



PIERRE DEUX'S
NORMANDY

A FRENCH COUNTRY STYLE & SOURCE BOOK

BY LINDA DANNENBERG, PIERRE LEVEC, AND PIERRE MOULIN
PHOTOGRAPHS BY GUY BOUCHET

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Photographs by Guy Bouchet
Design by Paul Hardy



Clarkson N. Potter, Inc./Publishers
DISTRIBUTED BY CROWN PUBLISHERS, INC., NEW YORK

To my father, who has always inspired me—*L.D.*

To Betty Jo and Mary, the keepers of the flame—*P.L.*

To Dominique and Jacques and our mutual
memories of life in wartime Normandy—*P.M.*

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Moulin

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MAIRIE



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P R E E F A C E

*Everyone has two countries,
his own and France.*

—BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

The allure of France is as powerful as first love and just as ineffable. While the secret of France's seductive spell remains elusive, facets of the mystique are obvious. The beauty and grace of the landscape—so distinctive, so diverse, from Lille near the Belgian border to Perpignan on the southwest Mediterranean coast, from Annécly in the Alpine east to Arcachon on the southern Atlantic coast—are certainly compelling. Also significant is a long and inspiring cultural history cast with an extraordinary assemblage of artists, writers, and statesmen of genius. The cuisine of France, of course, continues to be a potent draw. In a land where each region takes passionate pride in its culinary specialties, a tradition

of great chefs, from George Auguste Escoffier to Joël Robuchon, ensures some of the finest meals in the world. And then there is the awesome richness of the country's architectural style—the mansions of François Mansart and the heroic 18th- and 19th-century public buildings of Paris, the half-timbered *manoirs* and slate-roofed châteaux of Normandy, the thatched-roof cottages of Brittany, the colorful and harmonious Provençal *mas*, or farmhouses, of the Midi, and the gabled houses set on cobbled lanes in Alsace.

But if there is a key to the magic, it has to be in the tiny details and vignettes of daily life: a bistro serving up delicate crepes under flowering apple trees in a hillside Norman village; Parisian mothers meeting their small children at the school steps at four o'clock with bars of chocolate and fresh *baguettes*; the ritual gatherings of old men in the Midi for lazy afternoons of gossip, *pastis*, and a round of *boules*; the carefully grouped pots of cheerful red geraniums on a cottage windowsill in an Alsatian hamlet; the daily race of little fishing boats back to port in southern Brittany; the good-natured haggling over a bright pyramid of carrots at an open market in the Dordogne; the doorway of a half-timbered 17th-century house in Upper Normandy, lushly garlanded

with wisteria. These, as well as countless other scenes and customs, make up the French *art de vivre*, or life-style, that is so appealing.

France, in look, feel, taste, and spirit, is a country like no other. In spite of inevitable modernization—encroaching shopping complexes, parking lots, drugstores, and high-rise office towers—it remains unique. As travel-guide writer Eugene Fodor remarks, "France is still the France of our dreams."

In the series we call *Living in France* we will present individually the great French provinces, beginning in this volume with Normandy. We will travel throughout each region, visiting houses, gazing at the landscapes, learning of the arts and the crafts, and dining on regional cuisine. We will feature homes—from cottage to chateau—in all their detail, and spotlight some of the families who live within. Our goal is to portray, through our own personal prism, the style, the spirit, the idiosyncrasies, and the romance of each region. For us, this is truly a labor of love.

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

With its sun-stippled country lanes, rolling orchards lush with soft pink apple blossoms, and quaint, half-timbered houses shaded by oaks and willows, Normandy is a soft-focus kind of place. Even assessed *sur place* rather than viewed in the canvases of Boudin, Corot, or Monet, the landscape of this green and graceful province has an impressionistic quality. The perception comes from the way the light filters through the tall old trees; or is diffused over a horse meadow in the early morning haze that lingers until noon; or illuminates the plump cumulus clouds moving across the pastel sky.

Boudin, the pre-impressionist painter called “king of the heavens,” was enraptured by the Norman sky near Honfleur. For Courbet it was the interplay of sea and sky over the Seine estuary. Corot was inspired throughout his life by the gentle, poetic beauty of the lush green countryside he knew as a child. And Monet, protégé of Boudin and a member of the artistic band that haunted Honfleur in the mid- to late 1800s, was beguiled by the entire experience of being in Normandy, under the springtime apple blossoms as well as in an early and unusual snow. “Every day I discover ever more beautiful things,” he wrote to the painter Frédéric Bazille. “It’s enough to drive one mad, so strong is the desire to do everything; my head is reeling!”

The colors of Normandy come straight from the impressionist’s palette. The misty greens of the wheat fields in the morning; the creamy white and blush pink, softly blending, of the apple blossoms in the Pays d’Auge; the shimmering golden haze over an orchard in an autumn sunset; the softly mottled blues, mauves, and lavenders that define the Seine estuary as the day grows long; and the pale, iridescent sky overall—these tints and tones create tableaux that enchant on viewing and linger long after in memory.

