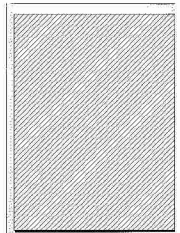
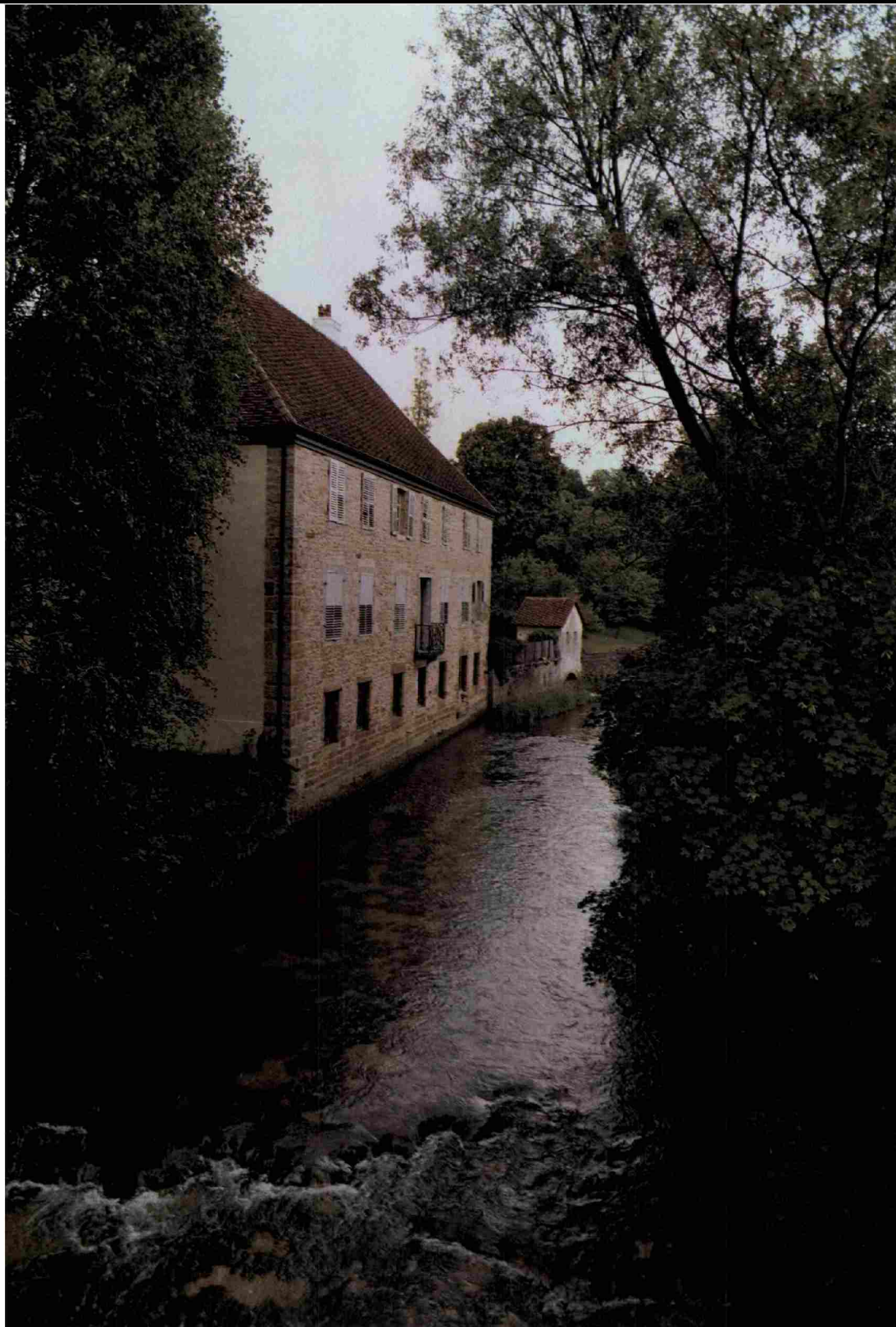


