



## A BRETON BITE

In Brittany, France, crêpes are a treasured local dish—but making them is no picnic, as **JAY CHESHES** learns when he steps up to the griddle.

**S**TANDING IN A CIRCLE in a converted boathouse facing the port of St.-Malo, in the northwestern French region of Brittany, our small group of strangers introduces ourselves. It's late February 2020, a few weeks before the COVID-19 pandemic will lock the country down, and months before what would typically be Brittany's summer tourist season. We are here for crêpe school, and my classmates are all locals—a few retirees, a mother and daughter, one high school senior—most of whom are cashing in gift certificates they'd received at Christmas.

"I've lived in St.-Malo for twenty years and I don't know how to make galettes," says Béatrice, a pharmacist, using the Breton name for savory crêpes made with buckwheat flour (regular crêpes are made with white flour and are often sweet). "The last time I made them it was a real catastrophe," says another classmate, Jacques, a retiree with a walrus mustache. "There was a family petition, and so I'm here," jokes his friend Jean-François. "I blew the batter, I blew the turning, I blew everything."

Galettes and crêpes are to Brittany what pizza is to Naples: a representative staple, an earliest dining-out memory. Here, mom-and-pop crêperies are ubiquitous—there are

FROM LEFT: ROMAIN BUISSON/COURTESY OF BREIZH CAFE; ALUXUM/GETTY IMAGES





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In St.-Malo, France, crêpes are a way of life. Left: A galette complète, with egg, cheese, and ham.

some 1,800 establishments specializing in this inexpensive dish. In most savory varieties, the crusty edges ooze with melted cheese, while the sweet crêpes are smeared with Nutella, jam, or chestnut cream.

The Atelier de la Crêpe—where I find myself tying on an apron with my new friends in a teaching kitchen early on a Saturday morning—aims to elevate Brittany’s most iconic food. The school has typically offered six-week certificate programs for aspiring professional *crêpiers*, which include lessons on the history and heritage of buckwheat. It also opens up its battalion of traditional cast-iron Billig griddles to amateurs, who can

do four-hour introductory courses like the one I signed up for.

The school is the vision of restaurateur Bertrand Larcher, a local celebrity who launched the state-of-the-art facility in the fall of 2018. Larcher has spent almost 25 years promoting Brittany’s food culture with his empire of Breizh Cafés, which can be found in Tokyo and Paris, as well as in St.-Malo and nearby Cancale. These establishments serve contemporary versions of standard crêpes, made with organic flours and top-of-the-line Bordier butter, and pair them with natural wines or small-batch apple ciders. “To seduce the new generation you have to present things in a new way,” he says.

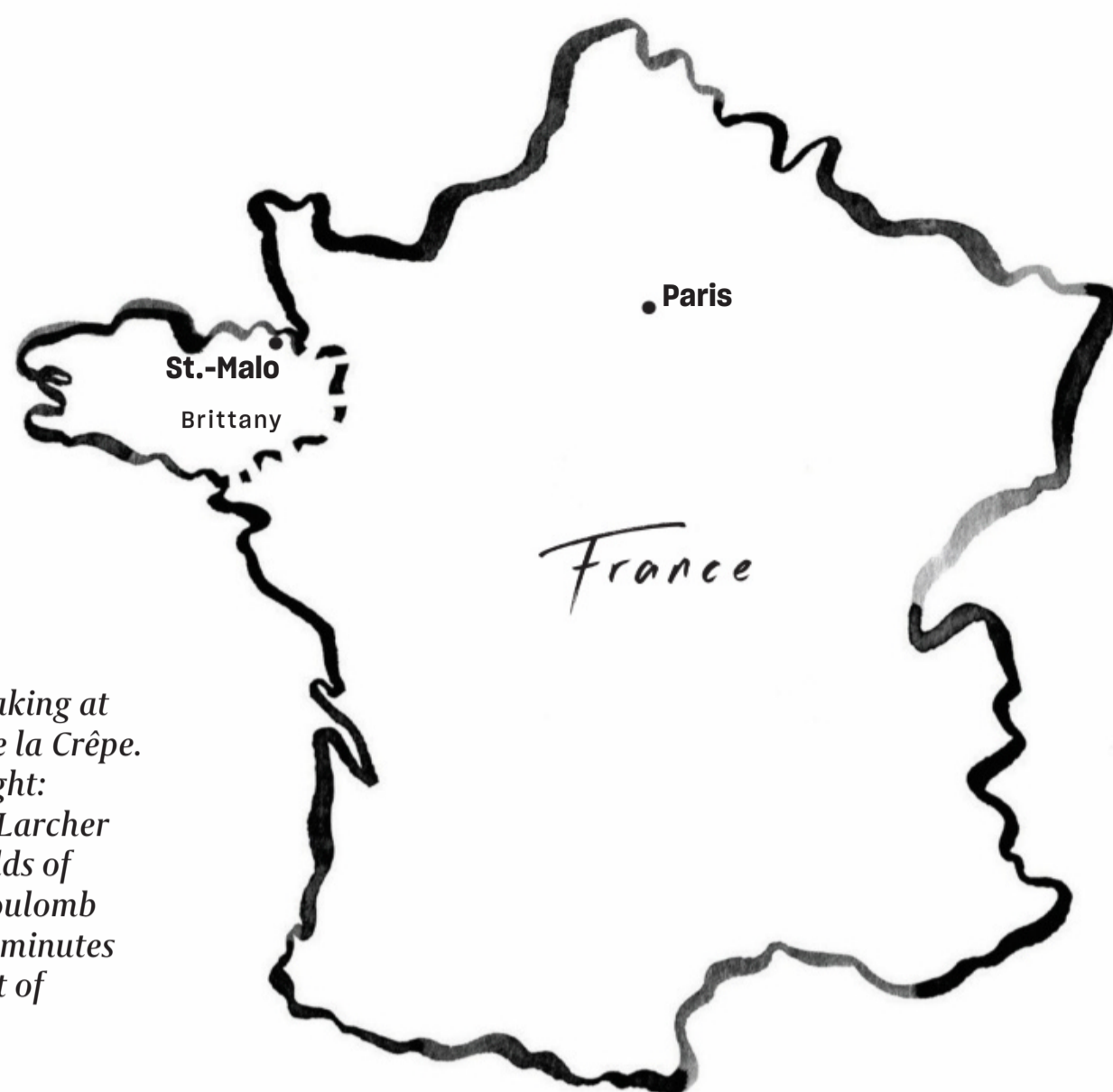
Larcher, who grew up on a farm in northeastern Brittany, started his hospitality career in Switzerland. There, he met his Japanese wife, Yuko, a perfumer, and in 1995 they moved to Tokyo, where he opened the city’s first Breton crêperie.

