



*The French Life*  
Paola Westbeek







## *Cookalong #2*

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

Bienvenue to second The French Life Cookalong! Once again, I am so excited to share some of my favorite French recipes with you – this time a selection of delights perfect for the upcoming holiday season. This booklet features eight recipes that will make you want to turn on your oven and are guaranteed to fill your house with the most delectable aromas: a spicy loaf with candied orange which makes a perfect teatime treat but is also amazing with foie gras, my savory Provençal cookies (you'll love them with your cheese platters or a bowl of tomato soup!), a classic moelleux au chocolat your guests will rave about, my cake with prunes and Armagnac (a welcome change from the traditional fruitcake), the French Christmas market favorite known as vin chaud, a baked Mont d'Or to share in front of the fireplace with someone special, my classic gougères (a perfect appetizer for welcoming guests), and last but certainly not least, a French onion soup guaranteed to keep you warm all winter!

So now that you have the recipes, how do you participate in the cookalong? Easy! You will have until December 17th to make and photograph at least three of the recipes featured in this booklet. You can then post the results on Instagram with a tag to @thefrenchlife\_paola along with the hashtags #frenchlifecookalong and #paolawestbeek. On December 21st, 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! Bon appétit et joyeux Noël !

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Note: If you would like to receive the recipes in a Word document for better legibility, please send me an email. Before getting started, please read the text on page 29 titled 'A Note on Cooking with French Flair'!





## Baked Mont d'Or

During the madness of the holiday season, it's good to give yourself a break. Take an evening off, put the kids to bed early and treat yourself (and someone special) to this delectable baked Mont d'Or. It's hardly cooking. You only need to add some flavorings to the cheese, pop it in the oven and bake it till golden and oozing. In the meantime, boil some baby potatoes and prepare a wooden serving board with the other sides: crusty bread, cornichons and a sliced smoked ham of your choice. You'll also want to serve a crisp, green salad with this, simply dressed with a vinaigrette made with mustard, olive oil, white wine vinegar and salt and pepper.

The best wine to serve with Mont d'Or, which like Comté, Bleu de Gex and Morbier also comes from Jura, is the regional vin jaune, a sherry-like wine with hints of nuts and dried/candied fruits. If you aren't partial to vin jaune, try an aromatic Pinot Blanc from Alsace.

And here's a very interesting tip I learned from Lili, owner of B&B Le Crêt l'Agneau in La Longeville: never drink water with fondue, only wine! Water with melted cheese will cause terrible indigestion. Now's there's a good excuse to keep your glass filled during this lovely meal!

Note: It is best if you find a box that's stapled and not glued (not a great idea as the cheese will be baked and the glue will melt). To be on the safe side, always wrap the box in a few layers of foil before baking.

I do not give exact measurements for the sides. I leave that up to you, and your appetite. You can use thyme instead of rosemary.

### *Serves 2*

#### INGREDIENTS:

1 Mont d'Or cheese  
1 large garlic clove, sliced  
Small sprig of rosemary, divided into sprigs of 3-4 needles  
2 tbsps dry white wine  
Freshly cracked mixed peppercorns

#### On the side:

Boiled baby potatoes  
Crusty bread  
Smoked ham of your choice  
Cornichons  
Vin jaune from Jura or pinot blanc from Alsace

#### INSTRUCTIONS:

Preheat oven to 200°C, wrap the cheese box in 2 layers of aluminum foil (going about half way up the sides) and place the box on a baking tray. Using a sharp knife, make 8 slits in the cheese and fill them with the garlic and rosemary. Drizzle with the white wine and season with plenty of cracked pepper. Bake the cheese for 25-27 minutes, until the top is beautifully bronzed. Keep an eye on it! In the meantime, boil your potatoes until tender. Serve on a rustic wooden board with the sides and get ready for a truly memorable meal







## *L* Winter days in Cersot *L*

One winter, we spent a most relaxing week recharging our batteries at a charming country house in Cersot, a small, sleepy village nestled between hills of vineyards in Bourgogne's southern department, Saône-et-Loire. Despite the frost and bareness that comes with the month of February, the landscape was so idyllic that more than once, I couldn't help but gasp aloud as we drove through the winding roads of the peaceful countryside. Especially in the early mornings when a thick layer of fog blanketed the vineyards in an almost ethereal splendor. Sometimes, we observed the pruning of the vines from a distance. Between the rows were men and women, braving the cold as they clipped away branches, discarding them in wheeled ovens that would infuse the cool air with the smoldering scent of burning wood. Every time I witnessed this arduous yet important task, my appreciation for wine grew tenfold.

