



The French Life

Paola Westbeek





Cookalong #1

SOUPE AU PISTOU

Page 6-7

PISSALADIÈRE

Page 10-11

FLAN PARISIEN

Page 12-13

HACHIS PARMENTIER

Page 14-15

MARINATED OLIVES

Page 16-17

GÂTEAU AU CHOCOLAT

Page 18-19

PEACH CLAFOUTIS

Page 20-21





*L*et's get cooking! *L*

Bienvenue to The French Life Cookalong! I am so excited to share some of my favorite French classics with you and hope you will like them as much as we do. This booklet features seven sweet and savory recipes: the richly filled soupe au pistou from Provence, the savory onion pie known as pissaladière (I've included the history of the dish), my creamy flan parisien (a childhood favorite of many French), a hachis parmentier (wonderful comfort food!), marinated olives (a great apéro treat) and last but certainly not least, my decadent gâteau au chocolat.

So now that you have the recipes, how do you participate in the cookalong? Easy! You will have until June 8th to make and photograph at least two of the recipes featured in this booklet. You can

then post the photos on Instagram with a tag to @thefrenchlife_paola along with the hashtags #frenchlifecookalong and #paolawestbeek. On June 11th, I will randomly select a winner who will receive a The French Life goodie box with a variety of surprise French products – think food, books, style and good living, pretty much the subjects covered in my Blissful Ten newsletter! PS: If you don't have Instagram, Twitter is fine, too. Just make sure to tag to @thefrenchlife_. If you have any questions along the way, please don't hesitate to get in touch. Now let's get into the kitchen and cook! Allez-y et bon appétit!

(© Paola Westbeek / The French Life / La Douce Vie)





Soupe au pistou

Soupe au pistou is a richly filled vegetable soup from Provence. It is made year-round with whatever vegetables the season has to offer. Much like with an Italian minestrone, the soup usually has beans and/or small pasta such as macaroni. The pistou is very similar to pesto but does not include pine nuts. You can stir the pistou through the soup once cooked or you can offer it on the side so that everyone can spoon it over their portion.

Note: The soup can be stored in the fridge for 2-3 days, and the pistou will keep just as long if stored in a jar under a thin layer of fresh oil. I love making this soup on Sunday for quick and easy lunches the next few days.

Serves 6-8

INGREDIENTS:

- 2 tbsps olive oil
- 1 onion, finely chopped
- 2 large carrots (350g) chopped into small pieces
- 4 stalks of celery, chopped into small pieces
- 1 dried bay leaf
- Fine sea salt and freshly cracked pepper
- 1 ½ L water
- 2 courgettes (650g), diced
- 350g haricots verts, chopped
- 1 sprig of rosemary, needles finely chopped
- 2 tomatoes, deseeded and finely chopped
- 50g small pasta (such as ditalini, macaroni or vermicelli)
- 110g white beans (from a can), rinsed

