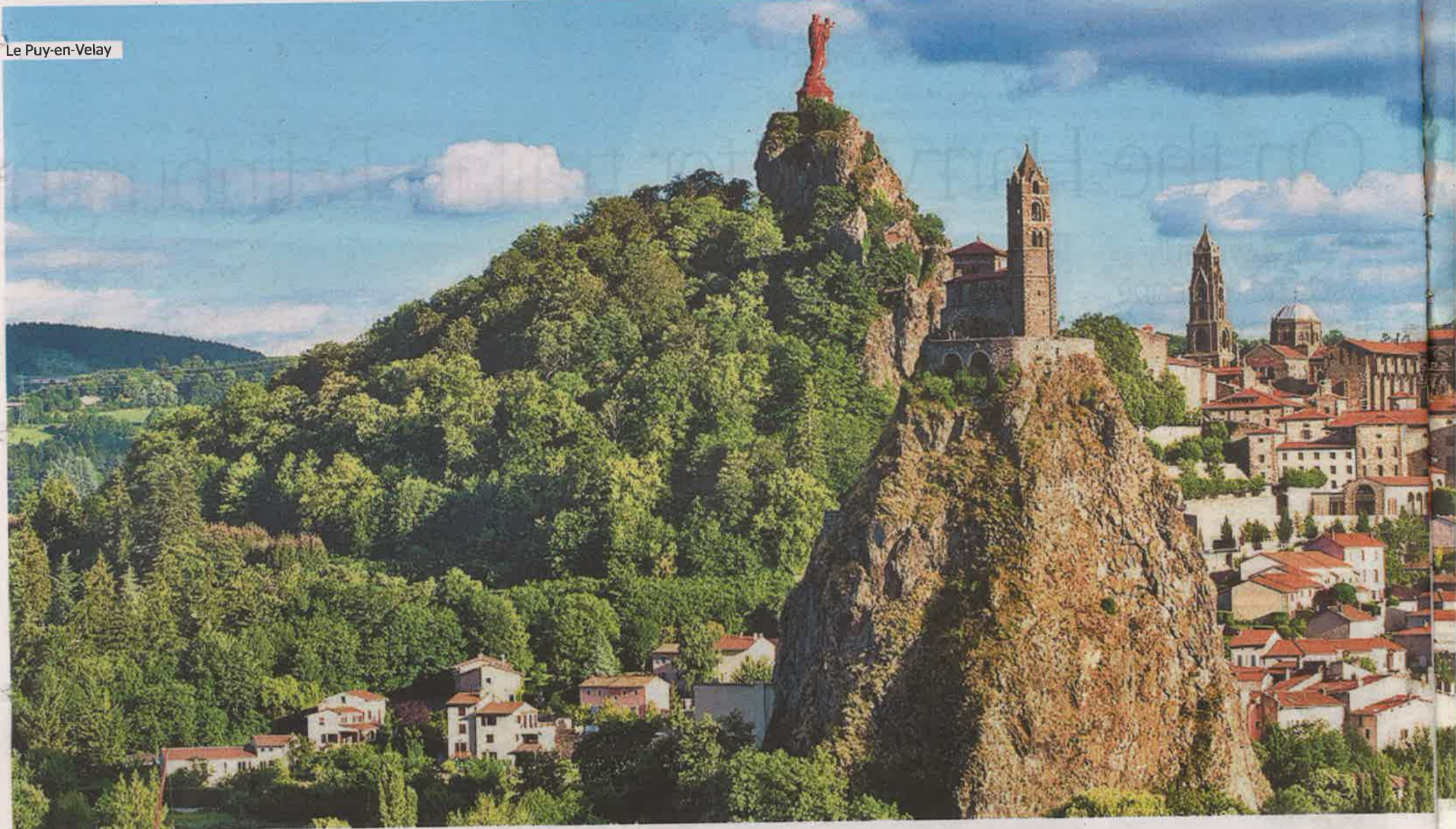


## 26 Travel

Le Puy-en-Velay



# Welcome to Auvergne, France's foodie secret

British restaurateurs are making a name for themselves in this remote and scenic corner of France. **Fiona Sims** tucks in

The British chef Chris Wright triple-kisses the last of the guests leaving his restaurant, voted by the French guide *Le Fooding* as Best Village Bistro 2017. "Do you mind if I serve your breakfast at 8am tomorrow? I have to get to the market," he asks me. Locals can't get enough of this ridiculously remote restaurant, which has created quite a buzz in the pretty village of Dienne.

