



# AMBERT,

## A storied history weaved into the Dore river



### Ambert, neat gardens and rolling countryside

Ambert is more than a town—it is the beating heart of broad farming community that finds markets for all of its local produce, including the flagship Fourme d'Ambert cheese. The mediaeval town centre, with its pullets hooked to rooftop eaves, stable gates, and the old stockyard at the Place du Livradois, still bears witness to long-held ties between town and country. By the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, its defensive walls no longer served a purpose, so Ambert swathed the centre with a ring of planted gardens and allotments providing congregations and leading figures with market garden vegetables and orchard fruit. This practice continued to grow in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, when the suburbs embodied a real 'garden-city' movement, providing the populace with a source of food and providing noted figures with a canvas to paint the landscape with 'exotic' trees, like the redwoods that stand visible from the top of Saint-Jean church steeple, emerging from the high walls that keep the throngs at a safe distance while shielding against late frost.



The Ambert landscape, with surrounding forests encroaching in, used to be a far more open expanse. The Cassini map shows that at the late 18<sup>th</sup>-Century height of the site's smallholders system, there was a vast cultivated clearing that kept the tree line hemmed into on the crests of the Livradois mountain peaks.

### Fourme d'Ambert cheese all dimer long

AOP-grade Fourme d'Ambert cheese normally comes just before dessert, but it also finds its way into other courses and sauces.

#### Auvergne-style savoury tart

Ingredients: 250 g shortcrust pastry, 100 g smoked bacon fat, 3 eggs, 100 g crème fraîche, 150 g Fourme d'Ambert, 15 g butter, flour, salt and pepper.

Dust a kitchen worktop with flour, take a rolling pin and roll out the pastry. Preheat the oven to 220°C (gas-mark 8). Butter the inside of a baking dish, line it tightly with the pastry, and poke holes into the base with a fork. Dice the bacon fat, blanch it in boiling water for 5 minutes, then pat it dry. Crack the eggs into a salad bowl and beat them together. Stir in the crème fraîche, the diced Fourme d'Ambert and the dry lardons, and season with salt and pepper. Pour the mixture onto the pastry base and pop straight into the oven for 30 minutes.

Recipe brought to you by chef Thierry Chelle of the 'Toques d'Auvergne' guild



### CHARACTERFUL TOWNS AND VILLAGES OF THE LIVRADOIS-FOREZ

The heritage of the Livradois-Forez Regional Nature Park is rich. It is made up of a network of towns, and big and small villages. Economic activity consists of agriculture, forestry, crafts and industry. The spatial organization of these activities goes back, for the most part, to the Middle Ages and produced, from the 14<sup>th</sup> century on, an interesting, and sometimes remarkable, urban architecture. The Parc Naturel Régional Livradois-Forez assists the communes in their efforts to revitalize those urban centres that are particularly interesting.



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Every week in July and August  
Group tours can be booked ahead all year round

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### Emmanuel Chabrier (1841 - 1894) soars

The son of a titled bourgeois family from Ambert was expected to attend law school and serve government, but forged his own path, becoming a peerless composer and figurehead of the late-19<sup>th</sup>-Century French modernist movement, and a popular friend in the Parnassian and impressionist circles of Paris. Born in 1841 at number 3 on the avenue that now carries his name, Emmanuel Chabrier learned piano early on, studying with Spanish refugees who had landed in Ambert. He was naturally sensitive and channelled his romantically exuberant energy into virtuosic piano performances, winning friends such as Villiers de l'Isle Adam, Cézanne, Daudet, Monet, Rodin, Zola, Renoir, Hérold, Mallarmé, Verlaine and Manet. He finally became a full-time composer around 1880. At the tender age of 42, after travelling first to Spain then Beirut, he wrote the orchestral rhapsody España, which proved an instant hit with the New Concerts in Paris. His music "achieves this paradox of frequently translating intentionally ingenious musical theory into a language thick with sensuality, and managing to pair it with the verve and impulse of the popular masses." Does it surface the subconscious soul of Ambert? The prolific composer, to whom we owe Gwendoline and L'étoile but also Villanelle des petits canards, Pastorale des cochons roses, Ballade des gros dindons, and Bourrée fantasque for solo piano, readily acknowledged it himself, saying: "My wood-soled sabots from Auvergne give me my tempo." His sabots would leave echoes resonating across French music for years to come, long after his death at age 53.



