

The area around Nantes boasts an abundance of high-quality produce as well as excellent seafood and wine. Clockwise from left: Leeks, *biscuits sablés de Nantes*, grilled chicken, oysters, strawberries, lettuce, Sancerre and crayfish. Background: The region's famous salt marshes.



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ISSUE

# NANTES NOW

YOUNG CHEFS ARE SUDDENLY FLOCKING  
TO THE CITY OF DUKES, ATTRACTED BY A  
REGION WHERE ANYTHING GROWS  
BY JAMIE SCHLER





“ANYTHING ONE MAN CAN IMAGINE, OTHER MEN CAN MAKE REAL.” Jules Verne could well have been speaking of Nantes when he wrote those words. In just a few short years, the imagination of the city fathers and the talents of a young generation of food professionals have transformed the author’s hometown from culinary obscurity into an exciting destination for all who love to eat and drink. Infused with the same sense of adventure as Verne himself, these innovative, passionate young chefs have been drawn—or drawn back, for many are native sons and daughters—to a beautiful metropolis rich in both history and local produce. Supported by energetic and ambitious cultural policies, they are creating a brand-new culinary identity for the city that was once the proud capital of an independent Brittany.

ALTHOUGH IT IS FRANCE’S SIXTH-LARGEST CITY and the capital of the Pays de la Loire region, Nantes has never boasted the gastronomic renown of places such as Lyon or Marseille, with their classic dishes such as *quenelles de brochet* and *bouillabaisse*, or Paris, with its galaxy of starred restaurants. Indeed, until recently, mentioning Nantes and food usually elicited a blank stare—except perhaps from those who remembered that it is home to LU, producer of the beloved Petit Beurre cookies. So what is behind this sudden culinary renaissance? In many ways, it is the logical outgrowth of the same savvy urban renewal and development strategies that led TIME to name Nantes “the most livable city in Europe” in 2004. Since then, it has continued to top lists of “best places to live in France,” pursuing policies that combine economic, environmental and cultural ambitions.

The latest phase began in 2005, when Nantes undertook what was then the largest urban renewal project in Europe. Formerly run-down neighborhoods now boast stunning contemporary architecture and are bustling with activity. In the city center, streets have been repaved, sidewalks widened, fountains added and most car traffic eliminated. The medieval Château des Ducs de Bretagne has also reopened after a dramatic 15-year renovation that included the creation of the Nantes History Museum.

On the cultural front, offerings such as La Folle Journée classical musical festival, the Trois Continents film series, the Utopiales

Nantes has aggressively promoted culture and tourism as part of its economic development.

**This page, from top:** Daniel Buren’s “Anneaux” (“Ring”) sculptures mark the reclamation of the riverfront; oysters, a local specialty.

**Opposite:** Chefs Alexandre Couillon and David Toutain collaborated on a “secret dinner” in Nantes’s Passage Pommeraye; the venue was revealed to guests at the last minute.



science fiction gathering and Les Rendez-vous de l’Erdre jazz festival have become tremendously popular with locals and visitors alike. Perhaps most emblematic is Les Machines de l’Île, a self-described “blend of the invented worlds of Jules Verne, the mechanical universe of Leonardo da Vinci and the industrial history of Nantes.” What this actually looks like is a former shipyard warehouse stocked with giant articulated creatures made of wood and steel. The most famous is the 40-foot-tall elephant that occasionally lumbers down the street, carrying visitors and spraying passersby with water from his trunk.

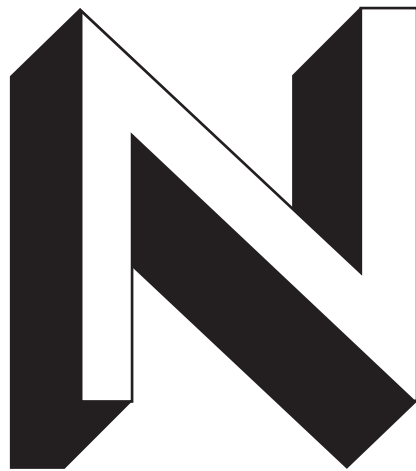
In 2010, Nantes decided to combine its offices promoting tourism,





culture and heritage with Les Machines de l’Île and the Château, creating a single organization called Le Voyage à Nantes. Headed by Jean Blaise, artistic director of Paris’s first Nuit Blanche, this umbrella group is responsible for coordinating the city’s cultural amenities and promoting Nantes as a tourist and cultural destination.

