

# FRANCE

Gigi Griffis

## 100 LOCALS

TELL YOU  
WHERE TO GO,  
WHAT TO EAT,  
& HOW TO FIT IN



Unconventional Travel Guides

# FOOD & WINE

## French Food on the Go

For a simple breakfast, I recommend a nice croissant or pain au chocolat (chocolate pastry), and an espresso. For a simple lunch, have a good sandwich or try a restaurant in Paris' Japanese district (1<sup>st</sup> arrondissement) for some handmade udon or sobat to go.

Find Chef Colagreco at *mirazur.fr*.



**Debbi Baron**

Owner, Domaines & Terroirs Cheese Tour Company.

## About Debbi

I fell in love with cheese when I was a kid. My grandparents would send us Maytag Blue Cheese for Christmas, and my dad would always source a real French Camembert in San Francisco. That was the beginning for me.

Originally from Los Angeles, I was a partner in a now-large international interior design and architectural firm. By luck of the draw, I ended up working on projects in France for over 10 years until I finally moved to Paris to open an office for the firm. Then I worked in the London office for 10 years, commuting between the two great cities. And in 2010, I retired and decided to install myself permanently in Paris (with monthly trips to London instead of weekly) to pursue my passion for cheese.

Now, I run a company called Domaines & Terroirs, which was created so I could organize journeys into regional France (and sometimes other countries) to discover the cheeses and terroir (geography, geology, and climate) of those regions.

## The Essentials of French Cheese

Cheese in France is fairly traditional, tends to be time honored and long established, and is often the benchmark for cheese-makers worldwide. The creamy, soft bloomy rind cheese Cam-

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embert from Normandy, for example, is the benchmark for that type of cheese anywhere in the world. The same recipe is used in countless countries by many cheese makers, and the result is a variation on the French-created theme. The things that make the variations different are milk type, region, and “terroir,” which, in the case of cheese, means the place, animals, artisan, and affineur (the person who determines the exact right moment to sell you the cheese).

## French Cheese Must-Trys

To get a sense of the French cheese landscape, first try:

- Rocamadour, a fabulous goat cheese from the Lot region;
- Camembert de Normandie, the quintessential cow’s milk cheese from Normandy;
- Crottin de Chevignol, a classic goat cheese;
- Aged Comté;
- Ossau Iraty, the iconic Basque sheep’s milk cheese;
- Époisse from Burgundy (the king of cheeses).

## Unique, Strange, or Interesting Cheese Finds

The French don’t do strange, but they do do unique and audacious. Try a Brie de Melun. It’s a big, complex cheese. The milk is fermented for 24 hours, which gives it a very special taste—robust, creamy, sour, and salty, with a bit of barnyard thrown in. It’s definitely not for the faint of heart.

Another unique one is Tomme Crayeuse, a relatively recent cow’s milk cheese that is interesting, especially when aged by someone like Laurent Dubois or Claire Griffon in Paris. Then there’s the Tomme Marc de Raisin soaked in marc (a type of brandy) and covered in grape must, which you eat along with the cheese.

If you’re looking for something really out there, the cheeses from Nord Pas de Calais are all hair-raisers!

## Hidden Gems

For those who know French cheese, there are many small producers worth seeking out. Go to Melun in the Île de France

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and try a Brie Noir (black brie). This is a Brie de Melun aged for 8 - 10 months. It's very special (and requires a bit of courage).

If you are truly courageous, try the Corsican sheep's milk cheese Casgiu Merzu. It is eaten with the maggots that infest the cheese naturally (so definitely not for the faint at heart). I still can't go there.

For goat cheese-lovers, try a Pelardon from the Cévennes, a Cathare from the Lauragais, and a Cabri Ariegeois (a goat cheese similar to a Mont D'Or). Then go for the sheep's milk cheese Le Pérail from the Larzac, the sublime cow's milk Livarot from Houssaye, or the nutty, subtle Beaufort from the Alpes.

## **Cheese Tasting Tips**

Tasting cheese is all about training your palette. Take your time. Squeeze it. Smell it. Let a small piece melt on your tongue. Take notes. Each step gives you different information.

And, by all means, do not limit yourself to wine with your cheese tasting. Try beer, all types of whiskey, cider, and even tea. Yes, tea. It doesn't work with every cheese, but you would be surprised how the tannins in some teas work beautifully with certain cheeses.

## **A Cheesy French Itinerary**

Every region (even Brittany now) has their traditional cheeses. Personally, my favorite is the Midi-Pyrénées. It is fabulously beautiful and has amazing food, tradition, history, architecture, and a wonderful array of cheeses. Then there are the Pyrénées and the Alpes for their competing mountain cheeses—sheep in the south, cow in the east. And don't forget Normandy and Burgundy. Each region has its own culture, myths, and legends worth exploring

Really, here in France, you can discover the original version of just about every known cheese (except maybe cheddar, only because the English use a special technique for cutting the curd not generally found here in France). If you really want to



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explore the regions, plan to start in a main city and work your way out to the artisanal producers.

One trip I highly recommend is to the *käs-kaller* (cheese cellar) of the famous affineur, Bernard Antony, for la Cérémonie des Fromages—a tasting evening featuring his very famous and sought-after cheeses, which he supplies to the very best chefs all over France, and wines from his personal cellar. You'll find this in the Sundgau region on the very southern tip of Alsace.

Find Debbi at *domaines-terroirs.com*.



## Pascale Bernasse

President, French Wine Explorers.

### About Pascale

I'm Pascale—the president of French Wine Explorers. We're a 15-year-old tour operator based in the US providing wine and culinary tours to France.

I'm Franco-Persian but have lived most of my life in the US, aside from stints in Paris, the Loire Valley, and the South of France as a student and a professional.

When I'm not working, I enjoy spending time with my children and husband, Pierre (who runs the company with me). I also like Pilates, ballet, biking, boating, and (of course) travel.

### The Essentials of French Wine

Bordeaux and/or Burgundy reds are great places to start. For Bordeaux, start with a St. Julien and branch out from there. The northern wines of St. Julien are often said to favor the bold Pauillac (considered by many to be the quintessential Bordeaux), while those closer to Margaux are more subtle.

Another good starting point is a Cru Bourgeois (in particular: Château Gloria or Château Phélan Ségur—both relatively easy on the wallet, yet offering great pleasure).

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Gigi Griffis is a world-traveling entrepreneur and writer** with a special love for inspiring stories, new places, and living in the moment. In May 2012, she sold her stuff and became a digital nomad. These days, she spends her time exploring and writing about Europe with her pint-sized pooch, Luna.

Gigi is the author of seven books, including 100 Locals travel guides for Italy, Paris, Prague, Barcelona, Switzerland, and now France.

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