Our house in Cersot was tiny yet comfortable enough for the three of us. The simple, rustic kitchen on the first floor was equipped with everything necessary to make hearty Burgundian meals, and because the living room was upstairs in what seemed to be the coldest part of the house, we spent most of our days huddled around the old wood burning stove in the corner, next to the gas hob. Every

morning, my husband Hans would pull on his thick, red sweater and head outside to the shed for wood to light a fire while I set the table to the gurgling sounds of an old-fashioned drip coffee maker. Still in our pyjamas we would sit down to a warming breakfast of toasted day-old baguette, raspberry jam, cheese and bowlfuls of hot, milky coffee. The feeling of not having to rush out the door, of being able to pour ourselves a second coffee and talk or read a book, was exactly what we had been craving.

In the afternoons, we would drive to Buxy, the nearest village with shops, a butcher, baker and a few restaurants. Sometimes we treated ourselves to a lunch of steak-frites at the brasserie, and if the mood struck (or the owner turned us away because he couldn't be bothered to cook), we would venture out a little further to the city of Chalon-sur-Saône where we would go for a walk followed by a stop at Le Verre Galant, a friendly café/restaurant at the foot of the cathedral on Place Saint Vincent. In the evenings, we would end our day with a round of Monopoly and a bottle of local wine, laughing and knowing that the next day would be deliciously the same. And with that we would drift off to sleep with ease and gratitude.



*“Especially in the early mornings  
when a thick layer of fog  
blanketed the vineyards in an  
almost ethereal splendor.”*







## *Pain d'épices with candied orange*

Whenever I visit the small town of Buxy in France's Côte Chalonnaise, you will likely find me at the tiny market held in the centre ville on Thursday mornings. Though there aren't many stalls, everything on offer is absolutely delicious. In the winter, they sometimes sell fresh choucroute garnie. And what an aroma it spreads through the cold air!

I especially look forward to stopping by the stand selling honey and French gingerbread, or pain d'épices. The dense, fragrant loaves come in different flavors such as blueberry or chocolate chip. But I prefer mine with a touch of candied orange, and a good pat of butter. This is my recipe for a beautifully spiced pain d'épices. Eat it for breakfast with a bowl of black coffee or as an afternoon snack with a cup of tea.

**Note:** You can substitute the candied orange for diced dried apricots. Though the gingerbread is traditionally made with rye flour, I have used spelt as I find it produces a lighter crumb.

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### *Makes 1 loaf*

#### **INGREDIENTS:**

250g spelt flour  
1 ½ tsp baking powder  
½ tsp baking soda  
1 ½ tsps ground cinnamon  
1 tsp ground ginger  
½ tsp ground cloves  
½ tsp ground nutmeg  
¼ tsp ground aniseed  
75g light brown sugar  
70g candied orange peel, diced  
120ml honey  
80ml water  
2 eggs

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#### **INSTRUCTIONS:**

Preheat oven to 180°C and line a 28cm rectangular baking pan with parchment paper. Put the flour, baking powder, baking soda, spices and brown sugar into a large bowl. Stir well using a whisk. Stir in the candied orange with a wooden spoon or rubber spatula. Whisk the honey, water and eggs in a small bowl. Make a well in the middle of the dry ingredients. Pour in the wet ingredients and fold until you have a smooth batter. Do not overmix. Pour the batter into the baking pan and bake for 20 minutes. Cover with foil and bake for an additional 25 minutes. Check for doneness by inserting a toothpick in the center of the cake. It should come out clean. Allow the cake to cool on a rack before serving.







## Pruneaux d'Agen: Delicacy from the Lot-et-Garonne

Pruneaux d'Agen are as popular in southwest France as foie gras. The prunes have been part of France's gourmet history since the 12th century when Crusaders came back from Syria with Damson plum trees which were grafted with local plum trees by the Benedictine monks of Clairac, not far from Agen. The result was a new plum variety called Prune d'Ente. Prune means 'fresh plum' in French and pruneau 'dried plum'; 'Enter' means 'to graft' in Old French. Since then, these special plums have been processed into Pruneaux d'Agen, named after the city in which their export started. From Agen they were shipped to Bordeaux, and from Bordeaux to Paris, London, Rotterdam and the New World.

