



Though he is best known for being the father of Impressionism, 19th-century artist

Claude Monet was also a huge food connoisseur who enjoyed lavish feasts made with the best ingredients, and preferably, shared in good company. After years of financial worries, he moved to Giverny with his family in 1883 and it was there that he developed a gourmet lifestyle and revelled in some of the most delicious culinary experiences.

The road to Giverny

Monet may be one of the most famous French painters, but the first half of his career was hardly prosperous. Born in Paris on 14 November, 1840, he moved to Le Havre in Normandy aged five. The young artist later returned to the French capital where he met and worked with contemporaries such as Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Berthe Morisot and Edgar Degas.

In 1874, he exhibited a painting depicting the port at Le Havre (*Impression, Sunrise*; 1872, Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris) which would give rise to the term Impressionism, an innovative style of art characterised by the use of

At the table with CLAUDE MONET

The Impressionist painter developed a taste for fine food after moving to Giverny, as **Paola Westbeek** discovers



bright colours and rapid brushstrokes, creating a sketch-like appearance on the canvas.

Unfortunately, Monet's artistic efforts were not applauded and he barely made enough to make ends meet. Tormented by creditors, he moved often and despair even led him to attempt suicide by jumping into the Seine. His wife Camille died in 1879, leaving him with their two young boys.

By 1883, life started to look better for Monet. He began selling more paintings, found love again and returned to his beloved Normandy, settling down at Le Pressoir, a spacious pink house with lush gardens, orchards and flowering meadows. With the financial help and trust of art dealer Paul Durand-Ruel, Monet was able to fully devote himself to his work and even had enough time to develop his other favourite art – that of eating and drinking. Shortly after his move, he wrote to art critic Théodore Duret, saying: "I am in raptures. Giverny is a splendid place for me."

The art of feasting

Le Pressoir became Monet's place of artistic and personal refuge. When he wasn't painting or gardening, he sat at the



Above:
Les Galettes

Left:
Monet's distinctive dining room and kitchen

Below:
Nature morte au melon



large table in his bright yellow dining room with family and friends, among them renowned painters, writers and art dealers. He couldn't cook, but had a highly developed palate and was an attentive and generous host who took great pleasure in sharing long meals where conversations about food flowed as abundantly as the carefully chosen wines.

Marguerite, his cook, used only the best ingredients, either freshly harvested from the garden or sourced from quality producers in France. He was especially partial to Périgord truffles, foie gras from Alsace and Provençal olive oil. Poultry was raised for meat and eggs, and in the autumn, Monet would go with his second wife, Alice, and their children into the nearby woods in search of fragrant *cèpes* and other wild mushrooms.

Monet painted mostly outdoors. In order to take advantage of the bright Normandy light, he started his day at five in the morning with a hearty breakfast consisting

of foods he discovered during his travels to England and the Netherlands: toast with marmalade, muffins, scones, scrambled eggs with bacon and Dutch cheeses.

Monet became quite agitated if lunch wasn't served promptly at 11.30am, which meant that Marguerite started preparations almost immediately in the beautiful blue kitchen equipped with a large Briffault stove, sturdy copper pans, terrines and all kinds of earthenware baking tins. The three-course meal included recipes from friends or those inspired by meals he had at fine restaurants, among them Cézanne's *bouillabaisse* and lobster à l'américaine from the Drouant in Paris.

Monet was as impatient as he was picky. Asparagus had to be barely cooked, sauces perfectly seasoned and neither too thick nor too thin, and salads flavoured with generous amounts of black pepper.

For his birthday, the table would be elegantly set with yellow Limoges crockery and fresh flowers. Monet usually



requested roasted woodcock, fish with *beurre blanc* and for dessert, Marguerite's speciality, her bright green '*vert-vert*' pistachio cake.

At Christmas, the family dined on Bresse poultry and *foie gras* pies luxuriously perfumed with black truffle. Dessert was a traditional English steamed pudding followed by Monet's favourite banana ice cream.

Delectable paintings

Journalist and art critic Octave Mirbeau once referred to Monet's lavish gardens as "a perpetual feast for the eyes," something which can also be said about the tempting images he captured on canvas. *Nature morte: le quartier de viande* (approx. 1864, Musée d'Orsay, Paris), one of his first food paintings, is a sober composition depicting working-class fare: an inexpensive cut of meat, garlic for flavour and a ceramic mug, probably holding beer.

By contrast, one of his most famous works, *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1865-66, Pushkin Museum, Moscow), depicts a sumptuous *pique-nique*. Bathed in a softly dappled light, a fashionably dressed group enjoys *pâté en croûte*, roast chicken, bread and fruit.

Everything is served on fine china and crystal glasses are used for the wine. Though obviously an intimate setting, the painting almost invites us to take a seat next to the curious dog in the foreground and reach over to receive the plate from the woman pictured in the centre.

Le Déjeuner (1868-69, Städel Museum, Frankfurt) captures a convivial, carefree scene. His first wife, Camille, is at the table with their infant son, Jean. It is an autobiographical painting rendered at a time when the artist was able to adequately provide for his family after receiving payment from one of his patrons.

Monet made several paintings of fruit, including *Nature morte au melon* (1872, Museu Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisbon), an exquisite image of a bowl of ripe peaches, sliced melon and a few bunches of grapes. But *Les Galettes* (1882, private collection) is perhaps one of his most delightful food paintings. Our mouths water at the sight of two freshly baked, golden *galettes* waiting to be sampled with a glass of *cidre* – a delicious artistic prelude to the wonderful years Monet would spend in Giverny until his death on 5 December, 1926. ❤️

Above:
Déjeuner sur l'Herbe

More on Monet



FONDATION CLAUDE MONET, GIVERNY

Monet's house in Giverny attracts roughly 500,000 visitors annually and is Normandy's second most popular tourist destination after Mont-Saint-Michel. From the outside, the painter's house with its pretty pink facade and green shutters is like something out of a fairy tale. Inside, beauty unfolds in every corner, but especially stunning is the kitchen with its blue Rouen tiles and the dining room which was painted in two shades of chrome yellow and boasts a huge selection of the Japanese prints. The gardens are a delight in spring when the flowers bloom in an explosion of colour. The house is due to reopen on 1 April. fondation-monet.com

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Those who would like to dine with Monet can get plenty of inspiration from *The Monet Cookbook: Recipes from Giverny* (Prestel, 2016). Included are 80 of Monet's favourite recipes such as 'Oxtail Hochepot', 'Chicken Chasseur', 'Venison with Rosehips' and 'Vert-Vert Cake'. The four chapters are generously peppered with views into the artist's life, enlightening quotes, stunning reproductions of some of his works and photographs with friends and family.