

# In the kitchen



Cavaillon melons are the taste of summer, says **Paola Westbeek...**

Summer in Provence means the serenade of *cigales*, vast fields of lush lavender and the scent of sweet melons. Not just any melons, but the world's most ambrosial melons and the pride of Cavaillon, a town in Vaucluse situated approximately 25km southwest of Avignon.

Revered by kings and clergy in the 14th century, these fragrant gourds find their origins in Italy and were introduced to France by the popes of Avignon around 1495. By the mid 19th century, they were being exported to Paris, quickly gaining fame in the rest of Europe.

Author and gourmand Alexandre Dumas was so enamoured with them that when Cavaillon's soon-to-be-opened library asked him to donate some of his works in 1864, he readily agreed to offer his entire oeuvre, asking only to receive 12 perfectly ripe melons delivered to him every year for the rest of his life in return. In his posthumously published *Grand Dictionnaire de Cuisine* (1873), a 1,600-page cookbook and culinary journal, he wrote: "I never ate anything fresher, tastier and more palatable than the melons from my annuity."

Cavaillon melon season runs from mid-June through September and approximately 276,000 tonnes are cultivated annually. During the weekend before *le 14 juillet*, the town holds its annual *Féria du Melon*, a spectacle of taste and entertainment that invites visitors to sample the melon's succulent, bright orange flesh and features melon-related art,



© JEAN LOUIS ZIMMERMAN

books, cooking demonstrations, farm tours and a remarkable grand finale with one hundred Camargue horses racing through the *centre-ville*.

If you're really in the mood to spoil yourself, end the day with a meal at *Maison Prévôt*, Cavaillon's one-starred Michelin restaurant headed by 'Monsieur Melon', Jean-Jacques Prévôt. He has been creating culinary masterpieces with the melons since 1981 and hosts cooking lessons where you can learn to make signature recipes such as *melon rosettes* or *melon cocotte au homard*.

Cavaillon melons can be found in abundance at almost every regional market. The ripest fruit is heavy with juice, so you'll want to weigh a few before purchasing. A perfect melon will have a loose stem, often surrounded by cracks and indicating it has been freshly harvested. Cavaillon melons are best enjoyed sliced and slightly chilled (never cold!). A classic combination and excellent starter is serving thick wedges with paper-thin slices of dry-cured ham and a drizzle of peppery olive oil. My personal favourite is making a chilled melon soup with lime, mint and *crème fraîche*.

## serve with...

Bring out their honey flavour with fortified wines such as a Muscat de Beauges de Venise. Port and dessert wines like Monbazillac also pair well.