Blaise immediately named Richard Baussay director of culinary promotion, the idea being to give food and wine the same importance as tourism and culture. The pair had already worked together on projects when Baussay was the director of musical productions at a local arts center; they notably created Cuvée Unique, five months of conferences, tastings and concerts built around six Muscadet wines. That sort of creative thinking is now the hallmark of their collaborations, which have included culinary happenings in iconoclastic settings ranging from historic shopping arcades and school rooftops to bridges and beaches.



NANTES HAS ALWAYS HAD all the ingredients, literally, to be a great gastronomic capital. An abundance of locally grown foods, extraordinary in both quality and diversity, and proximity to the Atlantic Ocean and the Loire River have influenced cooks here for centuries. Local fish and seafood, for example, include perch, eel, elver, turbot, oysters, mussels, sea scallops and the famous sardines de Saint-

Gilles-Croix-de-Vie. Excellent veal is raised in the area, and the Loire region, called the Garden of France, is so fertile and the weather so temperate that, as they say, anything grows here. Nantes and its environs are famous for carrots, plump white asparagus, lamb’s lettuce, turnips, strawberries and tomatoes.

And thanks to the city’s history as a major shipping port linked to the French West Indies, spices, sugar, exotic fruits and nuts have long been staples in local kitchens. Salt flats in nearby Guérande supply the *fleur de sel* and *sel gris* favored by gourmets, and neighboring vineyards provide a wide array of wines, from Muscadet and Gros Plant to the reds, whites and rosés of Anjou and Saumur.

A few *grandes tables* are credited with putting Nantes on the gastronomic map: Michelin-starred chefs Jean-Yves Guého at L’Atlantide, Eric Guérin at La Mare aux Oiseaux and Laurent Saudeau at the Manoir de la Boulaie. All offer extraordinary dining and luxurious settings, making them favorites for special occasions. For everyday dining, though, locals tended to patronize brasseries, both traditional and contemporary, with their huge kitchen staffs and bustling, impersonal waiters serving steak tartare and the usual selection of fish dishes.

Then the *bistro gourmand* came to town. Starting in 2007, a new wave of young, innovative chefs began setting up their own restaurants, introducing a modern focus and energy. What they all had in common was a desire to make high-end, inventive cuisine accessible to a much wider clientele. This new fare was less fussy, more affordable and offered an exciting, playful take on the classic gastronomic experience.



Nantes is a haven for talented young chefs, many of whom are creating a new type of fusion cuisine that adds a touch of exoticism to local ingredients. **Above:** “Lobster wok” from Restaurant Song. **Opposite from left:** Christophe François of Les Chants d’Avril and his zebra tomato and red pepper soup; Nhung Phung of Song Saveurs & Sens; Nicolas Guiet of l’U.ni.

Among the pioneers was Christophe François, who in 2008 moved here from Paris to open Les Chants d’Avril. He epitomizes this new approach, blending the best of local ingredients with heirloom vegetables, revisiting classic recipes from home cooks and giving it all a contemporary twist with spices and emulsions. Offering a tempting choice of local wines is also an important part of the formula.

“The chefs opening *bistros gourmands* in Nantes are like little birds leaving the nest,” he explains. “Most have spent time in *les grandes maisons* and Michelin-starred kitchens, and are now setting up their own establishments. They have come home—most have their origins in Nantes—with the desire to create a very personal cuisine, to do the kind of cooking they want to do rather than following the strict dictates that rule fine dining establishments. There is also the strong desire to welcome clients into their restaurants as they would friends in their own homes.”