### What must go round Ambert people's minds

—probably a millwheel—to build a round-walled town hall on top of a granary? Ambert country gets everything it has from the Dore river travelling through. Starting with its name—from Ambé for 'river', and ritu or rito, for 'ford' or 'crossing'. Ambert is the river crossing. Set on a floodplain hemmed in by mountains, Ambert was a natural crossing, irrigated by paths and routes that brought travellers and tradesmen down from the heights as they gravitated to the valley-floor crossroads. From hunter-gathers to livestock farmers, muleteers and peddlers, a myriad of crafts and cultures would collide at the crossing. This local geography would fuel communication, contact, commerce, and but also leave it awash with waves of clashes and conflict. After the Gallo-Roman vicus was razed in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century, the township went on the defensive. The, spiralling around the focal motte-and-bailey castle, a maze of feudal buildings grew up, laying the foundations to a period of prosperity grounded in the motive power of the Dore river, manorial land tenure, and a God-fearing community. Ambert had fortification walls, Gothic architecture, taxes and levies, 19 towers, plague and hardship, but worked hard to prosper in the face of repeated attacks on the Monarchy system. The town grew around industry, commerce, and markets with mountains for workshop walls. Industrious yet inventive, it brimmed with activity, the streets teeming with artisan crafts, clerks, traders, and serfdom, with its own codes and its own unwritten laws. In the Renaissance, at the height of Ambert's papermill craft—a skill imported from Italy—the township was exclusive supplier to the prestigious Lyon printworks market... and the very first runs of the famous—and seminal—Encyclopédie were practically all printed on paper hand-made in Ambert. A stroll around the streets of Ambert is to walk back through history, a river of colourful atmospheres with shades of eternity, past 'antique' spiral staircases of the artisan districts, half-timbered frontages overlooking alleyways packed with produce brought for sale by local peasantry, the broader trades and finance street flanked by imposing Grand Siecle frontages, and cloisters, the subprefecture in the main street build on the former ramparts, railroad expectations, dolmens in the vicinity, monuments to 'homegrown' talents... All marks points in history that tell a storied past that Ambert town has jealously kept alive and re-staged to inspire and forge a new chapter...

### Papermill and braiding industries with mountains for workshop walls.

From the 15<sup>th</sup> Century onwards, the Ambert region, richly resourced in flowing streams, started making paper from natural (hemp or flax) cotton paper, and very quickly acquired a sound reputation for high-quality craft output. By the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, Ambert was supplying most of the paper needed by printers in Lyon as well as merchants who traded with the whole of Auvergne, Savoy, the Dauphiné, and the Champagne region. This flourishing niche craft drew in other complementary activities, such as tanning to make hides sides for bookbinding, or the working of felt in the filling mills that popped up along the Ambert-country streams. At the close of Ancien Régime rule, all this activity was so heavily taxed that it fell into decline. France started missing out on markets, and the Ambert papermakers were forced to emigrate. Little by little, the burgeoning textile industry would move in and take over. Looms in rooms in every home! Even though some Ambert families built up fortunes from sheets and canvases under Colbertism, the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw them turn to trimmings, edgings, braids and laces for clients from Lyon and Saint-Etienne. The original braidwork craft continues to this day around Ambert, although it has now learned to mobilize cutting-edge technologies for new applications, such as fabricating the sheathing and special-duty cables used on TGV trains or Airbus planes. Ambert today is twinned with Annweiler in Germany and Gorgonzola in Italy, which share obvious pro-cheese affinities, but the town also cultivates its age-old trait of being porous to exchange and learning from other cultures.



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**2** Boulogne wood

The Boulogne wood hiking trail winds through 7 hectares of forest populated with all kinds of species, some of which—like Douglas fir, giant fir or northern red oak—are more typically found in English landscape gardens. Boulogne wood is great for learn-as-you-walk outings, and the site lies on the greenway connecting the Richard de Bas paper mill to the Boisseyes dolmen.

**1** The Boisseyes dolmen

The Boisseyes dolmen, dubbed 'covered stone', is listed heritage, and it ranks as one of the best-preserved examples in the Puy-de-Dôme, if not all Auvergne. Its granite capstone set on five portal stones with the remains of the pad-stoned east-to-west-facing megalithic tomb are thought to weigh a combined 25 tonnes. The structure has been dated back to three millennia ago—a legacy left behind by the Stone-Age civilizations that occupied this corridor and its neighbouring lowland plains and highland peaks.

**1** Val Dore recreation lake

Four-season family-friendly water-side leisure amenity.

**1** Boulevard Sully

Boulevard Sully was built up from the 18th Century onwards, on the site of the ditches lining the earlier fortifications, laying physical and spatial foundations for Ambert to grow into the town of today. Cosy in places, yet austere overall, this provincial artery with its smart façades also hosts the messier wood-paneled subprefecture.

