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At the Heart of France's Watch Country

The Lycée Edgar Faure, in the small mountain town of Morteau, has one of the country's most prestigious horology programs.

By Vivian Morelli

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MORTEAU, France — When you tell Parisians you are going east to visit the small town of Morteau, many will say you should sample la saucisse de Morteau, the smoked pork sausage that is the local specialty.

But to its 7,000 inhabitants and to industry specialists, Morteau is better known for watches.

Nestled in a valley of the Jura mountains — in the heart of what is known nationally as le pays horloger, or watch country — the town is a quiet, picturesque spot along the Doubs river and home to some of France's boutique watch brands, including Pequignet and Yema.

There also is an impressive horological museum, housed in the 16th-century Château Pertusier, with a collection that ranges from a 19th-century astronomical clock almost six feet tall to a Jaeger-LeCoultre mechanical movement that, weighing less than a gram, is said to be the world's smallest. And it has a large number of Comtoise clocks, a kind of grandfather clock with a pot belly, made in the region.

But “Morteau is known in the world of watchmaking because, despite its small size, it saw the creation of a watchmaking school in 1836,” said Grégory Maugain, director of the Musée de l’Horlogerie de Morteau.

And it has the Lycée Edgar Faure, one of the most prestigious watchmaking schools in the country.

Since the school opened in 1987, it has been producing skilled technicians for some of the world's best-known Swiss watch brands as well as smaller companies throughout Europe. Some students now have their sights on Asia.

“They are the elite,” Sophie Labre, the principal, said of her students. “To enter th

program, they do not need to take a test, but their application file is examined.”

The school, named for a local politician, is what the French call a lycée polyvalent offering general academic study as well as training in areas like machining, microtechnology, jewelry making and horology. Students enter at about 15 years old — although older students are accepted in the professional programs — and, of its 1,200 students this academic year, 167 are studying watchmaking.

Edgar Faure's reputation is well known. “Students come from all over France and territories such as La Réunion,” Ms. Labre said, referring to the island in the Indian Ocean governed by France. “We have a boarding school, so some live here on campus.”

It also attracts and retains top teaching talent, like Thierry Ducret, who in 2007 was designated horology's meilleur ouvrier de France, or best craftsman of France, a prestigious title awarded by the Ministry of Labor. A graduate of Edgar Faure himself, he has been teaching at the school since 1996.

Sophie Labre, the school's principal. Reto Albertalli for The New York Times

Detail of a watch movement created by a student. Reto Albertalli for The New York Times

And the school has fans at the very top of the watchmaking universe. Philippe Dufour, the celebrated independent watchmaker, said in an interview that Edgar Faure is “the best in the region.” He is one of the judges of the F.P. Journe Young Talent Competition, an annual contest organized by Mr. Journe, himself a highly regarded independent horologist, and the Fondation de la Haute Horlogerie.

Two of the 2018 competition winners, Charles Routhier and Rémy Cools, were Edgar Faure graduates.

Horology studies at the school can last two to seven years, depending on how long a student chooses to stay. The basic program, a two-year study for a certificate of professional aptitude, has students “learn quartz and mechanical movements, and how to put together a movement and take it apart, as well as oiling, adjusting and replacing parts,” said David Grandvuillemin, the school’s assistant director of the professional programs.

In two more years, for a brevet des métiers d’art certificate, “they work on more complicated movements like automatic watches, chronographs, restoration of antique watches, refabricating some parts with equipment and machinery and, at the end, they have their own project,” he said.

The highest level of achievement, after seven years of work, is the diplôme national des métiers d’art et design.

In a country where rigid labor laws are changing but many young people still struggle to find work, graduates of the horology program are in another category entirely.

"Some will pursue master-level studies and become engineers," Ms. Labre said. "Others will enroll in technical schools in Switzerland, create their own brand to become independent watchmakers, or work in haute horlogerie in the luxury industry to create unique pieces, such as at la Maison des Métiers d'Arts de Cartier."

The school is a 10-minute walk from the center of the town, which covers only about 5.5 square miles. The facade is a simple design with square windows, painted pale beige and accented with a strip of salmon pink that creates an arrow pattern with the roofline peak as the arrow's head (and, of course, includes a large clock).