Now, though, Wright has opened a B&B above L'Epicerie de Dienne, with three simple bedrooms (all wood floors and white walls) sharing a bathroom, plus a large Scandi-style apartment with wood-burn-

ing stove and room for four. Which means that the rest of us can head to *la France profonde* to enjoy the self-taught chef's great-value €18 (£16) three-course menu of dishes such as sweetbreads with cucumber and ginger, confit lamb and mille-feuille with strawberries. There are no British classics here: this is French nosh, making the most of local produce at bargain prices.

Wright is one of three British chefs in the Auvergne region who are making a name for themselves with their take on affordable French cuisine. Enough reason for a visit, you might think, but then throw in majestic scenery, a rich history and a volcano or three and you can make a handsome holiday of it.

So where is Auvergne again? It seems that not many Brits visit this part of France. It's one of the least understood of all French regions, especially for the English speaker. And, even though it is at the heart of the country, it is remote, its villages suffering from depopulation. Profoundly rural and mountainous, it can be hard to access in the harsher winter months, so most of us rush through on our way to the south, or hang a right towards Bordeaux or left to the Rhône. But we're missing out — on rather a lot, as we found out.

With its crater lakes and valleys shaped by the imposing Chaîne des Puys volcanoes (long since dormant, thankfully), plus vast national parks, medieval villages,

Chris Wright outside his restaurant, L'Epicerie de Dienne



elegant spa towns and hilltop castles, not to mention an impressive tally of Romanesque churches, Auvergne has plenty to keep us busy between all the eating. The region's largest city is Clermont-Ferrand (to which Ryanair flies direct during July and August — otherwise it's a two-hour schlep along the A89 from Lyons). You need to come here, though, to eat at Harry Lester's popular bistro, Le Saint Eutrope.

The British-chef-in-Auvergne thing starts with Lester. He began making waves with his wife, Ali, more than a decade ago at their first venture, Auberge de Chassignolles, an inn in the countryside. It was talked about in hallowed terms by a certain coterie of mainly London food and wine lovers, and still retains the magic (more of which later), but Lester's two children were growing up fast, so they upped sticks to Clermont four years ago for its better schools.

Now Ali runs front of house while Lester cooks, delivering the kind of perfect French bistro that we all dream about finding, but rarely do, set in a quiet side street in the old town. This year they won a coveted Bib Gourmand from Michelin.

For €21 for three courses we scoffed a starter of asparagus, *mousseline* and *bot-targa*, then roasted hake with baby broad beans and morels, finishing with rice pudding and poached rhubarb, pairing the lot with thrillingly quirky Auvergne natural wines. It turns out they also own the wine bar Le Quillosque next door, open three evenings a week.

When Lester is not in Clermont he's with his family at their second home near Chassignolles. "We could never leave the region because the produce here is just so good," he tells me as we nibble on a slice of its most famous cheese, Saint-Nectaire, one of five Protected Designation of Origin cheeses in Auvergne.

After lunch we explore some of the city's other highlights — most notably Notre-Dame du Port Basilica, the Hôtel Frontfreyde Photography Centre and the FRAC



art gallery — that we chanced upon wandering through the coral-roofed back streets, which contrast sharply with the looming black edifice of the cathedral, built entirely of volcanic rock.

Clermont is also the home of Michelin, as in the tyre company and the famous restaurant guide. There is an exhibition called L'Aventure Michelin, but we settled for dinner in a Michelin-starred establishment, Hôtel Radio, one of a handful in town. It's in Chamalières, a short walk from the centre (though locals insist that it is a different town entirely). It makes a stylish base, where the (French) chef Wilfrid Chaplain will cook you a smart supper in elegant surroundings.

Chaplain packed us off the next day with a picnic of Cantal cheese and air-dried ham for our ascent of the Puy de Dôme, the most famous of the Chaîne des Puys (immortalised in the Volvic mineral water ads) and a 15-minute drive away.

Half the fun is taking the little tourist train, the Panoramique des Dômes, to the 1,465m summit. Enjoy the jaw-dropping views, then wend your way back down on foot via another couple of craters, and on through peaceful beech and oak forests.

Or stay the night near the craters. In Les Volca'lodges, we eased our aching limbs in our own hot tub — with stylish cabin attached — magically set at the head of a valley. Supper was home-cooked veal stew and lentils to heat at our convenience, brought to us with a bottle of Auvergne wine by the affable owner, Lionel Tixier.

Some call Auvergne France's lost wine region. It suffered badly with phylloxera in the late 19th century, like everywhere else, but it never quite picked up again — until now, with a new generation of winemakers putting it back on the map and two appellations to call its own, Saint-Pourçain and Côtes d'Auvergne.

