

In the kitchen



Paola Westbeek on Céret cherries, the edible jewel of French Catalonia

With towering plane trees, hidden squares serenaded by the sound of gently trickling water fountains, and little alleys lined with houses in soft shades of lemon, salmon and apricot, it's no wonder Céret's painterly beauty has attracted the likes of Picasso. A visit to this colourful jewel tucked into the foothills of the Pyrénées is guaranteed to leave a lasting impression, especially in May when the annual cherry festival literally paints the town red.

Vast cherry orchards were planted in and around Céret in the second half of the 19th century. Up until then the region of Vallespir in French Catalonia was mostly known for its hazelnut production, but by the 1920s sweet, plump cherries were becoming the talk of the town. They were exported to Paris and other parts of the country, encouraging the planting of more trees and becoming a highly lucrative business by the late 1940s. In recent years, however, the influx of cherries imported from Spain and Portugal along with ageing trees has led to a decrease in production. From approximately 5,000 tonnes of fruit produced annually in the 1970s, the number has dwindled to 1,200.

Nevertheless, Céret is still known as France's cherry capital. The region's well-drained soils and warm, early springs provide the perfect conditions for the trees to blossom early in the season and bear ripe, juicy fruit by mid-April - before most orchards in the rest of the country. The first chest of cherries



is ceremoniously flown to Paris and delivered to the president, a tradition which dates to 1932 when Céret's cherries were first gifted to President Albert Lebrun.

Should you be in the region, the annual cherry festival, which features all kinds of entertainment (including a cherry pit spitting contest), is scheduled for 22 and 23 May this year. It's a fine opportunity to learn more about the fruit and taste it, either au naturel or in the creative menus offered at local restaurants.

Roughly 15 varieties of cherries are grown in the region, and the most popular of all, accounting for 80% of the early harvest, is the Burlat. Their dark, glossy skins and firm flesh make them a great choice for desserts. Stew these scarlet beauties in a sauce made with red fruits and serve with a dollop of vanilla ice-cream or crème fraîche. They're also wonderful with game, especially duck and guinea fowl. Clafoutis is another excellent idea, as long as you remember to use unpitted cherries. Not only does this keep the cherries from releasing their juices and 'staining' the batter, but the pits also impart a characteristic almond flavour to the dessert.

serve with...

Banyuls' rich red fruit flavours and nutty aromas make it a perfect pairing with clafoutis; it also works well in cherry sauces with game.

