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September 2013 | Issue 180

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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



they captured their trees instead,” says Jérôme Calmettes, of the *Bureau Interprofessionnel du Pruneau*, the Agen prune trade body.

“That may be where we get the expression ‘*Y aller pour des prunes*’ – the equivalent of ‘to go on a wild goose chase’.”

Agen lies on the southern edge, rather than the centre, of the south-west’s plum orchards, but the prune was named after Agen because the Canal du Midi, which passes through the town, was the main conduit for exporting the fruits, via Bordeaux. Today, the majority of the area’s 11,100 hectares of *pruniers* grow around Villeneuve-sur-Lot, to the north-east, where the clay soil is perfectly suited for growing the fruit.

Producing the prunes is a year-round occupation. In winter, the trees are pruned, then for a few precious days in spring they don an exquisite party frock of snow-white blossom. By August, the huge fruits hang heavy and indigo-ripe, ready to be turned into succulent prunes. For around three weeks, entire villages drop everything to

By August the fruits hang heavy and indigo-ripe, ready to be turned into prunes

help with the task of harvesting by day and drying by night. “No one sleeps at this time,” laughs Élodie Chauvel, who, with her brother Jean-François, produces prunes on the family fruit farm at Fongrave, west of Villeneuve.

With harvest and drying over, the rest of the year is spent turning the prunes into an array of products, from prunes covered in chocolate through to prunes stuffed with Armagnac and prune paste, then exporting them worldwide.

What makes the Ente plum perfect for prunes is its size – almost as large as a cricket ball – as well as its high sugar content. “The Ente contains upwards of 25 per cent sugar,” explains Jérôme. “Other plums you might eat at home contain around 15 per cent; the sugar is vital to stop the prune going off.”

Traditionally, plums were left to ripen and drop to the ground before being collected, to ensure they were at their sweetest before drying. Now, however, most growers use mechanical harvesters, which hug and lightly shake the plum

trees, then fan out like upside-down umbrellas to catch the tumbling plums.

Whereas locals would once have dried the plums in their ovens after baking bread, today the drying process, like the picking, has become mechanised, as a visit to a 30-hectare plum farm in Penne d’Agenais run by brothers Gilles and Sylvain Vergnes revealed. The basic process, though, is still the same; the plums are washed, checked for blemishes, then placed on trays which are stacked on to trolleys and inserted into big brick ovens which stand in the shed just across from the family château. They are then dried gently for 24 hours, coming out as small, wrinkled black fruits that, having lost most of their moisture, are just a third the size of the original plum.

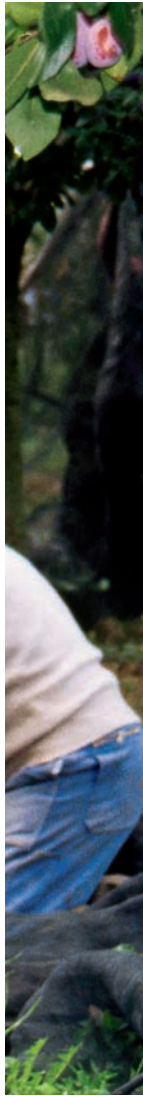
In the old days, that was the end of it: prunes were marketed as small, hard fruits that needed to be soaked before eating. Now consumers want prunes that are soft, moist and ready to eat. So the prunes are rehydrated by soaking in boiling water to regain some of their moisture, then packaged and pasteurised.

In France they are highly regarded, not only raw but also as an ingredient for pâtés, stews, sweets and desserts. One of the most heavenly pairings is with another south-west speciality, Armagnac. Prune and Armagnac ice cream must be one of the finest desserts. The locals also enjoy prunes stuffed with a prune and Armagnac purée as well as *pruneaux enrobés* – prunes dipped in chocolate.

