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March 25, 2007

France's Le Perche Is the Last Terroir

By COLETTE ROSSANT

When my friend Michèle Champenois, a writer for *Le Monde* in [Paris](#), invited my husband and me for the weekend in Le Perche, I was intrigued. Where's that? I wondered. I was born in Paris but had never heard of Le Perche, nor had any of my relatives in [France](#). It's two hours from Paris, I was told, in lower [Normandy](#), not far from [Chartres](#). "It has glorious manoirs and chateaus and is famous for its Percheron," Michèle wrote to me, "the noblest, absolutely most gorgeous horses in the world."

We drove down from Paris, past Chartres, through La Beauce, a flat plain with [Kansas](#)-like fields of wheat. Then suddenly, as we began to climb, the landscape changed radically; billboards dropped away, and the highway splintered into country roads that wound through brilliant yellow and deep green fields. All around were intermingling patches of woodland, heath, barley and rapeseed fields, tall hedgerows and orchards. Manoirs with fairy-tale towers hung on the side of the hills. Brooks meandered through the meadows where, sure enough, stood those majestic horses of Lancelotian stature, flashing silver in the light.

Michèle and Alain's house was in Rémalard, a village with a 12th-century church on the Huisne River. As we drove through some of Le Perche's dozen villages (and many more tiny communes), here and there were ocher stone houses with red-tiled roofs and herds of white cows on dazzling green pastures. We wound along roads lined with concave hedges so tall they formed soft green tunnels. I felt like Alice going down a rabbit hole.

By the end of our first day, we'd fallen in love with Le Perche. By the end of the second day, we'd seen a long stone farmhouse built in the 18th century next to two long stone barns. Near the house were apple, pear and plum trees, and out back were oaks, then fields of golden wheat and corn. It was for sale. By the end of the weekend, we were the owners of a farmhouse in Condeau, a village that three days prior I hadn't even known existed.

Le Perche inspires people to heroic gestures. Twenty-eight years ago, three men — Jacques Dussutour, Patrick Hoguet and Jean-Claude Lenoir — began petitioning the French government to grant the region the status of Le Parc Naturel Régional. In 1998 this status was officially granted. The government has since designated 45 such areas across the country in order to manage natural resources, develop the regions' social and economic potential, and control urban sprawl. Le Perche had long appealed to the few lucky urban escapees who had heard of it. Soon after it was made a Parc Naturel, Parisians weary of the fashionable scene in popular weekend towns like [Deauville](#) arrived and began buying and restoring abandoned farms and chateaus.

Six months later, after we were settled into our house, I decided it was time to get out and explore. So I did what any new homeowner would do. I got to know my neighbors.

Like Michèle and Alain, Béatrice Saalburg and her husband came to Le Perche as frazzled city folk on a quest for nature. They bought the 17th-century Château de Maison Maugis in 1970; a quadruple alley of horse chestnut trees leads to the house, which had been in the same family for 500 years. In her [garden](#), Béatrice grows thyme, mint, hyssop and a variety of vegetables, many of which end up in her atelier, where she teaches botanical painting. Down the road is the exquisite chapel of Saint Nicolas, which holds concerts in the summer. When I asked her husband, a graphic designer, why he came here, his answer was one that I would hear time and again: "I found a place where I could escape the turmoil of the 20th century, where the landscape was free of all modern trappings. This is not an area invaded by hordes of tourists."

To find out how Le Perche escaped the crush, I paid a visit to the Parc Naturel president Jacques Dussutour, at the Parc headquarters in Le Manoir de Courboyer, near Nocé, a tiny village with flowers everywhere and one excellent restaurant, L'Auberge des 3 J. Dussutour explained that in the early 1900s, Le Perche was a bountiful agricultural region that thrived on the raising of Percheron horses; just prior to World War I, an average of 10,000 Percherons were shipped to the [United States](#) every year. But the war and the tractor put an end to the horse business and to hundreds of small farms. By the 1970s, when the highway from Paris to Deauville was completed, bypassing Le Perche entirely, tourism had all but died, building booms took hold elsewhere, and Le Perche was quickly forgotten.