Typical is Ludovic Pouzelgues, who spent several years working with starred chefs Jean-Yves Guého at L’Atlantide and Michel Troisgros in Rouanne before opening his own restaurant, Lulu Rouget, in 2012. Before the *bistro gourmand* wave, he says, “Nantes was quiet...too quiet. It was still very old school.” So what is new school? Décors that are generally comfortable but simple, creating a more lighthearted ambiance. Slimmed down kitchen staffs, with chefs preparing each dish and dressing every plate themselves.



“THESE CHEFS WANT TO WELCOME CLIENTS INTO THEIR RESTAURANTS AS THEY WOULD FRIENDS IN THEIR OWN HOMES.”



Limited menus, allowing chefs to retain complete quality control. And fewer wait staff, typically only one or two servers who are attentive but also casual and friendly.

Pouzelgues, whom Gault & Millau has named one of the country’s 10 most influential young chefs, explains that an important part of the equation is the ability to source exceptional local ingredients with few middlemen. This makes it possible for them to work with the freshest products at a reasonable cost and thus offer a great dining experience at an affordable price. “It’s a return to the basics,” he says. And, it seems, a recipe for success: These new restaurants are full most days, lunch and dinner.

Another member of this new guard is Nicolas Bourget, who opened La Raffinerie in 2009. All Old World zinc, stone and wood, it somehow manages to exude a modern vibe. “The dynamic has changed. The chef is no longer the star; now the star is the ingredients. We discover what our suppliers have available in the morning and create all of our dishes on the spot. Chefs today are interpreters, letting their imagination loose when the day’s ingredients are delivered and making them shine on the plate.” Like many of his fellow chefs, Bourget changes his menus twice daily, often coming up with a new idea for a dish just before serving.

Each strives to add a personal touch, often a bit of humor, and flavor combinations that are frequently astonishing.

For many of these young chefs, Nantes’s lack of a defined culinary tradition has in fact been liberating. Some are staking out a new *“cuisine voyageuse,”* creating exciting, often surprising unions of exotic recipes and local ingredients. Influences from Bourget’s travels in Vietnam, Greece and Réunion, for example, find their way onto the plate, while chef Nhung Phung’s family roots in Vietnam and Laos are the inspiration for her beautiful restaurant Song Saveurs & Sens, launched in 2007.

The friendly dynamic among the chefs is palpable. “We are colleagues, not rivals,” assures François. Pouzelgues describes a network that includes established chefs and newcomers; they readily share suppliers, offer support and patronage, even lend staff when needed. And they are happy to recommend one another’s restaurants, to cook together at city food events and to promote themselves as a group. They have also brought new recognition to local farmers, fishermen and other purveyors, putting their names on menus and offering them a well-deserved place in the city’s culinary limelight.

## Must Have



**Les Tables de Nantes is a handy reference for gourmands who want to discover the best food and wine Nantes has to offer.**

**This online guide, available in French and English, features nearly 100 of the top restaurants, bistros, brasseries and wine bars in and around the city. [lestablesdenantes.fr](http://lestablesdenantes.fr)**



“PEOPLE  
LOVE  
DISCOVERING  
NEW FLAVORS,  
NEW FOODS.  
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E VOYAGE À NANTES HAS PLAYED A HUGE role in this newfound collegiality, and the appointment of a director of culinary promotion could not have come at a better time. Richard Baussay’s role—and desire—is to mentor the new arrivals, offering them visibility, publicity and the possibility of meeting and working with other chefs, thus allowing them to concentrate on their cooking. He promotes local producers and

artisans as well—the more buzz he can create around Nantes’s new dining and food scene, the better for the city in general.

“My goal,” he says, “is to create culinary events that have never before been organized in France.” For once, this isn’t a bit of PR hyperbole. His *Dîners Secrets*, for example, involve two chefs—one local, one not—who each make three dishes showcasing a different local ingredient. The meal is served to some 200 people in an unusual and unique location that is revealed to guests only at the last moment. More often than not, the friendly throwdowns end up in a delicious tie.

