

In the kitchen



The classic 'flan parisien' is so much more than a custard tart, says **Paola Westbeek**...

Nothing makes my friend's face light up more than recalling how she would help her mother bake a *flan parisien* once a month for the family's Sunday lunch. Marie-Louise can describe the childhood memory with such vividness that I can almost smell the pale yellow custard tart's irresistible vanilla aroma and taste its velvety smoothness.

She isn't alone, because for many French, the *flan parisien* ranks high on the list of favourite pastries. The history of this classic of French pâtisserie goes back to the Middle Ages, and in fact the tart is not French in origin but English. A pastry called 'doucettys' was first served at Henry IV's coronation in 1399, which would later become the humble 'custard tart' we know today.

Consisting of thick pastry cream baked into a buttery crust, variations of the recipe made their way all over the world. In Portugal it is called *pastéis de nata*, in Hong Kong it goes by the name of *dàn tà*. The original French recipe dates back to the 19th century and was first published in Jean-Baptiste Reboul's cookbook *La cuisinière provençale* (1897).

Those eager to try their hand at making a *flan parisien* at home may be overwhelmed by the diversity of recipes available. Some call for making the filling with milk and others with cream. Some are flavoured with vanilla, while others opt for lemon zest or even a combination of the two. And then there's the question of which crust to choose: a rich *pâte brisée* (shortcrust



Flan parisien is a favourite pastry for many

pastry) or a more delicate *pâte feuilletée* (puff pastry)? Personally, I prefer making my *flan parisien* with puff pastry and a mixture of full-fat milk and cream, scented with nothing more than the seeds of a fleshy vanilla pod.

Though you can purchase a decent slice of *flan parisien* at every French bakery, to truly taste the best you'll have to plan a trip to Paris. The one made at Boulangerie Utopie in the 11th *arrondissement* (20 Rue Jean-Pierre Timbaud) is a masterpiece in all its exquisite simplicity. You can taste quality vanilla in the silky soft custard and the crust has a delectable melt-in-the-mouth texture. Or stop by renowned pastry chef Philippe Conticini (37 Rue de Varenne) to sample another winner, perfumed with a subtle hint of lemon.

A word of warning: do not be tempted to buy the *flan parisien* at a French supermarket (usually packed in sad plastic trays). Nine times out of 10, the pastry cream is bland and the crust tastes like cardboard. And finally, the *flan parisien* should not be confused with the *flan pâtissier*, which is simply a custard baked without a crust.

serve with...

A sweet wine with hints of honey or candied fruits, such as a succulent Coteaux du Layon (Loire) or an aromatic Monbazillac (Bergerac).