"By 1979, we had enough," Dussutour said. So he and his colleagues drafted a charter to protect their buildings and forests, promote local artisans and agriculture, and restore tourism. Nearly every commune signed it.

The charter has been so successful that agrarian ideals have once again become the driving force of Le Perche. In the heart of Mortagne-au-Perche, the region's second-largest town, new construction must use stone for the walls and tile for roofs pitched at 45 degrees, an expensive proposition that has limited modern buildings and, in turn, helped preserve the integrity of the surrounding 17th-century houses. The town's busy weekly market, too, is much the same as it was centuries ago; only now, the meat and produce are being sold by a younger generation of farmers and artisans who have returned to the land and its customs. On any Saturday, the Place Notre-Dame is swarming with locals — old folks and couples with babies alike — examining some prize-winning rabbit or pig before meeting up with friends for broiled boudin and a glass of local hard cider.

After spending the afternoon in Mortagne, walking past the building where Henry IV slept and the house of the Counts of Le Perche, I drove about 10 miles to Bellême, another of Le Perche's larger villages. It sits nobly on a high plateau, behind medieval walls and near the magnificent woods of Reno Valdieu and the Forest of Bellême. Climbing Rue d'Alençon past the church of Saint Sauveur, in the heart of old Bellême, I found Le Comptoir du Porche, a delightful boutique with pottery, jewelry and textiles, and an adjacent tea room and garden serving more than 20 types of tea.

Not far from Bellême is the farm of Le Village, where Laurent Renou raises Percherons on 128 acres. Every year in May at Percheval, the day of the horse, he and other local breeders show their prize steeds in Nogent-le-Rotrou, attracting admirers from all over the region. As Renou waxed poetic about the sweet nature of the Percheron and its contribution to France as far back as the Crusades, I sensed what deep attachment the people of Le Perche have formed to their land. The days of keeping the world on horseback or a hungry France free from want are, of course, gone for good. But somehow Le Perche has come as close to recapturing its past as the 21st century will allow.

What the region is most proud of, however, may just be a loaf of bread. The baguette du Perche has been made under the auspices of the Parc Naturel system for the past three years. Every loaf is carefully monitored and bears an official seal. Philippe Gallioz and Jean Larriviere, who both left corporate jobs, first developed the baguette at their 400-year-old mill in Bivilliers. "What we were looking for," Gallioz told me, "could only be accomplished in an area like Le Perche, which still operates on the criteria of 100 years ago." Today about 50 bakers in Le Perche make this fragrant, perfectly crusted bread. And the reigning king of la baguette is David Lambert, whose bakery, Les Fleurs du Perche, is in Bretoncelles. Lambert is a second-generation baker and one of the new group of Percherons who

combines modern marketing ideas with old traditions. Community response to his bread has been so favorable that he built a new wood-fired brick oven and began using a machine that simulates kneading by hand. His output has swelled to more than 1,200 baguettes a week.

Similar success has come to Philippe Couvreur, an ebullient 45-year-old who married Fabienne, a Percheronne woman, in 2000. That year, they founded Les Escargots du Perche on their farm in the village of Préaux-du-Perche. As I sat with them under one of their towering walnut trees, eating tender, garlicky escargots, Philippe told me the familiar story of his flight from the corporate world to an old farmhouse. He took classes to learn how to raise escargots and ultimately developed an entirely new kind of snail that grows twice as large as and more tender than [Burgundy](#) snails — and in half the time. Soon his farm became the talk of the industry, and with the help of the Parc Naturel, he began marketing pâtés and ready-to-eat escargots, which he sells to area restaurants at markets in Le Perche and from a boutique on his land. Today Philippe grows more than 400,000 escargots a year and is building a visitors' center for demonstrations and tastings. "Life is different here," Philippe said. "People care about their neighbors. My friends come on weekends to help me finish the barn. We are a close-knit group, so different from the rest of France."

