

# The Loire Valley, France: California's Kissing Cousin

By RUTH & RICH CARLSON

Imaginative winemakers experimenting with organic methods, garden displays using only recycled materials, creative vegetarian cuisine almost too beautiful to eat, and bike paths crisscrossing between countryside and villages lined with coffee houses. It sounds like a new-age California town, but it's France's Loire Valley, where young people are remaking ancient traditions.

Just an hour by the TGV (speed) train from Paris, the Loire Valley is often skipped by tourists who are more familiar with the wine regions of Bordeaux, Burgundy, and Champagne. Their ignorance is your bliss. The Loire Valley is not at all crowded, is less expensive, and is welcoming to international visitors. For everything you need to plan a personalized visit, check out [www.visaloire.com](http://www.visaloire.com).

Here's a guide to some of the trendy spots:

**Bonjour!** Wave "hello" to the local farmers as you bicycle by asparagus fields on a new bike route that runs through the Loire Valley, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Clearly marked signs guide bikers along paths winding along the Loire River and through villages with cobblestone streets and buildings constructed with the local "tuffeau" gray stone.

Unlike the ambitious bicyclists you would see whizzing by your car in California, however, the French encourage leisurely rides with a stop for a three-hour lunch at restaurants owned by generations of families. Wine is recommended but only the white varietals, which are considered good for helping to build strong thighs. That's a Tour de France a gourmand can appreciate!

**Bon Appétit!** The food in the Loire Valley is some of the best in France—quite a feat in a country that treats meals like religious ceremonies. The restaurants offer the best of fowl from the forests and fish from the Loire River. At the tiny bistro La Cuisine de Georges, managed singlehandedly by Jacquelin Pujole, you're sure to



**BONJOUR!** A local farmer tends the fields in the beautiful Loire Valley. RICH CARLSON

make friends since seating is primarily limited to one big wooden communal table.

Pujole quit his job as a marketing director to follow his passion, cooking, which he learned at his mother's knee. Get there early (that's around 7:30 p.m. in France) because he only serves dinner until the food runs out. Specials are displayed on a large chalkboard, but he always serves the popular chocolate gâteau (cake) for dessert and the thinly cut prosciutto appetizer. He doesn't have a Web site, an e-mail address, or even regular hours. As he puts it, "If a pretty woman knocks on my door, I will open up early."

A favorite stop for bicyclists, the Auberge du Centre Hotel and Restaurant is run by the genial Gilles Martinet, whose daughter is one of the waitresses. Order the duck topped with gingerbread cookie crumble paired with local sauvignon blanc wines from Delaillé Cheverny.

Martinet, who grew up in the hotel, says he remembers from his childhood that it was important to have pigs and potatoes for food, but the most important consideration was making wine to drink with friends. His customers have always requested local wines, but he said that in the past it was difficult to find a source with consistent quality. Now he relies upon his neighbor Thierry Delaillé, who caused quite a controversy when he made bottles with screw tops—a heresy among traditional French winemakers.

**Caverne** Many tourists associate the Loire Valley with castles and rightfully so, but for every chateau there were hundreds of cave dwellers who built their homes out of the soft limestone. The peasants supplied those rocks to the castles, transporting them along the Loire River.

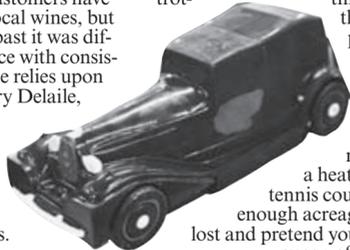
Tour the troglodytic valley to see subterranean caves that date back to the Middle Ages. Donkeys and pigs also served as primitive heaters, sleeping in rooms next to families to keep them warm! These farms were the original



**TRADITIONAL GARDEN ARTISTRY:** The beautiful gardens of Chateau Villandry are open to the public 365 days of the year. RICH CARLSON

form of sustainability, where nothing was wasted. Even cave rooftops were vegetable gardens.

**Chambre** It's fascinating to visit the caves but when it comes time to rest your head, live like royalty for a night and stay at the Chateau des Grotteaux. When you enter, you'll hear "the sound of the Loire," tiny pebbles crunching underneath car tires and footsteps, and it's easy to imagine horses pulling carriages trotting over these same paths. The estate has a new underground cave restaurant, a heated pool, tennis courts, and enough acreage to get lost and pretend you're king or queen of the castle.



**CHOCOLATE CAR:** This miniature chocolate car was made in the Max Vauche Chocolate factory, where the making of chocolate is like the making of a fine wine. RICH CARLSON

cocoa with a conscience. Along with five other French chocolatiers, he has reached a fair trade agreement with São Tomé, nicknamed Chocolate Island.

Known for its high-quality chocolate, the island nation produced 36,000 tons a year in the previous century, but today the plants there only yield about 4,000

tons. The French chocolate makers plant new cocoa trees, which have a life span of about 30 years, and ensure the employees have quality working conditions.

At the Max Vauche showroom, you learn how chocolate is like wine, with the soil and aging process affecting the taste of the final product. At the tour's end, your patience is rewarded with a sampling of the goods, including candy from Cuba and, naturally, Chocolate Island, which has a distinct banana undertone. Since you're helping the islanders improve their quality of life, enjoy your chocolate guilt-free.

**Jardins** The Loire Valley has been called the Garden of France and, with the scent of roses and lavender perfuming the air, it's easy to understand why. Villandry has what many consider the finest example of a traditional French garden, ironically created by an American and Spanish couple in the early 20th century.

Their great-grandson, Henri Carvallo, has opened the chateau and gardens to the public every day of the year—even Christmas Day!—because he says, "People often travel a long way to visit and I don't want to disappoint anyone."

