

# In the kitchen



This month **Paola Westbeek** is impressed by Périgord truffles, known as the black diamond of French cuisine

Périgord's most famous culinary gem is the black winter truffle, revered by renowned writers and gastronomes such as Brillat-Savarin who called it "the diamond of the art of cookery" and Curnonsky who poetically described it as "the fragrant soul of the Périgord".

There's no shortage of legends inspired by the sought-after fungus either. In fact, it was said that Napoleon II was born exactly nine months after his father was gifted a large bag of truffles from Sarlat-la-Canéda. Though truffles were already prized in antiquity for their medicinal and aphrodisiac properties, *la truffe noire* did not make its appearance in French cuisine until the 16th century when it was introduced to royal tables by Francis I. By 1763, Périgord truffles were hailed the best of their kind in Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*, a 17-volume reference work emblematic of the Age of Enlightenment. Harvests boomed in the last quarter of the 19th century when the grounds of vineyards destroyed by the phylloxera plague were used to cultivate truffle trees (mainly oak and hazelnut), but by

## Serve with...

Périgord truffles are best enjoyed in simple dishes that allow their intense flavours to shine through. Try them in a classic omelette or with scrambled eggs. They're also delicious in a rich sauce to accompany sweetbreads or with pan-grilled foie gras. A fleshy Pécharmant with ripe tannins would complement them marvellously.



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the early 20th century production fell drastically as a result of the war and rural exodus. As of the 1960s, production increased once again with new cultivation methods based on scientific research. Today, approximately four to nine tonnes of truffle are produced annually in Périgord. My first taste of *le diamant noir*'s earthy piquancy was during an anniversary dinner. The main was a succulent breast of *poulet jaune* with black truffle stuffed under its delicate skin, a preparation called *demi-deuil*, which translates to 'in half mourning'.

It was served with a thick *aligot* (cheesy mashed potato) and generous shavings of fresh, black truffle - and its heady aroma was addictive. Eager to experience the magic all over again, I embarked on a trip to Sarlat a few weeks later to attend the annual *Fête de la Truffe*, a gastronomic two-day festival honouring the famed *Tuber melanosporum*. Held in January, it features everything from hunting and cooking demonstrations, to a truffle market on Place de la Liberté and tastings of 'croustous', appetisers with truffle and foie gras. Truffle markets are held throughout the region during the season (December to February), but do bear in mind that each carefully curated truffle comes with a hefty price tag ranging between €500 and €800 per kilo!

## RECIPE

### Couronne des rois

France celebrates the feast of Epiphany on 6 January with dessert: a *galette*, *gâteau* or *couronne des rois* to mark the arrival of the three kings to Bethlehem. Each cake is baked with a tiny little porcelain figurine hidden inside, known as the *fève*. He or she that finds the *fève* in their piece of cake becomes king or queen for the day.

#### INGREDIENTS

##### FOR THE STARTER

- 20g fresh yeast or 7g dried yeast
- 5 tbsp tepid milk, plus extra for brushing
- 50g plain flour

##### FOR THE COURONNE

- zest of one orange
- 60g caster sugar
- 1 tbsp orange blossom water
- 250g plain flour, plus extra for dusting
- 2 eggs, lightly beaten
- 80g butter, softened
- 40g chopped candied peel
- 1 porcelain *fève* (charm), or whole almond

##### FOR DECORATION

- 3 tbsp apricot jam
- 1 tsp orange blossom water
- 8 glacé cherries (optional)
- 8 candied fruit pieces (optional)
- 2-3 tbsp pearl sugar

#### METHOD

##### FOR THE STARTER:

Crumble (or add) the yeast into a bowl containing the tepid milk. Mix in the flour, then cover with clingfilm. Leave in a warm place for one hour or so, until the dough has risen a little and bubbles have formed: your starter is ready.

##### FOR THE COURONNE:

**1.** Add the orange zest to a large mixing bowl with the sugar and orange blossom water. Mix, then sift over the flour.

**2.** Add the beaten eggs, softened butter and prepared starter. Mix with a spoon as much as possible, then take over with your hands.

Knead for a few minutes. The dough will be quite sticky.

**3.** Transfer the dough to a clean surface sprinkled with flour and continue to knead for 15 minutes.

If you find the dough is still very sticky after five minutes, add a little extra flour.

**4.** Once you have finishing kneading, shape the dough into a ball and place back in the mixing bowl.

Cover the bowl tightly with clingfilm and place in a draught-free, warm spot. Leave to rise until it has doubled in size. This will take two to three hours in a toasty place.

**5.** After a few hours, knock back the risen dough and allow the air to escape. Knead for a minute on a lightly floured surface, then roll into a circle

about 2cm thick. Transfer to a baking tray lined with greaseproof paper.

Stick a finger in the centre to make a hole, then move it around to increase the aperture so that you are left with a shape like a giant, flat bagel, hole approximately 5cm in diameter.

**6.** Sprinkle the chopped candied peel around the hole and nestle the *fève* or almond inside it. Fold the outer edges of the dough inwards, over the candied fruit and press to seal with the inner edge, forming a giant stuffed bagel: your *couronne*.

**7.** Carefully flip the *couronne* upside down (the bottom side is generally prettier), cover with clingfilm and prove once more in a warm place for two hours.

Towards the end of the proving time, preheat the oven to 200°C/180°C fan/gas mark 6.

**8.** When you're ready to bake, remove the clingfilm and brush the cake with a little milk.

Bake for 15-20 minutes, until the top is a lovely deep golden colour. Once out of the oven and still warm, the *couronne* should be decorated.

Place the apricot jam in a small saucepan and add the orange blossom water. Gently heat for one minute, then brush over the cake to glaze. Top with the glacé cherries and candied fruit, if using, followed by a generous sprinkling of pearl sugar.

**This keeps for two to three days in a cake tin.**



Provence: The Cookbook by Caroline Rimbart Craig (£22, octopus books.co.uk)

Photos © Susan Bell

Next month's recipe: Chocolate croissants