Five years ago, Larcher returned home to Brittany with Yuko and their five kids, moving to the coast in St.-Malo. He’s been investing in his new hometown ever since, with help from billionaire benefactor and Brittany native François Pinault, the founder of luxury fashion group Kering (which owns brands like Saint Laurent, Alexander McQueen, and Gucci). Pinault is now Larcher’s partner in the expansion of Breizh Cafés. The flagship, Le Comptoir Breizh Café, is in St.-Malo; it turns out remarkable, delicate crêpes made from superior ingredients, whether a *maki*-style roll or a classic *complète* filled with salty ham, runny egg, and nutty Comté. Larcher also operates a Japanese bistro, Otonali, next door to his St.-Malo crêperie, plus a boutique that sells buckwheat pasta and flour, salted caramels, and honey.

Four years ago, Larcher purchased a rambling farm above the sea in St.-Coulomb, just outside St.-Malo, where he is planning an ambitious epicurean retreat, still years from fruition, that will include restaurants, hotel rooms, and a spa, along with acres of farmland to grow food on-site. Larcher has already planted 3,000 apple saplings with the goal of producing cider, and 20 acres of buckwheat for milling into flour for—what else?—crêpes.

“This farm, like everything, will be a bit Japanese, a bit Breton,” he says, tromping through the property’s muddy fields in his wellies. “You’ll be able to eat a galette and drink some sake, with a view of the sea.”





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Crêpe-making at *Atelier de la Crêpe*.  
Below right:  
Bernard Larcher  
in the fields of  
his St.-Coulomb  
farm, 20 minutes  
northeast of  
St.-Malo.



While the farm project percolates, the *Atelier de la Crêpe* remains Larcher's proudest achievement. He hopes the school will help him make a case for inscribing Breton crêpes on UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage list, alongside other culinary treasures like Belgian beer and North African couscous.

My own Saturday-morning class at the school turns out to be a surprising challenge. Our chef-instructor, Claude Hirlay, shows a hands-on method for whipping up buckwheat batter, rolling up a sleeve, thrusting a forearm into the bowl, and beating the mixture back and forth—*whack! WHACK!*—until the batter is thick and airy.

We get our Billigs smoking hot before ladling on batter. Inching the liquid into an even layer with our *rozells* (wooden batter spreaders) requires speed and dexterity. The finished galettes should be almost thin enough to read a newspaper through but solid enough to support lots of fillings, Hirlay tells us. Mine turned out to be a mangled mess—gloopy, misshapen, and falling apart. “It takes practice,” he says. “People think this job is easy. Just imagine if you were trying to handle six orders at once.” ●

#### LEARN TO MAKE CRÊPES IN BRITTANY

St.-Malo is three hours from Paris by train. **L'Atelier de la Crêpe** offers four-hour amateur classes on weekends that are scheduled to resume this fall. [ateliercrepe.com](http://ateliercrepe.com); \$89.

#### WHERE TO STAY

Thirty minutes east of St.-Malo in Cancale, Bertrand Larcher operates a small guesthouse above the town's outpost of the Breizh Café (a great place to see crêpe masters in action). Most rooms have views of the oyster beds in the Bay of Mont-St.-Michel, just across the street. [breizhcafe.com](http://breizhcafe.com); doubles from \$164.