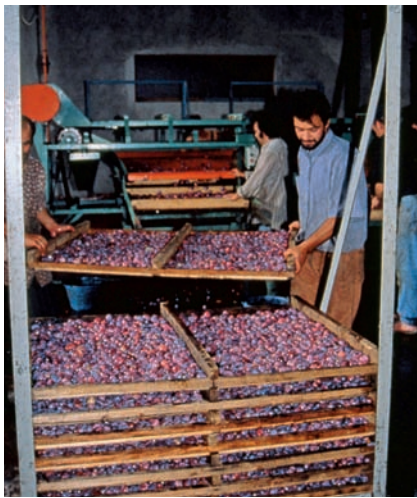
Sadly, in Britain we tend to dismiss the fruit as merely a laxative for the elderly. “Our big challenge is to overcome the British snigger factor,” laughs Jérôme.

If there’s one man who can do this, it’s Pierre Koffmann, the Gascony-born chef who used to run the three-Michelin-starred Tante Claire in London and now heads Koffmann’s inside The Berkeley hotel in London, where his *tarte aux pruneaux* features on the dessert menu (*see the recipe on the facing page*). The trick, Koffmann says, is to soak the prunes in tea the night before. One bite of his tart and you will agree that prunes can reach another plane. Fruity heaven. 🍷





CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Machinery assists in the picking process; The fruit is transformed in the ovens; After 24 hours of drying, the prunes are unloaded, then rehydrated; August is a busy month for the locals as the plums are ready for picking



RECIPE

Tarte aux pruneaux

INGREDIENTS

- 250g prunes
- 3 tea bags
- 250g sweet shortcrust pastry
- 250ml whipped cream, to serve

Pastry cream

- 300ml milk
- 70g caster sugar
- 1 egg yolk
- 40g plain flour

SERVES
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1. The night before, put the prunes in a saucepan, cover with water and add the tea bags. Boil for five minutes, then take the pan off the heat, cover and leave overnight. The next day drain the prunes and stone them.

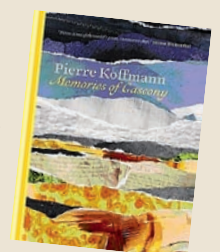
2. Prepare the pastry cream: bring the milk to the boil. Beat the sugar with the egg yolk until pale, then mix in the flour.

The mixture should be like very fine breadcrumbs. Gradually pour on the boiling milk, stirring continuously. Pour the mixture into a saucepan, heat it until it bubbles, then cook gently for five minutes, stirring all the time. Pour into a bowl, cover and leave to cool completely.

3. Preheat the oven to 220°C/425°F/gas 7. Line a 25cm flan dish with the pastry and prick the bottom with a fork. Put in the cold pastry cream and arrange the prunes on top; the pastry case should be three-quarters full.

4. Bake in the preheated oven for 30 minutes. Leave the cooked tart to cool and serve with whipped cream on the side.

This recipe is from *Memories of Gascony* by Pierre Koffmann (Mitchell Beazley, £30).



FRANCOFILE

Visit the prune producers of south-west France

GETTING THERE

Clare travelled to Agen by train with Rail Europe. A standard return from London starts at £109. Tel: 0844 848 4070 www.raileurope.co.uk

WHERE TO VISIT

La Ferme des Tuileries
47260 Fongrave
Tel: (Fr) 5 53 01 33 91
www.ferme-tuileries.com
Farm shop open from April to mid-September.

Le Musée du Pruneau
Ferme Bérintot-Martinet
Granges-sur-Lot
47320 Lafitte-sur-Lot

Tel: (Fr) 5 53 84 00 69
www.musee-du-pruneau.com

WHERE TO BUY

La Boutique des Pruneaux
11 Place de la Libération
47300 Villeneuve-sur-Lot
Tel: (Fr) 5 53 70 02 75
www.laboutiquedes-pruneaux.fr

Les Vergers d'Escoute
47140 Penne d'Agenais
Tel: (Fr) 5 53 41 25 42
www.vergers-escoute.com

Maître Prunille
5 Place de la Libération

47300 Villeneuve-sur-Lot
Tel: (Fr) 5 53 70 30 86
www.maitreprunille.com

TOURIST INFORMATION

Agen tourist office
Tel: (Fr) 5 53 47 36 09
www.ot-agen.org

Villeneuve-sur-Lot tourist office
Tel: (Fr) 5 53 36 17 30
www.tourisme-villeuneuvois.fr

Lot-et-Garonne tourist board
Tel: (Fr) 5 53 66 14 14
www.tourisme-lotetgaronne.com