

Best of Brittany

We're sitting on the low harbour wall at Cancales, slurping just-shucked oysters from the small cluster of market stalls nearby, and dropping the shells into the clear shallows, where shoals of tiny fish await the pickings.

By Verne Maree

This is Brittany's Côte D'Émeraude, or Emerald Coast, named for the greeny-blue of the sea. All the oyster vendor gives you is your platter of chosen bivalve molluscs, a plastic knife and a freshly halved lemon.

You could do as we did one blue-sky day in early September: bring along your own Tabasco and black pepper, a crisp baguette and some chilled white wine. Or not even bother. With or without the frills, this is a foodie moment – far more memorable than lunching tamely at one of the stretch of admittedly attractive cafés and restaurants that stretch along the sunny promenade (pictured below).

Brittany (or Bretagne) is a cultural region in the northwest of France. Picturesque Cancales is situated on Brittany's Baie de Mont Saint-Michel, a wide and shallow curve of a bay that's dedicated to the cultivation of **mussels and oysters** so good that they've earned appellation *d'origine contrôlée* (AOC) status.

Due to extraordinary tidal differences of up to 15 metres – only Canada's Bay of Fundy has the same – the bay offers a huge acreage for this *mytiliculture*. And harvesting is easily done when the tide recedes twice daily to expose the thousands of rows of mussel-

encrusted posts (called *bouchots*) on which they grow.

Brittany is known for **seafood in general**. From the humble whelk through to the popular sea bass (or bar) – often served on a stew of local vegetables and sundried tomatoes – and the luxurious lobster, it's all immaculately fresh, wherever you go.

Ancient windmills dot the Breton landscape. Once, they served to grind the *blé noir* (or black wheat) that's still used in the making of another culinary staple of the region – the savoury pancakes known as **galettes de sarrasin** (pictured below).



Generally, they're filled with a combination of cheese, ham, sausage or mushrooms, and topped with a fried egg whose golden yolk shines through; the typically Breton variety I tried contained smoked salmon and crème fraîche.

Sweet pancakes are just called **crêpes**, of course, and they're made from white flour. A good place to enjoy either variety (or both) at would be one of the many cafés lining the cobbled streets of St Malo's beautiful mediaeval walled city, or "Intramuros".

Beautiful Butter

In many part of France, bread comes with butter only at breakfast; at lunch and dinner, it's served plain for the mopping up of soups and sauces. Not so in Brittany and neighbouring Normandy, which are rightly famous for their beautiful butter.

I found it impossible not to overindulge in the world-famous artisanal **Bordier butter**, handmade by master butter-maker Jean-Yves Bordier in Normandy. Found in the world's top restaurants – and of course in all the best Parisian



hotels – its only dedicated outlet is the Maison du Beurre, located in Saint Malo's old walled town.

Using a wooden paddle, they'll separate your portion from the mother lode, slap it into shape and wrap it neatly in wax paper. The simply salted version is wonderful, but they have other varieties, too – herby, garlicky, fruity and more.

I'm still dreaming about the a small slab of rich butter flavoured with local black **seaweed** – indescribably delicious, it would be as good tossed with fresh pasta as it was spread thickly (you could see the teethmarks) on our chunks of cereal baguette. This *algae*, as it's also called, is sold fresh as a flavourful cooking ingredient, or in the form of dried flakes, or mixed into anything from ordinary sea salt and sel de fleur to artisanal soaps.

Cabbage is big, too. If the relatively small local population were to consume all the cruciferous vegetables I saw growing in the area, they'd be eating their weight in *choucroute* (pickled cabbage) every week. Topped with slow-stewed pork belly and other piggy cuts, we demolished a huge pile of the stuff at the Lion D'Or in St Malo's old town (pictured left), where they also do a delicious pot of *moules marinières* – with frites, of course.

It's partly the salted local butter mixed into the recipe for Breton **caramel** toffee, too, that makes it so wonderful. Other local specialties include anything to do with apples – Breton **cider**, and the apple brandy known as **calvados** that's the perfect way to end a meal. À votre santé! 🍷