from conger eel and the

remains of the catch. Generally, Breton cuisine is simple, with little use of sauces, and features much fish and seafood. Try *palourdes farcies* (baked clams stuffed with garlic, herbs and shallots) or *pot au feu d'homard* (lobster, shrimp, scallop, mussel and oyster stew). Brittany's young lambs, raised on the salt meadows, are also very good.

**CHEESES:** The region's few cheeses are all made from cow's milk. Trappiste de Campénéac is mild and supple with tiny holes. Mingaux is a soft, mild cream cheese, often served with fruit or simply sprinkled with sugar.

## LOIRE

**CUISINE:** There is no single culinary style. In the valley itself, referred to as 'the garden of France', numerous types of fruit and vegetables are grown, and fruit tarts are common - *tarte tatin* originated in the Loire. Freshwater fish, caught from the Loire and its tributaries, features widely on menus, particularly pike, shad and eels. These are often accompanied by *beurre blanc*, butter whipped up with white wine and shallots or with vinegar. Game, from the Sologne forests to the east of the region, is a common ingredient in the region's excellent *charcuterie*.

**CHEESES:** The Loire produces a good range of both cow's and goat's milk cheeses. Olivet bleu, made from cow's milk and often wrapped in plane leaves, is rich and fruity, with a blue rind. Couhé-Vérac is a square goat's cheese with a nutty taste, covered in chestnut or plane leaves.

**WINES:** The Loire is one of France's main wine-producing regions, and the wines produced are very diverse

## CHAMPAGNE

**CUISINE:** Champagne has no distinctive regional cuisine of its own, adopting instead dishes from neighbouring regions such as *quenelles de brochet* (poached pike mousses in a creamy sauce) which originated in Burgundy.

**CHEESES:** Most Champenois cheeses are mild and creamy. Barberey and cendré des Riceys are both soft cheeses made from skimmed milk and coated in ash. Chaource is supple with a slightly fruity taste and a downy white rind. One strong-smelling cheese is Langres, which has a tangy taste.

**WINES:** Unlike most French wines, champagnes are known by their brand name rather than by the vineyard, as they are made from a blend (*cuvée*) of grapes from different vineyards and from different years (the exception are vintage champagnes, which are made solely from grapes of that year when the harvest is particularly good). The *méthode champenoise* for making champagne was invented by Dom Pérignon, a monk. Once the wine has been fermented and blended, a mix

of cane sugar and yeast is added into the bottle to induce a second fermentation and produce the sparkle. It is left to mature for between one and five years, then the cork and any sediment is removed and the sweetness adjusted before being recorked and sold.



## ALSACE

**CUISINE:** Alsace has a distinct gastronomy. Unlike other French cuisine, the German influences are very evident - *choucroute* (*sauerkraut*) and sausages etc are common sights on menus - but Alsatian cooking is lighter and more delicate than German cooking. Pork is the most common meat, though game from the wooded Vosges Hills, pike and trout from the mountain rivers, and salmon from the Rhine, also feature. Look out for *backenoffe* (marinated beef, pork and mutton stewed with onions and potatoes in wine), *oie à l'alsacienne* (roasted goose stuffed with sausage and served with *sauerkraut*) and *flammekueche* (quiche made of bacon, onions, cream cheese and cream). The plain between the Vosges and the Rhine produces lots of fruit, which is incorporated into tarts (*tarte à l'alsacienne* is an open fruit or custard tart) and also added to meat dishes.

**CHEESES:** The region's most famous cheese is the strong-smelling, tangy Münster.

## BURGUNDY

**CUISINE:** People eat well in Burgundy and the region boasts some of the best produce and meats. The cuisine is delicate without being overly 'fussy'. Common components are pork, beef and chicken, onions, mushrooms, garlic, snails and cream (used sparingly!). Many of the traditional dishes are well known outside France, such as *coq au vin* (chicken in a red wine, mushroom and onion sauce) and *bœuf à la bourguignonne* (beef stewed in red wine with mushrooms and onions). Other regional specialities include *marcassin farci au saucisson* (young wild boar with a sausage stuffing), *escargots à la bourguignonne* (snails served with parsley and garlic butter) and meat or fish dishes *en meurette* (in a red wine sauce).

**WINES:** Burgundy reds are world famous, and prices are high.



## DORDOGNE

**CUISINE:** For such a rural region, the cuisine of the Dordogne is surprisingly sophisticated. Two common ingredients are truffles (used in soups, sauces, pâtés, stuffing and with meats) and *foie gras* (enlarged liver of goose or duck that has been force-fed on maize, which is either served by itself as a starter, or used in other dishes). Items on menus that are served *à la périgourdine* are stuffed with, accompanied by or have a sauce of *foie gras* and truffles. *Ballottine de lièvre à la périgourdine* is hare stuffed with veal, rabbit or pork, *foie gras* and truffles, and flavoured with brandy; while *cassoulet périgourdin* is a stew of mutton, haricot

beans, garlic sausage and goose neck stuffed with truffles and *foie gras*. Food is often cooked in goose fat, giving the cuisine its own distinctive taste. Walnut oil is a common salad dressing.