The purple plums are usually harvested between mid-August and mid-September when they are so dark and ripe that they start to fall from the trees on their own. Machines, however, are used to give them a final nudge. First, huge collars are set out under the trees, and then the machines shake the trees just hard enough for them to release all the ripe fruit into the collars. Immediately after the harvest, the plums are carefully sorted and washed. The best fruits are laid on grids which are then stacked on shelves in a drying area with a temperature of about 75°C-80° C. The plums are allowed to dry for approximately 20-24 hours until their moisture content is reduced to

23%. After drying, the pruneaux are kept in a cool environment. Prior to being sold to processing companies, they are treated to a hot bath that increases their moisture content to approximately 35%. At that moment, the shiny, plump prunes are ready for consumption.

Today, approximately 40,000 tons of Pruneaux d'Agen are produced annually. Two-thirds of the production still takes place in Lot-et-Garonne and only 30% is exported. In the southwest, you will often see them preserved in jars of Armagnac, eau-de-vie or wine, and flavored with cinnamon or vanilla. They are also popular as sweets, coated with dark chocolate or stuffed with sweet pastes. For a truly special treat, I like to fill them with foie gras and wrap them in bacon or thin slices of magret – a perfect apéro! They also do exceptionally well with rabbit or pork dishes and are blissful in terrines. Another one of my favorite ways to use them is in ice cream, coarsely chopped, with touch of orange zest and a good shot of Armagnac.

If you ever find yourself in the town of Duras in the Lot-et-Garonne, make sure you stop by Maison Guinguet where you will not only find the prettiest handmade chocolates but also a fine choice of pruneaux sweets, jams and preserves.





## *Cake with Agen prunes, almonds and Armagnac*

When the winter chill really sets in, I love baking my prune, almond and Armagnac cake. It makes a wonderful teatime treat, but is also a great dessert to round off a holiday meal. In that case, serve it in tiny slices with a scoop of good vanilla ice cream, one or two prunes soaked in red wine and a light dusting of confectioner's sugar.  
**Note:** If you cannot find Agen prunes, substitute with normal prunes.

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*Serves 8-12*

### **INGREDIENTS:**

130g (Agen) Prunes (pitted), roughly chopped  
2 tbsps Armagnac  
175g all-purpose flour  
1 ½ tsp baking powder  
Pinch of fleur de sel  
75g ground almonds  
125g soft butter  
175g sugar  
3 eggs  
1 tsp vanilla extract

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### **INSTRUCTIONS:**

Soak the chopped prunes in the Armagnac and set aside while you get on with the rest of the recipe. Preheat the oven to 170°C. Butter a round 22cm springform cake tin and line the bottom with a circle of baking paper. Dust the sides with a little flour, shaking off any excess. Whisk the flour and baking powder into a bowl. Whisk in the salt (making sure to grind it finely between your fingers) and the ground almonds. Using a hand-held or standing mixer, cream the butter and the sugar until they form a light paste. Add in the eggs, one by one, while continuing to beat and scraping down the sides of the bowl if necessary. Don't worry if the mixture looks a little curdled. Add the vanilla and beat again. Using a rubber spatula or wooden spoon, gently fold the dry ingredients through the wet. Fold in the prunes along with the Armagnac. Scrape the batter into the prepared cake tin, spreading it out evenly and smoothing out the top. Bake for approximately 45 minutes. After 30 minutes, cover the cake with a sheet of aluminum foil and continue to bake for the remaining 15 minutes. Check for doneness by inserting a wooden skewer into the center of the cake. It should come out clean. Allow to cool completely on a wire rack before unmolding and carefully removing the paper lining. You can dust the cake with powdered sugar or serve it as suggested in the introduction.







## Vin Chaud

Vin chaud, or mulled wine, is a favorite at French Christmas markets. Its spicy notes and warm aroma make this one of the most perfect holiday drinks.

