

AFFORDABLE CLASSIC Muscadet

LESS
THAN
£10K



Whether jostling on a start line or enjoying a leisurely cruise, the Muscadet cuts 'la moutarde'. It's an inspired little yacht that arguably gives more fun per € than any other One Design cruiser-racer.

MAIN: PETER POLAND. INSET: LUDOVIC DE COCKBORNE

It was a POETS Day in the mid-1960s. Sitting in the cockpit of an Elizabethan 29, I was helping prepare supper before heading off to the Friday evening start of the Cowes-Dinard race. On an adjacent mooring bobbed a jaunty, ‘boxy’ 22ft-ish yacht flying a French ensign. Then a bearded bloke shot out of its hatch holding a hissing pressure cooker, opened it, poked around inside it then popped back into his ‘box’. His supper smelled better than ours.

We later spotted the same boat on the start line, with four Frenchmen driving it to windward at impressive speed as the fleet sailed off into the sunset. Imagine our surprise when – as the sun rose over the Channel the next morning – we spotted this little French ‘box’ trundling along on a parallel course. How could it be keeping up?

I had met my first Muscadet – the Philippe Harlé-designed mini-masterpiece that has brought budget boating to thousands of French sailors.

Harlé knew that bending sheets of plywood around chines would produce a small cruiser-racer as effectively as it did a dinghy. This method of construction has a lot going for it. It’s light and strong; and simple enough for DIY builders to turn dreams into budget-boat reality. Robert Tucker was successful in the UK with his *Debutante* and *Silhouette*, and his 18ft *Caprice* shot to fame when Shane Acton sailed *Shrimpy* round the world. The Maurice Griffiths-designed *Eventide* and *Waterwitch* were also ‘chined’ cruisers that sailed across oceans.

Harlé’s sporty little Muscadet is special. It sails fast and takes heavy weather in its stride. Built by the Aubin yard in Nantes and by amateur builders in sheds around France, it introduced a generation of young French sailors to offshore sailing and racing.

Between 1963 and 1981 around 700 were built, and a Class Association (apmuscadet.com) exists. You can still buy plans if you fancy building a Muscadet. Beautifully maintained and imaginatively painted examples continue to brighten up French harbours and make a stirring sight when racing as a fleet. The target for the 2019 Nationals at Granville is 100 entries. It’s just a shame that Muscadets have not yet been bought by many Brits.

The combination of the words ‘plywood’ and ‘classic’ might seem oxymoronic to some people. But the

MUSCADET

LOA

6.48m (21ft 3in)

LWL

5.6m (18ft 4in)

BEAM

2.26m (7ft 4in)

DRAUGHT (KEEL)

3ft 7in (1.1m)

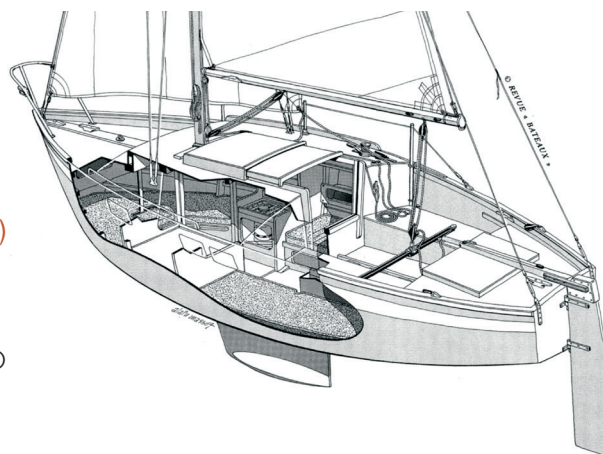
DRAUGHT (C/B)

75cm (2ft 5in)

1.25m (4ft 1in)

WEIGHT

1.2 tonnes



Muscadet and her bigger sister, the Armagnac, are exceptional yachts. They prove that ‘plywood classics’ can and do exist.

What makes Harlé’s first little masterpiece so special? He drew a ‘hard chine’ hull, giving it a reverse sheer with windows in the topsides and a flush deck on top. So construction could hardly be simpler. It doesn’t just do what it says on the box. It is the ‘box’ – and a brilliant one at that.

Thanks to its beam of 7ft 4in (2.26m) there’s a surprising amount of usable space in its simple three/four-berth accommodation. A basic galley and general workspace are amidships – separating the saloon quarter berths and the forepeak – and a heads can hide forward.

The Muscadet’s prowess is legendary. It has won coastal races galore and dominated the field in the first MiniTransat (6.50) race, with five Muscadets in the total entry of 26 boats. Jean-Luc Van Den Heede – a star of subsequent round-the-world solo races and winner of the 2018/9 Golden Globe Race – sailed one of these to fourth overall.

“It’s a super boat and I have yet to discover its limits in ‘la brise’!,” says Jean-Luc. Jean Le Cam and Roland Jourdain also started their sailing careers racing Muscadets across the Atlantic.

Much of the Muscadet’s success comes from its clever hull shape and proper keel. This long-ish fin (43 per cent ballast ratio) draws 3ft 7in (1.1m), so keeps leeway to a minimum. The hull’s generous beam, chines and relatively narrow ends contribute to windward ability and directional stability. There was also a less popular version with a centreboard protruding from a stub keel.

Andrew Sinclair of Highwater Sails in Plymouth raced a Muscadet in the GPEN regatta at Camaret and sums up the appeal: “It’s easy to handle, seaworthy, spacious for its size and fast for its age, thanks to constant tuning and tweaking going on in the class. The icing on the cake is the Muscadet sailors – a crazy and amazingly friendly bunch.” Indeed, the class rules include the stipulations that crew must be good company and ready to take part in social events organised by the regatta committee, and that each competing boat must have at least one full bottle of Muscadet on board at the start and finish of the race.



SKIPPER’S VIEW

“I know the boat well. I cruised one around the Scillies from Le Havre with my wife and six-month-old daughter in 1970, then raced one in the first Mini Transat (1977).”

Jean-Luc Van Den Heede

Two on the market

Prices vary between €1,500 for a tired example up to €10,000 or more for a fully restored and race-winning beauty. Ads appear in the magazines *Bateaux*, *Voile et Voiliers* or *Voile*, and there are a good number for sale on the association site, apmuscadet.com, like the ones pictured below.



Lazy Jack 1972, Aubin-built, keel version, €6,000 ONO



Artaban 1963, Aubin-built, c/board version, £POA

NEXT MONTH: Cut-price Contessa – the Invicta 26