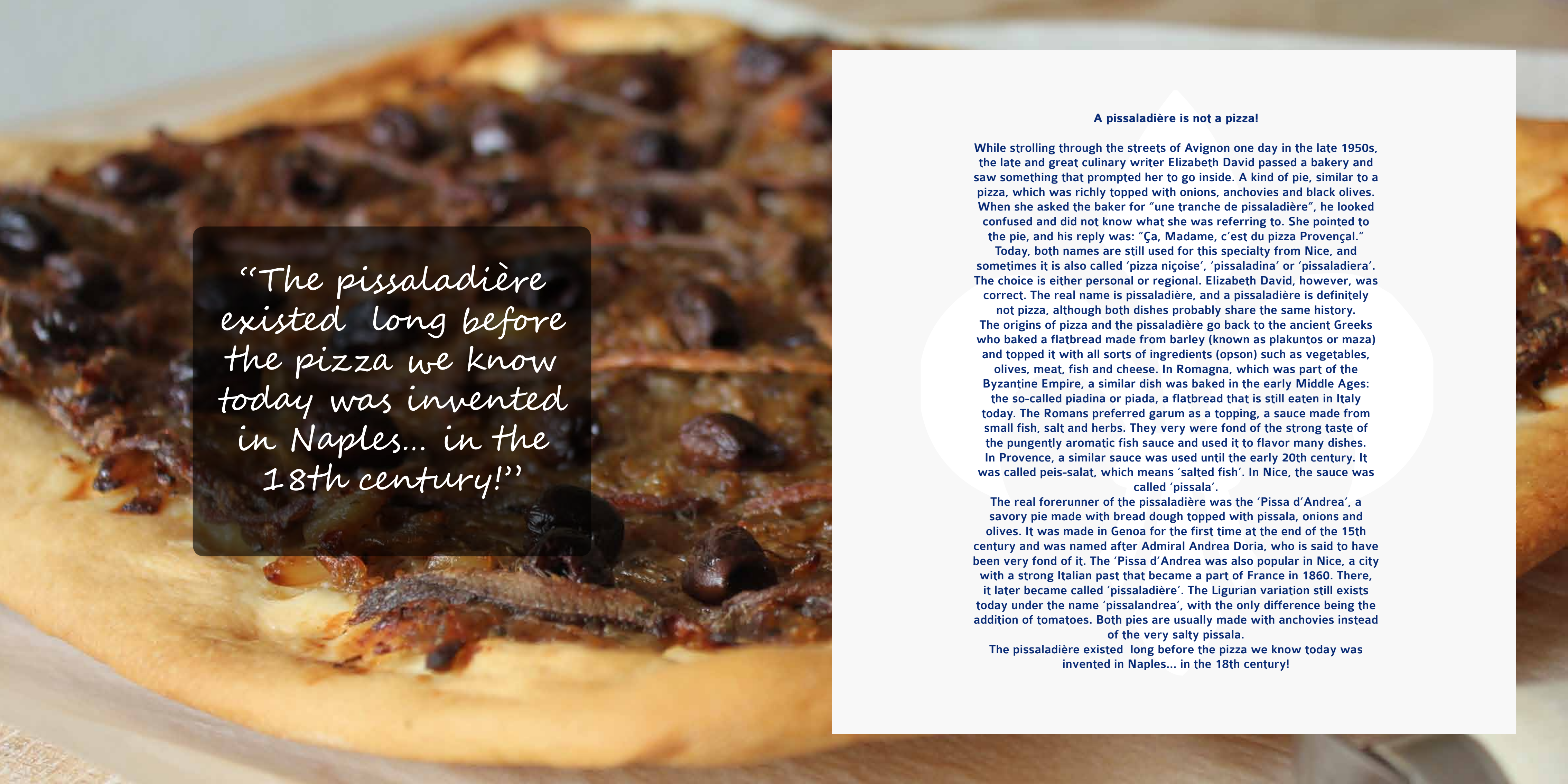
For the pistou:

- 4 fat garlic cloves
- Fine sea salt
- 1 bunch of basil, leaves torn
- 50g grated Parmesan cheese
- 4 tbsps extra virgin olive oil

INSTRUCTIONS:

Heat the olive oil in a large, heavy-bottomed soup pan and add in the onions, carrots, celery and bay leaf. Cook gently for 10 minutes, stirring every now and then. Add the water, bring to the boil, add salt and pepper and immediately reduce the heat. Place the lid on the pan and simmer for 10 minutes. Taste and add more salt and pepper if necessary. Turn up the heat a bit, add the courgettes, haricots verts and rosemary and simmer for another 15 minutes. Finally, add the tomatoes pasta and white beans and cook for a final 5 minutes. In the meantime, make the pistou. Pound the garlic cloves with a little salt using a pestle and mortar. Add the basil leaves in a few at a time, pounding them in well. Add in the Parmesan and olive oil and stir well. Once the soup is done, you can either stir the pistou in or serve it on the side.





“The pissaladière existed long before the pizza we know today was invented in Naples... in the 18th century!”

A pissaladière is not a pizza!

While strolling through the streets of Avignon one day in the late 1950s, the late and great culinary writer Elizabeth David passed a bakery and saw something that prompted her to go inside. A kind of pie, similar to a pizza, which was richly topped with onions, anchovies and black olives. When she asked the baker for “une tranche de pissaladière”, he looked confused and did not know what she was referring to. She pointed to the pie, and his reply was: “Ça, Madame, c’est du pizza Provençal.”

Today, both names are still used for this specialty from Nice, and sometimes it is also called ‘pizza niçoise’, ‘pissaladina’ or ‘pissaladiera’. The choice is either personal or regional. Elizabeth David, however, was correct. The real name is pissaladière, and a pissaladière is definitely not pizza, although both dishes probably share the same history. The origins of pizza and the pissaladière go back to the ancient Greeks who baked a flatbread made from barley (known as plakuntos or maza) and topped it with all sorts of ingredients (opson) such as vegetables, olives, meat, fish and cheese. In Romagna, which was part of the Byzantine Empire, a similar dish was baked in the early Middle Ages: the so-called piadina or piada, a flatbread that is still eaten in Italy today. The Romans preferred garum as a topping, a sauce made from small fish, salt and herbs. They very were fond of the strong taste of the pungently aromatic fish sauce and used it to flavor many dishes. In Provence, a similar sauce was used until the early 20th century. It was called peis-salat, which means ‘salted fish’. In Nice, the sauce was called ‘pissala’.