Baussay is also behind the *Goûts Uniques* festival, which lasts several weeks and brings in chefs from other regions, inviting them to work with local ingredients. In 2012, none other than three-star chef Alain Passard of Paris restaurant *Arpège* created a meal for 1,000 guests in the courtyard of the *Château des Ducs de Bretagne*. Candlelight flickering among the old stones made for an unforgettable evening, followed the next day by an outdoor farmers’ market and Muscadet tastings.

This past summer, *Les Vignes de Nantes*, an independent association of 16 wine producers, took a page from Baussay’s playbook when they organized the first outdoor Food and Wine Flash Mob. The free event involved nine chefs and artisans and took place at three of the city’s monuments, with visitors treated to tastings of an appetizer, main course and dessert, a glass of Muscadet and musical entertainment. Nantes also hosted its first *Salon du Chocolat* this year, with 60 participating artisans and more than 16,000 visitors.

“People love discovering new flavors, new foods,” says Nhung Phung. “They are curious, they want new experiences.” Phung has obliged, starting the trend of upscale takeout when she opened *Song Comptoir* in 2010. Now clients can enjoy her refined fusion cuisine, Pad Thai, wok and curry dishes at the counter or order them to go. Other chefs have followed suit, but no one has gone quite as far as Laurent Le Boulter, who closed his restaurant *Les Temps Changeant* in 2012 and opened *Ozon Cantine Chic & Gourmande*, a gourmet fast-food eatery. Le Boulter offers a selection of hot and cold dishes as well as soups and salads that he prepares from fresh ingredients and sells in eco-friendly glass jars. His newest endeavor is *Ozon Cantine Nomade*, a cart laden with his jars that pulls up in front of office buildings at lunchtime.

Meanwhile, new high-end food shops are popping up left and right—fromagers *affineurs*, *chocolatiers*, *confiseurs* and *pâtisseries* are making their own delectable contributions to the Nantes food scene, and respected wine merchants are proudly featuring and

Nantes’s innovative food-related events include the Festival des Goûts Uniques, which brings in top chefs from other regions to cook with local ingredients. Events last year included a lunch at the Ile-d’Yeu light-house (left) and an unforgettable dinner at the Château des Ducs de Bretagne, masterminded by renowned three-star chef Alain Passard (right).



promoting local wines like never before. The city’s urban renewal has encouraged this development, providing a growing network of downtown pedestrian streets that offer inviting havens for shoppers and diners alike.

On so many levels, the city’s culinary evolution has been nothing short of dramatic—and it’s far from over, at least according to local top toques. “Cities such as Lyon live and cook with respect to their experience, their traditions and their past,” says chef François. “Nantes is different. We’re focused on the future, we’re creating new traditions. One day soon, we too will be known as a great gastronomic city.”





Nantes boasts some of France's most original and irreverent eateries. Clockwise from left: Les Chants d'Avril's apricot-almond-rosemary *clafoutis*, topped with a Petit Lu, the city's signature cookie; Lulu Rouget and its influential young chef, Ludovic Pouzelgues; fresh loaves from La Petite Boulangerie.

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## DISHING ON NANTES

*Resident Jamie Schler  
shares her insider's guide to the city's  
exciting new food scene*

### Lulu Rouget

Named one of France's 10 most influential young chefs by Gault & Millau, **Ludovic Pouzelgues** creates dishes that are astonishing in their flavor and texture combinations. His stint as sous-chef to Michelin-starred chef Michel Troisgros and his training with local *pâtissier* Vincent Guerlais means you can look forward to a stunning meal from *amuse-bouche* to dessert. Stand-outs include roast duck aiguillettes with rhubarb and fresh peas; the catch of the day, coated in a sesame seed crust and served on a bed of bok choy and spring onions; spiced panna cotta with mangoes and pineapple; and the best traditional

*île flottante* anywhere. Or just let him surprise you with his *Les Yeux Fermés* (Eyes Closed) menu. *1 rue du Cheval Blanc, Tel. 33/2-40-47-47-98.*