I have many fond memories of wandering through the brightly lit stalls of Christmas markets with a cup of vin chaud warming my hands and lifting my spirits. The sweet, festive drink which is loved by many, has a history that goes back to Roman times. A honeyed version was probably made somewhere around the 2nd century and consumed not only as a winter warmer but also prized for its restorative properties. Medieval Europe took a special liking to the drink, adding exotic spices such as cinnamon, cloves and cardamom which were introduced through trade and exploration. Back then, the drink was an aid for digestion and popular at banquets. It was also a way to make wines last longer and improve their taste when they were bitter or unpleasant. By the end of the 19th century, mulled wine had become the Christmas drink we know today. Remember to never let the drink boil as this will affect the taste and lower the alcohol content. I like to make my vin chaud in advance so that the wine — my preference goes to a smooth merlot — becomes infused with the flavor of all the spices. My version has Armagnac (I was probably a Gascon in a past life), fresh orange juice (not the rind, it adds too much bitterness) and dark brown sugar for a deep, rich taste.

### *Serves 2*

#### INGREDIENTS:

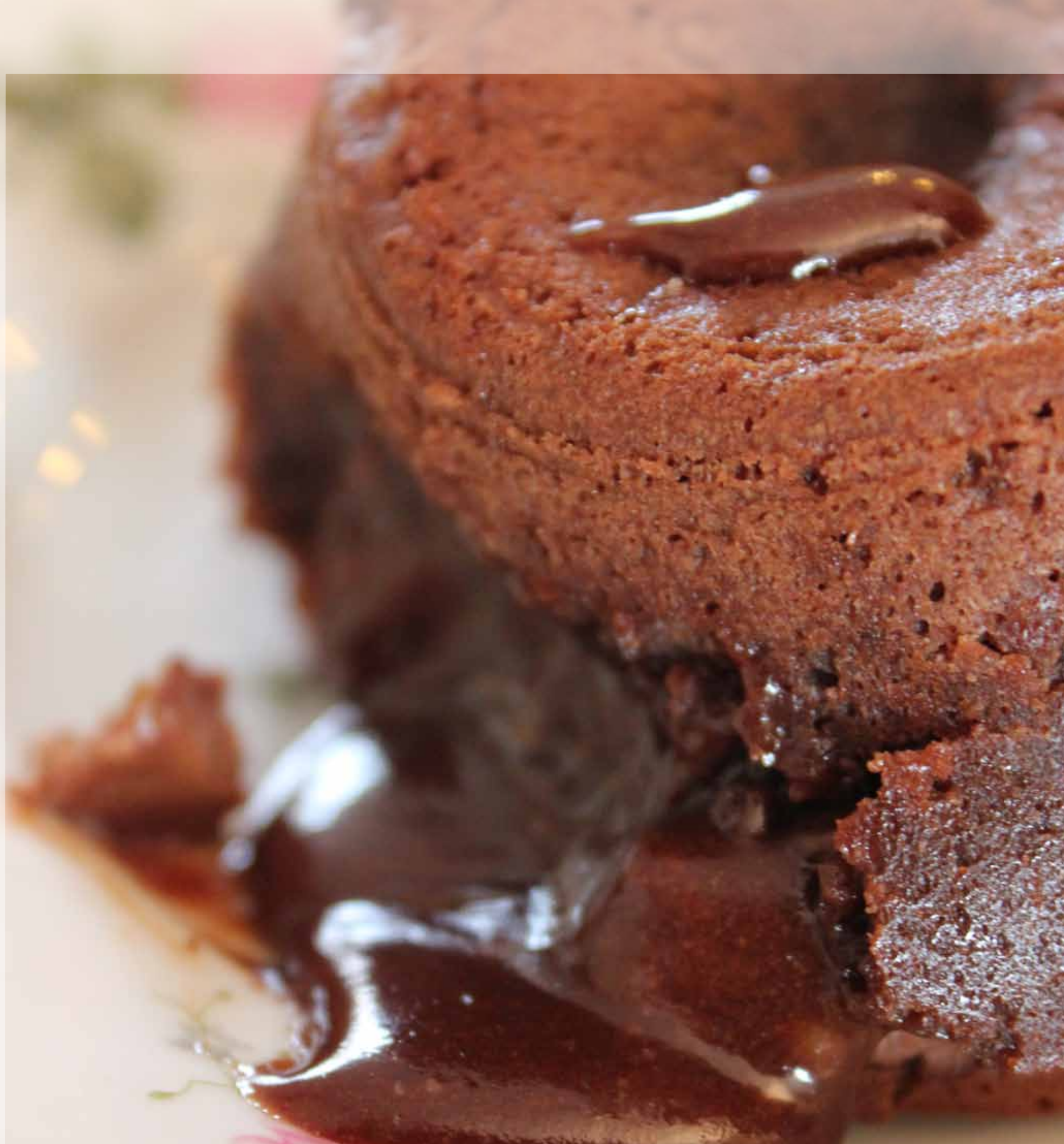
260ml red wine (preferably merlot)  
Juice of 1 large orange  
2 small cinnamon sticks  
2 cloves  
3 cardamom pods  
1 tbsp Armagnac  
2 tbsps dark brown sugar  
1 star anise