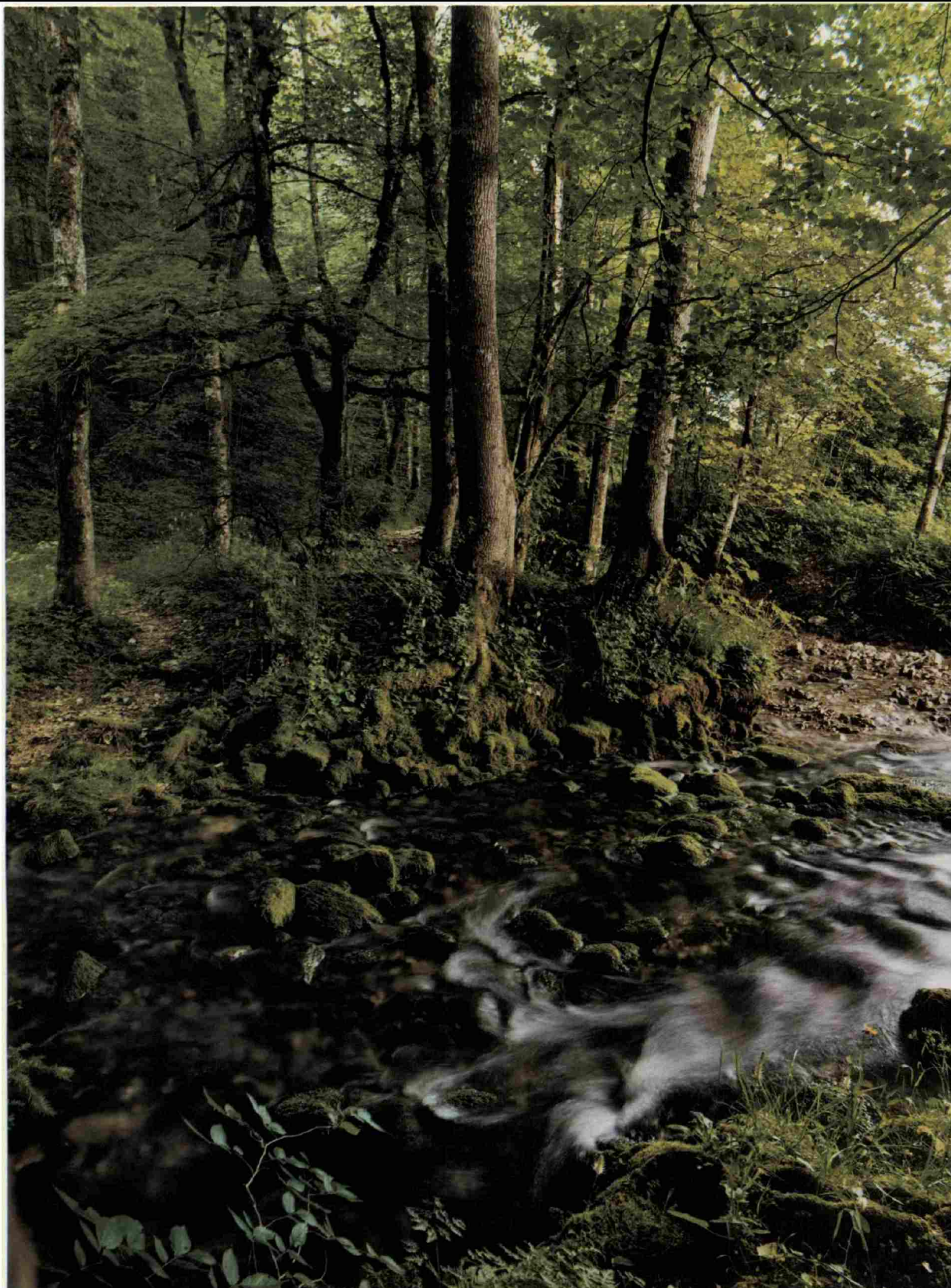
## JURA THE OBSCURE

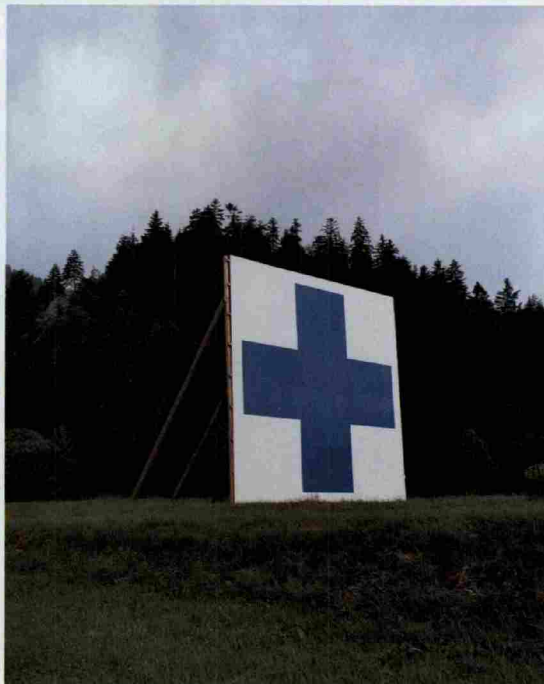
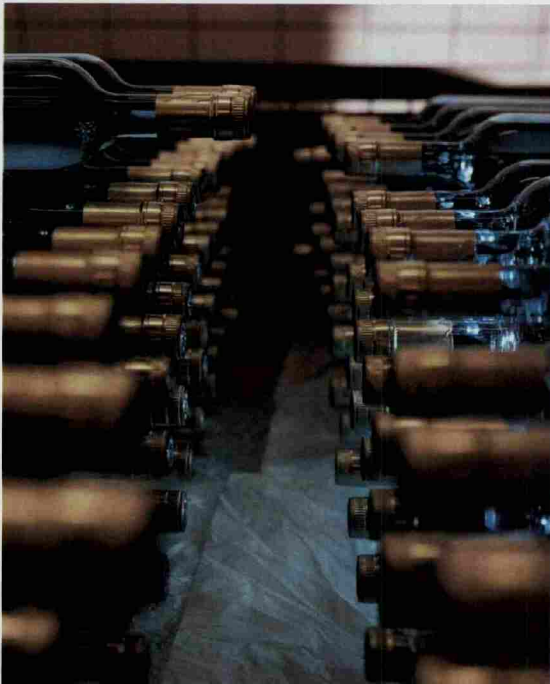
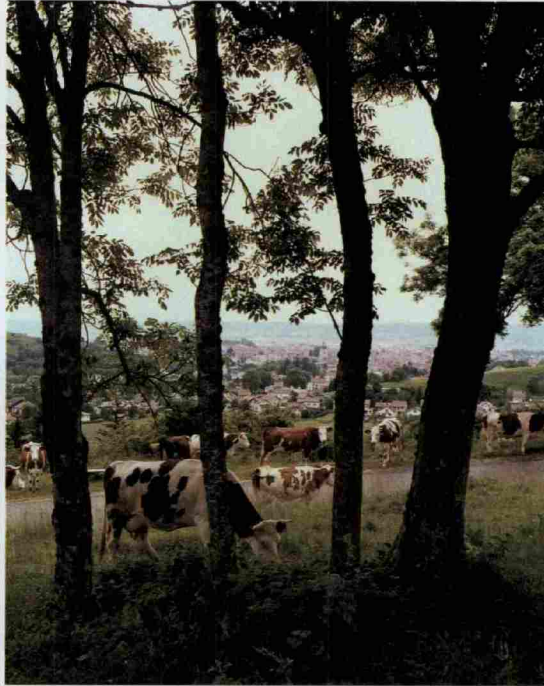
You've probably never heard of it, but this region on France's border with Switzerland is home to some of the most prized culinary treasures in the world. By Jack Turner Photographs by Brown W. Cannon III





