

# In the kitchen



This month **Paola Westbeek** prepares an Easter feast with succulent Poitou-Charentes lamb

In France, the Easter table would not be complete without a fragrant, slow-roasted leg of lamb, so meltingly tender you could eat it with a spoon.

Studded with garlic and seasoned with fresh garden herbs, *le gigot d'agneau* is usually served with flageolets (creamy, pale green French beans) and an aromatic gravy. *Carré d'agneau* (lamb's rack) and *navarin d'agneau* (a stew of lamb shoulder and seasonal vegetables such as carrots, peas and turnips) are other popular dishes enjoyed during the Easter lunch feast.

Approximately 9,000 tonnes of lamb are eaten on Easter Sunday and when it comes to excellent lamb, the Poitou-Charentes region in northern Nouvelle-Aquitaine is one of the country's top producers.

More than 1,000 breeders spread out over the departments of Charente, Charente-Maritime, Deux-Sèvres and Vienne are proudly continuing a tradition that goes back to at least the 14th century.

Though at first sheep were mainly reared for their wool, as of the 18th century, meat production became significantly more important.

The region's lush grazing pastures (a result of its mild oceanic climate and sufficient rainfall) proved to be an



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ideal environment for the production of quality, free-range meat with a delicate and refined flavour that did not go unnoticed by chefs and culinary connoisseurs.

By 1983, the brand L'Agneau du Poitou-Charentes was created in order to regulate production and in 2004 it was granted the IGP (*Indication Géographique Protégée*) label guaranteeing its origin.

Only seven breeds of sheep are used (Vendéen, Texel, Charollais, Suffolk, Western Red, Charmoise and Île-de-France).

The ewes are allowed to graze for a minimum of seven months per year and breastfeed their lambs for at least 60 days.

After this important period, lambs are offered a diet of local grains and herbs supplemented with essential vitamins and minerals. The result is a light-coloured meat marbled with firm white fat that makes it exceptionally juicy and suitable for a variety of delicious preparations.

One of my favourite recipes is marinating the chops in lemon juice, good olive oil, thyme, rosemary and pink garlic before quickly grilling them to a perfect rosé so that they retain their succulent texture and finesse.

Served with rocket lettuce, a salad of new potatoes and a ripe Blanc de Blancs Champagne with a hint of citrus, it is one of spring's culinary delights. *Joyeuses Pâques et surtout... bon appétit!*

## RECIPE

### Molten chocolate cakes

#### INGREDIENTS

- 150g dark chocolate
- 4 eggs
- 135g caster sugar
- 135g soft unsalted butter
- 40g flour
- 20g potato starch
- 6 squares dark chocolate

#### METHOD

Preheat the oven to 210°C (410°F).

Butter and flour six individual foil cupcake cases (5x4cm).

Chop the chocolate and melt over a bain-marie.

Put the eggs and sugar in a bowl over a bain-marie, whisk until the mixture is pale and leaves a thick ribbon trail: it should flow from the whisk without the ribbon breaking. Remove from the bain-marie and whisk the mixture with an electric whisk on high speed until it cools.

Mix the butter with the melted chocolate and add to the mixture. Gently fold in the flour and the potato starch.

Fill the cupcake cases halfway, place a square of dark chocolate in the middle, then finish filling the cases.

Bake for five or six minutes. Leave to cool for five minutes before removing from the cupcake cases.

Serve immediately.

### Serve with...

If you're lucky enough to have a leg of Poitou-Charentes lamb gracing your table this Easter, pair it with a fleshy syrah from the northern Rhône Valley such as a Crozes-Hermitage, or keep it classic and pop open an elegant Pauillac with herbal, smoky notes.



**Le Cordon Bleu  
Chocolate Bible**  
(£35, Grub Street)  
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*Next month's recipe:  
Grilled sardines*