

BON APPÉTIT

The best of French gastronomy at home and away

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A plum job

The prunes of Agen are considered a delicacy, as **Clare Hargreaves** discovers when she visits producers of south-west France's prized dried fruit

Mention the south-western town of Agen to a French person and they'll think of two things: rugby and prunes. It's famous for both, not necessarily together – although prunes have been shown to have a low glycemic index, making them a perfect snack for rugby players (and other sportspeople) who require slow-release energy.

Travelling by train from Bordeaux, I noticed that roughly halfway along the journey my window-seat view saw stubby vines give way to rows of delicate *pruniers*, which continued right up until I reached the unassuming town of Agen.

Unlike in Britain, where the prune invariably elicits sniggers, in France it is

prized as a gourmet delicacy. So what's special about the Agen prune in particular? Its supporters say its texture, taste and sweetness make it the finest in the world. They point to the fact that although prunes are produced elsewhere, notably Chile and California, Agen's prunes are the only ones to have a protected name in the

same way as champagne or Roquefort cheese do.

The Agen prune comes from a variety of plum unique to the region called Ente, from the old French word *enter*, meaning 'to graft'. The original grafting was performed by Benedictine monks at the Abbaye de Clairac near Villeneuve-sur-Lot in the 12th century, crossing their local variety with one brought back from Syria by French Crusaders.

"The Crusaders tried to storm Damascus strongholds but failed, so

ABOVE: Ente plums are grown for their high sugar content. **LEFT:** Prune production is a local tradition