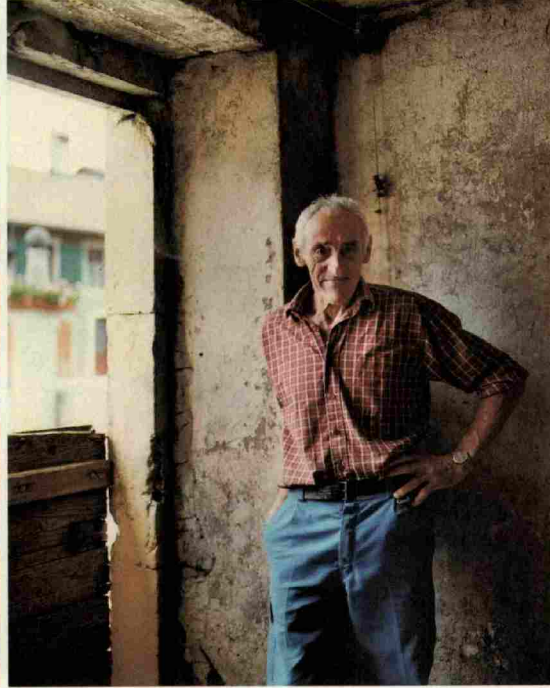
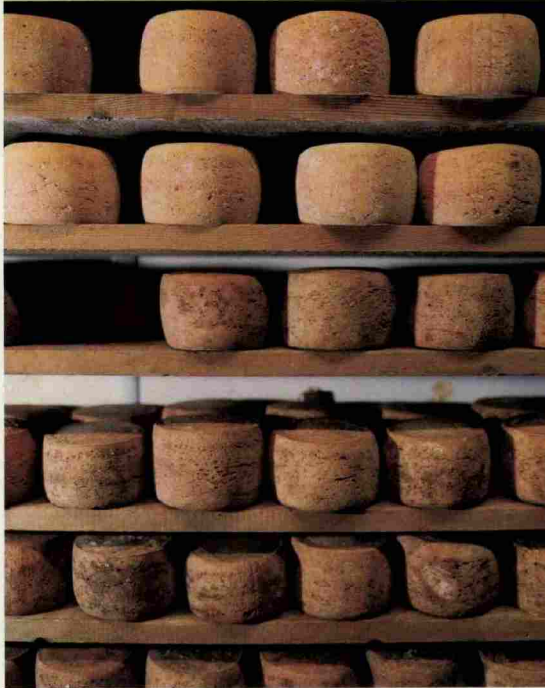
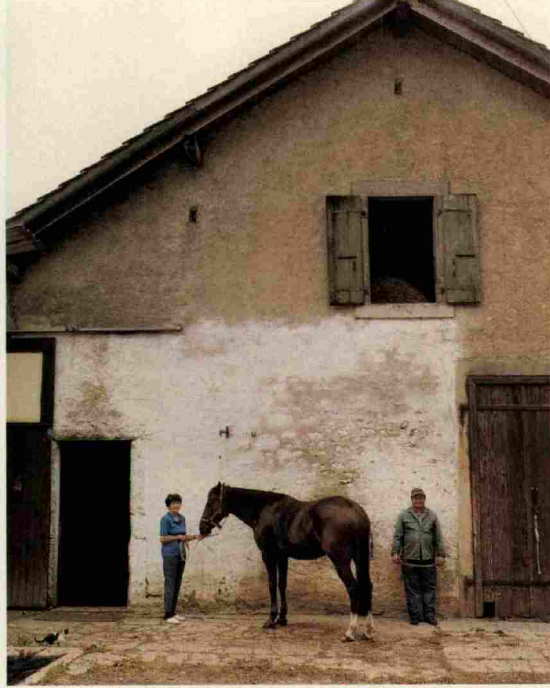
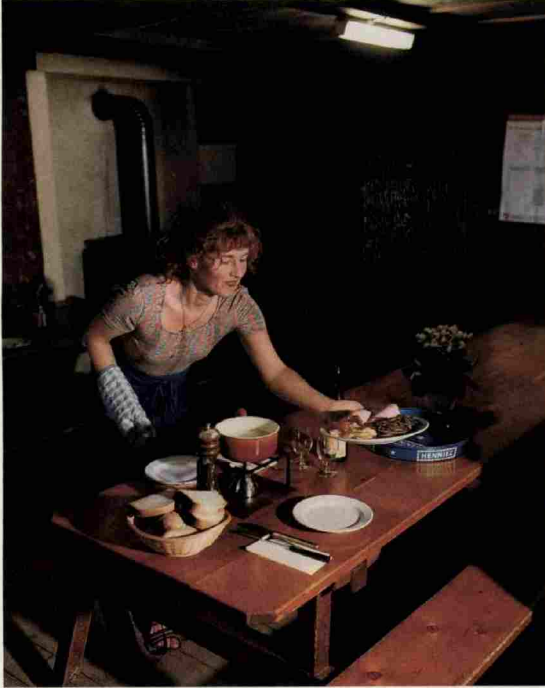
Traveling the dark, wooded mountains of the Haut Jura means finding your way to such delicacies as *vin jaune*, fresh Mont d'Or, and absinthe.





A vin jaune can be guaranteed to go on improving long after other wines have turned to vinegar. The best start to come into their own up to 20 years after bottling. The very best will hold up for 60 years.

Branch sculpture in Môtiers; pasture near Pontarlier; more art in Môtiers; absinthe at the Artemisia Distillery. Opposite: Sylan Switzerland.



While absinthe may once again carry the Jura's name across the world stage, Mont d'Or, another great product of the region, seems destined to remain, for most Americans, a matter of hearsay.

Fondue time at Le Soliat; farm living and local Georges Moulandon, both in Môtiers; Tomme Flora at the Fromagerie Michelin, in St.-Point-Lac.

Every year in early February, in the foothills of the High Jura, the long range of mountains that stretches from France into Switzerland, a village throws a party, a party for which the guests have been waiting six years and three months. It is not a party in the usual sense: There are approximately 50,000 people with wineglasses slung on strings around their necks, a heaving mass of humanity, shouting, singing the Marseillaise, and—which helps explain the atmosphere—drinking.

This year, there are men with their hair dyed yellow, others dressed as ancient Gauls, and one, for reasons known best to himself, who has come along as Brunhilde.

The immediate cause of the fuss, and the center of attention, is a large oak barrel surrounded by a dozen or so *vignerons* wearing brightly colored medieval robes. They are passing around a microphone through which they deliver tasting notes to the crowd: a scene, the first time you see it, that seems slightly surreal. Imagine, if you can, a bunch of football fans attending a wine tasting conducted by Oxford dons, and you are getting close. If picturing the scene is hard for the uninitiated, there is still less imagining the product they are celebrating and the nominal excuse for this almighty shebang. The event is known as the Percée, the breaching of the barrel stoppered up all those six years and three months ago. Inside is *vin jaune*, the yellow wine of the Jura.