The real forerunner of the pissaladière was the ‘Pissa d’Andrea’, a savory pie made with bread dough topped with pissala, onions and olives. It was made in Genoa for the first time at the end of the 15th century and was named after Admiral Andrea Doria, who is said to have been very fond of it. The ‘Pissa d’Andrea was also popular in Nice, a city with a strong Italian past that became a part of France in 1860. There, it later became called ‘pissaladière’. The Ligurian variation still exists today under the name ‘pissalandrea’, with the only difference being the addition of tomatoes. Both pies are usually made with anchovies instead of the very salty pissala.

The pissaladière existed long before the pizza we know today was invented in Naples... in the 18th century!



Pissaladière

As with most French classics, every cook has their own variation of the popular pissaladière. For me, the most important step is really taking the time to sweat the onions, which must be sweet and have a high water content. You want to cook them gently so that they become soft and fragrant. Though using ready-made pizza dough is perfectly acceptable if you're pressed for time, I encourage you to try my dough recipe. The French enjoy their pissaladière as a casse-croûte (snack), in small pieces during the apéro and sometimes as an appetizer for Sunday lunch. Of course, you can also serve it as a light meal. In that case, I would also offer a green salad.

Serves 4-8

Ingredients:

For the dough:

320g all-purpose flour

¼ tsp fine salt

1 envelope yeast, 7g

50ml olive oil

200ml lukewarm water

For the topping:

3 tbsps mild olive oil

1 kilo sweet onions, peeled, halved and thinly sliced

3 garlic cloves, whole

1 small bunch of thyme, leaves picked

2 sprigs of rosemary, leaves picked and chopped

Fine sea salt and freshly cracked pepper

60g anchovies (in olive oil), drained cut in half lengthways

3 tbsps Niçoise olives

Good quality, extra virgin olive oil

INSTRUCTIONS:

Mix the flour, salt and yeast in a large bowl. Mix the the olive oil and water in a measuring jug. Make a well in the center of the dry ingredients, pour in the liquid and stir well with a wooden spoon. Knead for approximately 8 minutes on a well-floured surface or in the bowl of your standing mixer using the hook attachment. Clean out your bowl, rinse it with hot water and grease it with a bit of mild olive oil. Form the dough into a ball, put it back in your bowl, cover with cling film and a clean tea towel, and allow to rest for 1 hour and 30 minutes. In the meantime, start the topping. Heat the olive oil in a heavy-bottomed pan and add the onions. Sweat the onions together with the whole garlic cloves on a low heat, uncovered and stirring frequently, for 1 hour and 15 minutes. Stir in the thyme and rosemary, season with a little salt and a generous amount of pepper and allow to cook for an additional 15 minutes. In the meantime, preheat the oven to 190°C and line a baking sheet with parchment paper. Take the dough out of the bowl, punch it down, and knead it again for about a minute. Roll the dough out thinly to a 30 x 38 cm rectangle, place on the baking sheet and prick the surface with a fork a few times. Remove the garlic from the onions, and spread the onions over the surface of the dough, leaving an edge free. Make a criss-cross pattern over the onions with the anchovies and divide the olives over the top. Brush a little olive oil over the free edges and drizzle some over the onions. Bake the pissaladière for 35-40 minutes. Season with freshly ground pepper and serve.





Flan Parisien

What’s not to love about a thick slice of flan parisien? Especially on a late spring afternoon in the garden with a cup of verveine tea (one of the most popular after-dinner herbal teas, or ‘tisanes’, in France). The sweet custard tart is a childhood favorite of many French. The simplicity of the dessert demands that you use good products: organic eggs, farm fresh full-fat milk and cream, and a fat vanilla pod. Once you have a slice of this tart, it is bound to become one of your favorite French desserts, too.

