

# Travel

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'We don't want to be Paris or London. We just want to be Guimarães'  
Portugal's small but proud city of culture

## There's a little region I know ...

Franche-Comté is France's best-kept foodie secret. Chef **Raymond Blanc**, who grew up there, reveals where to eat

**E**very Frenchman has a fierce loyalty to the area in which he grew up. In Bordeaux you will hear that it is the best region of France, with the finest cheese, wines and the greatest chefs. Meanwhile, the inhabitants of Burgundy, Provence and the Loire will say, "Not so. We have the best."

They're all talking nonsense. There is no doubt that the best part of France is Franche-Comté. It is the region near the Swiss border, sandwiched between two great food and wine regions of France — Burgundy below, and the rugged Jura mountains above. Oh, and it's the region where I was raised.

It was in the glorious summer of 1972 that I left both my little village of Saône, near Besançon, and headed for Britain. My mother, the woman who inspired me to cook, pressed a St Christopher into my hand and, with tears in her eyes, said: "This will keep you safe."

I kissed Maman Blanc a thousand times, pinned the silver emblem to the dashboard of my Renault Gordini and drove through France to the ferry port in Calais. Over the past 40 years I have returned many times, to see Maman Blanc, of course, but I also get cravings for the wonderful food of Franche-Comté, which is rich and creamy, hearty and comforting.

So when the BBC asked me to tour five regions of France, including Franche-Comté I said: "Where do I sign?" In *The Very Hungry Frenchman* (which begins on BBC Two on February 2) I was, for the first time, cooking in professional kitchens in France; it was a real challenge. And I got to cook some of the best produce ever and savour the special dishes of each region. There was bouillabaisse in Provence, kirsch baba in Alsace, and boeuf bourguignon, of course, in Burgundy. In Lyon I took over a *bouchon*, a traditional Lyonnais restaurant, and served the best *quenelles de brochet soufflées* — quenelles of pike in crayfish sauce.

But I am always an extremely happy gourmet when I'm back in Franche-Comté. And if you love food then you will be equally content in this part of France.

I'll tell you about the food, but first you'll want a little description of the area. Geographically, it is really two regions (although there are four *départements* or counties: Haute-Saône, Jura, Doubs and Territoire de Belfort). The high valley of the Saône is wide, gently rolling country with a certain rustic simplicity, while the Jura Mountains are more rugged, with



Michelin-starred chef Raymond Blanc returns to the French region of Franche-Comté, where he grew up, as part of a TV series starting in February on BBC Two

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► dense forests, sheer cliffs, deep gorges and torrents of water.

The pretty towns include Arbois, where Louis Pasteur once lived, and Château Chalon, perched on a cliff overlooking the vineyards. Métabief and Les Rousses are small ski resorts with summer activities, and there are plenty of river cruising tour operators along the Saône. The hills are honeycombed with caves. The streams and lakes provide world-class fishing.

I discovered my passion for food while working as a waiter in Besançon, the region's capital (and birthplace of Victor Hugo). It is one of the most beautiful cities in France with amazing architecture and good museums, especially the Musée des Beaux-Arts, known as Le Petit Louvre, but hardly anyone knows it. Sadly, most British tourists who are searching for sun speed towards the South of France, unknowingly bypassing my magnificent Roman city and its treasures.

It's worth spending time in its pedestrianised centre, enjoying an espresso and patisseries — you must try *pets de nonne* (translated as nun's farts), which are little choux pastry fritters. Besançon might not have many Michelin-starred restaurants but its food is delicious, rustic and generous, just like its people.

Outside the towns, Franche-Comté is known as "the garden of France". It is a vibrant tapestry of immense forests, lakes and mountains from which torrents and rivers gush. Our gastronomy draws its character from these mountains: there are plenty of fish and the forests hide game and wild mushrooms, particularly morels.

As a child, I would roam and forage for wild asparagus, escargots, frogs, mushrooms, wild flowers and berries, and sell what I gathered at the roadside, at markets, or to restaurateurs. The region has magnificent milk, butter, cheese and cream, all of it thanks to the Montbéliarde cows, which graze on the high plateaus of Doubs and Jura, where the grasses contain up to 20 varieties of flowers and herbs.

The pig is also worshipped. In fact, when I was growing up it was honoured with countless feast days throughout the year. It is devoured from nose to tail: black puddings, patés and charcuterie are on restaurant menus.

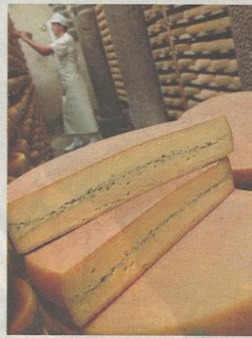
You will also find Morteau (Morteau is a village in the Jura), the world's greatest smoked sausage. Over pine wood and juniper, it is smoked for a few days in enormous *tuyés* — special chimneys.



