Home of the ‘handsome’ onion

For nearly two centuries, ‘Onion Johnnies’ have been making the journey from the Breton town of Roscoff to sell onions in Britain. And while these travelling salesmen are now a rare breed, the sweet, pink alliums are still abundant — and worthy of an annual celebration

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Picture a Frenchman. What do you imagine?

Beret, striped jersey, bicycle, string of onions around his neck? The French themselves are baffled by this widely held cultural stereotype — after all, France is the home of haute cuisine, delicate pâtisserie and fine wine. Why on Earth would the Brits choose to sum them up with a string of onions?

The answer lies in the small town of Roscoff in northern Brittany. Most French have never even heard of the place, let alone know about the region's gently flavoured pink onions, which can enhance every dish. Yet for nearly 200 years, Roscoff's 'Onion Johnnies' have travelled to Britain to sell their carefully braided strings of onions. The rest is history.

I've long loved Roscoff — a friendly seaside town of stone cottages, cobbled streets and heavenly off-shore views of colourful fishing boats and the Île de Batz, just 10 minutes away by boat. The ferry arrives at Roscoff from Plymouth, so I often pass through, picking up a string of onions on my way home. This time I've come in August, when those onions have their moment in the spotlight at the annual Fête de l'Oignon, a chance for the whole town to celebrate the allium's production, flavour and history.

The sun is shining, and when I arrive at the festival site on the Saturday morning it's already buzzing: children are clambering over vintage tractors while a Victorian threshing machine chugs away, demonstrating its agricultural might. Steam rises from the food stalls serving sausages with casseroled onions, wrapped in galettes — local buckwheat pancakes. There are onions everywhere: people holding strings of them, others pushing wheelbarrows full of them, and tables piled high with beret-clad, striped-jersey-wearing men plaiting them into 'tresses' with dried flowers and raffia string. It's a technique that prevents them from sprouting, preserving them until April. And this was key to the success of the Onion Johnnies, who would sell from the harvest in July through to February.

Mingling in the crowd is François Seité, an Onion Johnny who regularly travels to south-west England to sell at farmers' markets and high-end grocery stores. Now 78, he comes from a family of onion-sellers, having entered the trade himself at just 13 years old.

"I started in 1953 and I'd go with my father in the school holidays," he says. "We'd leave Roscoff, a little rural town, and arrive in Bristol. The big buses, tall buildings — it was magnificent, you know? It was a complete change." His eyes are sparkling.

François's memories reflect those of so many of Roscoff's people. But the full story dates back to 1828, when a bright spark named Henri Ollivier had the idea of crossing the Channel to sell the town's pink onions. He found a keen market, and the idea soon caught on. First there were just a few dozen working in Cardiff; by the early 20th century, thousands were working in towns throughout Britain, from Cornwall to as far north as Orkney.

Previous page: a typical Frenchman? This archetype was created in the French town of Roscoff
Opposite page, clockwise from top: colourful fishing boats by the water; casseroled onions to be stuffed into buckwheat galettes; an onion stall at the Fête de l'Oignon

Tying the onions helps to preserve them and prevent sprouting
Right: a mountain of onions harvested from the Roscoff earth

Why the nickname 'Johnnies', though? François explains: "There were lots of young Bretons called Jean [or Jean-François, Jean-Michel, Jean-Philippe and so on]. When my father started, he was young — also just 13 years old — and they called him 'Little John'. Then the English called them all 'Little Johnnies'."

The fact that 20,000 tons of onions are sold over the two days of this small festival shows how in demand they remain. Loïc Le Bail, Michelin-starred chef at Brittany & Spa hotel on Roscoff's seafront, has ideas about why this is.

"The Roscoff onion is handsome," he says. "It's round, it's a pretty colour. You feel like biting into it, as you would an apple. You can eat it raw, too, because it's quite sweet."

I ask him about local signature dishes using Roscoff onions, but the truth is there isn't one. "I use them as condiment," he says. "You can use them in so many different ways."

And he does: when I visit him in his kitchen, between lunch and dinner service on a Saturday afternoon, he shows me a saucer of what looks like octopus, but it's onion — deep-fried in slices, cut in such a way that the delicate strands tail off from the root. On the shelf is a jar of pickled onion slices, the colour having leached into the vinegar and turned it a bright pink.

It's not just about onions, though. The area provides a bounty of other vegetables, not to mention top-quality seafood for chefs to work with. "I call the area my garden," Loïc says.