Still, Philippe worries about the future of small-scale farming in France, as do many of Le Perche's independent growers. I met with Maurice Levier, a fifth-generation farmer who makes an award-winning 25-year-old Calvados and who owns about 1,000 acres of apple orchards and corn and wheat fields. In front of the fireplace at his manoir, Le Grand Brolles, he explained that the region's chief concern is that the [European Union](#) has pressured France to accept reduced farm subsidies by 2014. But Levier is optimistic: his two sons decided to return home after college and work on the farm with their father. "Most of my friends' children feel strongly about the land and Le Perche and return to live here," he said. "They bring modern ideas with them but still have a love of old traditions." Like his fellow Percherons, Levier will keep working to protect the marriage of progress and preservation. And in the meantime, he said, "we will continue to enjoy this beautiful land."

ESSENTIALS:

HOTELS: Château de Saint Paterne Beautiful chateau hotel. Outside Alençon; 011-33-2-33-27-54-71; www.chateau-saintpaterne.com; doubles from \$151. Le Château de Villeray Refurbished hilltop chateau in a lovely village. Villeray; 011-33-2-33-73-30-22; www.domainedevilleray.com; doubles from \$118. Hotel du Tribunal Twenty-one rooms and

an excellent restaurant. Mortagne-au-Perche; 011-33-2-33-25-04-77; perso.wanadoo.fr/hotel.du.tribunal.61.normandie; doubles from \$63. Villa Fol Avril Charming seven-room hotel and restaurant in a restored house. Moutiers-au-Perche; 011-33-2-33-83-22-67; www.villafolavril.fr; doubles from \$85.

RESTAURANTS: L'Auberge des 3 J Elegant restaurant in one of the prettiest villages in Le Perche. Nocé; 011-33-2-33-73-41-03; prix fixe menus from \$33. La Croix d'Or Good local dishes and attractive décor in a former inn. Le Pin-la-Garenne; 011-33-2-33-83-80-33; prix fixe from \$22. Le Trou Normand Gourmet restaurant run by a young chef and his wife. Verrières; 011-33-2-33-73-82-31; entrees \$20 to \$25.

SHOPS: The markets of Le Perche are one of its great pleasures; among the best are those in Bellême (Thursday mornings), Mortagne-au-Perche (Saturday mornings), Nogent-le-Rotrou (Saturday mornings) and Rémalard (Monday mornings). Les Flaveurs du Perche David Lambert's baguettes du Perche. 1 Rue Garreau, Bretoncelles; 011-33-2-37-37-22-77. Charles Bataille Artisanal chocolates. 14 Boulevard Bansard des Bois, Bellême; 011-33-2-33-73-41-02. Le Comptoir du Porche Adorable housewares shop and tea salon. 1 Rue du Château, Bellême; 011-33-2-33-73-15-00. La Grande Vianderie Charcuterie and Calvados. Off Route D955, Berd'huis; 011-33-2-33-83-06-88. La Maison Fassier Antiques and hand-woven textiles. 55 Rue de l'Eglise, Rémalard; 011-33-2-33-73-56-21.

SIGHTS: One of the region's chief attractions is its old manoirs, or fortified estates. Those open to the public include Le Manoir de Courboyer in Nocé (for visits, call 011-33-2-33-25-70-10); Le Manoir de la Fresnaye in Saint-Germain-de-la-Coudre (011-33-2-33-83-57-64); Le Grand Brolles in Condeau, where Maurice Levier makes Calvados (011-33-2-33-73-34-22); and Le Château de la Pellonnière, which hosts public concerts in summer and fall, in Le Pin-la-Garenne (www.lepinlagarenne.com). And don't miss the 37-acre Arboretum in Rémalard (011-33-2-33-73-71-94); L'Écomusée du Perche in Sainte-Gauburge (011-33-2-33-73-48-06); and Les Escargots du Perche, Philippe Couvreur's farm in Préaux-du-Perche (011-33-2-33-25-91-79).