Crottin de Chavignol

The name could be a little more inviting – it means horse droppings – but take heart, this is one of the most famous Loire Valley cheeses and has been produced in the village of Chavignol, near Sancerre, since the 16th Century. There are around 19 million made every year, so it must have something going for it!

This unpasteurised goat's milk cheese, also known as just Chavignol, is unusual in that it can be eaten at various stages of maturity. A fresh, white Crottin weighs about 140g and has a soft white or ivory-coloured pâte (everything within the rind) and at this stage is often eaten clothed in fine herbs. It then has a creamy, nutty, slightly salty taste.

After around six weeks of affinage (maturation), the cheese has shrunk and its smell starts to get stronger and its pâte dry and brittle with a meaty texture and robust flavour. This is now a ripe Crottin. After that the cheese continues to mature and the robust taste increases.

After four months its weight has shrunk to around 40g and the rind – which through maturation can range from pale ivory to almost black – develops into a rough, hard layer and should be removed by grating. At that stage the taste can be fairly sharp and salty and perhaps a little intimidating to all but the most dedicated.

The Crottin is ideal for grilling when just a hint of mould appears, but it is also tasty upon further maturation when a blue-grey mould covers the cheese. Hot Crottin on salad with wine vinegar can make a good starter, accompanied by a white Sancerre.

Production can be fermier, artisanal or industriel and affinage (maturation) must take place within Appelation d'Origine Contrôlée specified areas. Frozen curds are allowed in the manufacture of Crottin but then the words fabrication fermière or fromage fermier are forbidden.

Photo above: © La Fromagerie London

Enter the Dragon..

Flying insects can, quite literally, be a real pain. Wasps and bees sting, mosquitoes bite and flies... well, they do just about anything disgusting. But there's something quite magical about dragonflies.

Take a walk along a river bank, or just relax beside a lake or even a garden pond on a warm, sunny day and you're almost certain to be rewarded with the spectacular sight of a dragonfly or damselfly.

These amazing insects have a long history and modern species are almost identical to ancestors that flew over prehistoric forests some 300 million years ago. Some were real giants, with wingspans of up to 70cm! Today's species are tiny by comparison, but are still large and spectacular enough to capture the attention.

Riveting to watch, their iridescent bodies and acrobatic skills provide a fascinating spectacle. Of all the aquatic insects, dragonflies and damselflies are surely the best known. A few are instantly recognisable, but there are 100 or so species in France and some of them are now very rare.

Often referred to collectively as just 'dragonflies', damselflies (Zygoptera) and dragonflies (Anisoptera) are two distinct groups of the insect order known as Odonata, meaning 'toothed jaws'.

At first glance they seem very similar – delicate wings, long body and big eyes – but on closer inspection a few key characteristics will help you tell them apart.

Dragonflies are generally larger than damselflies, are stronger fliers and can often be found well away from water. Their hind wings are usually shorter and wider than the front wings and at rest the wings are held open, much like an aeroplane. They have large eyes – occupying most of the head – that are very close together, often touching.

Damselflies are small, delicate-looking with a weak flight and often stay close to water. Their hind wings and front wings are roughly the same size and shape and at rest they are held closed along the body (except for the Emerald damselfly, which holds its wings half open). The eyes are always separated, never touching, and positioned on

Female Emperor dragonfly (Anax imperator)
Photo : wikimedia © ChristianFischer

Golden-ringed dragonfly
(Cordulegaster boltonii)
Photo : wikimedia © Siga

Banded demoiselle damselfly
(Caloperyx splendens)
Photo: wikimedia AndreaEiskler

either side of the head.

These creatures of the sun may be seen on any warm day between April and October, but most commonly at the height of summer. The distinctive colours of the adults make it relatively easy to tell one species from another. However, their colours change as they mature. When dragonflies and damselflies first emerge from the water, most have very muted colours and it can take several days before they gain their brilliant adult appearance. Common blue damselflies, for example, are often a pale pinkish-brown rather than sky-blue when they first appear as adults.

The panels on pages 28 & 29 shows some of the 100-plus Odonata found in France that are most likely to be seen in this region, often described as among France's finest for this group of insects. Some are quite common, others not so common. It's not uncommon to find 20-plus species around an established lake. The best months for watching these riveting insects are June and July, but keep a sharp lookout as unusual weather patterns can occasionally bring in some unexpected exotic species!

Most of a dragonfly's or damselfly's life – perhaps as much as 95% of it – is spent in the water. The eggs, which are usually laid underwater, develop into larvae from which flying adult insects eventually emerge. The whole process may be completed within six months, but for most species it takes one or two years. In contrast to the larvae, the adults are generally short-lived.

While in the water, the larvae undergo a series of moults as they grow. Once a larva is ready to become an adult, it leaves the water by crawling up a plant stem or twig and then undergoes its final moult – the skin of the larva splitting to release the winged adult. You may find these discarded skin casts, called 'exuviae', on vegetation by the edge of your pond: clear evidence that dragonflies and damselflies have bred there.