**2** Avenue du 11 Novembre

Back in 1902, the Avenue du 11 Novembre was known simply as 'Avenue de la Gare' or 'Station road'. Ambert had been lobbying hard for a railway connection since 1850. But instead of an east-to-west rail link that could have connected the town to Saint-Etienne, the project ultimately adopted was a Vichy-Le Puy line, thus postponing any viable completion of a first alternative to a distant future. This decision, which was counter-intuitive given the town's natural strategic position, changed the picture entirely. Ambert became a north-to-south-served town with an east-to-west-running centre that once had a gateway to Lyon! The eastern-edge neighbourhoods began to fall into decline, while the areas touching onto the railway station built between the town and the Dore river developed industry-ready amenities such as abattoirs. It is on this avenue that several Art Nouveau-style buildings popped up, one of which (at number 12) has a much-feted design.

**4** The Station

Ambert train station opened doors to passengers on 5th May 1885. At the time, all of the community's hopes for progress were tied to this new rail link. The station has been closed to rail and freight traffic since September 1980. The line now serves for the not-for-profit AGRVAP, which runs old-timer tourist trains and other family-friendly rail adventures across the Livradois-Forez from Ambert to La Chaise-Dieu.

**6** Avenue Maréchal Foch

Ambert station also serves as starting point for outdoorsy activities from self-powered handcar outings to hiking and mountain-biking trails, and the first floor hosts a number of not-for-profit organizations.

**1** The nature walk

**1** The train station avenues

**1** The centre of town

**1** The 'Cours des Allées'



**1** The round-walled town hall

Ambert's iconic, dramatic round-walled town hall is unique in Europe. The original idea, back in the Bourbon Restoration period, was to build a granary, as seed and grain trading had been hosted in Saint-Jean church since the French Revolution. The first stone was laid in 1816, and it was decided later, in 1823, to raise the building to host the local council and tax office. The round-walled town hall garnered literary fame with Jules Romain's upstart novel 'Les Copains' (The Boys in the Back Room), (1922) which described it as a "strange-looking monument, like a big daddy rotunda that would have hatched a cuter rotunda in Parc Monceau".

**2** Place de la Pompe

Place de la Pompe, which used to be named the 'Place du Marché', once had a well that was equipped with a mechanical pump under the Restoration period. The square opens a gateway into what was the trade district of Ambert, which is visible in some of the names of streets that run east-to-west. Rue des Ollières (where 'oles'—earthenware stock pots—were made) ran into Rue de la Saboterie (cobblers and shoemakers). Rue de la Salerie harks back to the salt trade. Today's Rue Montgolfier (a homage to the famous papermaking dynasty at Annonay) used to be known as 'Rue du Marché aux grains' (grain market street) and led into 'Rue de la Boucherie Vieille' (the old butcher's) and 'Rue de la Mercerie' ('mercier', trading piecegoods).

**3** Place du Pontel

The square was ground-planned in the late 18th Century to replace two former chapels alongside the cemetery and a cluster of eight shop stalls. In the 19th Century, local priest and eminent scholar Abbé Grivél read 'pontel' as a mark of the 'pointier', i.e. the pillory that served for public punishment. However, the prevailing thought since is that it marks the site of a bridge that lay across the ditch to connect the first line of defensive fortifications to the neighbouring trade hub.

**4** Rue de Goye

This archetypal 18th-Century street counts an interesting row of imposingly-fronted buildings. Granite quarried from nearby Job is an unlikely candidate for elaborate decorative work and it does lend the street an austere feel, but look closely and you will find a degree of ostentation in the craftwork around the doors. Rue de Goye was home to the richer merchants of Ambert—and probably the local consuls too. Refurbishment work across the historic old town has opened up old shops to new Ambert-based nonprofits and opened old buildings to new tenants.

**5** Stripped-and-exposed Rue de la Grave

The fact that this 15th-Century home has fallen into such abandon is often the opportunity to get a stripped-down picture of technique behind the many half-timbered constructions found in the historic old town of Ambert. This Medieval-vernacular homes present a series of rising corbels that are keyed inside a set of horizontal, vertical or diagonal timbered supports and then upheld up using rammed earth or wattle and daub masonry. The frontage was then faced with naturally-stained lime plaster. Systematically exposing and painting the timber latticework is something learning from far more recent restoration techniques.

**6** Saint-Jean church

Construction on this imposing Gothic church made of five unevenly-spaced bays and an ambulatory began in 1471. The project was shaped by a desire to showcase the town's prosperity as a successful papermaking centre by 'undertaking to build a scheme that mirrors Notre-Dame de Paris'. Its style resonates with Chaise-Dieu and borrows southern French influences. The bell-tower features Renaissance-style pilasters in keeping with the prevailing style of 1550 when construction was completed. The building tops out at 55 metres high, successfully fulfilling its purpose, which was to be seen from very far away and comfortably rise above the walls that ringed the town's old centre. There is vernacular custom unique to Saint-Jean church, whereby throughout the three days leading up to Easter, services of worship are announced by a 'cornaire' who sings a terret from the Stabat Mater through a 3-metre-long wrought iron horn.