On the first Sunday in February last year, I found myself in the village of Salins-les-Bains—along with several thousand other fans of *vin jaune*, one of the region's most remarkable and yet obscure products. Before Michael Crichton and Steven Spielberg brought the term to Hollywood, anything Jurassic was likely to ring bells only among geologists, dinosaur buffs, and a small group of wine and food lovers who knew better. For the Jura is indeed a lost terroir: These dark, wooded mountains are perhaps destined to be overshadowed by the neighboring topography—the spectacular snowy peaks of the Alps on one side, the open rolling hills, rivers, and valleys of Burgundy on the other. But the Jura's obscurity, if understandable, is unmerited, for the region is home to some of the most distinctive wines and food you will find anywhere in Europe.

They are so distinctive, in fact, that newcomers are in for a surprise. Away from the chaos of the Percée, Jean Berthet-Bondet, a local *vigneron*, frankly admitted his wine was *déroutant*: disconcerting, even puzzling. Walking down his long, vaulted cellar, in the medieval village of Château-Chalon, Berthet-Bondet pulled from a shelf a dusty bottle dating from 1988. We retreated to his study, where he poured me a glass in front of a vast fireplace. The first impression was of Sherry—indeed, some claim the Sherry flavor is a relic of the Spanish occupation of this region, back in the 16th and 17th centuries. But this wine had more character and depth than any Sherry I've tasted. The flavor was mineralized, nutty, with a suggestion of dried fruit and turmeric, held together by a crisp, appley acidity. For a wine nearly 20 years old, its vitality was breathtaking. It was, after the initial shock, quite sublime.

If *vin jaune* tastes like no other wine, it is simply because it is like no other. It is made from the Savagnin grape, a variety unique to the Jura, in a unique manner. In the normal process of barrel aging, the barrels are topped up as the wine evaporates, so as to prevent oxidization. With *vin jaune*, however, the *vigneron* lets evaporation take its course. By the time the wine is bottled, the barrel volume may have shrunk by up to a third, for which reason, according to tradition, the wine is bottled in the smaller *clavelin* bottle, containing a mere 62

centiliters. But where evaporation would spell disaster for most wines, for *vin jaune* it is alchemy.

Removing a stopper from a barrel, Berthet-Bondet shone a flashlight inside, revealing a thin, mottled blue-gray layer of mold: a fine film of yeast that grows spontaneously in the barrel as the wine evaporates. It looked less like winemaking than like a grievous violation of a health code: something you'd scrape off a cheese that had lurked unsuspected in the darkest corner of the fridge, perhaps. However, that alarming film of yeast, called a *voile*, is the secret to the wine's uniqueness. For not only does the yeast protect the wine from oxidizing, it will also, over the next few years, slowly imbue the wine with an inimitable and unmistakable flavor.

During the six years and three months (or longer if the *vigneron* sees fit) the wine spends in a barrel, the yeast works its magic. (Something similar happens in the production of Fino and Manzanilla Sherries, which also benefit from a film of benevolent yeast, or *flor*.) Even when the *voile* is long gone—the yeasts are spent by the time the wine is bottled—a *vin jaune* can be guaranteed to go on improving long after other wines have turned to vinegar. The best *vins jaunes*, which sell for about \$70 a *clavelin*, start to come into their own up to 20 years after bottling. The very best will hold up for 60 years, making them among the longest-lived of wines. Even by the patient standards of the winemaker's art, *vin jaune* needs time.

At the Percée, however, no one was in the mood for waiting. The dignitaries on the stage gave a string of windy, grandiloquent speeches in the civic style, while the increasingly impatient hordes shuffled their feet. Finally, a *vigneron* stepped up and uncorked the barrel with a swing of a hefty wooden mallet. To a mighty cheer from the crowd he raised the glass and, after a sip, dispensed with the tasting notes for a full-throated roar: "*Le terroir—c'est vous!*"

The Monday morning after the Percée, Salins-les-Bains had the air of a town suffering from a richly deserved hangover. Apart from a lone street sweeper looking somewhat daunted by the task ahead of him, all was quiet as I drove away. My road led me north and up the hill, away from the gentle terroir of *vin jaune*, dotted with vineyards and villages, into the hills and woods. I was heading to the High Jura and the Swiss border.

Though politically divided between France and Switzerland, gastronomically the High Jura is one. Specifically, this region is all about milk, albeit milk with a difference. As the road climbed, I passed isolated farms and dark pine forests interspersed with alpine meadows. From these meadows comes the milk that makes the Jura's remarkable cheeses; and from the wormwood that grows wild comes the drink that first put the Jura on the map, arguably the most underrated and misunderstood drink of them all: absinthe, or, as it was once known, the "milk of the Jura."

