

On the Road

NORMANDY

This region of north-west France is renowned for its cheese, cider and seafood but there are unexpected foodie discoveries to be made, too – among them saffron ice cream and refreshing calvados cocktails

Words LUCY GILLMORE

It's a misty morning, colourless apart from the vivid piles of purple petals on the grass. At the **Domaine de Gauville**, an organic saffron farm in Normandy, a handful of pickers are crouching close to the ground to collect crocus flowers in woven wicker baskets. The blooms are plucked in the early morning when the buds are still tightly closed. As they open, the precious red stigmas are carefully extracted (domainedegauille.fr).

For centuries saffron, dubbed 'red gold', has been the most highly prized – and most expensive – spice in the world. Some 90% of the world's saffron is grown in Iran, but the saffron cultivated in France is sought after, renowned for its high quality.

It was the Crusaders who first brought the bulbs back from their travels to far-flung lands during the 11th century. By the 1300s, saffron production was firmly rooted in French culture, and heavily taxed. However, a combination of three consecutive hard winters, bulbs weakened by disease and the intensity of labour (the flowers are harvested by hand) led to the decline of the industry during the 19th century. »



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“The last saffronerie closed in 1956,” Myriam Duteil tells me as we kneel on the damp earth, filling our baskets with delicate blooms. Recently, however, there has been a revival.

Myriam was a media executive, working in New York for the Public Broadcasting Service before returning to France and launching the French Food Network in 2001. A decade or so later, her focus shifted. Her mother and grandmother had been farmers and she felt drawn to the land. By 2015 she had a six-hectare plot, an entrepreneurial spirit and 20,000 bulbs imported from India. Last year she produced one kilo of saffron (France as a whole produces 200 kilos), making her a key player.

“Its powers are not only culinary, it also has medical properties,” she explains as we carry our baskets back to the kitchen. “It helps digestion and is a natural antidepressant.”

Saffron has to be dried the day it’s picked, so Myriam’s mother is working at the kitchen table carefully removing the spindly red threads, and placing them on a linen cloth to absorb any moisture. Myriam unscrews a jar and holds it up to my nose. It smells of honey.

“I always sell the saffron in threads as it’s easy to grind it to a powder using a pestle and mortar,” she explains. “Saffron is expensive but you only need a couple of threads per person – say a gram per family each year.”

She brings out a tub of homemade saffron ice cream and

hands me a spoon. I struggle to identify the flavour.

“Vanilla?” She smiles. There’s no vanilla in the recipe. “When you combine the saffron with milk and sugar it creates the aroma of vanilla.”

Myriam sells the saffron at local farmers’ markets and to nearby restaurants such as **Le Logis de Brionne**, where I’m heading for lunch (lelogisdebrionne.com). Chef Alain Depoix’s menu showcases seasonal ingredients in a series of intricate dishes. The highlight of the lunch is an egg: ‘L’oeuf parfait aux truffes’, with purée de céleri and émulsion mascarpone tartufata. Slow-cooked for an hour and a quarter at 63 degrees with celery purée and mushroom emulsion, it’s dish-scrapingly cloying and sweetly rich, yet pungent as a forest floor and light as a chick’s downy feathers.

The saffron makes a star appearance during dessert: a pear poached in a blood-red saffron sauce with almond cream.

Normandy, just a hop over the English Channel, is one of the most easily accessible regions of France for a gourmet short break. It boasts no fewer than 30 Michelin-starred restaurants and a packed calendar of food festivals throughout the year celebrating its natural larder, from the Fête du Camembert in Orbec in June, July’s oyster festival in Denneville, the Foire aux Fromages in Livarot in August, the scallop festival in Ouistreham in October and an annual cider festival in picturesque Beuvron-en-Auge.

With 370 miles of coastline, menus are brimming with seafood. The region’s oysters have their own AOC (appellation d’origine contrôlée) and Port-en-Bessin’s scallops are justifiably famous – this is the home of coquilles St Jacques. The countryside is lush and green, grazed by native dairy herds, the region’s cheeseboard showcases the big four: livarot, neufchâtel, pont l’évêque and camembert de Normandie. The rolling hills are also blanketed with orchards of apples and pears, used to produce cider, calvados and poiré.

After a hard day’s grazing I’m bedding down in the east wing of **Château de la Puisaye**, a rambling 18th-century property in Verneuil-sur-Avre, now an elegant b&b (chateaudelapuisaye.co.uk). British owners, Diana and Bruno Costes, have spent years renovating the Napoleonic III château, and now offer a handful of rooms in the main house, a studio over the stables and a holiday cottage: the old hunting lodge. Breakfast in the wood-panelled dining room is a delicious spread of home-baked bread and jams, fruit from their orchards, and local cheeses.