Rustic and serene, yet only a two- or three-hour drive west from



The Café du Coiffeur, with its array of outdoor tables, occupies one of the many refurbished houses in the restored 16th-century village of Beuvron-en-Auge.

Paris, Normandy has for centuries been the desired vacation spot for wealthy Parisians. Their superb châteaux and *manoirs* peep out through clearings in the greenery all over the province and give an aura of elegance to the countryside.

The hamlets and byways of the Norman hinterland are rich in vistas and country charm of a kind sought by many visitors to France. Take the tiny D22 road south from Honfleur toward Bonneville-la-Louvet and you will pass one of the region's most spectacular fields of flame-red poppies. Drive along the D48 south of Pont l'Évêque and you will come to Pierrefitte-en-Auge, an extraordinary little hamlet of thatched-roof cottages with a rustic bistro—Les Deux Tonneaux—that offers cider, crepes, and other simple fare by a fireplace hung with old copper pots. Worn stone chapels, ivy-covered manor houses, rambling rose gardens, and brick-sided barns are as much a part of the harmonious landscape as the apple trees and the broad, neat, grassy fields.

To live in Normandy, or even to sojourn there for a few days or weeks, is to enjoy a verdant province of remarkable richness. Achingly fertile, the fields produce tons and tons of the best sugar beets, oats, and wheat that abundantly supply the rest of France. Cows nourished



by the land provide the milk that becomes the region's voluptuous *crème fraîche*, as well as a multitude of famous cheeses, from Camembert to Pont l'Évêque. The sea that washes the coast from Le Tréport, north of Dieppe, down to Mont-Saint-Michel offers up boatloads of fleshy fish,



Laden with dairy products gathered in her sturdy basket, a shopper returns home from Honfleur's Saturday-morning market.

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mussels, oysters, and shrimp. But perhaps more than anything else, it is the apple that symbolizes the plenty of this vast, undulating region. The orchards that cover the Pays d'Auge yield Alpine hillocks of red, green, and golden apples, the majority of which are pressed for cider or Calvados, while the rest are either packed for export or are used locally throughout the year for *tarte aux pommes* and a variety of succulent dishes.

The style of Normandy is a rich mix of elegance, earthy functionalism spawned from the region's agricultural heart, and the inspired craftsmanship of Norman stonemasons and carpenters. The province's abundant wood, stone, straw, and slate have been precisely crafted over the centuries by master artisans, creating dwellings as simple as a farm cottage or as graceful, elegant, and harmonious as an aristocratic stone manor house. As for the soaring *flamboyant* gothic cathedrals of Rouen, Caen, and Bayeux, they are in a realm by themselves, in the firmament of architectural masterworks.

The artisans of Normandy, deeply committed to regional traditions but at the same time rather sophisticated in their creative approach, have always been aware of the trends in Paris. The lines of the pretty armoires, chairs, and tables of 18th- and 19th-century Normandy, often sculpted in oak, reflect contemporaneous fashions of the capital, while the elaborate floral carving that adorns the pieces is purely regional.

The skills and traditions of the gifted lacemakers of Alençon and Bayeux have their roots in 17th-century Venice, where the 17th-century minister Jean Baptiste Colbert recruited a group of Italian lacemakers to bring their craft to France. But the Norman *dentellières* soon made the craft their own, turning out exquisite handmade lace that was prized the world over.



After school on Saturday morning, three little girls in the Pays d'Auge carry home their pet rabbit.

Pride in craftsmanship and in perpetuating a venerable tradition is apparent not only among the handful of lacemakers still producing Bayeux and Alençon lace, but also among the artisans of Villedieu-les-Poêles. Using production processes virtually unchanged for centuries, they turn out the magnificent, pitch-perfect church bells of the Fonderie de Cloches, or bell foundry, in one part of town, and world-renowned, hand-hammered copperware in another.

The people of Normandy are traditionally characterized as being stoic, stubborn, and reserved, qualities inherited, along with a taste for adventure and exploration, from their Viking ancestors. These dauntless but dour Norsemen had been invading what came to be called Normandy for more than six hundred years before they officially established themselves in the province in 911, led by their powerful chief, Rolf-le-Marcheur. The Vikings, good farmers as well as good sailors, cultivated the land and developed trade routes that soon made Normandy one of France's most flourishing provinces. By the time Rolf, then called Rollo, died about twenty years later, the Vikings were well assimilated into their French surroundings. But their legacy of fearlessness lived on. William the Conqueror, Samuel de Champlain, and Cavalier de la Salle of Rouen are only a few of the intrepid Normans who carried on the winning ways of their ancestors.

Despite his distinctive ancestral traits of courage and curiosity, *Le Normand* today is generally not an extrovert. You won't find in Normandy the effusive, open-armed welcome you would encounter in a region like Provence. It may take an hour of conversation or a day or two's residence in an *auberge* before you detect a reticent smile from your host and a letting down of the guard.

Normandy demands a slow and gentle acquaintanceship. Like the best friendships, Normandy rewards with repeated encounters, yielding each time a greater understanding and a deeper love.



On market day, residents of the small town of Honfleur stock up on fresh vegetables in the Place Sainte-Catherine.