From the arched stone windows of the restaurant, I look out over the bay as the sun drops below the Île de Batz on the horizon. To the right is the Chapelle Sainte-Barbe, a tiny white chapel perched on a small hill that manages to hide from view the gargantuan Brittany ferries in the port. The chapel is where the Onion Johnnies would come to be blessed before setting off. Their wives and families would climb the hill and wave them off. At La Maison des Johnnies et de l'Oignon de Roscoff, the town's museum dedicated to the onion-sellers' history, I learn that several ships were wrecked, killing all on board — a devastating loss when all those people came from the same village. So the blessing was a ritual that was taken seriously.

In the bright summer sunshine, I climb the steps to the Chapelle Sainte-Barbe and look down over the festival site as the sound of Breton bagpipes are carried on the breeze. Some Breton dancing is in full swing; a huge circle of people arm in arm, following basic side-to-side dance steps along to the jolly Celtic jig blaring out from the stage.

A slice of the action

As a novelty experience, festival-goers can join in the harvest, so I head back downhill to join a cheerful group of families on the back of a tractor-pulled wagon painted red and yellow. After the straw-hatted farmer helps a young boy on to the seat next to him, we're off.

The red tractor chugs its way out of town, people waving as we go, and we arrive at the farm. As soon as we disembark the wagon, beakers of cider and Breton sablé biscuits are dished out to all. If there were ever a way to get free labour, then this is it.

Warmed by the alcohol, we stroll over to the field where the drying onions are lined up in rows on the sandy red soil, which is fertilised using seaweed from the coast. We gather

Loïc Le Bail's onion confit recipe

Sweet Roscoff onions lend themselves well to this onion marmalade. Perfect served with cheese or charcuterie.

SERVES: 6 **TAKES: 2 HRS**

INGREDIENTS

1 tbsp butter
1kg Roscoff pink onions, finely chopped
100g granulated sugar
50ml grenadine
30ml red wine vinegar
10g salt, preferably fleur de sel
5g freshly ground pepper

METHOD

1 Cut a circle of greaseproof paper that fits in a large, heavy-based saucepan. Set aside.
2 Melt the butter in the saucepan over a low heat.
3 Add the chopped onion, sugar, grenadine, vinegar, fleur de sel (or regular salt) and pepper, and sweat the onions, stirring gently.
4 Cover the onion mixture with the paper and simmer over a low heat, taking care it doesn't brown, for around 90 mins, until it has a glossy, marmalade-like consistency.
5 Cool, then serve or keep in the fridge for up to five days.

Onion chutney on sale at the two-day Fête de l'Oignon

up the onions in buckets and toss them into the back of a truck, where there's already a mountain of alliums. As fun as it is for a half-hour experience, it would be tough as a day job. It's therefore little wonder so many men chose to cross the Channel to sell onions instead of doing this back-breaking work.

Back at the festival, I'm introduced to local English teacher Estelle Champeau, who's helping out on the Johnnies' stall. Estelle is a fount of knowledge, having studied the onion-sellers for her master's degree. "There were big families here and each had a small plot of land," she tells me. "If the men had stayed in Roscoff, they'd have been working the land all day. When they went to Britain, they were working with people, talking — they had to charm their customers. They saw big cities, and when they came back they brought things like cameras, tea and presents for their children; [the money they earned] allowed them to build houses."

While it was enjoyable for many, life was tough for them, even in Britain — for six months of the year, the Johnnies would essentially camp each night in the warehouses with the onions. "Selling the onions was a hard job, but at the same time the Johnnies had stars in their eyes," says Estelle.

For her research, Estelle travelled the length of Britain, digging into the history and listening to people's stories of sharing tea and developing friendships with their regular sellers. The trade began in Cardiff because the Breton-speaking Johnnies could be understood by Welsh speakers (the numbering systems, in particular, are similar) and soon spread throughout the country. With it went the archetypal image of a Frenchman.

"It was funny to hear about the caricature of the French in Britain, with onions around their neck," says Estelle. "I went to Cardiff and saw a 'Frenchman's costume' that had plastic onions with a label that said 'Made in China'. It's crazy that a small village could inspire that. But beyond Roscoff, the French don't know that image exists. When they see the caricature of a Frenchman, with beret, striped jersey and onions, they don't understand it."

