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The Artisan Bread of Poitou

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Introduction

Nestled amidst rolling fields, meandering rivers, and centuries-old villages, the Poitou region of western France is a land shaped by its agricultural abundance and rural traditions. Few places in France remain as deeply connected to the rhythms of the land, and nowhere is this more apparent than in the region's bread. Here, humble loaves occupy a place of honor not only at every meal but also at the heart of Poitevin identity, spirituality, and sociability.

Poitou is a landscape shaped by its soils and seasons. Its temperate climate and fertile plains have made it a breadbasket for generations, with fields of wheat, rye, and barley stretching to the horizon. These cereals, harvested and milled by local hands, form the basis of an extraordinary bread culture—one that is at once distinct and steeped in the broader currents of French history. From the outside, Poitou may seem quiet or even overlooked in the shadow of more famous gastronomic regions, but it guards foodways and rituals that have endured for centuries.

Local bread here is more than mere sustenance. Each loaf tells a story written by the hands of bakers, farmers, and families who, over the centuries, have shaped the dough and the culture alike. This book seeks to reveal those stories—through encounters with village bakeries that have stood for a hundred years, through conversations with millers who understand a grain field's subtleties as well as they know their own kin, and through the tastes and textures of breads that could only be born in Poitou.

To understand Poitou's bread is to appreciate the intimate dance of geography and gastronomy: how the interplay of water, salt, grain, and wood-fired ovens creates loaves entirely unique to their terroir. Here, bread is a linkage across generations, binding together grandmothers and grandsons, neighbors and strangers, the sacred and the everyday. It marks daily life with the aroma of rising dough and the convivial act of sharing a warm slice topped with local goat cheese. It also marks celebration and solace, from village fêtes to the hush of family kitchens on a winter's morning.

In our journey through Poitou's bakeries and backroads, we will not only share hands-on recipes and time-honored techniques but also illuminate the cultural and historical tapestry in which each crumb is embedded. Along the way, we will meet the guardians of tradition—some preserving ancient methods, others finding new ways to reinvent and sustain them—as well as the artists and artisans whose work ensures that Poitevin bread remains an expression of place, memory, and creative pride.

Whether you are a home baker, a culinary historian, or a traveler with a hunger for

stories and connection, this book invites you to break bread with Poitou. Prepare to roll up your sleeves, listen to the voices of bakers past and present, and savor not just the tastes but the traditions of France's artisanal heartland.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Land and Its Loaves: Poitou's Agricultural Heritage

The story of Poitou bread begins, as all good stories of the land do, with the earth itself. Before we can delve into the intricate techniques of sourdough or the familial warmth of village bakeries, it is essential to understand the stage upon which this culinary drama unfolds. Poitou, a historic region now largely encompassed by the Nouvelle-Aquitaine administrative entity, is a place where the rhythm of life has long been dictated by the turning of the seasons and the bounty of the soil. This rural corner of western France, often overlooked by travelers flocking to the more famous wine regions or the sun-drenched Côte d'Azur, holds a quiet charm and a profound connection to its agricultural roots.

Geographically, Poitou sits at a crucial crossroads. To its northwest, the ancient Massif Armoricaïn gently slopes, while the Massif Central rises to the southeast. The heart of the region, however, is characterized by low-lying plains, traversed by the shallow valleys of rivers like the Vienne, Clain, Charente, and Sèvre Niortaise. This topography creates a diverse landscape, from verdant pastures to vast stretches of arable land, each contributing to the agricultural tapestry of the region.

The climate in Poitou is predominantly oceanic, known for its mild winters and pleasantly warm, though not muggy, summers. The region enjoys a generous amount of sunshine, with Poitiers, the historical capital, receiving around 2,400 hours annually, making it one of the sunniest spots on the Atlantic coast. This blend of sufficient rainfall and abundant sunshine is ideal for a flourishing agricultural sector, nurturing not only the grains essential for bread but also the grapes that yield celebrated wines and spirits like Cognac.

While the coastal areas benefit from the tempering influence of the Atlantic, creating a micro-climate on the littoral, the hinterland experiences a slightly more continental climate, which can be either drier or damper. This subtle variation in climate across the region contributes to the diverse range of crops cultivated and, by extension, the distinct characteristics of local produce, including the very grains that become Poitevin loaves.

Agriculture has been the lifeblood of Poitou for centuries, shaping its economy and its culture. Wheat, barley, and corn are widely cultivated, particularly in the lowlands around Poitiers and in the central and southern parts of the region. Sunflowers also paint vibrant swathes across the landscape, another key crop in these areas. This dedication to cereal farming provides the foundational ingredients for bread-making,

ensuring a local supply of high-quality grains.

Beyond grains, Poitou's agricultural heritage extends to livestock. Beef cattle graze on the Massif Central and the Massif Armoricaïn, while dairy cows are a common sight in southern Deux-Sèvres and central eastern areas. These dairy farms are particularly significant for the production of Charentes-Poitou PDO butter, a renowned ingredient celebrated for its creamy texture and delicate taste. This butter, made from the milk of local cows, is a vital component in many regional pastries and breads, adding richness and flavor.

Goat farming also holds a special place in Poitou. The region is famous for its goat cheeses, such as Chabichou du Poitou, Bûche du Poitou, and Mothais sur feuille du Poitou. There's a charming legend that attributes the arrival of Poitou goats to the Saracens, who, after their defeat by Charles Martel at Poitiers in 732 AD, supposedly left their herds behind. While archeological research suggests goats have been bred in Poitou for much longer, the tale highlights the enduring connection between the land, its people, and its animals. The commitment of local farmers has even seen a resurgence in the Poitou goat population after a decline in the 20th century, demonstrating a dedication to preserving this agricultural legacy.

The intimacy between the people of Poitou and their land is palpable. Nearly half the population still resides in settlements of fewer than 2,000 inhabitants, and rural areas are generally sparsely populated, often with an aging demographic. This demographic reality means that farming remains a significant occupation, fostering a deep understanding of the land and its nuances among the local populace. Farmers here understand their terroir, the unique combination of soil, climate, and topography, which profoundly influences the character of their produce.

This agricultural abundance is not just an economic fact; it's a cornerstone of Poitevin identity. The food grown here, particularly the grains, directly influences the flavors and textures of the bread that emerges from local ovens. When a baker in Poitou selects flour, they are not just choosing a commodity; they are choosing a product of their region, imbued with the very essence of the Poitevin landscape.

The deep-rooted agricultural practices also mean that traditions around food production are strong. While not always highly productive in a commercial sense, the emphasis is often on quality and the continuation of ancestral methods. This dedication to local, quality ingredients forms the bedrock of the artisan bread culture that we will explore in the following chapters. The fields of Poitou are not merely a backdrop; they are an active participant in the story of every loaf.

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