

Dijon:

More than Mustard

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY MARY ANN DESANTIS

Everyone thinks of mustard when they hear about Dijon, France, but the city's real attraction is the Owl's Trail, a sweet and spicy walking tour through the capital of Burgundy.

Years ago I visited Paris, but I did not travel elsewhere in France. I equated my experience with foreign tourists who visit only New York City and picture the mega-metropolis as "America." A more recent trip to the French countryside convinced me that to truly appreciate French culture, history, and people, tourists have to explore much more than just the "City of Light."

Dijon, known as the "Town of 100 Spires," captured my imagination in college when an acquaintance studied abroad there. And as a Dijon mustard lover, I thought it would be interesting to taste the product in the place where it originated. Dijon lies about 186 miles southeast of Paris, and daily trains make it an easy jaunt from the French capital.

Good walking shoes are imperative because Dijon has organized the Owl's Trail, a twenty-two-stage walking route that leads visitors to the city's historic sites, museums, shops, and cafés. Each stop is numbered and marked with a plaque that correlates with a free Owl's Trail guide, available from Dijon's Office of Tourism.



Why an owl trail?

It is believed a small stone owl on the exterior of the city's thirteenth-century gothic church, Notre Dame of Dijon, brings luck to visitors who touch it with their left hands. Although the church is famous for its Jacquemart clock tower built in 1382 and grotesque gargoyles that hover above the entrance, the stone owl on the right exterior wall has become a good luck charm for the city itself, which draws tourists from around the world. Rubbed smooth by millions of hands over the centuries, the owl is actually the ninth stop on the trail. If you don't look up, the small icon can be easily missed; however, the crowds at the corner of the Rue de la Chouette (Street of the Owl) will indicate you are in the right place.

My visit to Dijon began with the traditional workman's lunch of Beef Bourgogne at the charming L'Épicerie et Cie, located on the picturesque Place Emile Zola. I should not have worried about the calories I was consuming because I needed every last one for my walking tour, which began at the Tour Philippe le Bon, known to Anglos as Philip the Good's Tower. The 316 steps led to a panoramic view of Dijon's eclectic architecture. Erected in the fifteenth century, the tower symbolized the prestige and power of the Dukes of Burgundy, who chose the town to be the capital of their vast territory from 1363 until 1477.

Although the city's tourism office says the trail can be covered in two hours, I took much longer. I wanted to spend time at the sites, particularly the covered market designed by Dijon's native son Gustave Eiffel. The market, number five on the Owl's Trail, comes to life on Tuesdays, Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays as locals shop for the freshest fruits, vegetables, cheeses, pastries, candies, and meats.

The Musée des Beaux Arts (Fine Arts Museum) also should be more than a photo op. Founded in the eighteenth century, the museum is renowned for its diverse collections ranging from Egyptian art to twentieth-century masterpieces. With free admission, the museum is one of Dijon's highlights and is the fourteenth stop on the Owl's Trail.



And what about mustard?

A trip to Dijon would not be complete without a stop at the Moutarde Maille boutique in the town's center. Although not an official Owl's Trail stop, the boutique on the Rue de la Liberté is worth visiting because you will never again see so many flavors of mustard in one place. Many of these unique flavors come from the Burgundy winemakers who provide juices for Dijon mustards. Antoine Maille was a vinegar master who, in 1747, provided the *official* mustard to the French king. Today, the shopkeepers are happy to provide free tastings and offer tips on how to preserve mustard's flavor (put a lemon slice inside the open jar). You will also learn that more than sixty percent of today's mustard seeds are actually from Canada.

Don't stop with mustard, though. Dijon is renowned for its other gastronomical delights, such as gingerbread, black currants, Charolais beef, truffles, pastries and, of course, grand cru wines. So when you stop at Notre Dame, be sure to tell the wise, old owl you do not wish to gain any weight in this delightful city. For more information, go to www.visitdijon.com.



About the writer

After receiving a bachelor's degree in journalism, Mary Ann DeSantis began her career as a newspaper reporter and photographer before moving into public relations and marketing in Atlanta. She and her husband moved to Florida in 2000, and she began writing for *Style* publications in 2006. Her writings can be found at www.maryanndesantis.com.