

In the kitchen



Discover fresh and fruity Marmande tomatoes with **Paola Westbeek...**

No other vegetable (botanically speaking, a fruit) is more popular in France than the humble tomato. In 95% of French kitchens, *les tomates* - fresh or tinned - are as indispensable to proper cooking as good olive oil. You'll find them in everything from soups and salads to rich stews and delicate tarts. With over 480 varieties grown in France, there is choice aplenty, but none as irresistible as *la tomate de Marmande*.

Though tomatoes were introduced to France (more specifically, Provence) by way of Italy in the late 16th century, it would take another two centuries before they became a staple in French cuisine. They were used in swanky Parisian restaurants such as Les Trois Frères Provençaux, which opened on Rue Ste-Anne in 1786, and renowned gastronome Brillat-Savarin referred to them as "a great blessing to good cookery".

By the end of the 19th century, some tomatoes used in the capital's restaurants or sold at the famous Les Halles market came from the town of Marmande in Lot-et-Garonne. Their history begins in the 1880s, shortly after the phylloxera plague had wiped out a large part of French vineyards. At the time, local horticulturist Pierre Gautriaud had the idea to plant tomatoes as a replacement crop.

At first, they were only sold at local markets, but the arrival of the railway meant they could be exported to major French cities and even London. It wasn't long before tomatoes had put Marmande on the map, not only for fresh tomatoes, but also the



tinned variety. Production expanded to neighbouring towns such as Agen, and today they are also cultivated in Dordogne, Gironde and Lot. While the harvest is modest (currently, 16 *producteurs* account for 1,500 tonnes per year), the taste is huge.

I first discovered the sweet, fragrant tomatoes one July during the annual Marmande Tomato Fiesta, held around Place Clemenceau. After sampling them fresh and in jams, soups and sauces, I purchased a slice of *tarte à la tomate*: flaky pastry topped with glistening ruby slices dotted with olives. Eating this at brasserie Les Neuf Fontaines while sipping a large glass of local white wine and enjoying the fanfare of the lively market, ranks high on my list of most memorable food experiences.

From June to October, you'll find the tomatoes at almost every market in south-west France. Their firm flesh makes them excellent for *tomates farcies*. For four people, stuff eight hollowed tomatoes with 400g of seasoned minced meat. Place them in a roasting tin on a bed of rice (200g), pour in 400ml hot water, drizzle with olive oil, bake for 40-45 minutes and serve with a scattering of parsley.

serve with...

Fresh, fruity wines that won't overpower the dish. A suitable red would be a young Beaujolais or opt for a crisp Côtes de Provence rosé.