Behind the entrance, however, is a sprawling building of more than 70 classrooms. The atmosphere is much like any high school, with students walking the halls from one class to another or sitting in groups during breaks. The cafeteria lunches, however, let you know you are in France: multicourse meals that included, on one day in early January, a cheese plate featuring regional varieties like Comté and, for dessert, galette des rois (or king cake, the puff pastry layered with marzipan and apple filling that in France is served just after Christmas).

Even though less than 15 percent of the student body is enrolled in the horology program, it occupies most of the school's more than 253,000-square-foot space and will have the use of a new wing, totaling almost 3,800 square feet, that is expected to be completed in the spring.

Ms. Labre said the horology class space was modeled on modern watch factories, with spacious rooms to house equipment and large windows to capture natural light (which sometimes is difficult as each morning in Morteau's mountainous area is accompanied by dense fog).

The laminate surfaces of all the workstations are pale green (the color is restful for the eyes, Mr. Grandvuillemin said), the chairs are adjustable and the tables are ergonomic.

In a back corner of one atelier hangs a tall pendulum clock, a precise timekeeper with a hand to indicate seconds, which the school said had been used as a teaching aid for years. And in the middle of the room, on a wooden platform, sits an horloge de clocher, or bell tower clock, the kind of timepiece typically seen in a French village church.

In 2014, teachers said, students spent about 300 hours restoring the clock's mechanism, which is about 3.5 feet wide and about 4.5 feet tall. More recently it also has been used as a teaching aid but, teachers said, it will be returned soon to its home, the village of Valempoulières, about 50 miles southwest of Morteau.

The ateliers can be a bit noisy from time to time, mostly when the students are using its large pieces of machinery, like a Haas OM2A milling unit and a Schaubli lathe, that are lined up against the walls. "Those machines were bought by the school," Mr. Grandvullemin said. "They are very expensive machines, our most recent purchase was about 65,000 euros (\$71,440), but they last for a long time if we take care of them."

Students are required to wear white work coats over their own clothes while in the ateliers, to ensure their safety while operating the machinery and other tasks — making the whole operation look a bit like a laboratory.

Across the room, Émilie Detouillon, 20, one of the nine women among the 29 students in the seven-year diploma program, said she planned eventually to work on the production of small watch parts, in an inspection group or "perhaps decoration, which is a very interesting area."

Throughout the school year, which runs from September to June, horology students in the diploma program work on small projects like creating a watch case, a sundial or a tellurium, a type of astronomical clock. The latter was what Arthur Marchegay, 20, was working on that particular day.

"It's not quite done yet," he said, showing the sandpaper he used for the hand finishing.

(The program's students regularly update their Instagram page with photographs of their projects.)

Next to Mr. Marchegay, Antonin Falk, 20, was working on a watch case. In 2016, he was awarded a national prize as watchmaking's meilleur apprenti de France, or best apprentice of France, for his rendering of a Breguet hand (a watch hand with an open circle at its tip, designed in 1783 by Abraham-Louis Breguet to stand out against heavily decorated dials).

Asked about his plans after graduation, Mr. Falk said he wanted "to continue to learn watchmaking know-how and techniques on the other side of the border, and in the long-term create my own business. And perhaps my own watch brand."

The border with Switzerland is only a 10-minute drive, and it is less than an hour to Le Locle and La Chaux-de-Fonds, the Swiss towns that house the offices and factories of many big names in watches: Cartier, Patek Philippe, TAG Heuer, Breitling, Jaquet Droz. (Some French residents, known as frontaliers, cross the border daily to go work in Switzerland.)

Being hired at one of those brands or furthering their studies across the border motivates a lot of the students.

“Every time I have a few hours of free time, I come to the atelier to work,” said Thomas Choulot, 17, a student in the four-year certificate program. The horology teachers said he was not alone — most of the program’s students tend to stay long after school hours to work on their projects.

Mr. Grandvuillemin, however, said with a laugh, “Maybe it’s possible because we are a small town and there is not much else to do.”