The next day we went south to Salers, one of the Plus Beaux Villages de France (Auvergne has 11), with the Puy Mary

volcano a dramatic backdrop as we journeyed on to Dienne. Don't look down as you hug the bends on the Puy Mary — at 1,787m it towers over the valley, at the end of which you'll find Wright and his L'Épicerie de Dienne.

The Manchester-born chef closed his hugely popular Le Timbre restaurant in Paris to open this place a year ago. His aim was to "wind down and do something more low-key". Here he cooks, serves, takes your order, opens wine and hangs your coat — and he clearly enjoys it. "I love the conviviality of it," he says, serving a woman who has popped in to buy a lemon.

For our hike up the Puy Mary the next day we beg another picnic, getting a warm baguette stuffed with homemade terrine. We munch it at a spot on our way down, where we are rewarded with an impromptu show from a family of marmots.

The next day we head off exploring. First is medieval Murat, with its distinctive stone-tiled roofs, handsome 19th-century market and signature pastry, Le Cornet de Murat (a horn-shaped biscuit filled with cream). We then push on to Brioude, which has Basilique Saint-Julien. We en-



joy Cantal cheese crumble at La Cave Gourmande, before driving for ten minutes to visit the ancient cloisters at another of the Beaux Villages, Lavaudieu.

From Lavaudieu it's an hour to Le Puy-en-Velay, with its Unesco World Heritage-listed cathedral. You can't visit this town without climbing the 268 steps to the 10th-century chapel, St Michel d'Aiguilhe, dramatically perched on a volcanic outcrop. And there's a maze of streets to explore in the old town. It's here that pilgrims start their journey to Santiago de Compostela, and is where Puy lentils originate.



Puy de Dôme volcano

We ate the lentils that night at the Auberge de Chassignolles, slowly braised in stock and brightened with garden herbs, alongside roasted guinea fowl. After Lester put this lovely auberge on the map he sold it to Peter Taylor, a Bristol chef. Taylor spends most of his summer in sleepy Chassignolles, tending to other pilgrims like us (I'm talking the natural-wine kind), making sure that he and his chefs keep us blissfully happy with a daily-changing roster of dishes made with sparkling produce — their take on modern French bistro.

Over two nights, at €25 a head for the set five-course dinner, we enjoyed dishes such as beetroot and hazelnut salad, guinea fowl and lentils, and cherry tart, washed down with Auvergne wines. Producers to look out for include Aurélien Lefort, Marie & Vincent Tricot and François Dhumes, all offered with ridiculously low mark-ups.

The place is pitched just right, from the terrace on the village square, where you can watch the sun go down behind the 12th-century church as you savour a Negroni made with Gentiane, to the eclectic interiors overseen by Taylor's partner, the illustrator Max Ososki. Local residents (and Auberge regulars) include the British film-maker Sally Potter.

We could stay all week, but we have to go home — although not before a final lunch in Thiers, France's cutlery capital thanks to the fast-running Durolle River, which once turned the blade-sharpening grindstone mills. We're on the hunt for a steak knife. We stop by Robert David, where knife-making classes are €35 a person, and drop in on Yves Charles at Atelier Perceval — a former Michelin-starred Paris chef who returned to his home region in 2008 to make knives. These range from €50 for the 9.47, coveted by Hackney hipster bistros, to €30,000 for the meteorite-handled Laguiole.

So think of that the next time you are planning on bombing south down the A75 — there's much more to Auvergne than meets the eye.

Need to know

Fiona Sims was a guest of Auvergne Tourist Board (auvergne-tourism.com). For more information, see www.panoramiquedesdomes.fr

**How to get there**  
Ryanair flies from Stansted to Clermont-Ferrand from £30

**Where to stay**  
Hôtel Radio in Chamalières (00 33 473 30 87 83, hotel-radio.fr) has B&B doubles from €137 a night. Volca'lodges in Saint-Pierre-le-Chastel (00 33 603 49 68 31, volcalodges.com) has doubles from €92. L'Épicerie de Dienne (00 33 471 20 59 84, lepiceriededienne.com) has doubles from €44. Aubergé de Chassignolles (00 33 471 76 32 36, aubergedechassignolles.fr) has doubles from €60.

**Where to eat and drink**  
Le Saint Eutrope in Clermont-Ferrand (00 33 473 34 30 41, sainteutrope.com); L'Épicerie de Dienne (00 33 471 20 59 84); La Cave Gourmande, Brioude (00 33 471 74 82 76, lacave-gourmande.fr); Le Choix des Mets, Thiers (00 33 473 51 06 61, le-choix-des-mets.fr)

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