Once the young adults have matured and gained their full colours – a process which may take a couple of weeks – the male and female are ready to breed. Males use claspers at the end of their bodies to grab a female and the couples fly in tandem while they mate. After mating, the female lays her eggs, either alone or while still in tandem with the male. The females of some species deposit eggs directly into the water, while others insert individual eggs into leaves, stalks or pieces of rotting wood that may be floating on the water surface. Depending on the species, the eggs hatch after a few weeks or months.

After transforming from an underwater nymph to flying adult – but before becoming sexually mature – young adults may spend a week or more away from the water. During this period, the larger dragonfly species can travel several kilometres away to feed on flying insects. This is the reason you might see dragonflies in your garden even if you don't have a pond nearby.

The Odonata definitely don't die of old age. They live just long enough to mature and reproduce. Small damselflies live only for a couple of weeks as flying adults, while larger dragonflies can fly for three or four weeks but seldom for longer than a few months. Many die from accidents or predation. Odonata are unable to hunt in poor weather and large numbers simply starve during those times.

Predators....

Dragonfly and damselfly larvae will eat almost anything smaller than they are, including bloodworms, snails, tadpoles and the larvae of mosquitoes or other aquatic insects. The larvae of larger dragonflies may also catch small fish. The larvae are mostly ambush predators, lying in wait until something comes close enough to pounce on. They have an extendible lower jaw, called a mask, which they can extend with lightning speed to spear their prey with sharp, hook-like mandibles.

As adults, Odonata are big eaters and may consume 20% of their bodyweight in food every day. They eat other flying insects, particularly flies, midges and mosquitoes. Larger species will take butterflies, moths and even smaller Odonatas. Adults use their impressive eyesight to detect prey. In flight they hold their bristly legs in a basket shape to scoop up their catch before eating it, often in mid-air.

...and prey

Among those that catch and eat dragonflies and damselflies are birds (such as wagtails), spiders, frogs and larger species of dragonflies. As larvae, dragonflies and damselflies are preyed on by fish, frogs, toads and newts. As adults, their excellent eyesight and flying skills help protect them from capture, while the warning colours of some species – black and yellow, or black and red – deter some birds.

Fascinating Facts

Dragonflies can out-fly almost all other insects. They can fly straight up and down, forwards and backwards, side to side, hover like a helicopter and even mate in mid-air! The larger species can hit about 30mph but their average cruising speed is a more sedate 10mph. Smaller dragonfly species and damselflies are much slower.

A newly-emerged Odonata adult has to wait several hours before its wings dry out and it becomes strong enough to fly. The dragonfly at this stage is called a teneral, a Latin word meaning tender, soft, or delicate.

A single dragonfly can eat hundreds of mosquitoes in a single day.

Almost all of a dragonfly's head is eye, so it has incredible vision that encompasses almost every angle except right behind them.

Dragonflies

Four-spotted chaser (Libellula quadrimaculata, Libellule à quatre taches).
Medium-size brown species with black tipped abdomen. Dark spot on middle of front edge of the front wings. Small dark patch at base of hind wings.
Photo : wikimedia © JörgHempel

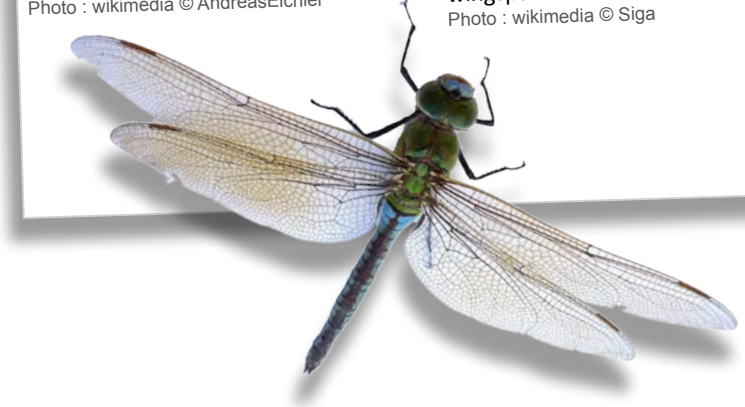
Emperor (Anax imperator, Anax empereur).
Male: green thorax and bright blue abdomen. Female: all green. Both sexes have dark line running along top of abdomen.
Photo : wikimedia © AndreasTrepete

Migrant hawker (Aeshna mixta, Aeschne mixte).
Small yellow triangle at top of abdomen. Male: quite dark brown with small blue paired dots along abdomen. Female: brown with dull yellow-green spots.
Photo : wikimedia © AndreasEichler

Broad-bodied chaser (Libellula depressa, Libellule déprimée).
Male: broad blue abdomen with yellow spots along sides. Female: yellow to yellow-brown abdomen. Both sexes have dark patches at base of wings.
Photo : wikimedia © AndreasEichler

Ruddy darter (Sympetrum sanguineum, Sympétrum rouge sang).
Male: blood-red abdomen with clear, slim waist. Female: dull yellow-brown with thin black lines along sides of abdomen.
Photo : wikimedia © AndreasEichler

