

In the kitchen



Paola Westbeek savours the humble jambon-beurre, a simply perfect creation

The first meal I ever had in Paris was a *jambon-beurre*. Sitting on a bench at Champ-de-Mars while basking in the glory of the Eiffel Tower, it was that humble sandwich that impressed me most. Never had I eaten such a perfect yet simple creation: a freshly baked *baguette de tradition*, crispy on the outside and chewy on the inside, slathered with unsalted butter and generously layered with paper-thin slices of rosy pink ham. Little did I know I was sinking my teeth into a piece of French gastronomic heritage – one that years later would be upstaged by the hamburger.

The *jambon-beurre* used to be France's most beloved sandwich. Its history goes back to the 19th century when it was a nutritious and portable meal for the working class and merely consisted of two thick slices of bread covered with a layer of lard or bacon. After the 1920s, however, the sandwich was given a makeover and became a sophisticated treat. No more stale bread with rancid lard, but elegant baguettes, churned butter from Normandy and freshly sliced *jambon de Paris* (hence its nickname 'le Parisien').

Nevertheless, the *jambon-beurre* started to lose popularity a decade or so ago as restaurants across the country began putting the hamburger on their menu. No longer just the fare of fast-food chains such as 'MacDo', it became a canvas for chefs to show off their culinary prowess. Burgers are now made with top-notch ingredients



and often 'Frenchified' in order to boost their gourmet appeal. They're served on brioche and fancied up with comté or roquefort, black truffle and even foie gras. Logically, all this goodness doesn't come cheap: Le Dalí in Paris once had a burger on their menu with a whopping price tag of €42 (*frites* not included). Chez Aline (Rue de la Roquette) still makes one of the best *jambon-beurres* in the city and won't set you back more than €5.

Since 2017, more hamburgers have been sold in France than *jambon-beurres*. According to hospitality marketing company Gira Conseil, the French ate 1.46bn hamburgers versus 1.22bn *jambon-beurres* that year. French culinary experts blame it on the Americanisation of society, although most French will not readily admit to that.

Today, hamburgers are found in 80% of restaurants in France, even those with Michelin stars. Appetising as some may sound, they have little to do with French gastronomy. Therefore, I encourage you to do your part to keep this food tradition alive. Opt for the *jambon-beurre* and order it in its most authentic form: no mustard, cheese, tomato or wilted lettuce leaf. These ingredients would irreverently ruin the perfect trinity of bread, ham and butter, precisely what makes it so special – and so exceptionally French.

serve with...

A wine with a good level of acidity will balance the richness of the *jambon-beurre*. Opt for a Brouilly if choosing a red or a refreshing Vouvray if you prefer a white.