A little over a century ago, absinthe was the major industry of the High Jura town of Pontarlier. The same was true a few miles across the border, in Switzerland's Val-de-Travers. Indeed, it was here, in the late 18th century, that the drink originated. According to legend, credit goes to one Doctor Ordinaire, who rode around, collecting ingredients and selling the end product, on a horse called Roquette. For a hundred or so years, absinthe was wildly popular in France and Switzerland. But by the start of the 20th century, the drink had made deadly enemies among the temperance unions, the Church, the medical profession, parliaments, and, weirdly enough, the anti-Semitic press (some of the biggest producers were Jewish). For reasons that had little to do with scientific fact but a great deal to do with hysteria and misinformation, it was banned. Until last

March, the production and sale of all absinthe (though not, with characteristic FDA logic, its consumption) was illegal in the U.S., a ban based on a combination of flawed 19th-century science and enduring myths about toxicity—none of which have any basis in reality. (Currently only commercial brands of absinthe that contain less than ten parts per million of thujone, the active ingredient in wormwood, are allowed in this country.) Absinthe is a strong liqueur, but it is no hallucinogen, and it is certainly no poison.

It is, if correctly made, utterly delicious and somehow deeply evocative of the alpine meadows that produced it—all those bohemians and artists were onto something, in fact. And now, in the country of its birth, absinthe is making a comeback. At the Pierre Guy distillery, in Pontarlier, you can smell the aromas of wormwood and sweet, tangy anise before you get out of the car. Across town, at the Emile Pernot distillery, they are also rediscovering their past, turning out a superb absinthe, fresh, floral, astringent, and minty. The day I visited, Pernot was playing host to two absinthe enthusiasts, Peter Schaf and David Nathan-Maister (see “The Details,” page 109), who were borrowing the huge copper still to make what they called the *absintheur’s* absinthe: an exact reproduction of 18th-century absinthe, just as it was when Doctor Ordinaire rode up and down these hills. They have named it, aptly enough, Roquette 1797.

While the French and their collaborators are rediscovering absinthe, a few miles across the border, in Switzerland, it has never been forgotten. Re-legalized on March 1, 2005, absinthe is now one of the valley’s major industries. One reason behind this success is that absinthe never really went away, for in spite of the ban, the Val-de-Travers was the scene of a thriving home industry of moonshine absinthe. If the government said one thing, the Val-de-Travers was determined to do another, and absinthe was its talisman. Indeed, so firmly intertwined are absinthe and the sense of local identity that some people I spoke to voiced regret that absinthe is now, once again, legal. The thrill is gone and so, too, some would say, is the flavor—and they can, if you like, find you a bottle to prove it. (Critics point out that gone, too, is the thrill of not paying taxes on their alcohol.) But on one thing everyone seems to agree: Absinthe’s return represents the righting of a historic wrong.

While absinthe may once again carry the Jura’s name across the world stage, another great product of the region seems destined to remain, for most Americans, a matter of hearsay. *Vin jaune* and absinthe are by any measure extraordinary, but the cheese known variously as Vacherin du Haut-Doubs, Vacherin Mont d’Or, or, more simply, Mont d’Or, is in some ways the most distinctive product to have emerged from these mountains.

The day I visited the Mont d’Or, or “Mountain of Gold,” it was looking anything but golden; in fact, it was not even to be seen, shrouded in snow and swirling clouds. It was hard to picture how the snowy fields must look in summer, filled with grass and flowers and dotted with cows. Their milk produces cheeses known the world over: Comté, Morbier, Raclette, and Tomme. Yet for the cheese aficionado, winter is the only time to visit. The cows come down and into the barn, where they munch on feed harvested from the summer pastures. And the cheesemakers, so to speak, make hay.

More precisely, they make Mont d’Or. On that February morning, I found Fabrice Michelin, an artisanal producer at the foot of the Mont d’Or, stirring the morning’s production as long strands of rennet formed in the vat. Just on the French side of the border, overlooking pretty St.-Point-Lac, Michelin spoke of his cheese with the sense of strong regional identity I had by now come to expect. His cheese, he argued, is the fullest expression of these mountains, sourced exclusively from meadows at an altitude of between 800 and 950 meters. You could try to make Mont d’Or elsewhere, and indeed there are ersatz versions, but they don’t come close.

Mont d’Or is almost unique among cheeses in that it varies not so much with the seasons as with the weeks. By law, it can be made only between mid-August and mid-March, from milk produced by cows fed on hay and alfalfa. As the winter progresses, the feed ages, and the milk—and thus the cheese—develop accordingly. The best time to eat Mont d’Or is, says Michelin, in the depths of winter, when the flavor is at its richest.

