



NEWS FROM LA VIEILLE DISTILLERIE SPRING 2010



Hello and Welcome to the March 2010 issue of La Vieille Distillerie Newsletter.

The Poitou-Charentes is a deeply rural part of France where it seems as if time has stood still. The rolling countryside is rich in Romanesque architecture with hundreds of churches dating from the 11th century, imposing chateaux, ancient abbeys and impressive ruins. With a warm sunny climate that stretches into late October, this region is ideal to discover by car. The countryside covers gently rolling hills with fields of sunflowers, vines and meandering rivers. It is also a great region for discovering the countryside on a walking or cycling holiday.



chateau la Rochefaucauld



chateau de Verteuil



chateau Hautefort



La Roche Courbon



chateau de la Riviere



France is world renowned for its magnificent chateaux and castles. In this issue we have pictured above five of the most spectacular chateaux within the Poitou-Charentes and in the adjoining regions. The south Charente is close to the Dordogne border where there are more than a thousand chateaux, many of which are closed to the public but the most important chateaux can be visited. Many bear witness to the Hundred Years War between the French and the English and are among the most fascinating chateaux to be found in France. The french word 'chateau' is frequently thought of as a castle but it may mean a country house, a medieval defence structure, a royal residence or a wine producer's estate.



The first glimpse of this castle set high on a hill is impressive. Looking out over forests, rolling landscape we have often wondered who, or why, would build what has been described as "a bizarre homage to Versailles" out in the wilds of the French countryside. This place, with its 2,200m-long façade, neoclassical arches and Doric columns in the middle of nowhere has always intrigued us. But on closer inspection it becomes obvious that this extraordinary castle set high on a hill is nothing more than a pretentiously imposing unfinished facade.

Talking with the locals, recently we discovered the unusual story. The chateau, known as the Charentais Versailles, was the meglomaniacal dream of a pair of ambitious brothers who, in 1925, inherited a fortune after their parents died in a motor car accident. Raymond, the elder brother, who was never able to accept that he was the offspring of a pig farmer, decided it was time to build a palace of his own.. We're going to create our own little Versailles here in the countryside and you're going to design it, he told his younger brother Alphonse.

But the brothers never finished their dream. In 1983 Alphonse, the younger brother, died after a fall. While making his way to the toilet along a corridor that had not been wired for electricity, he fell down a half-built staircase onto the statue of a Greek nude and fractured his skull. . His brother, Raymond, had his remains interred in the wall of the castle. A marble placque reads "Here lies my brother Alphonse". When Raymond died a few years later, his remains were sealed up in the pillar opposite.

Not surprisingly the castle has been difficult to sell! However, it is now owned by a Parisian antique dealer.



It's impossible to visit Paris without seeing the Eiffel tower. You can see its top from all over Paris. The tower, 984 feet high (300 metres) was designed by French structural engineer and specialist of metallic structures Alexandre Gustave Eiffel built during 1887-1889 for the 1889 Universal Exhibition in Paris. The Eiffel Tower was the focal point of the exhibition. It had a huge impact on France and drew millions of people to Paris. Nearly two million people visited the Eiffel Tower in 1889.

The tower quickly became a tourist attraction and brought large amounts of money into France's economy. After originally being thought of as an eyesore (it was actually designed to be torn down easily after the end of the Exhibition), the tower quickly became a national symbol of France. The Statue of Liberty, designed by Eiffel, was a gift from France to the United States. The statue showed the friendship and respect that was shared between France and the United States. It became a national symbol of freedom in the United States giving citizens a sense of pride as well as becoming a great tourist attraction which brought many people to New York, boosting the economy. Several Americans living in France were pleased by the gift to their country and in turn, built a ¼ scale bronze model which stands on the downstream end of the Ile de Cygnes, a small island in the Seine in Paris.





The Charente River described by Francois 1st as "one of the most most beautiful rivers in France" is a perfect leisure area for boat trip lovers.

This year a new boat, La Balandra, complete with restaurant will be sailing each day through and around the city of Angouleme. A commentary in French will describe the historic features of

the city. The boat has been transferred from the Loire river to a new berth at Port l'Houmeau, Angouleme.

Further down the river at St Simon a pleasant way to spend a hot summer's day is to take a river excursions on a traditional gabare. These boats are reconstructions of the old boats which transported salt, cognac, paper and stone from the region to England and Holland from the 16th to the early 19th century. The guide will share his knowledge of local history and wildlife around the river.



The Charente is also a Fisherman's paradise; it is easy to arrange a fishing permit and the tourist offices produce helpful guides.



A visit to the local markets is a must. One of the pleasures of visiting France is to just wander, browse and enjoy what is part of the France's historic heritage. There is a market in nearly every French town and village selling fruit, vegetables, farm-produced poultry and cheese, organic meat and home-made bread. Some of the stall-holders are local market gardeners selling their own produce. There are also specialised traders selling a rich range of produce from the region. In some of the larger markets there are traders offering specialities from other countries such as Italy, Spain and Vietnam.



Though the French like to call the Brits “Biftecks” they are great meat eaters. In a French Supermarket or Butchers shop you will find a notice giving the origin and date of slaughter for the meat on sale, restaurants will also declare the origin of meat. Charolais is now an Appellation Controlee, meaning that only beef from this area can be described as Charolais.



Pineau de Charentes, a great way to start the evening !



According to legend, during the harvest of 1589, a winemaker accidentally added grape must into a barrel that he believed was empty but in fact contained eau de vie. The mixture was duly returned to the cellars for fermentation. A few years later, the barrel was retrieved and was found to contain the drink that is now associated with the region of Charente.

The Bougainvillea is named after the French Admiral Antoine de Bougainville who commanded a circumnavigation of the world in 1768. It was found in Brazil by Philibert Commercon, botanist on the voyage.





Some places to go and events to see this season include:

Every weekend during the summer there are local festivals and brocantes.

Cognac Blues Festival July 27 - 1 August, 6 days and 6 nights of live open air street music, soul music and daytime concerts.

Bastille Day, the 14 July, and is a National holiday to commemorate the end of the Monarchy in France. The day is celebrated with a myriad of activities from dancing, live music, street parties and a host of activities from food markets to firework displays.

Circuit des Remparts - Classic Car Race, Angouleme 17th, 18, 19, September 2010

Concours d'Elegance: Vintage cars and vintage costumes.

Concours d'Etat: historic cars maintained and restored in style.

Race day

Classic car races within the town , the world's only bugatti race.

Each year on the third weekend in September, this classic car race takes place in the town of Angouleme on a street circuit unchanged in layout since it first hosted this race in 1939. The high spot of the program is a race devoted to Grand Prix Bugattis. 20 or more Bugattis race around the narrow streets of the old walled town.

Explore the famous Grande Champagne vineyards, the premier cru of cognac. Visits to wineries and cognac distilleries and meet the owners of individual distilleries.

Visit the village and vineyards of St-Emilion, world famous for its wine. A medieval town with steep cobbled streets and picturesque squares.

In the 8th century a hermit from Brittany, Emilion, made his home in a cave that contained a natural spring. Over many centuries this cave was hollowed out from a single rock and enlarged. It is now the largest monolithic church in France.

Happy Easter to everyone.

Robert and Veronica