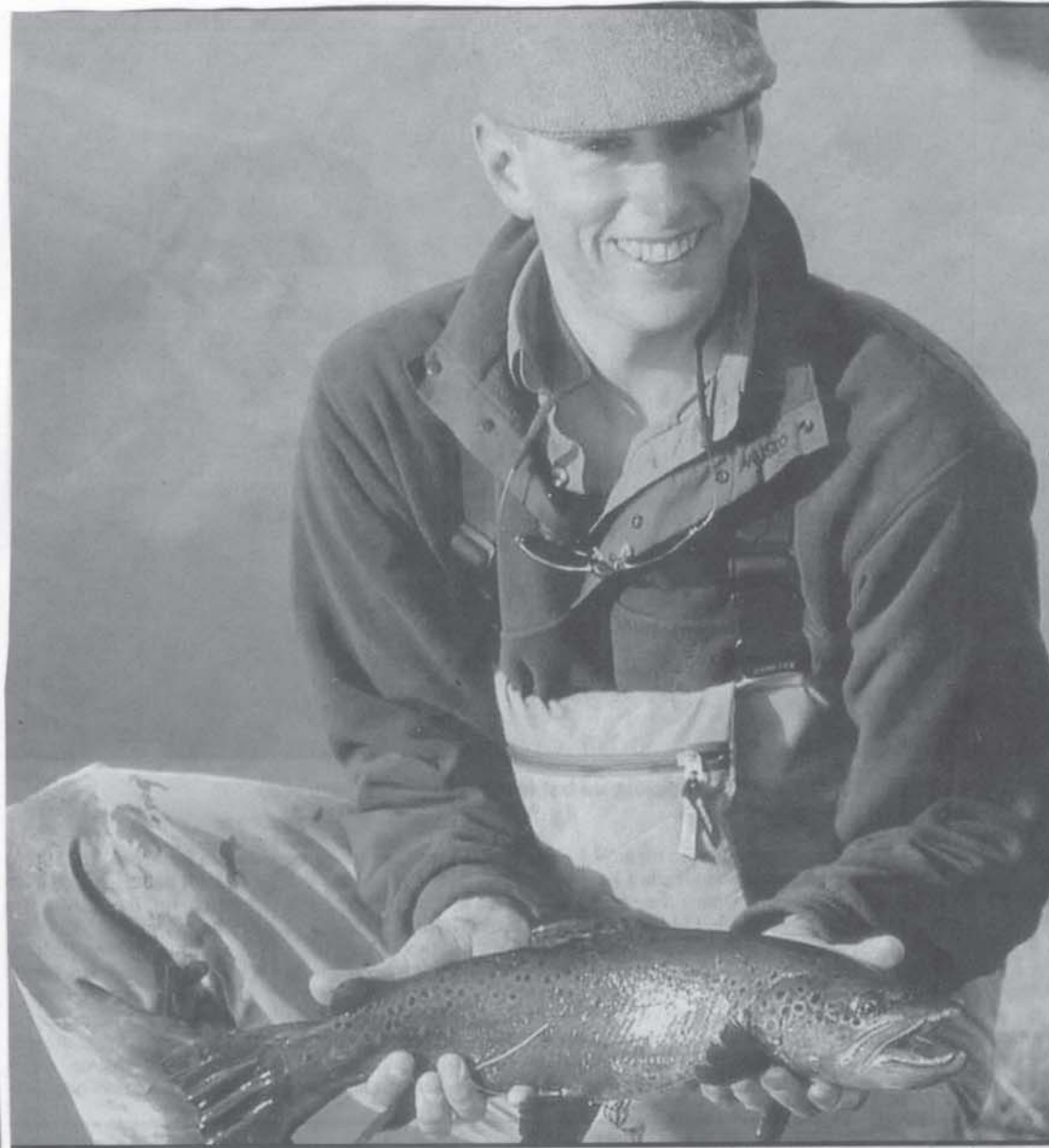


Is there anything more relaxing than a day knee-deep in the streams of the Dordogne? Not if you ask **Charles Rangeley-Wilson**

