

# In the kitchen



**Paola Westbeek** is enjoying the tart citrus tang of Menton lemons

Besides olive oil, butter, garlic and *fleur de sel*, lemons are one of the most indispensable ingredients in my cooking. In fact, I feel slightly anxious if I don't have a bowl of lemons on my kitchen counter. Their tart juice is squeezed into vinaigrettes, marinades and sauces, their aromatic zest adds flavour to bakes and vegetables, and I even preserve them to make authentic chicken tagines and other Middle Eastern dishes.

While some ladies swoon with delight when they see a Tiffany's box, I seem to have that with swanky food items, and gourmet lemons are no exception. I thought I had struck gold when I discovered Sorrento lemons, but my first taste of lemons from Menton left me hungry for more. The dish that did it was a lemon curd mousse, light as a cloud, crowned with jewel-like slivers of preserved lemon and served with fresh summer berries and *tuiles* (delicate almond biscuits). Every spoonful was infused with their fragrance and subtle citric tang. You see, unlike regular lemons, Menton lemons are not mouth-puckeringly acidic. Their taste is bright with sweet notes that balance that typical lemon astringency.

According to legend, we can thank Eve for bringing lemons to Menton. Much to Adam's horror, she didn't leave the Garden of Eden empty-handed. Fearing further divine repercussions, he implored her to get rid of the golden fruit. She would only do so in a worthy place, which happened to be around the Garavan



Menton lemons

Bay, in the same spot where the town of Menton came to be.

The less romantic but true story is that the lemons were first cultivated in the region in the mid-14th century. By the 19th century, they had made Menton famous and were being exported all across Europe and even as far as North America. Production started to decline towards the beginning of the 20th century but picked up again in the 80s and 90s.

Today, Menton produces roughly 150 tonnes of lemons per year and is known for its spectacular *Fête du Citron*, which has been taking place every February since 1934 and attracts more than 200,000 visitors. The 15-day festival (this year from the 12th to the 27th) sees the Biovès Gardens decorated with magnificent citrus fruit sculptures, parades of towering floats that will dazzle you with an explosion of colour, and plenty of opportunities to try specialities made with the lemons.

Menton lemons are about three times more expensive than regular lemons and quite difficult to find. If you spot them, count your lucky stars and don't hesitate. Then rush home to make my classic *tarte au citron meringuée* (you'll find the recipe at [thefrenchlife.org](http://thefrenchlife.org)). *Avec plaisir!*

## serve with...

Choose a wine that has citrus fruit and minerality but also a hint of sweetness, such as a demi-sec Vouvray from the Loire Valley.



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