Cheese-lovers will be in ecstasy. This is one of the great cheese districts of the world — it produces morbier, edel de claron and cancoillotte, and not surprisingly fondues are popular. My favourite cheese is Comté, well-aged and nutty, which has been made in this region since the 13th century. If you go to Fort St Antoine, an ancient fort converted into a Comté cathedral, you will see more than 100,000 wheels of the cheese maturing. But when you try it, make sure you do so with the local *vin jaune*, which is aged in oak, a veil of yeast on its surface, and has a sherry flavour. It is a wine which also goes beautifully with *poulet aux morilles*, a dish which unites the local chickens with perfumed morels.

Game is popular in this part of France, and in the markets you'll find pigeon, quail, partridge and pheasant. Venison is also good, and restaurants serve *sanglier* (mature wild boar), while baby boar, or *marcassin*, is a delicacy.

Meals end perfectly, I always find, with a glass of Franche-Comté *eau-de-vie*. There are plenty of these *digestifs*, including one made from distilled, slightly tart cherries and their stones, and another of walnuts. Ooh la la. My mother made the former, while my grandmother made the latter. We didn't have much money but there were always plenty of smiles chez Blanc.



### Raymond's recommendations

#### Le Vin et L'Assiette, Besançon

This small restaurant, run by my friend Bernard Leroy and his wife, has a 16th-century dining room with 10 tables. Downstairs is a vaulted cellar filled with a huge collection of prized wines from the Jura, Burgundy and beyond. Should you wish, Bernard will match your food with wines by the glass. There is plenty of game

on the menu, and offal during the winter. In the summer months there are frogs, morels, and wild asparagus. You'll eat well for little money, and you will make a new friend in Bernard.

Details 97 Rue du Battant; mains €12-17 (00333818148180).

#### Le St Pierre, Besançon

In the same street as Le Vin et L'Assiette, this tiny restaurant offers less traditional *faïte*. There is fish, both from the sea and freshwater, as well as more expensive dishes, such as oysters and *foie gras*.

Details 104, Rue du Battant; three-course lunch or dinner with wine and coffee €38 (0033381812099).

#### Le Poker d'As, Besançon

One of the oldest restaurants in town, this friendly place holds fond memories; it is where I had my first *haute-gastronomie* experience. I was 15 and the smells coming out of this place were divine. The sommelier recommended a half-bottle of Côte-Rôtie, and I ate veal kidneys, glistening in their rich, red-wine sauce. I spent all of my hard-earned money on a single meal but left feeling richer than when I had arrived. Poker d'As still serves tasty regional dishes, and is close to a little hotel, the Florel, full of character and situated in the old town.





**Details** 14 Rue Clos Saint Amour; menus from €21.50 (00 33 381 81 42 49, restaurant-lepokerdas.fr)

#### Le Manège, Besançon

With its magnificent terrace, and close to La Porte Rivotte (in the loveliest part of the city), this restaurant serves amazing chicken with morels, trout meunière, pork cheeks and gâteau à la crème. **Details** 2 Faubourg Rivotte; lunch and dinner menus €29-€39 (00 33 381 48 01 48, restaurant-le-manège.eu).

#### L'Auberge du Château de Vaite, Champlive

One of my favourites, this is in the heart of a little village about 20km from Besançon. Last year, the entire Blanc clan — 60 of us — celebrated my parents' birthdays in style. Maman was 89 and Papa was 90; both were born exactly a year to the day apart. It is a charming hostel with nine rooms: the gardens are magnificent, while the terrace borders a little stream crossed by a wooden bridge, which children will love. The food is locally sourced: the morel is used in many dishes, with trout, pike and zander that have come from the stream. The pork is from a nearby farm and the beef comes from the plateaus. Be sure to have the Franc-Comtoise salad, crudités,

snails with herbs and garlic, frogs' legs and game in the winter. Afterwards, visit the nearby Musée des Maisons Comtoises. **Details** 17 Grande-Rue; menus €12-€35, half-board with rooms from €63 (00 33 381 55 20 66, auberge-chateau-vaite.com/).

#### La Cheminée, near Saône

This country-style restaurant (which is a couple of kilometers from Saône, the village where I grew up) is high up in the village of Montfaucon, overlooking Besançon and the Doubs valley. The food might be a little more expensive than other restaurants in the region, but it is seriously good and the hospitality is second to none. The last time I visited I had superb hare with a compôte of onion, and a fabulous tart of mirabelle plums. After lunch, take a brief stroll to the 18th-century Fort de Montfaucon. **Details** 3 Rue de la Vue des Alpes; à la carte with wine, about €80 per person.