The first wild trout I ever saw was in France. It's still there in midair, in a picture in my head. I was on holiday with my parents and their friends, and fishing with their son Warren and his friend, Justin, I think, or Julian. I can smell fish, Warren had said, and he was a fishing god because he owned a Mitchell reel. He caught half a dozen small fish from a Brittany harbour and cooked them on an open fire, though they tasted like a sewer and the first mouthful made me gag. The brown trout came from a rocky stream, on a float run through fast water, and I can remember the float dipping, the strike, and the fish leaping into the air.

From then on I always associated France with trout, though I've been back many times and rarely caught one — the wrong time of year, or the wrong place. But for three summers during college I took the train south with friends from art school. We crammed ourselves into a narrow railway carriage, taking turns to stretch out on the floor, filling up on baguettes *jambon-beurre* and coffee that made our eyes bleed, until we fell out blinking into the southern sun of Cahors, made for a sort of artists' summer camp we'd heard of, and eroded our stomachs and morals with a fortnight of black wine and tent hopping. Then a London cab pulled up at our den in the woods, and in it were friends of a friend, dreary pseudo-hippies for the most part, but also Juliet. I had a thing for Juliet, and I don't think it was merely lust. I was overdosing on Yeats and nurturing a sense of Celtic melancholy. She had this long hair, and a face from a painting. She was cool and she could dance. And I was young and had an erection for most of the day. So I defied my better judgment and joined the dropouts for a drive around the hills. I remember making pasta in some derelict barn, and realising through an eight-francs-a-bottle haze that she was getting her hair stroked by one of the pseudo-dropouts. All of a sudden I didn't know what I was doing there, so I left, walked down through the woods to a gorge I'd seen earlier in the day, and cut a branch, strung it up with a hook and line, and fished with cheese in a pool between huge boulders. A railway train clattered over a stone bridge high over the gorge and a few minutes later I caught the second wild trout I'd seen in France.



It was this big: Rangeley-Wilson with his catch of the day



And when, years later, I came to the Dordogne for the first time, only to find it in full flood, and ended up on a nearby river running through a gorge and below a high-arched railway bridge, I realised I'd been there before.

There was no fire in my head that time. Well, a gentler one, mellowed

by surety. I had tagged along with Jean-Pierre, who was guiding some regular clients. We climbed from the flooded Dordogne onto the plateau of the Massif Central, and meandered south until we found a gorge so deep our ears popped twice on the way down, and Jean-Pierre's worn-out Renault had an alarming case of brake fade.

At the bottom we drove past the brutalist concrete architecture of a hydroelectric barrage, and parked up in the cool woods. There was clearly no hurry to the river — I'd pulled on my waders before I realised Jean-Pierre and his rods from Paris were breaking out red wine and a garlic sausage so strong that I felt sure it would ward off the vipers I'd been warned about.

"La Cère est bonne, mais il y a beaucoup de vipères. Gardez," a local had warned me the day before. "They're batty about vipers," said

Jim later. "Obsessed. They all go round mixing home-grown vaccines, far more dangerous than the snakes themselves. More of these guys end up in hospital each year from vaccines than snakebites."

We lay under the trees with the Cère tumbling past, and Jean-Pierre sliced up the sausage, laid it on chunks of white bread and handed pieces around.

We rummaged through fly boxes. Jean-Pierre saw the two types of fly I'd been sold at the shop in Argentat the day before. "*C'est parfait.*" One had a fiery brown collar hackle. These hackles had a sheen that you only got from Corrèzian birds, the shopkeeper had told me. Take one of these creatures to the north, and the sheen goes — and it's the sheen that attracts the trout. I listened sceptically, admired the fine-looking hackles and bought a few.