### Les Chants d'Avril

Once a Belle Epoque *épicerie*, this wonderful eatery—a Gault & Millau 2012 *coup de cœur*—was converted into a bistro in 1950 and still sported its original décor when it was taken over by **Christophe François**. The chef's Mystery Menu takes the diner on a playful voyage of discovery, with each traditional dish re-created, turned on its head and modernized. François loves sharing his culinary passions and surprising his clients with such

dishes as sea scallop carpaccio with passion fruit, mackerel marinated in combara oil and rice vinegar with fennel, and chocolate panna cotta with fresh figs and Petit Lu crumble. *2 rue Laënnectel, 33/2-40-89-34-76; leschantsd'avril.fr.*

### L'U.NI

**Nicolas Guet**'s passion for vegetables and the sea illuminates his well thought-out, extremely creative dishes, although the extraordinary Nantes veal and beef are not to be missed. Expect exotic touches—Thai basil, harissa, yuzu, wasabi—and surprising flavor combinations. *36 rue Fouré, Tel. 33/2-40-75-53-05.*



### La Raffinerie

Based on the freshest ingredients, **Nicolas Bourget**'s cooking is infused with the flavors of his travels through Vietnam, Greece and Reunion Island. Everything is prepared from scratch, from the bread to the sorbets. His comfortable bistro offers a view of the kitchen and a lovely vine-covered patio for summer dining. *54 rue Fouré, Tel. 33/2-40-74-81-05; restaurantlaraffinerie.fr.*

### Tontonpic

A hometown boy whose impressive CV includes the Tour d'Argent, **Steven Jourdon** serves modern, creative food in a joyous, casual, green-and-black setting. Don't miss his salmon and coriander ceviche, his quenelle of smoked haddock mousse on Moroccan-style carrots and his reinvented chocolate Irish coffee. *5 rue Cha-teaubriand, Tel. 33/2-40-74-09-27; tontonpic.fr.*

### Song Saveurs & Sens

Chef **Nhung Phung** blends her

family's legacy of Vietnamese and Laotian recipes with those of her adopted country. Refined, creative dishes include seafood-poached chicken infused with coconut; crab salad with Thai flavors accompanied by an iced avocado-mint-green apple soup; gambas tartare with black sesame, ginger and a touch of wakame algae; and salted butter caramel with green apple sorbet. Takeout is available from Song Comptoir, next door. *5 rue Santeuil, Tel. 33/2-40-20-88-07; restaurant-song.fr.*

### Vincent Guerlais

It's impossible not to be dazzled by **Vincent Guerlais**'s phenomenal selection of artisan chocolates and *macarons*—as gorgeous to look at as they are exquisite to eat. Try his *Tablette à Partager*, a chocolate bar filled with silky salted butter caramels, and *Les Guerlingots*, his take on *berlingots*, the local triangle-shaped confection. His are fruit-infused, praline-filled and chocolate-coated. *Two locations; vincentguerlais.com.*



### La Petite Boulangerie

One of the youngest bakers to qualify as a Meilleur Ouvrier de France, **Franck Deperiers** offers an incredible selection of breads, *viennoiseries* (croissants and the like) and pastries, including the traditional *gâteau nantais*, individual *kugelhops* and Alsatian *flamme-kueche*. *Two locations; 33/2-51-82-39-51; lapetiteboulangerie.fr.*

### Débotté Maître Chocolatier

**Débotté frères Gérald** (a *chocolatier*) and **Josselin** (a *pâtissier*) run this traditional chocolate shop founded by their grandparents. In addition to the stunning chocolates, don't miss their specialties: crispy praline chocolate-covered *macarons nantais*, Muscadet-soaked grapes dipped in chocolate, and caramels in a variety of flavors. In summer months, they sell Nantes's best ice cream. The brothers have three pastry shops, two with tea salons, as well as the original chocolate shop. *debotte.fr.*

### Maison des Vins

#### de Loire de Nantes

This is the place to go for information on regional wines and local vineyards, as well as tastings and private classes. *15 place du Commerce, Tel. 33/2-40-89-75-98; vinsdeloire.fr.*

### Les Caves des Coteaux

With more than 300 wines in stock, Les Caves offers advice and pairing suggestions. Their Loire Valley selection, which includes many organic and biodynamic wines, is especially wonderful. *Three locations; cavesdescoteaux.com.*