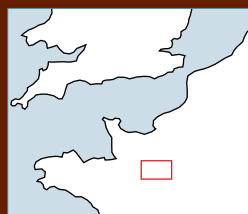




Black Pudding Fair in Mortagne-au-Perche

The Gourmet Pudding Club



In Normandy's remote green Perche, **Nick Rider** finds manorial splendours, space to expand and the world capital of black pudding

Ruddy-black sausage slices piled on plate after plate fill long trestle tables in a sports hall on a Saturday in mid-March. Around them are *jurés* of judges – stout men with beards, professional chefs, local ladies – who for several hours will debate and dissect each sample in fabulous detail. Every mouthful needs to be fully savoured, for this is the annual *Foire au Boudin* or Black-Pudding Fair in Mortagne-au-Perche, established as the world championships for makers of blood sausage of every kind. There are more than 500 entries from France and abroad, and the range on view is extraordinary, including

gateaux-like creations completely remote from any conventional sausage.

Long unfairly scorned, black pudding has of course recently won unheard-of fashionable status – as a *Masterchef* staple – and this has brought all-new international attention to this small-town fair. Mortagne, though, wears



its foodie celebrity very lightly. The competition has been organised for 50 years by the *Confrérie des Chevaliers du Goute-Boudin* (Brotherhood of Knights of Pudding-Tasting), devoted connoisseurs who dress up in fancy regalia – velvet robes, medals, hats like medieval barons – with a great sense of fun. “The food thing here is hilarious”, says John-Paul Habermann of Kent-based Franconian Sausages, a first-time entrant and silver medal winner at the 2014 *Foire*. “They’re obsessed with food, and very friendly, everybody shakes your hand, they’re really happy you made the effort to come here and participate”.

Outside the hall, stalls from Mortagne’s magnificent *charcuteries* offer succulent puddings mixed with all kinds of flavours – walnuts, apple, chestnuts, figs. And, while France’s finest *boudin noir*, black pudding, is the Perche region’s most celebrated product

“Montagne is an ancient little town of sandstone towers at the heart of the Perche”

– hence the *Foire* – it’s not the only one. Bypassed by big agriculture, the Perche also produces other fine foods including some of Normandy’s finest, subtlest ciders, calvados and its own deliciously crunchy bread, made only with local flour, the *Baguette du Perche*.

Mortagne is an ancient little town of sandstone towers at the heart of the Perche, a pocket of lush, rolling green hills in the far south of Normandy, about 1½ hours south of Caen ferry port. It has been one of Normandy’s least-known corners, unnoticed even by the rest of France, and outsiders who come upon it tend to regard it as a personal discovery, treasuring its feel of rural France as everyone →

Where to stay?

Cabanes de la Grande Noë, 61290 Moulicent, tel +33 (0)6 58 54 21 24, www.lagrandenoe.com. Six treetop cabins, and three charming rooms in the adjacent château.

Château de la Mouchère, 61130 St-Cyr-la-Rosière, tel +33 (0)2 33 83 02 99, www.lamouchere.com. Lovely rooms full of character, personal hospitality and large grounds.

Flamingo Rooms, 10 rue Général de Gaulle, 61290 Longny-au-Perche, tel +33 (0)6 64 16 29 90, www.flamingo-rooms.fr. Very welcoming B&B with a wonderfully eclectic art collection and snug garden.

Hôtel du Tribunal, 4 place du Palais, 61400 Mortagne-au-Perche, tel +33 (0)2 33 25 04 77, www.hotel-tribunal.fr. Mortagne’s classic hotel has been attractively modernised and has a fine restaurant.

La Maison d’Hector, 61400 St-Mard-de-Réno, tel +33 (0)2 33 73 58 59, www.lamaisondhector.com. A stunning flower-filled garden, and B&B rooms decorated with humour and a touch of decadence.

Manoir de Lormarin, 61340 Nocé, tel +33 (0)2 33 25 41 89, www.manoirdelormarin.fr. Stay in one of the grandest Perche manoirs.

Villa Fol Avril, 61110 Moutiers-au-Perche, tel +33 (0)2 33 83 22 67, www.villafolavril.fr. Delightful boutique hotel with a pretty garden with pool and a great restaurant, in a hill village with exquisite 12th-century church.



