

## Things to Know: Places to Go A French Chateau in the Loire Valley: Chenonceau

Janer Danforth Belson, MGV 2016

In 2014 Susan Strauss (MG 2014) contributed a lushly illustrated essay in the *Trumpet Vine* on Villandry, a frequently visited chateau near Tours southwest of Paris. The chateau is known primarily for its remarkable gardens restored in the early 1900s to their mid-16th century style. I recently traveled to the Loire Valley to visit Chenonceau, Chaumont-sur-Loire and Chambord. All are impressive creations of the Early Renaissance when landscape architecture began to flower in France.



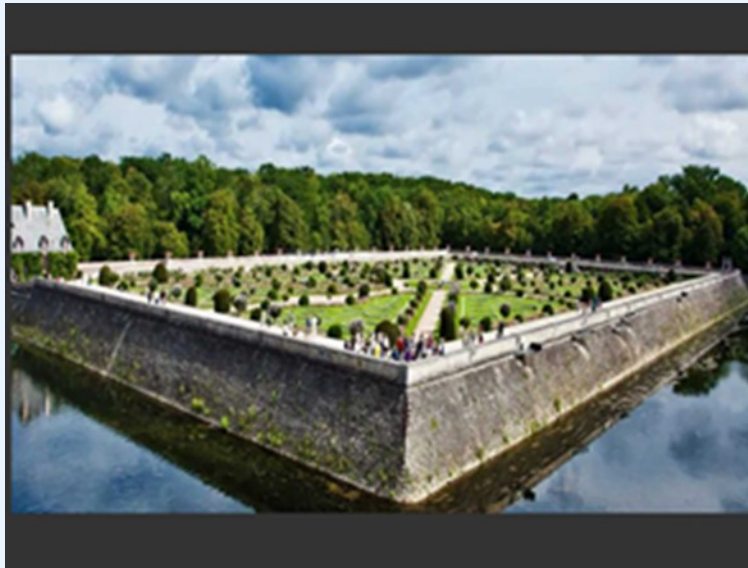
Chenonceau is a beautifully restored chateau that straddles the banks of the River Cher in the Loire Valley. It is a popular destination with a rich history and stunning gardens. Its evolution over the years is well documented through primary sources, including household records, contemporary drawings and official accounts.

In the 13th century, the Domaine de Chenonceau belonged to the Marques family. The original structure was burned in 1412 to punish Jacques Marques for an act of sedition. He rebuilt the chateau in the 1430s. His son, Pierre Marques, fell into debt and was forced to sell the property in 1513 to Thomas Bohiers, who served Charles VIII as Chamberlain and Francis I as Treasurer. Thomas and his wife Katherine Briconnet demolished all the buildings on the site except for the tall round keep (or donjon) which still stands today as the "Tours des Marques" and retains its medieval appearance. Thomas reused the pilings under the mill as the foundation for a square pavilion built as their home between 1515 and 1521. Thomas and Katherine had nine children. Their son Antoine inherited the property but lost it to Francis I because of a financial scandal involving embezzling from the crown. When Francis died, his son Henry II inherited the chateau.

D'ANE DE POICTIER.



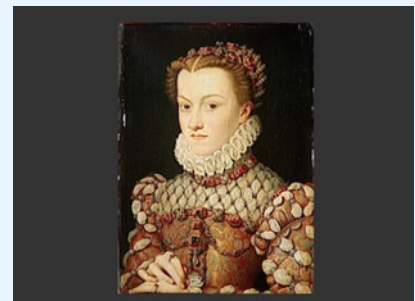
Diane de Poitiers was given Chenonceau as a gift from her lover, Henry II, in 1547, much to the displeasure of Henry's wife, Catherine de Medici. Diane was the beauty of her day, more than 20 years older than Henry and an astute business woman. She turned Chenonceau into a lucrative farm, harvesting and selling produce, fruit and grapes.

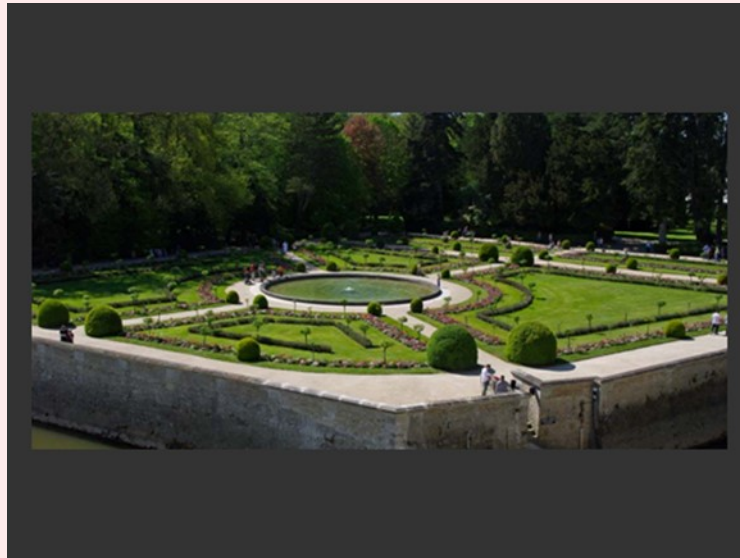


She also ran a silkworks on the mulberry bushes growing on the property. Diane kept very good documentation of the successful business operation of the estate. She built a bridge over the River Cher to access her fields on the other side. Henry gave her 50 trees to use to make caissons during the construction of the bridge. We also know that she had 200 fruit trees delivered to the chateau, gifted to her by the Archbishop of Tours. The type of trees that she was given are unknown, but later records list cherry, plums and pear trees being bought for the gardens.

