

In the kitchen



This month *Paola Westbeek* indulges her sweet tooth with the Queen of French strawberries

Some culinary experiences are akin to falling in love and I must admit to getting butterflies in my stomach as I watched Didier Casaguana, Michelin-starred chef at Les Fresques in Monestier, prepare one of his signature dishes for me: a vibrant tartare of 'Gariguettes' strawberries voluptuously crowned with thick chunks of blue lobster and a delicate foie gras escalope.

The marriage of flavours and textures was superb, but what captivated me most was the 'Gariguettes' strawberries.

With their scarlet red colour, these jewel-like strawberries are almost too pretty to eat, turning dishes into edible works of art.

The real magic, however, happens when you actually savour them. After having my fair share of deceptively beautiful strawberries that tasted like water, I was instantly smitten by the 'Gariguettes'.

One of the most popular strawberries in France, they have an exceptionally sweet aroma with slightly acidic notes and a succulent bite. They are cultivated in Lot-et-Garonne (the country's leading strawberry producer) along with the



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'Ciflorette' and the 'Charlotte'. All three varieties were granted Label Rouge certification in 2009.

Though strawberries have been grown in this fertile region since at least the 15th century, the story of the 'Gariguettes' began in 1976 when it was invented in Avignon by a research team led by agricultural engineer Georgette Rissler.

Their mission was to create a hardy strawberry that was resistant to disease, could withstand transport and, of course, would be fragrant and delicious. It wasn't until the late 1980s, though, that the 'Gariguettes' would gain popularity.

At a time when inferior strawberries were being imported from Spain and Italy, this early, indigenous variety caught the eye (and tempted the nose!) of choosy consumers who did not mind paying more for better quality.

In the 1990s, producers in Lot-et-Garonne took an interest in the fruit and today the 'Gariguettes' variety accounts for 45% of the department's total strawberry production.

Best enjoyed from the middle of March until the end of June, they are wonderful eaten fresh (they don't survive a market stroll with me!), but you can also serve them with thick crême fraîche, which in my opinion, is a far superior pairing than just whipped cream.

RECIPE

Grilled sardines with cucumber salad and harissa

Ingredients

- 12 sardines, fresh, whole, scaled and gutted – as many as you fancy, but I recommend at least three per person
- Olive oil
- 1 tsp fennel seeds, toasted slowly and roughly ground
- 4 small cucumbers
- Lemon juice
- A big handful of chopped mint
- Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper
- Flatbreads, to serve (optional)

For the harissa:

- 4 fat garlic cloves, peeled
- 100g/3½oz medium red chillies, deseeded and any white removed
- 150g/5¼oz tomatoes, halved
- 1 tsp cumin seeds
- 1 tsp caraway seeds
- 1 tsp red wine vinegar
- 2 tsp olive oil
- Salt, to taste

Method

First, make the harissa. Preheat the oven to 170°C fan/190°C/375°F/gas mark 5. Roast three of the garlic cloves, three quarters of the chillies and all of the tomatoes in the oven for 25 minutes, or until soft and beginning to blacken.

Meanwhile, toast the spices slowly in a heavy-based pan until they release their aromas but are not bitter or burnt. Grind the toasted spices in a pestle and mortar. Add the remaining garlic clove and a pinch of salt to the ground spices, then crush to a fine paste.

When the garlic, chillies and tomatoes are roasted, put them in a blender with the spice paste and the remaining raw chillies. Blitz very well, add the vinegar and olive oil once smooth, then season with salt. The harissa should be very spicy, but not so spicy that you can't actually eat it.

On occasion, the heat of the chillies takes me by surprise. If this happens to you, add a little

more tomato to cool things down. This recipe will likely make more harissa than you are going to need to accompany the sardines, but it keeps well when stored in the refrigerator.

When ready to eat, build a charcoal fire under a grill. Light the fire, then wait until the flames have died down but the embers are still white hot. Rub the sardines with olive oil and sprinkle with salt, pepper and the ground fennel seeds. Place the sardines over the hot charcoal and grill for a couple of minutes on

each side. If serving with flatbreads, lightly grill them too.

Meanwhile, using a vegetable peeler, cut the cucumbers into long ribbons.

Dress the cucumber ribbons with a good squeeze of lemon juice, some olive oil, the chopped mint and a pinch of salt.

Serve the grilled sardines with the cucumber salad, harissa and flatbreads, if preferred.



Sardine: Simple seasonal Provençal cooking by Alex Jackson
(Pavilion Books, £25)
Photography: © Matt Russell

Next month's recipe:
Orange and lavender
mini cakes