**CHEESES:** Bleu de Quercy and Bleu de Causses are firm, blue-veined cow's milk cheeses with a strong taste and smell. There are numerous types of *cabécous* (goat's milk cheeses) such as Cabécou de Rocamadour which is soft with a nutty taste. Picadou is Rocamadour wrapped in leaves and aged, resulting in a much stronger taste. Made from sheep's milk, Roquefort is one of the best blue cheeses.

## AUVERGNE

**CUISINE:** Auvergne being a remote and rural region, its traditional cuisine is simple and filling. Dishes often feature a combination of pork, cabbage, potatoes and cheese, such as *potée auvergnate*, a soup-like stew of pork and cabbage with potatoes, onions, turnips, leeks and garlic. *Truffade*, mashed potatoes with cheese through it that is then fried with bacon and garlic, is a common accompaniment to meat.

**CHEESES:** Auvergne produces a huge variety, such as bleu d'Auvergne, a sharp-tasting firm blue cheese, and Cantal or Salers cheeses, which are supple with a taste ranging from mild to nutty.

## JURA & SAVOIE

**CUISINE:** The Ognon and Doubs rivers, as well as the mountain lakes, provide a plentiful supply of fish, particularly salmon, and the forests are a good source of game. *Fondue*, and cheese in general, is common - try *brochette jurassienne* (pieces of cheese wrapped in ham and fried on a skewer) or *escalope de veau belle comtoise* (veal escalopes covered in breadcrumbs and baked with slices of ham and cheese). Other specialities include *brési* (cured beef in thin slices) and *poulet au vin jaune* (chicken and morels in a creamy sauce flavoured with the local wine).

**CHEESES:** Most of the Jura's cheeses are made from cow's milk and include some sharp-tasting blues, and local versions of Swiss emmental and gruyère.



## PROVENCE

**CUISINE:** Provençal cuisine is known for its use of herbs, olive oil, tomatoes, garlic, onions, artichokes, olives and sweet and hot peppers. Dishes prepared *à la provençale* are made with tomatoes, garlic, olive oil, onions, herbs and sometimes aubergine, while dishes made *à la niçoise* are similar but also include olives, capers, anchovies and tarragon. Vegetables are often baked or fried in oil for dishes such as *ratatouille*, or used in salads. Fish and shellfish - sardines, red mullet, tuna, monkfish, sea bass, and anchovies - are commonly found on menus, even inland, and are often accompanied by *raïto* or *rayte* (red wine, tomato, garlic and ground walnut sauce). Other fish dishes include *bouillabaisse* (stew-like soup with conger eel, scorpion fish, gurnet and other fish, saffron, fennel, garlic and bitter orange peel, served with garlic mayonnaise) and *soupe aux poissons* (smooth soup made from white fish and chilli and garlic mayonnaise). Slowly-cooked stews such as *estouffade* and *daube* are based on beef or mutton.

On the Côte d'Azur, Italian influences are noticeable, with wide use of pasta, especially ravioli and cannelloni, gnocchi, and *pistou* (similar to pesto).

**CHEESES:** Banon is a supple cheese made from either goat's, sheep's or cow's milk and wrapped in chestnut leaves. Picodon de Valréas is a goat's cheese with a delicate nutty taste.



## LANGUEDOC-ROUSSILLON & MIDI-PYRÉNÉES

**CUISINE:** The cuisine of south-west France is very varied, influenced by the harsher climate of the mountains and the warmth of the Mediterranean. In the south and east, olive oil, tomatoes and aubergines feature widely in dishes (foods prepared *à la languedocienne* are cooked with aubergines, tomatoes, wild mushrooms and garlic), while in the north and west, pork, wild mushrooms, truffles, dried

beans, lentils and chestnuts are common ingredients (try *cousinat*, a rich chestnut and cream soup, in the Cévennes). *Cassoulet* is the classic Languedocien dish, a garlicky stew of haricot beans, pork and other meats depending on the area (in Toulouse goose is added, and in Carcassonne, lamb). The local lamb and mutton are very good, both often tasting of the herbs that grow in pastures where the animals graze. Despite the proximity to the Mediterranean, sea fish is only found in large quantities on menus on the coast itself; near the Spanish border you may come across dishes served in a Collioure sauce of anchovy and garlic-flavoured mayonnaise. Trout and eel are the most commonly found freshwater fish. *Pâtisserie* specialities can be found throughout the south-west.

**CHEESES:** As in other regions, there is a wide variety of cheeses. Try *passé l'an*, a hard cheese with a strong taste, or Pelardon de Cévennes, a rich goat's milk cheese.

## PAYS BASQUE

**CUISINE:** Basque cuisine is very flavoursome. Garlic, peppers, onions, tomatoes and herbs are widely used in fish and meat dishes. Regional dishes include *pipérade* (scrambled eggs with peppers, ham, garlic and tomatoes) and meats such as chicken prepared *à la basquaise*, which means in a spicy sauce of tomatoes and peppers. Bayonne (salt-cured) ham is eaten raw in thin slices, or cooked in stews. *Chipirones* (squid cooked in its own ink) features widely on menus along the coast. A common sweet is *gâteau basque* (black cherry pie).

**CHEESES:** There are numerous excellent varieties of sheep's milk cheeses (*fromage de brebis*) such as Ardi-Gasna and Iraty. Made in large discs with a yellow rind, they range from mild to nutty and are typically served with blackberry jam.

