

In the kitchen



Versatile and delicious, crème fraîche is a dairy delight says **Paola Westbeek**...

There's plenty to love about Normandy. The region charms with spectacular cliffs, pretty fishing villages, and pastures dotted with apple orchards and half-timbered farmhouses. Its visual splendour, however, is not the only reason I keep coming back.

Normandy is home to some of the country's best dairy products. There are robust cheeses such as Camembert and Neufchâtel, and when it comes to producing the richest crème fraîche, Normandy is unmatched. Drive through the countryside on a spring or summer day, and you'll understand why. The verdant landscape is a paradise for the region's robust Normande cattle seen grazing to their heart's content on lush grass and fragrant herbs. This results in sweet, fatty milk which is perfect for making crème fraîche. Its high fat content (30-40%) makes it ideal for cooking as it won't separate when heated. But truth be told, I'll gladly devour it by the spoonful.

The history of crème fraîche can be traced back to the Neolithic period when people in the Middle East started rearing animals for milk. They soon noticed that the thick layer of cream which rose to the surface when fresh milk was left to cool, could not only be kept longer, but also tasted delicious. During the Middle Ages, cream was mainly used for the production of butter, but by the 17th century it had made its way to the tables of the elite. Even François Pierre de la Varenne, author of the influential cookbook



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Tarte aux pommes with crème fraîche

Le Cuisinier François (1651), mentions how it often appeared at Louis XIV's lavish banquets. In the centuries that followed, its popularity continued to grow. Normandy's wet, maritime climate provided the ideal conditions for rearing cattle, and by the second half of the 20th century, crème fraîche had become a flagship product of the region.

Crème fraîche is indispensable in my cooking. I prefer crème fraîche d'Isigny, granted AOC certification in 1986. The cream has a fat content of 40% and is voluptuously thick with a pale yellow colour and a zesty lactic tang. I use it to make all kinds of sauces, from a vibrant mustard cream sauce to go over pork chops or chicken, to *sauce au poivre* for my steak. Vegetable soups and rice gratins are also enriched with a dollop or two. It's the only cream I'll use in my quiches and tarts.

With apple season upon us, allow me to suggest making a *tarte Normande aux pommes*. Line a tart mould with shortcrust pastry, fill with apples and top with a custard made with crème fraîche, eggs, sugar and a good shot of calvados. How to serve? With more crème fraîche on the side, of course!

serve with...

Keep things regional. A glass of calvados will complement the rich caramel notes in the tart. For a more refreshing option, try a fruity cidre.