#### INSTRUCTIONS:

Place all the ingredients in a small saucepan and bring to a gentle simmer. Do not boil! Remove from the heat after 2 minutes and leave to stand for at least 4 hours at room temperature. Reheat gently when ready to serve.







## Moelleux au chocolat

From elaborate tarts glistening with fruit, to a simple serving of fromage blanc topped with a ruby red, fresh berry coulis – nobody does dessert quite like the French do. At least, that’s what most of us are bound to think when we enter a pâtisserie or marvel at a beautiful, sweet creation presented to us at a restaurant. Desserts, especially the French kind, can be intimidating.

But the truth is that some (if not most) are quite easy to recreate at home. Even the impressive desserts that many are not so keen to try, in fear of a possible culinary disaster. Take the moelleux au chocolat, for example. When I first had it at a restaurant many years ago, I didn’t think much of it – until my spoon tore through the cakey layer and met with a heart of warm, molten chocolate. After that very first bite, I fell in love with the dessert and knew that I had to make it for friends at my next dinner party. The only question was ‘how’.

Through trial and error, I finally came up with the perfect recipe. You’ll be pleased to know it requires very little ingredients. I like to serve my moelleux au chocolat warm, preferably with a scoop of salted caramel ice cream or a crowning pool of crème anglaise, and preferably in good company.

**Note:** I used small ramequins measuring approx. 6½ cm. If using bigger ones, adjust the time as stated in the recipe.

### *Serves 6*

#### **INGREDIENTS:**

150g pure dark chocolate  
100g butter  
Pinch of fleur de sel  
2 eggs, plus 2 egg yolks  
120g sugar  
50g all-purpose flour

#### **INSTRUCTIONS:**

Preheat the oven to 210°C and butter your ramequins well. Place them on a baking sheet covered with aluminum foil. Melt the chocolate, butter and salt (making sure to grind it finely between your fingers) au bain-marie and allow this mixture to cool slightly. In a small bowl or glass jug, whisk the eggs and the yolks well. Add the sugar and whisk again. Whisk in the flour followed by the chocolate and butter mixture. Divide the the batter over the buttered ramequins and bake for approximately 8-10 minutes, depending on the size of your ramequins. To serve, place a small plate over the ramequin and carefully (using oven gloves if still hot) flip the whole thing over and shake gently until they are released onto the plate. You may have to use the tip of a small knife to help them a little.







## Gougères

In Burgundy, gougères are usually served at wine tastings. The light, airy cheese puffs are the perfect appetizer for guests and a lovely Sunday nibble. They can be flavored with a variety of ingredients. These are made with Gruyère and chives, but you can substitute with Comté, Emmental, Gouda or Cheddar. Blue cheese and spring onions would also be a delicious variation.

The gougères are made with a classic French pâte à choux, an airy pastry also used in other French pastry classics such as éclairs, profiteroles and chouquettes (there's a recipe for these on my blog).

You'll want to eat these warm as they will lose their charm (that beautiful lightness!) once cooled

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*Makes approx. 25-30*

### INGREDIENTS:

100g butter  
200ml water  
Pinch of fleur de sel  
Freshly cracked pepper  
130g all-purpose flour  
3 eggs  
100g grated Gruyère, plus a bit extra for garnish  
2 tbsps finely chopped chives

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### INSTRUCTIONS:

Preheat the oven to 220°C and line a baking sheet with parchment paper. Bring the water with the butter, salt (making sure to grind it finely between your fingers) and pepper to a boil. Take the pan off the heat once the butter is melted, add the flour all at once and using a wooden spoon, stir it in vigorously for about a minute. Return the pan to a low-medium heat and stir the dough vigorously for another minute, using the spoon to shape it into a ball at the end. Transfer the dough to a large bowl and allow to cool for 3 minutes. Add the eggs in one at a time, mixing them in well with a wooden spoon. You will notice that the dough will separate after you add in each egg. Not to worry. Just keep stirring vigorously and it will come back together. Stir in the cheese and the chives after all the eggs have been incorporated. Using two teaspoons, drop little mounds of dough onto the baking sheet. Garnish each piece with a little extra cheese. Bake the gougères for 5 minutes. Reduce the heat to 180°C and bake for an additional 25 minutes. Serve hot!