Fifteenth century drawings document the layout of Diane's garden. Inventories record what was planted on the grounds during Diane's time in the mid-16th century. What is known today as Diane's Garden (shown above) occupied 5 acres, and was planted with lilies, musk roses, violets and vegetables. To protect it from flooding, Diane built an earthen embankment out of wooden frames faced with stone.

The current layout was designed by landscape architect Achille Duchene (1866-1947), which gives the appearance of a floating parterre with clipped yew topiary, santolina shrubs and bedding plants. A circular fountain has been restored in the center of the garden where it stood in Diane's garden. In 1559 when Henry died, Diane had to forfeit Chenonceau to Henry's widow, Catherine de Medici, in exchange for Catherine's chateau at Chaumont. Diane was philosophical about the loss of Chenonceau. It had never been her primary residence, which was at Ante. Plus, Chaumont turned out to be a more lucrative estate due to its position on a bluff over the Loire. Diane collected tolls from ships transporting trade goods up and down the river.





Catherine de Medici exulted in her new prize and used it as a major residence during her time as regent for her three young sons. She was responsible for adding a second-floor ballroom on top of the bridge Diane built. She also redesigned the gardens to accommodate her lavish outdoor fetes and garden parties. Contemporary sources report at least three major month-long galas here, referred to as “orgies” by the popular press of the time.

Catherine’s Garden (shown above) faces the lake and park, just to the west of Diane’s garden. There are five panels of lawn next to the “Tours des Marques” grouped around an elegant circular basin adorned with globes of boxwood. Catherine had plans to expand the chateau to triple its size, using the current chateau as the central section of the larger building laid out like pincers around the existing buildings. This never came to pass. When Catherine died, her daughter-in-law, Louise de Lorraine (widow of Catherine’s deceased son Henry III), inherited Chenonceau in 1589. Louise went into deep mourning in response to Henry’s assassination, becoming a recluse. She redecorated her bedroom in black and purple wall paper and draperies. Louise’s bedroom is displayed today as it may have appeared then.

The Chateau is sometimes referred to as the “Chateau des Dames” because of its distaff ownership over the years. In the 18th century, Louise Dupin, a brilliant French “saloniste,” owned Chenonceau; and she turned it into a famous intellectual center for French philosophers of the Age of Enlightenment, such as Voltaire, Montesquieu and Rousseau. She wrote a feminist essay, *On the Equality of Men and Women*. She invested a considerable amount of money in the chateau, stripping away the funereal décor imposed by the grieving Louise de Lorraine. It was Madame Dupin whose cool head saved the chateau from destruction during the French Revolution by explaining to the revolutionary forces that Chenonceau provided the only bridge across the Cher for many miles. The last heir of the Dupin family sold it to Marguerite Wilson Pelouze, who spent a considerable amount of money returning Chenonceau to its state under Diane de Poitiers. Many of Catherine de Medici’s embellishments were removed. A number of chimneys in the Renaissance style were reconstructed, and the gardens were restored. Unfortunately, mounting debts forced Pelouze to sell the chateau in 1888.





The current owners are the Menier family, chocolate magnates, who bought the chateau in 1913. Gaston Menier converted the bridge/ballroom of the chateau (shown here) into a field hospital, treating over 2,500 wounded WW I Allied Soldiers. This work was administered and underwritten by hospital matron, Simone Menier, and her husband George. During WW II, Simone was again active. The River Cher formed the dividing line between Nazi-controlled France and free France. The Nazis controlled the north Chateau side of the bridge/ballroom; the south side of the bridge/ballroom was on the Allied side. Even though Nazi guards patrolled the river to prevent people from crossing, Simone helped Jews and French villagers to escape by unlocking the south side ballroom doors (shown above) whenever patrols were out of sight. The chateau was bombed by the Allies in 1944. The chapel was hit and its windows destroyed. In 1951, the Menier family hired Bernard Voison to restore the chateau. It remains in excellent condition, and well worth a visit.

Chenonceau is a popular and sometimes crowded visitor destination. Tours are given on a regular basis, and chateau and grounds can be rented as a venue for private events. The chateau is known for its inventive school of flower arranging, with fantastic creations that change constantly by utilizing flowers grown in the chateau's gardens and greenhouses. Sound and Light presentations are also offered during the evenings on summer weekends. For more information, visit the website [www.chenonceau.com](http://www.chenonceau.com).



#### Photo credits:

Photo 1: Chenonceau aerial view: [www.traveltoeat.com/chateau-chenonceau-gardens-and-forest-loire-valley-france/](http://www.traveltoeat.com/chateau-chenonceau-gardens-and-forest-loire-valley-france/)  
 Photo 2: Portrait of Diane de Poitiers: [www.thecultureconcept.com](http://www.thecultureconcept.com)  
 Photo 3: Diane de Poitiers' Garden at Chenonceau: [www.tripadvisor.com](http://www.tripadvisor.com)  
 Photo 4: Catherine de Medici's portrait: [www.reign.wikia.com](http://www.reign.wikia.com)  
 Photo 5: Catherine de Medici's Garden at Chenonceau: photo by Charles V. Belson  
 Photo 6: Chenonceau's Ballroom/Bridge interior: photo by Charles V. Belson  
 Photo 7: Chenonceau Floral Arrangement: photo by Charles V. Belson  
 Photo 8: Chenonceau Floral Arrangement: photo by Charles V. Belson