Serves 6-8

INGREDIENTS:

1 roll ready-made puff pastry
700ml milk
200ml cream
1 vanilla pod, split and seeds scraped out
2 eggs
3 egg yolks
150g sugar
80g cornstarch

INSTRUCTIONS:

Butter and flour a 20cm springform tin. Line it with the puff pastry, trimming off the excess around the edges, and place in the fridge. Preheat the oven to 180°C. Heat the milk and cream in a heavy-bottomed saucepan and add the vanilla seeds and pod. Lower the heat and allow the milk and cream to simmer for 8 minutes. In a large bowl, whisk the eggs, yolks and sugar. Whisk in the cornstarch. Take the milk and cream off the heat and remove the vanilla pod. Slowly add the milk and cream to the eggs while whisking continuously. Return the mixture to the pan and cook again while whisking continuously. The mixture should be creamy and thick enough to coat the back of a spoon. Pour the mixture into the crust and bake in the oven for 40-45 minutes. Allow to cool. Best served cold, although you can also enjoy the tart warm.





Hachis parmentier

Originally, this homey, French classic was made with leftover pot-au-feu (meat and vegetables stew) baked under a thick layer of mashed potatoes. Today, it is also made with minced meat. In this recipe, I add a layer of mashed potatoes both on the bottom and top of the flavorful meat filling.

Serves 3-4

INGREDIENTS:

1 kg floury potatoes
1 tbsp olive oil, plus a little more for the baking dish
1 onion, finely chopped
1 carrot, peeled and diced
1 garlic clove, finely chopped
250g minced beef
250g minced pork
3 tbsps tomato paste
½ tsp sugar
1 tbsp fresh thyme
Fine sea salt and freshly cracked pepper
1 tbsp flour
125ml hot beef stock
2 tpsps Dijon mustard
Pinch of nutmeg
3 tbsps crème fraîche
125ml hot milk
1 egg, lightly whisked
A little butter, for dotting the dish

INSTRUCTIONS:

Brush the potatoes under running water and peel and cut them into pieces. Boil the potatoes in salted water for 15-20 minutes, or until soft. In the meantime, preheat the oven to 180°C and grease a rectangular 26 x 18cm baking dish with a little olive oil. Heat the tbsp of olive oil in a heavy-bottomed casserole and sauté the onion, carrot and garlic for 5 minutes. Increase the heat, add the mince and cook for 5 minutes. Stir in the tomato paste, sugar, thyme and salt and pepper and cook for 3 minutes. Stir in the flour and pour in the beef stock. Put a lid on the pan and let the sauce simmer for 10 minutes, stirring occasionally. Meanwhile, make the purée. Drain the potatoes, add mustard, nutmeg, crème fraîche, milk, salt and pepper and mash to a purée. Stir the egg through. Place half of the purée in the baking dish in an even layer and top with the mince. Cover with the rest of the purée. Use the tines of a fork to trace a line pattern on the purée. Dot with butter and bake for 45 minutes. Place the dish under the grill for the last few minutes for a nice brown crust. Delicious with a green salad.





Marinated olives

Though most French markets have you spoiled for choice when it comes to purchasing marinated olives, making your own variation is utterly gratifying. Perhaps because there's something wonderfully domestic about putting beautiful ingredients into a jar. Or maybe because anything homemade just always seems to taste better. You can use pitted or unpitted olives. Pitted tend to be more flavorful, while unpitted are, of course, easier to eat. I leave the choice entirely up to you.

Makes 1 750ml jar

INGREDIENTS:

125ml good quality extra virgin olive oil
½ tsp dried red chilli flakes
1 ½ tbsp Herbes de Provence
400g mixed olives
3 slices of an organic, unwaxed lemon, each slice halved
1 sweet red pepper from a jar, roughly chopped
1 sprig of rosemary, halved

INSTRUCTIONS:

Put the olive oil, chilli flakes and Herbes de Provence in a small saucepan and gently heat. You want the oil to be warm to the touch, not hot and certainly not bubbling! Place the olives, lemon slices, red pepper and rosemary in a bowl. Pour the warm oil over these ingredients and stir gently to combine. Transfer to a sterilized jar and allow to marinate for at least 4 hours before serving.





Gâteau au chocolat

A traditional French chocolate cake that melts in the mouth and goes beautifully with a drizzle of crème anglaise or a dollop of thick crème fraîche. The choice of ingredients can make or break this cake, so make sure everything is top-quality.