## Provençal olive cookies

During the holidays, there’s nothing quite as festive as serving a sumptuous cheese platter before dessert. For the French, however, cheese is not only saved for special occasions but enjoyed (in moderation) almost every day. Usually with salad. Bread and crackers, though lovely, are not really served with cheese. In fact, I once attended a cheese tasting at the French embassy and was told never to pair cheese with things such as fruit/nut bread and crackers. Well, allow me to break the rules because I simply adore Bleu de Gex with walnut bread and Brillat-Savarin with date bread! At my house, a holiday cheese platter will always include breads, various crackers and my Provençal olive cookies. Nibble on them between your cheeses – and don’t tell the French I told you to! By the way, they’re also great with soups. Note: Use small olives. If your olives are large, chop them roughly.

*Makes approx. 15*

### INGREDIENTS:

250g all-purpose flour  
½ tsp baking powder  
Fat pinch of fleur de sel  
1 ½ tsp dried herbes de Provence  
120g small black olives (in oil, drained well)  
2 eggs  
75 ml olive oil

### INSTRUCTIONS:

Preheat the oven to 180°C and line a baking sheet with baking paper. Sift the flour and baking powder into a large bowl. Add the salt (making sure to grind it finely between your fingers) and the herbes de Provence and stir well. Stir in the olives. In a separate bowl, whisk the eggs with the olive oil. Add the wet ingredients to the dry, stir well with a wooden spoon and then knead the dough in the bowl. Transfer the dough to a well-floured surface and knead it a bit more until it comes together. If some olives fall off, simply stick them back on. Roll the dough out to a thickness of approx. ½ cm. Again, if some olives try to escape, simply stick them back on. Cut out cookies of approx. 6 cm in diameter. Knead leftover dough, roll out again and cut out more cookies until all the dough is finished. Place the cookies on the baking sheet with a little space between them. Bake the cookies for 25-30 minutes and allow to cool on a wire rack before serving.







# French Onion Soup

What makes an exceptionally delicious French onion soup? To me, the most important element is time. Slowly cooking the onions is one of the most important steps, in order for them to gently caramelize and infuse the broth with all of their natural sweetness. I like to cook mine for a good hour, until they are soft and enticingly fragrant. To give the soup a fine touch and extra flavor, I also add a shot of Armagnac. This is the kind of soup to make on a chilly Saturday afternoon. Perhaps after returning home from the Christmas fair. Savor it slowly, just as it was cooked. Preferably with a fruity pinot noir or beaujolais, and if you're lucky, in front of a roaring fire.

*Serves 4*

## INGREDIENTS:

- 50g butter
- 1 kilo onions, halved and thinly sliced
- 1 clove of garlic, pressed
- Small bunch of thyme, plus 4 small sprigs for the toasts
- 1 tsp raw cane sugar
- Fleur de sel & freshly cracked pepper
- 1½ tbsps all-purpose flour
- 1½ tbsps Armagnac
- 1L strong beef bouillon
- 4 thick slices of sourdough bread
- Gruyère, freshly-grated

## INSTRUCTIONS:

Melt the butter in a heavy-bottomed soup pan over a gentle heat. Add the onions, garlic, thyme, sugar and a little salt and pepper. Stir, place a lid on the pan and allow everything to cook for 1 hour. Stir occasionally. Stir in the flour and cook for three minutes. Turn up the heat, add the Armagnac and follow with the bouillon. Allow the soup to cook for an additional 10 minutes, without the lid. Taste and correct the seasoning. To make the croutons: Put the pieces of bread on a baking sheet lined with baking paper. Top each piece with grated cheese and a sprig of rosemary. Place under a hot grill for 1-2 minutes, or until the cheese melts. Keep an eye on them so they don't burn! Divide the soup over the bowls and top with a piece of toast.







## *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 recognize 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.