By February, the cheeses were looking full, ripe, and deep. He brought me to his cellar, where they were lined up, ripening for market. Over the course of 17 to 25 days, he will hand-brush each and every cheese—seven tons in total—until they

## CHICKEN WITH VIN JAUNE AND MORELS

SERVES 4

ACTIVE TIME: 20 MIN START TO FINISH: 3 HR  
 (INCLUDES SOAKING MUSHROOMS)

*An elegant meal for four that requires only 20 minutes active time? That’s our kind of dinner. This creamy, comforting dish is just the type of thing you crave on a blustery March night. Because aged vin jaune can be hard to come by in the United States, we substituted a two-year-old Savagnin (with a flavor similar to a dry Sherry) and were very happy with the results.*

- ¾ oz dried morel mushrooms (½ cup; see Shopping List, page 142)
- 1 cup boiling-hot water
- 1 large shallot, thinly sliced
- 2 garlic cloves, smashed
- 1 tablespoon unsalted butter
- 1 cup heavy cream
- 1 whole chicken (about 3½ lb), cut into 8 pieces
- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil
- ¾ cup *vin jaune* or Savagnin plus additional for sprinkling

- ▶ Soak morels in boiling-hot water 2 hours.
- ▶ Squeeze liquid from morels into remaining soaking liquid (set morels aside), then strain soaking liquid through a paper-towel-lined sieve into a bowl and reserve ½ cup.
- ▶ Cook shallot and garlic in butter with ¼ teaspoon salt in a small heavy saucepan over medium-low heat, stirring occasionally, until tender and golden brown, about 3 minutes. Add cream and reserved soaking liquid and boil until reduced to about ¾ cup, about 8 minutes.
- ▶ Meanwhile, pat chicken dry and sprinkle with ¾ teaspoon salt and ½ teaspoon pepper. Heat oil in a 12-inch heavy skillet over medium-high heat until it shimmers, then brown chicken in 2 batches, skin sides down first and turning once, until golden brown, about 6 minutes per batch. Transfer to a plate as browned.
- ▶ Return chicken to skillet, skin sides up, with any juices from plate and add morels, reduced cream mixture, and ¾ cup *vin jaune*. Cook at a bare simmer, covered, over low heat until tender, about 45 minutes.
- ▶ Transfer chicken and morels to a serving dish and keep warm, loosely covered with foil. Boil sauce until slightly thickened and reduced to about 1¼ cups, about 5 minutes.
- ▶ Pour sauce over chicken and morels and sprinkle with a little more *vin jaune*.

look like children that have been freshly bathed, scrubbed, and readied for bed. The youngest were pale and creamy, like Camembert; those nearing full ripeness had turned a gorgeous golden pink. Around each **cheese** was a band of bark—from spruces cut from the forest around the Mont d'Or—which not only holds the cheese together but also imparts a touch of its own unmistakable flavor. Thanks to the spruce, the best Mont d'Or is a sublime marriage of creaminess cut by a delightful suggestion of resin and tannins that leach in from the bark.

As with the absinthe, the cows—or rather the cheesemakers—take little notice of the border. On both sides of it they make Mont d'Or, with the important difference that Swiss Mont d'Or is thermized—that is, heated short of pasteurization. It is by any measure a superb cheese, but one that, many people will tell you, is not quite what it was. Back in France, the Mont d'Or is neither thermized nor, ergo, pasteurized. Which makes a world of difference. The somewhat gummy, milder flavor of the Swiss cheese is overshadowed by the more complex, deeper flavor of the French product.

Even the Swiss precautions, however, are not enough to satisfy the FDA. The very qualities that make Mont d'Or such a superb cheese also guarantee it will rub the cheese police

the wrong way. In terms of texture, a ripe Mont d'Or is positively molten, more liquid than the ripest of Bries. Being made from raw milk, it would be, after the 60 days of aging stipulated by FDA regulations for raw-milk cheeses, long gone. Everything that goes into creating that inimitable, supremely creamy and complex flavor is precisely what condemns it—no deterrent to those determined cheese guerrillas who run the gauntlet of U.S. customs at the airport or to the odd intrepid restaurateur. But for all intents and purposes, Mont d'Or—the real Mont d'Or—does not reach the States.

In the dairy, pressing a fresh batch of cheeses into their spruce bands, Michelin seemed unconcerned. Indeed, he already had his hands full (his clients include a certain M. Sarkozy of the Élysée), and the four small milk suppliers he visits on his daily round at 5 A.M., day in, day out, are already struggling to meet his demand. In a globalized world, where you can get most things online or in a local store, there is something reassuring about his attitude, just as there is something reassuring about the products he and his fellow Juraissiens make. He would, he admitted, like the wider world to know about his Mont d'Or; then he observed, with a Gallic shrug, that they'll just have to come and get it. ☞

## THE DETAILS

### STAYING AND EATING THERE

At Malbuisson, in the heart of Mont d'Or country, Catherine and Marc Favre run the superb **Le Bon Accueil** (Rue de la Source, St.-Point-Lac; 011-33-3-81-69-30-58; le-bon-accueil.fr; from \$96), respectful of tradition and happily innovative. Try the saddle of rabbit cooked in Savagnin, coriander, and Savoy cabbage.