1 Old City Gate, Mortagne-Au-Perche
2 The Voie Verte long-distance foot and cycle path
3 La Perrière lace museum





imagines it to be. Roads twist and turn between hedgerows, orchards and woodland (the name Perche stems from an old term for 'high forest'), and the sense of calm is unbreakable. Roger and Marie-Monique Huss, former academics who decamped from Britain to create a delightful B&B at Château de la Mouchère near St-Cyr-la-Rosière, describe it as "a bit like Sussex, but in the '20s and '30s".

For centuries the Perche was a fought-over borderland between English Normandy and France, and between Protestants and Catholics in France's Wars of Religion. Its gentry protected themselves in extraordinary fortified *manoirs* or manor houses, combination farms and mini-castles, whose pointed towers cropping up among the trees are a hallmark of the landscape. The Perche is also prime horse country, home to the Percheron. Said to be descended from medieval war horses, adaptable for riding and towing, the ghostly-white Percherons – they're actually born grey-black, but get white with age – are a magnificent blend of strength and elegance.

The whole of the Perche is a *Parc Naturel*, and the park information centre is in one of the grandest manors, the 15th-century **Manoir de Courboyer** near Nocé (www.parc-naturel-perche.fr/la-maison-du-parc.asp). As well as the dramatic tower itself, the grounds host an attractive restaurant, shop, a nature trail and a majestic herd of Percherons. Another way to get close to these famous animals is with **Celine Maudet**, who takes rides in a Percheron-drawn carriage – a lovely way to experience the countryside at natural pace (attelagenaturedansleperche.blogspot.fr). There are also great walking routes, including



La Maison d'Horbé, La Perrière

a *Voie Verte* long-distance foot and cycle path through many of the prettiest villages.

Outside Mortagne there are more gorgeous small towns and villages, above all **Bellême**, a gem of a medieval hilltop walled town with steep, winding streets containing fascinating antiques shops and charming cafés. Nearby in **La Perrière**, atop a high ridge with superb views, there's a tiny museum of local lace and two very engaging combination café-bistros and antiques galleries, ideal for lazy Sundays.

The Perche is a place that once discovered people fall in love with, and it now has some exceptional places to stay that are very much their owners' personal projects. When antiques dealer Albin Cristin and his artist wife Laurence Klein first saw the magnificent 1560s **Manoir de Lormarin** in 1998 it was for both a *coup de coeur*, love at first sight, even though it was a near-ruin. After painstaking restoration it now contains, as well as their home, antiques store and galleries, just one

Where to eat

The Tribunal in Mortagne and Villa Fol Avril also have excellent restaurants.

Auberge des 3 J, 1 place du Dr Gireaux, 61340 Nocé, tel +33 (0)2 33 73 41 03, aubergeles3j.fr. Refined, creative cooking.

Le Bistrot des Ecuries, 61110 Boissy-Maugis, tel +33 (0)2 33 25 46 06, www.bistrot-des-ecuries.com. Laidback bistro in a former stable, with great wines. They also run the restaurant in the **Manoir de Courboyer**.


La Maison d'Horbé, 61390 La Perrière, tel +33 (0)2 33 73 18 41, www.lamaisondhorbe.com. Friendly bistro, tea room and antiques shop, great for light lunches.

Shopping

The best local markets are in **Mortagne-au-Perche** (Saturdays), **Bellême** (Thursday) and **Nocé** (Tuesday). For food shopping Mortagne is unbeatable, and Bellême and La Perrière are excellent for antiques.

B&B 'room', a fabulously atmospheric baronial suite. At the **Château de la Mouchère**, Roger and Marie-Monique have combined original features of the 18th-century house with art deco and intriguing literary references. Perhaps most unusual of all is **La Grande Noë**, where Agnès Davey has built six extraordinary wooden cabins in the trees, guaranteeing total seclusion, and an adventure for kids.

And, even though the number of options has been growing, they are all still small-scale, so the Perche never gets remotely crowded, as Sandrine Sicre, who with husband Philippe runs the lovely **Villa Fol Avril** in Moutiers-au-Perche, points out. Even in August, when she goes riding in the woods "you don't see anybody, anybody... it's as if it was *my forest!*" A dream easier to make real than you might expect. 🐎

 We would love to see photos from your trip to Perche and your black pudding attempts @BrittanyFerries

Further information

For more on the Perche and Orne *Département*, see www.normandy-travel.co.uk. The next Foire au Boudin will be from 14–16 March 2015.