#### Château de Germigney, Port-Lesney

A ten-minute drive from Arbois, you will find this 17th-century château, which was restored in 1997 by the brilliant host Arnauld Baert and his charming Irish wife, Vanessa. It's an elegant hotel set in wonderful grounds and it offers some of the best food in Franche-Comté. The head



chef Pierre Basso-Moro offers creative dishes inspired by the local produce. I have tasted his cooking many times and it is simply delicious. Have the Bresse chicken, whichever way Pierre wants to serve it. **Details** Rue Edgar Faure; menus €41 for lunch, €69 for dinner, hotel rooms from €150 without breakfast (00 33 384 73 85 85, chateaudegermigney.com/en).

#### Bistrot de Port Lesney, Port Lesney

Perching beside the river, this bistrot, which is next to the Château de Germigney and is under the same ownership, has picture-postcard charm. It is the place that I took over in *The Very Hungry Frenchman*, and where I cooked a glorious feast for my friends, my first boss, headmistress and parents. The "route du vin" takes you to Arbois, one of my favourite towns, with bridges arching over fast rivers, many museums (Musée Pasteur is a must) and a strong food and wine culture. It has many cellars, terraces, restaurants, patisseries and a wonderful chocolatier. Around Arbois you have some of the most beautiful villages, such as Montigny and Château-Chalon. **Details** Place du 8 Mai 1945; menus from €27 (00 33 384 73 85 85, bistrotdeportlesney.com/uk)

#### La Cuisance, Arbois

With its beautiful riverside setting, this restaurant serves inexpensive home-cooking to a high standard under François and André Aranda. There is a children's menu and one for vegetarians. **Details** 62 Place Faramand, menus from €17 (00 33 38 43 74 074, lacuisance.fr).

#### Jean-Paul Jeunet, Arbois

This two Michelin-starred restaurant promises a treasured experience. The dining room is rustic yet elegant. Jean-Paul's food is exceptional and intimately linked with our vast forests and rivers. His specialities are foie gras poached in wine, snails in liquorice and a warm chocolate mousse flavoured with pine bark. You can also stay in the hotel. **Details** 9 Rue de l'Hotel de Ville; rooms from €120 a night without breakfast (00 33 384 66 24 20, jeanpauljeunet.com).

#### Château du Mont Joly, Sampans

This is an 18th-century Michelin-starred restaurant in impressive grounds. Romuald, the chef, serves macaroni stuffed with morels, veal sweetbreads and chocolate and rice soufflé. Catherine is the sommelier. It's pricey, but worth it. **Details** 6 Rue du Mont Joly; €156 for two with wine and coffee; rooms €50-€150 per person; dinner €75 (00 33 03 84 82 43 43, chateaumontjoly.com).

#### L'Anversis, La Combe du Lac, Lamoura

At their bistrot in the mountains, Sylvie and

Bernard Robbe serve great charcuterie and fondues. **Details** 239 Chemin de l'Anversis; three-course lunch from €20, dinner from €25 (00 33 384 41 20 91, lanversis.com).

#### Restaurant Le Lac, Lac de Saint-Point, Malbuisson

Close to Pontarlier, Lac de Saint-Point is the third biggest lake in France. The restaurant, which is decorated in Louis XVI style, serves simple, fresh food. You can also stay in the hotel here. **Details** Grande rue, BP 1; menus €18-€49; rooms from €62 (00 33 381 69 34 80, hotel-le-lac.fr).

#### L'Epicurien, Courlaoux

You get great local cuisine here, using local produce. The promising chef produces menus that are almost gourmet. **Details** 1 Chemin Perroux; menus €15-€52 (00 33 384 24 63 91, restaurant-lepicurien.fr)

#### Le Tuyé du Papy Gaby, Gilley

This is a traditional tuyé — the name given to a special chimney where meats are smoked above pine and juniper. Although you can't eat here, it's worth going to stock up on the home-smoked meats — be sure to buy a Morteau sausage. **Details** 2 rue les Coteys (00 33 381 43 33 03, tuye-papygaby.com).

#### Raymond Blanc is chef patron of Le Manoir aux Quat' Saisons in Oxfordshire (manoir.com)

### Need to know

#### Getting there

Rail Europe (0844 8484070, ralleurope.co.uk) has London to Besançon returns from £89pp. The journey from Paris takes 2h4m.

#### Getting around

Rhino (rhinocarhire.com) has car hire from £24 a day.

#### Package trip

French Connections (01580 819303, frenchconnections.co.uk) offers a two-night stay at La Table de Gustave, a hotel in Ornans which specialises in classic regional cuisine, with return rail tickets from St Pancras from £315pp. Ornans was home to the painter Gustave Courbet and there is a Courbet museum.

#### Where to stay

Hôtel Charles Quint (hotel-charlesquint.com) is a new hotel in the historic centre of Besançon with traditional rooms from €89. Also in Besançon's centre, try L'Hotel de Paris (besanconhoteldeparis.com), which has smart doubles in a building dating from the 18th century from €85.

#### Further information

Franche-Comté Tourist Office (franche-comte.org).

Clockwise from far left: Château de Germigney; Bistrot de Port Lesney; local cheeses and sausages from Morteau in the Jura; and specialty moribier cheese

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