Why I love an old trout

"Regardez." Jean-Pierre picked up his rod and waded out into the first pool. "Comme ça, et ça." He turned the rod in the air like a conductor beating out a slow rhythm, his arm at full stretch, a fixed length of line hanging from the tip of the rod. The river fell down the gorge from one small circular pool to the next, squeezing between boulders the size of cars. Jean-Pierre got in close behind one of these pools, cast on to it with a graceful rise and fall of the rod, and then, lifting gently, he kept all the line off the surface as the collared dry fly floated downstream more slowly than the current. After a few casts his rod dipped and a small brown trout leapt clear of the water, throwing spray into the sunshine. "C'est facile, non?"

I nodded, and shrugged my shoulders. "Go, Charles, va, et attraper les truites." He gestured me upstream, and I left him with his two

pupils. The sun shone hard and split the valley in two — my bank was dark and cold, the far one shone brilliantly. Heat rippled off rocks, and ached the backs of my eyes. When I slipped into the water I felt the chill wrap itself around me. The river tumbled down past giant boulders, and where the falling water caught the sun, it glistened. At the top of the run was the railway bridge.

I flicked my line onto the first pool, and lifted the rod as Jean-Pierre had shown. I saw a copper flash in the water as a trout turned on the dry fly, and in the next pool the same happened, though this time the line straightened immediately after, and a small trout rushed around the pool.

Working up this run I felt as if I was fishing in a corridor, searching behind doors to see what was there, teasing bright creatures into the sun. I caught only small trout, though Jean-Pierre assured me there were

bigger ones. I fished up under the bridge and found the boulder I'd sat on years before. I rested there for a bit, watching the current in mid-stream, and thought about how the water just there had been flowing past from that day to this, and would do the same for thousands of years.

A train clattered overhead, and I carried on upriver, catching trout until the sun left the water. Jean-Pierre was sitting by the river with his two clients, finishing the wine we'd opened at lunch. I asked about the chances of fishing on the Dordogne the next day. He shrugged. "The Dordogne, she is still a bad woman. She will not behave."

I found a small stream called La Doustre, and picnicked there with Vicky and our tiny son Patrick. We drove into the valley by accident, taking a backstreet out of Argentat, following it across a small meadow and up a steep, wooded escarpment, until the road dropped steeply and broke out into daylight. Immediately we crossed a bridge, and I jumped out to look. In the pool downriver I could see a trout, its dark back lit up by the sun that shone through the trees. A single-lane road followed the stream through small farms and villages, before climbing up and over the range of hills beyond, on to the vast emptiness of the Massif plateau. It was not on the way to anywhere.

The valley was narrow and bounded by steep wooded hills and outcrops of white stone mottled with moss. The river snaked through in easy curves, rattled into long quiet pools under lines of poplar and willow. Even at midday the place had the silence of dawn. I could hear Patrick shouting about tractors off in the woods somewhere, and every so often a dog barked, or a 2CV buzzed by. Over the stream, dragonflies the size of toy aeroplanes swooped on the few light olives that were hatching, and along the edge thousands of water boatmen skittered across the water. Every so often one would disappear in a violent splash.

I ran a small sedge through these flotillas and caught fat trout with coal-black spots. One old fish had a vast head and a kype on his jaw. The trout were too closely packed to get big in a little stream with long winters, but this ancient fish had seen at least eight or 10 of them.

Our week unfolded changelessly, confined to side streams near Argentat, but each evening we'd walk along the quay and sit and watch the Dordogne. She flowed hard, two or three feet up on summer level and as cold as space. We had to leave before the bad woman river would let me near her. It was just the time of year, we reasoned.

■ *Extracted from Somewhere Else by Charles Rangeley-Wilson, published by Yellow Jersey at £12.99. To order a copy at the reduced price of £10.39, excluding p&p, call The Sunday Times Books First on 0870 165 8585*