Serves 6

INGREDIENTS:

150g dark chocolate (72%)
100g butter
¼ tsp salt
3 eggs, separated
100g fine sugar
2 tsps vanilla extract
50g all-purpose flour

INSTRUCTIONS:

Preheat oven to 180°C and butter a 20cm springform tin. Dust with flour shaking off any excess. Melt chocolate and butter au bain-marie and leave to cool briefly. In a large bowl, whisk the yolks, sugar and vanilla until pale and creamy. In a separate bowl, whisk the whites until stiff. Add the melted chocolate to the egg yolks and whisk well. Whisk in the flour. Using a spatula, gently fold in the whites in two batches. Pour the batter into the prepared pan and bake for 30 minutes. Allow to cool on a wire rack. Serve as is or with crème anglaise.





Peach clafoutis

Clafoutis is a sinfully delicious ‘cakey-puddingy’ dessert that comes from the Limousin region of France. It is usually made with unpitted cherries, but I pretty much make it with any type of seasonal fruit. I am quite fond of making a clafoutis with the summer’s sweetest strawberries and serving it with a bowl of crème fraîche and a dusting of icing sugar.

Another wonderful variation is ripe, fragrant peaches. The clafoutis will taste best if served in the garden on a sunny day with a chilled bottle of Crémant – and a big smile.

Serves 4

INGREDIENTS:

2 ripe peaches (approx. 300g), halved and sliced
100ml single cream
1 vanilla pod, split lengthwise, seeds scraped out
100ml milk
3 eggs
70g caster sugar
50g all-purpose flour
30g ground almonds
2 tsps almond extract, or just use vanilla extract
Crème fraîche and icing sugar, to serve

INSTRUCTIONS:

Preheat your oven to 180°C. Butter a 27cm oval oven dish and line it with the sliced peaches. Put the pan on a baking tray. Heat the cream along with seeds from the vanilla pod and the pod. Let this cook gently without boiling for about three minutes. Add the cold milk and set aside. Meanwhile, beat the eggs with the sugar, flour and almond extract. Remove from the heat, fish out the vanilla pod and allow to dry. You can use it in a pot of sugar. Add the cooled cream and milk mixture to the eggs while beating and pour the batter over the peaches. Bake for 25-30 minutes and serve warm with crème fraîche and icing sugar. Bliss!





L A note on cooking with French flair *L*

Though renowned chefs are sometimes referred to as culinary artists, you do not need to be neither an artist nor a famous chef to be able to cook well. People who claim they cannot cook are often those who have been discouraged by kitchen disasters (a dish that was burned or a recipe that did not work and was nothing but a waste of ingredients) or those who simply cannot be bothered. The fact that convenience food and fast food are so readily available does not help the latter either.

The French know all too well that good food does not need to be complicated. To me, one of the best places to witness this is at the marché des producteurs held in the south of France during the summer months. One of the most enjoyable, in my opinion, is the one that takes place on Sunday afternoons in Soumensac, a tiny village in the Lot-et-Garonne with a population of about two hundred. Locals and tourists alike come together to enjoy a picnic with fresh offerings from regional producers. There is a stand selling plump escargots; one at which juicy duck breasts, sausages and kebabs are grilled on the spot; and another with plates of rustic charcuterie and foie gras. There are local wines proudly offered by the same hands that made them, freshly prepared salads with colorful and seasonal vegetables, enticingly bright fruit desserts, and so much more. Nothing is complicated, nothing looks fancy, and everything is absolutely delicious. The *salade de chèvre chaud*, which I adore, is

a perfect example of French culinary simplicity. I could have never imagined that a plate of lettuce topped with two bacon-wrapped pieces of young, creamy goat's cheese (locally and lovingly produced) and a drizzle of honey could be so beautiful.

My point is that if you start with quality ingredients, you are already well on your way to preparing a special meal. If possible, try to use seasonal and sustainably produced ingredients. Strawberries will always be fleshier and sweeter when they are in season, much in the same way that eggs purchased at the market from a small-scale producer will always taste better than ones from the supermarket. Buying at markets and speciality shops is not only a feast for the senses, but it is also far more gratifying. Especially when you start to build a relationship with the producers and shop owners. They will soon recognise you, greatly appreciate your patronage and will always be more than willing to share cooking tips and even recipes. In France, these relationships are fundamental to good eating.

The recipes in this booklet are accessibly written. Make sure you read through the recipe a few times before attempting to make it, and remember to set out your ingredients at the beginning. Nothing is worse than realizing you do not have enough of something halfway through the recipe. Finally, do not be afraid of giving a recipe your own interpretation. Creativity and curiosity are also key to the pleasures of the French table.