



the last terroir

LE PERCHE IS ONE OF THE MOST BUCOLIC REGIONS OF FRANCE, A RURAL BASTION OF MEDIEVAL FARMSTEADS AND PASSIONATE ARTISANS WITH A LANDSCAPE AS BEAUTIFUL AS IT IS UNKNOWN. COLETTE ROSSANT EXPLORES.

Photographs by Katherine Welkoff



When my friend Michèle Champenois, a writer for *Le Monde* in Paris, invited my husband and me for the weekend in Le Perche, I was intrigued. Where's that? I wondered. I was born in Paris but had never heard of Le Perche, nor had any of my relatives in France. It's two hours from Paris, I was told, in lower Normandy, not far from Chartres. "It has glorious *manoirs* and chateaus and is famous for its Percheron," Michèle wrote to me, "the noblest, absolutely most gorgeous horses in the world."

We drove down from Paris, past Chartres, through La Beauce, a flat plain with Kansas-like fields of wheat. Then suddenly, as we began to climb, the landscape changed radically; billboards dropped away, and the highway splintered into country roads that wound through brilliant yellow and deep green fields. All around were intermingling patches of woodland, heath, barley and rapeseed fields, tall hedgerows and orchards. *Manoirs* with fairy-tale towers hung on the side of the hills. Brooks meandered through the meadows where, sure enough, stood those majestic horses of Lancelotian stature, flashing silver in the light.

Michèle and Alain's house was in Rémalard, a village with a 12th-century church on the Huisne River. As we drove through some of Le Perche's dozen villages (and many more tiny communes), here and there were other stone houses with red-tiled roofs and herds of white cows on dazzling

green pastures. We wound along roads lined with concave hedges so tall they formed soft green tunnels. I felt like Alice going down a rabbit hole.

By the end of our first day, we'd fallen in love with Le Perche. By the end of the second day, we'd seen a long stone farmhouse built in the 18th century next to two long stone barns. Near the house were apple, pear and plum trees, and out back were oaks, then fields of golden wheat and corn. It was for sale. By the end of the weekend, we were the owners of a farmhouse in Condeau, a village that three days prior I hadn't even known existed.

Le Perche inspires people to heroic gestures. Twenty-eight years ago, three men — Jacques Dussutour, Patrick Hoguet and Jean-Claude Lenoir — began petitioning the French government to grant the region the status of Le Parc Naturel Régional. In 1998 this status was officially granted. The government has since designated 45 such areas across the country in order to manage natural resources, develop the regions' social and economic potential, and control urban sprawl. Le Perche had long appealed to the few lucky urban escapees who had heard of it. Soon after it was made a Parc Naturel, Parisians weary of the fashionable scene in popular weekend towns like Deauville arrived and began buying and restoring abandoned farms and chateaus.

Six months later, after we were settled into our house, I decided it was time to get out and explore. So I did what any new homeowner would do, I got to know my neighbors.

Like Michèle and Alain, Béatrice Saalburg and her husband came to