Gathering pace

By the 1920s, 9,000 tonnes of onions were sold throughout Britain each year by about 1,400 Johnnies. "From a population of about 3,500, it was pretty much every man in Roscoff," says Estelle, who found the Johnnies were well documented in British culture — songs, poems

The best of Brittany

Beyond Roscoff, the region is known for several key ingredients

ARTICHOKES: Growing in the fields around Roscoff, the purple-and-green globes rise eerily out of a bed of spiky green leaves. Local restaurants serve them stuffed with potatoes, onions and bacon. Their true homeland is Roscoff's neighbouring town, Saint-Pol-de-Léon — 70% of France's entire production comes from here.

CAULIFLOWER: Summer cauliflower has a lighter, more delicate taste than its winter counterpart. Along with other locally grown vegetables — asparagus, leeks, carrots and broccoli — it was at the heart of the creation of the 'Prince de Bretagne' label, known throughout France for its fine quality.

POTATOES: A mild climate, warmed by the Gulf Stream, as well as the fertile, marine-rich soil, means vegetables grown on the Île de Batz, off the coast of Roscoff, are also of exceptional quality. Among them are potatoes that compete in the flavour stakes with the acclaimed variety from Île de Noirmoutier, on the west coast of the Loire region.

SEAFOOD: The 28 miles of coastline around Roscoff offers a rich bounty of fish and seafood. Huge crabs, succulent oysters, Breton lobster, cockles, winkles, prawns and langoustines are all staples on seafood platter menus — look out for clams and scallops, too. When it comes to fish, you're spoiled for choice with sea bass, monkfish and mackerel.

Above: La Confrérie de l'Oignon de Roscoff in their finery

and novels all showed the friendship that blossomed between them and their customers. "For a long time they were the only foreigners that British people had met — every two or three weeks, all their lives, they came. I found lots of texts that described them as tanned and exotic."

While the onion trade declined after World War II, Roscoff remained a town of Anglophiles, and no one is fonder of Britain than François, who regales me with tales of a friend selling to Winston Churchill ("He once gave him a cheque and he swapped it for cash in the pub — a cheque signed by Winston Churchill!") and how much he adores my home town of Cheltenham ("but not Gloucester... though the centre is prettier now").

When I meet him again, it's at the brunch event held at the town hall just before the festival's Sunday-morning parade. The brunch is for La Confrerie de l'Oignon de Roscoff — the Brotherhood of Roscoff Onions — a group of some 30 people, from farmers and sellers to chefs, all of whom promote and protect the reputation and quality of the Roscoff pink onion. It gained its AOP (appellation d'origine protégée — a protected status in France) in 2009 thanks, in part, to the fascinating history of the Johnnies.

Outside, a band of Breton musicians are practising their toots, whines and beats on bagpipes, clarinet-like instruments and large drums, ready to lead a parade through the town to the festival site. The members of the 'confrerie', including chef Loïc Le Bail, are dressed in traditional 19th-century costumes: neat black jackets adorned with magenta-pink buttons and brocades, and wide-brimmed hats or berets.

They're joined by the purple-and-green-robed members of the Brotherhood of Artichokes (yes, really — artichokes are the pride of neighbouring town Saint-Pol-de-Léon), other invited members of various confreries across France in their respective costumes, as well as beret-clad, bicycle-pushing members of the Association des Johnnies and locals in Breton costume.

As the church bells strike 11am, the parade begins and the merry band walks along, banners and flags held aloft. Locals and tourists take pictures with smartphones, while others watch, cheer and follow along the street. Watching quietly from the pavement is former prime minister of France Lionel Jospin, who has a house nearby.

The town is so full of adoration for a tradition that's been going for nearly 200 years. Although around 15 Johnnies still travel to Britain to sell onions (François Seité among them), it's now the locals who keep up the demand for these delicious onions. At first glance, they might appear just like any other allium — but look a little closer and you'll find layers of history that contain a deep connection between one Breton town and the people of Britain. ●

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE:
Brittany Ferries' Plymouth to Roscoff crossing costs from £273 return for a car plus two passengers, including an en-suite cabin on the outward overnight sailing. The nearest airport is Brest, a 50-minute drive away; Ryanair flies there from Southend, while Flybe flies there from Birmingham and Southampton. ryanair.com flybe.com

WHERE TO STAY:
The four-star Brittany & Spa hotel has a Michelin-starred restaurant and a spa. Room-only doubles from £106 a night. hotel-brittany.com
Chez Janie is a budget option with a good seafood restaurant and a bar famed for serving the Onion Johnnies their last drink before they'd set sail across the Channel. Doubles from £61 a night, B&B. chezjanie.fr