

In the kitchen



Chestnuts are a perfect ingredient all year round, says **Paola Westbeek**...

Although chestnuts are synonymous with the festivities of December, their nutritional qualities make them appealing year-round. Rich in magnesium and calcium, they can be used to make a wide variety of gluten-free products. At Domaine de Rapatel (chataigneduperigord.fr), a 34ha organic chestnut farm just outside Villefranche-du-Périgord in south-east Dordogne, Tanguy and Isabelle de Rosanbo make approximately 26 gourmet delights with their wholesome chestnuts, harvested from mid-September to mid-November.

The couple took over the farm three years ago when the previous owners retired. "We saw it as an opportunity to work with nature," Tanguy explains. Today, the dedicated chestnut farmers (or *castanéculteurs*, as they are called in France) work a 6.5ha chestnut grove and plan to add a hectare every year. They are part of the *Bienvenue à la Ferme* network of French farmers who open their doors to the public in an effort to promote agricultural tourism.

Villefranche-du-Périgord counts around 80 chestnut producers, and Domaine de Rapatel is one of the two farms where they are processed. There are approximately 10 varieties, but the Marigoule, known for its sweetness and versatility, makes up most of the annual production of eight to 10 tonnes. Tanguy harvests his chestnuts with machines and nets. "No shaking is needed," he says. "They drop when they are ripe." The trees are planted in neat rows with



enough distance between them for annual growth and to allow the 7x3m harvesting machine to pass through.

I follow Tanguy to the processing factory where he explains the production process and shows me how the chestnuts are cleaned, sorted by size and dried, cooked or frozen. The smaller ones are dried and milled into flour, and the larger are used in all kinds of preparations. At the shop, where our visit ends, I feast my eyes on everything from jars of whole chestnuts for use with roasts or in stuffings, to decadent chestnut jams and creams, hearty soups, purées and pastas in all kinds of shapes.

Tanguy shows me a bag of *apéro* biscuits. "They're made with only chestnut flour, seeds, olive oil and salt," he says. I am intrigued by the jar of grainy chestnut polenta. Tanguy suggests using it in a crumble. "You only need to add butter and can omit the sugar." I make a mental note to try this with apples, cinnamon and perhaps a splash of chestnut liqueur. With the exception of the pastas and beer (a product added last winter), everything at Domaine de Rapatel is gluten-free and honours the nutty, rich flavour of chestnut by using a minimum of ingredients.

serve with...

Domaine de Rapatel's chestnut flower syrup can be added to (sparkling) white wine and served as an *apéritif*.