The ultimate Jura dining experience can be had at **Jean-Paul Jeunet** (9 Rue de l'Hôtel de Ville, Arbois; 011-33-3-84-66-05-67; jean-pauljeunet.com; from \$128), rated France's Best Establishment of the Year in 2006 by the prestigious *GaultMillau* guide. Jeunet's menu changes every month, according to seasonal variations and the herbs he picks from the surrounding hills. If you go in February, you'll get the Percée menu, accompanied by a range of *vins jaunes*. Try the frogs' legs with parsley and garlic sauce with an infusion of absinthe, and the *féra*, a local fish poached in a Savagnin butter and served on baby turnips dissolving into a milk sauce infused with dandelions and herbs. Located in the historic center of Lons-le-Saunier (a very pretty and surprisingly grand provincial town), **La Comédie** (65 Rue de l'Agriculture; 03-84-24-20-66) serves low-key but superb *cuisine jurassienne*, with an emphasis on the local fish, eels, and crayfish.

### BEING THERE

The **Percée** (percee-du-vin-jaune.com) is held each year in early February. In June, Boveresse, Switzerland, hosts an **absinthe festival**. The harvest festival, known as the **Biou**, is held in the major wine-producing villages of the Jura in September. Pontarlier holds the **Absinthiades**, a gathering of *absintheurs* and collectors from around the world, in October. Pontarlier also hosts a small gastronomic fair in early September. There is a well-signposted **Route Touristique des Vins du Jura** (laroutedesvinsdujura.com), which will lead you the length and breadth of the Jura's wines. Not to be missed is **Château-Chalon**, an extremely pretty village that also happens to produce some of the most distinguished of all *vins jaunes*. It's just up the road from the even prettier village of Baume-les-Messieurs, where you can stay in the vast, crumbling abbey and eat at a handful of modest restaurants. To the north, near Arbois, **Jacques Puffeney** (Quartier St. Laurent; 03-84-66-10-89) is a favorite *vigneron*, in the gorgeous stone village of

Montigny-lès-Arsures. For the cheese lover, the best bet is to follow **La Route des Fromages du Haut-Jura** (parc-haut-jura.fr), which will take you to a string of small producers who will give you samples of their product until you are truly cheesed-out. If you are here outside of the Mont d'Or season, you'll have to console yourself with the superb Comté (lesroutesducomte.com). In Pontarlier, on the French side, the **Pierre Guy** (49 Rue des Lavaux; 03-81-39-04-70) and **Emile Pernot** (44 Rue de Besançon; 03-81-39-04-28) distilleries are open to visitors and will happily give you a sample of absinthe. In Switzerland, one of the best distillers is **Claude-Alain Bugnon** (32a Grande Rue, Couvet; 032-863-36-46). His La Clandestine absinthe is a regular award winner—but then he ought to know his stuff, having been a clandestine distiller for many years during prohibition. If your head isn't spinning from the absinthe, there can be few areas as spectacular as the **Creux du Van**, on the mountain ridge above Couvet, with breathtaking views over the lake of Neuchâtel and the Alps—a Swiss version of the Grand Canyon. Once you've soaked up the views, head to **Le Soliat** (near Couvet, on the road to Noiraigue; 032-863-31-36) for a genuine fondue experience, served upstairs in this farmhouse inn. For those in need of a respite, there are luxurious spas at **Lons-le-Saunier** and **Salins-les-Bains**.

### SOURCING THE BEST OF THE BEST

*Vin jaune* is relatively hard to find in the U.S., but Puffeney's superb *vins jaunes* are available at New York's **Chambers Street Wines** (chambersst wines.com), California's **K&L** (klwines.com), and other venues (for stores selling Puffeney's in your area, go to wine-searcher.com). France's **Lucid Absinthe Supérieure** has been available in this country since last May. For sources, visit drinklucid.com. There are many dealers selling illegal and overpriced ersatz Czech absinthes in the U.S., but very few good or legal ones. The best source is Peter Schaf's **www.absintheonline.com**, which will mail some of the finest Swiss and French absinthes from the U.K. (Assuming the products contain less than ten parts per million of thujone, the transactions are legal.) If you want to buy vintage, pre-ban absinthe, such as Toulouse-Lautrec might have drunk (from around \$3,000), try **oxygenee.com/vintage**, the site affiliated with David Nathan-Maister's Virtual Absinthe Museum. —J.T.