The following day I’m on the hunt for poiré, heading to the **Ferme de l’Yonnière** (fermedelyonniere.com). Jérôme Forget is one of only 20 producers who make poiré, a sparkling PDO (protected designation of origin) pear cider and Normandy’s answer to champagne. At his bucolic

15-hectare farm, grazing cows keep the grass low, clear the lower branches and fertilise the soil. It’s a complete eco-system. From August to October, when the fruits start to fall, he moves the animals, to prevent them trampling or eating the apples and pears. The grass cushions the fruit as it falls and keeps it cool.

“You can hear them thudding to the ground through the night,” he smiles, picking up a tiny apple for me to taste. It’s crunchy, tart and incredibly juicy, yet mouth-puckering and tongue-strippingly astringent.

He has around 300 old trees, some between 200 to 300 years old, and 400 young trees. “They say it takes a pear tree 100 years to grow, 100 years to live and 100 years to die,” he says.

The fruit is pressed in an old barn. In another he shows me the sparkling fermentation tanks. There’s a small tasting room next door, crammed with cases of poiré, pear and apple juice, cider and calvados. On the bar are plates of warm bread from the local boulangerie, one oozing with pont l’évêque and pear, the other camembert and apple.

He pours me a glass of Poiré Domfront. It’s dry and crisp. “It goes well with sea trout,” he says, “and you can use it instead of white wine with mussels and cream.” He uses the champagne method to remove the sediment and create finer, tighter bubbles. The fermentation is natural. »

FROM LEFT:
BASKETS OF
CROCUS FLOWERS
PICKED AT
DOMAINE DE
GAUVILLE; THE
PICTURESQUE
BEUVRON-EN-
AUGE; L’OEUF
PARFAIT AUX
TRUFFES AT
LE LOGIS DE
BRIONNE;
SCALLOP SHELLS
ON THE BEACH AT
PORT EN BESSIN;
AN OYSTER FARM
AT CANCALE;
MUSHROOM
FORAGING AT
MANOIR DU LYS

PHOTOGRAPHS: GETTY; LUCY GILLMORE; LAURA ROWE

EXPLORE



My next stop is a Michelin-starred gourmet bolthole on the edge of the Andaines Forest, **Manoir du Lys** in Bagnoles-de-l'Orne, an old hunting lodge turned family-run hotel (manoir-du-lys.com). Chef Franck Quinton offers cookery classes and foodie breaks. Mushrooms are a signature, from the artwork around the hotel to the moreish mushroom bread and mushroom butter served in the restaurant.

During the autumn the hotel runs mushroom-themed events with guided jaunts in the surrounding forest with a local mycologist, wandering through the dense undergrowth collecting fungi in baskets (from cèpe de Bordeaux to bolet orangé) before returning to the hotel to label and discuss the day's finds over a mushroom-focussed dinner (the mushroom ravioli has a sweet, sublime earthiness).

My final stop before catching the ferry home is the **Ferme de Billy** in the little village of Rots, a fifth-generation family farm dating back to 1651 (fermedebilly.fr). Most of the 24,000 apple trees on the 120-hectare estate are in regimented rows – apart from those sprinkled around the 13th-century chapel, now an eye-catching exhibition space. This is the new breed of cider farm from the next generation of cider-makers.

“In Normandy cider is popular, but everyone makes cider around here. We need to give it a more modern image.” Olivier Vauvrecy worked in Paris

and New York before returning to the farm with a host of new ideas.

He recently ran a pop-up bar in Paris to showcase cider cocktails, and has collaborated with Barney Butterfield, a Devon-based journalist turned cider-maker, to create a blend of Norman and English cider called The Collaborators. With his brother, Olivier has also turned the barn-like buildings into a rustic chic restaurant serving a sprawling buffet brunch at the weekends, spilling out into the garden with its low-slung seating and firepit.

He opens a handful of bottles for a tasting at the bar. They make a range of aperitifs, pommeau de Normandie and digestifs, as well as cider. The two-year-old calvados works well in cocktails with champagne or tonic water, mint and apple juice, he explains, while the deeper, darker, oak-aged, five-year-old can be drizzled over vanilla ice cream.

But it's the ciders that Olivier wants to highlight: their versatility and the fact that they can be a modern alternative to wine. “The brut is the one to drink with dinner. It's slightly tannic and bitter.” The recently launched fraîcheur is more acidic. “It goes well with dessert, pont l'évêque and fish,” he smiles. Which, just a pebble's throw from Normandy's bustling harbours, gives it more than a fighting chance to make its mark.

FROM TOP LEFT:
FERME DE BILLY
CALVADOS;
A NORMANDY
ORCHARD; BOXES
OF THE PRIZED
APPLES

HOW TO DO IT

Brittany Ferries sails from Portsmouth, Poole and Plymouth to Normandy, with fares starting from £85 each way for a car plus two passengers from Portsmouth to Caen (brittanyferries.com). Doubles at Château de la Puisaye start from €88, b&b, and at Manoir du Lys from €124, b&b. For more info, visit normandy-tourism.org. Follow Lucy on Instagram and Twitter @lucygillmore