Golden-ringed (*Cordulegaster boltonii, Cordulégastre annelé*).
Quite rare. Male and female are quite similar in appearance. Black body patterned with gold rings and a pair of bright green eyes. Very large, with a wingspan sometimes exceeding 10cms.
Photo : wikimedia © Siga



Damselflies

Banded demoiselle
(Caloperyx splendens, Caloptéryx éclatant).
Male: metallic blue-green body with distinctive large blue patch on wings. Female: metallic green body and green tinge to wings.
Photo : wikimedia © IanKirk

Common emerald
(Lestes sponsa, Leste fiancé).
Keeps wings half open when at rest. Both sexes have metallic green body with the male having a powdery blue colour at the top and tip of abdomen.
Photo : wikimedia © Loz

Large red **(Pyrrhosoma nymphula, Petit numphe au corps de feu).**
Mainly red with black markings at the end of abdomen. One of the first damselflies to hatch. Female is larger than the male, with a wingspan of up to 5cms.
Photo : wikimedia © soebe

Common blue **(Enallagma cyathigerum, Agrion porte-coupe).**
Male: bright blue with thin black segments. Black oval or mushroom shape on second segment of abdomen. Female: black and either blue or dull green, with wide stripes on thorax.
Photo : wikimedia © Zampel

Red-eyed
(Erythromma najas, Naïade aux yeux rouges).
Male: red eyes and dark abdomen with blue tip. Female: eyes brown-red and black abdomen with no blue 'tail'.
Photo : wikimedia © AndreasEichler

Blue-tailed
(Ischnura elegans, Agrion elegant).
Male: black abdomen with blue 'tail'. Female: black abdomen with either blue or brown 'tail'. Associated with still waters including stagnant ponds.
Photo : wikimedia © PietSpaans

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DID YOU KNOW ?

The most famous, most challenging and most controversial bike race in the world is coming to town. You'd have to be from another planet not to have heard of the Tour de France, but you don't have to be a bike fan to savour an atmosphere unrivalled in the sporting world.

This year's event – the 103rd since it was first run in 1903 – starts on July 2 with the Grand Départ from the spectacular Mont-Saint-Michel on the Manche coast and finishes three gruelling weeks and 3519kms later on the Champs-Élysées, in Paris. The third stage starts in Granville and finishes in Angers on July 4, while the fourth stage leaves Saumur for Limoges the following day.

Le Tour is much more than a bike race, however, and much of that is due to something that doesn't involve the racers. It's the caravan, a parade that covers every single kilometre of the Tour de France route.

It sets off a couple of hours before the riders and passes millions of fans, throwing one-size-fits-all caps, blow-up hammers and keyrings like they were going out of fashion. Grown men battle with youngsters for their share of the free booty; music blasts out from the floats and every fan gets a smile and a wave. At its peak the caravan can be 10kms long and take 30 minutes to pass by.

For the roadside fan sitting for hours in the hot summer sun for just a few seconds of racing, the caravan is as much – if not more – a part of the experience as the race itself.

TOP TOUR-WATCHING TIPS

- Know what's happening when. The official website (www.letour.com/le-tour/2016/us/) has a timetable for every stage and it lists the exact location and time-splits for the day. Detailed maps help you to pick the best viewing points.
- Get there early. Nearby roads will be closed and the world and his auntie will be there looking for the best spots.
- Take a picnic and plenty of water. This is July, after all!
- Try to find a raised vantage point or a sharp corner, when the riders will be at their slowest. Pick a fast straight and if you blink you'll miss it.
- Be safe. Keep clear of the road and leave the dog at home!

On this month

July 14, 1789: The storming of a medieval fortress and prison in Paris, known as the Bastille, takes place. Its fall signals the beginning of the French Revolution and a decade of political turmoil and terror in which King Louis XVI is overthrown and tens of thousands of people, including the king and his wife, Marie Antionette, are executed.

July 24, 1802: One of France's most popular authors, Alexandre Dumas, is born in Villers-Cotterêts, north-east of Paris. The Dumas family name was adopted from his grandmother, a former Haitian slave. His best-known works include historical adventure novels such as The Count of Monte Cristo and The Three Musketeers.

July 6, 1885: Louis Pasteur (1822-1895) gives the first successful anti-rabies injection to Joseph Meister, a nine-year-old boy who had been bitten by an infected dog. The success of the vaccine brings Pasteur immediate fame and begins an international fundraising campaign to build the Pasteur Institute in Paris.

July 25, 1909: The world's first international aeroplane flight is achieved by Louis Bleriot in a small monoplane. After asking "Where is England?" he takes off from Calais without even a compass to guide him. Flying at 250ft and at around 45mph, the flight takes just over 36 minutes. As he approaches Dover a French reporter waves the Tricolore to guide him down. A pancake landing collapses his landing gear, but Bleriot still walks away with £1000 prizemoney put up by the London Daily Mail.