Green thumbs will appreciate Le Grand Velum International Garden Festival of Chaumont-sur-Loire. Held for six months every spring through fall, 30 new gardens are chosen annually from a global competition.

Each year, chefs also compete to serve innovative fare. Last



**SUMPTUOUS SILK:** A worker weaves the silk threads into bolts of material for drapes at the Le Manach Silk factory, the oldest operating silk factory in France. RICH CARLSON

year's winner prepared delights such as black squid risotto topped with fresh asparagus, artichokes, and Parmesan cheese.

**Soie** The sunlight filters through pane windows to protect the delicate silk fabric, and it takes a moment for your eyes to adjust to see the brilliant display of red, gold, and blue threads spread like spider webs on antique weaving machines.

Le Manach is the oldest working silk factory in France and none other than fashion designers John Paul Gaultier, the late Yves St. Laurent, and the Getty Museum in Los Angeles have commissioned tapestries from this family-run factory. The man who won the award for best weaver in all of France works here. To prove his dedication, one of his legs is shorter than the other from pedaling the historic machines.

Olivier Biosse Duplan, the handsome heir, says the historic building "belongs to the people" but he still operates the factory, which owns 4,000 designs and also carries out custom orders. Often, wealthy customers bring in small pieces of fabric from family heirlooms and the Le Manach masters are able to reproduce them.

**Vin** "Making wine is magic," says Valerye Mordelet, who owns Les Loges de la Folie with her partner Jean-Daniel Kloeckle. The name of the winery, which she explains translates to "It's cool to be crazy," reflects the couple's modern take on an ancient French tradition. They use organic grapes and don't add sugar to raise the alcohol level. "We grow our wine on the vine not



**'IT'S COOL TO BE CRAZY':** The owner of the Les Loges Winery pours the day's samples for visitors. RICH CARLSON

in the cellar, so we must have great grapes," says Mordelet.

In the last decade, young people have started a revolution, creating new wineries rather than limiting the field to those who inherit estates. The change is happening primarily in the Loire Valley where land is cheaper than in the more established areas like Bordeaux. The young vintners are shaking things up with some decidedly California ideas like imaginative labels and casual wine tastings.

**Au Revoir!** Air France, which flies direct from the San Francisco airport (SFO), has special business rate packages that will ensure your stay your trip refreshed. With their French savoir-faire, they put "airline food" jokes to shame.

If you're the worrying type (or traveling with one) who likes to arrive at the airport hours ahead of departure, there is good news. You can stay overnight at the Sheraton hotel located inside Terminal Two of the Charles de Gaulle Airport in Paris. It's a good thing, too, since the ticketing and security lines can take a good hour and a half to get through—leaving precious little time for duty-free shopping. With names like Hermes and Chanel for you to choose from, your loved ones will not be complaining about last-minute "airport gifts."

Despite a front-row seat to the planes landing and taking off, the Sheraton is specially constructed so that you won't hear the jet engines' roar in your room. Spring for the Club Floor and you won't even have to go out for dinner; the room serves heavy appetizers and drinks till 11 p.m. and an American-style, sit-down breakfast.

**Voilà!** As you can see, the region is adapting the best of California creativity while still holding on to the things that make France unlike any other place on earth. Best of all, at a time when the dollar is as weak as a wilted piece of France's famous white asparagus, it's still got some snap in the Loire Valley.

Ruth and Rich Carlson are an award winning travel writing team with over 40 years of experience in print and broadcast media outlets. Together they write and photograph articles on destinations around the globe and produce a television program broadcast on google TV and cable outlets seen in a million homes in California.



**DELICATE APPETIZER:** Bistro owner Georges Courteline slicing the evening's prosciutto. RICH CARLSON

The Epoch Times  
**Geography Guru™**  
 "Growing your geography knowledge"  
 Quiz #209

**WATERFRONT TOWNS:** Many prominent U.S. cities between the Appalachians and the Rockies began as forts or settlements on the banks of major rivers or the shores of large lakes. Match the body of water on the left with the multiple cities on the right that sit on its edge.

Lake Erie	Buffalo
Lake Michigan	Chicago
Missouri River	Cincinnati
Ohio River	Cleveland
	Kansas City
	Louisville
	Milwaukee
	Omaha
	Pittsburgh

Read The Epoch Times next week for the answer!

Answer for Quiz #208

**FRAGMENTS OF OLD EUROPE:** Ethnic groups and the modern nation that best reflects where each collection is rooted:  
 Bavarians, Frisians, and Saxons: GERMANY  
 Bretons, Gascons, and Provençals: FRANCE  
 Flemings, Franks, and Walloons: BELGIUM

Have an adventure to share? Write us at: [submissions@epochtimes.com](mailto:submissions@epochtimes.com), Attn: Travel Page

## Sudoku

Fill in the boxes using numbers between 1 and 9 so that each column, each row, and each 3x3 square contain all nine numbers only once.

			9	3		6		
1		2		4	8			
	9		8				5	
9	1					6		3
				9				
3		4					2	7
	8				7		1	
		1	2			5		8
	2		4		8			

Exclusive Epoch Times puzzle by Sudoku Works.  
 Sudoku puzzles and software at: [www.SudokuWorks.com](http://www.SudokuWorks.com).

9	6	7	8	1	5	2	3	4
8	5	6	9	2	1	7	4	3
7	1	2	7	6	5	8	9	4
4	2	6	5	8	1	7	9	3
5	7	1	9	6	4	8	2	7
6	8	9	2	7	2	5	1	6
2	9	3	1	2	8	9	6	7
6	7	8	7	5	9	2	3	1
1	9	7	6	2	6	4	5	8

This week's solution