**7** Place des Minimes

At the dawn of the 17th Century, the Minims played a part in revitalizing the town's religious standing, and they used this square for tithing. It features a fine 15th-Century half-timbered house that is on the national heritage list. The immediate surroundings of this building form an ensemble that is unique in Ambert, with several half-timbered houses huddled together around a 19th-Century fountain that stands on what used to be the four banal, or communal oven, that was kept separate from the building to avoid risk of fire. Rising from the heart of this ensemble is what is called 'Mandrin tower', in memory of the famous 18th-Century smuggler's many stopovers in Ambert.

**8** The feudal heart of town

The first walled settlement was probably built around the 9th or 10th Century, on a rare flat site overlooking the Dore river. The original defensive bastion encompassed the castle, the prisons, and then Saint-Michel chapel, as well as an interlacing network of passageways and houses for merchants, priests, men-at-arms and craftsmen. Little of the original enclosure remains today, but the walls followed an oval boundary line that is still easy to pick out. It is bounded to the north by the Rue des Chazeaux, to the south by the Rue de la Boucherie, and to the west by the Rue de l'Ancienne Prison. The road into the Rue du Château, which crosses the feudal heart of the town, was originally guarded by a gate on either side. Rue du Château would take you to the Place du Châtelet, which was home to the feudal castle sited at the highest point of the town to easily keep watch and organize defences. The Maison de la Fourme d'Ambert (15th Century) hosts audio-guide tours that unveil the secrets of cheese-making.

**9** Boulevard de l'Europe

Built over the protective ditches bordering the second curtain wall that was raked during the town's heyday, the Boulevard de l'Europe retains the typical featured of a commercial artery, made for trade and holding goods in storage. It is dotted with warehouses, gardens and mansions, and commands fine views over the Forez mountains.

**1** Chabrier public gardens

The discrete and cosy charm of this very 'Third Republic' garden offers a welcome contrast in a town more used to building monuments and naming streets to celebrate its native sons: the composer Emmanuel Chabrier de Pierre, but also the noted academic Pierre de Nolhac (1858-1936) who championed humanism and the Renaissance, the mathematician Michel Rolle (1652-1719) of the eponymous Rolle's theorem, and the regional painter François Angeli (1890-1974) who penned the illustrations for fabulous 1951 edition of Gaspard des Montagnes (1951)—Ambert's own Pliade spanning centuries of culture.

**2** Cours des Allées—home to lime trees, a cinema, and the Tribunal

The Cours des Allées, now renamed Place Charles de Gaulle, is a meadow that was recovered just after the Revolution from the estate of the last lord of Ambert. The space took shape under the July Monarchy, in parallel with construction of the combined courthouse and prison by local Puy-de-Dôme architect Agis Ledru. Its flat-plan tree-lined landscape, offering views across a fountain made of Volvic stone to a bandstand and out to the colomnade of the Palais de Justice, is a typical example of 19th-Century urban style. The heavy shade of chestnut trees is just perfect for dreamy strolls and friendly chats. In summer, it clicks and murmurs with the sound of pétanque, a communal hub of the community made stronger by its media library (housed the former theatre), cinema, and the arts venue. The way in is set into a row of well-reserved façades.

**3** The Monument to Henri Pourrat

This granite-built monument erected in 1975 by Jean Chaudard represents Gaspard protecting Anne-Marie in a classic allegorical tale of Good versus Evil, signed off by the author in these words: "The world may be bad, but friendship is its saving grace". The author of *Gaspard des Montagnes* and *Ceux d'Auvergne* was born here in Ambert on 7th May 1887. He had moved to Paris in 1905 to attend the National Institute for Agronomy, but illness forced him back to his hometown Ambert. He would spend his days writing, walking, and reading. Pourrat spent the last few years of his life on his life-work volume *Trois des Contes*. He died on 16th July 1959 in Ambert, where he is buried. Henri Pourrat portrayed the Auvergne as deeply catholic, more bourgeoisie than rural peasantry, which is not the whole Auvergne picture. However, his sprawling work, which counts nearly a hundred volumes, counts a few gems that are more as masterpieces.

The town of Ambert is listed as an Architectural, urban and landscape heritage protection area (ZPPAUP). However, it has not always held such conscious interest in keeping the city's built identity as a legacy to future generations! The history of Ambert can be staked out in the public buildings like chapels or community homes left to fall into ruin... Today, though, the protection of heritage-value sites is part of a wider policy to reclaim the mediaeval and classical centre. Ambert's centre originally counted three distinct focal hubs—one clerical, one feudal, and one merchant—that were later unified in the 15th Century to form a single inner compound—ringed by the 19 towers—that continues to shape town centre today.

