

# Chapter One



## *The Tastes of Languedoc*

This chapter introduces some of the special foods of Languedoc – favourite ingredients and local produce, both familiar and unfamiliar. Some have a Spanish connection, or are special to the French *Pays catalan*; others have Moorish roots; many are products of the Mediterranean, like the oysters and mussels of the coastal lagoons.

Foraging is important in Languedoc; there are local methods of foraging and hunting in the mountains and forests, and practical ways of eating these free wild foods.

It would be impossible to find room for everything of interest, so I have simply described some of the things to look out for, and attempted to introduce a few of the unusual ingredients of the *pays*, all part of the siren song of the Sud de France that makes us long to be there.

### Catalan Influences in Languedoc-Roussillon

I spent several summers in Spanish Catalonia. We ate well there, living on *pan amb tomàt* (Occitan, *pa amb tomàquet* in Catalan), tomato bread (see page 80), and grilled fish, prawns or chicken. More recently, I encountered Colman Andrews' book, *Catalan Cuisine*, and *A Catalan Cookery Book* by Irving Davis, and I began to realize what a fantastic and special way of cooking the Catalan people have developed over the centuries, part Spanish, part Roman, part Moorish. The cooking of Catalonia has ancient roots, and the Roussillon has the same heritage; it is still the *Pays catalan* today.

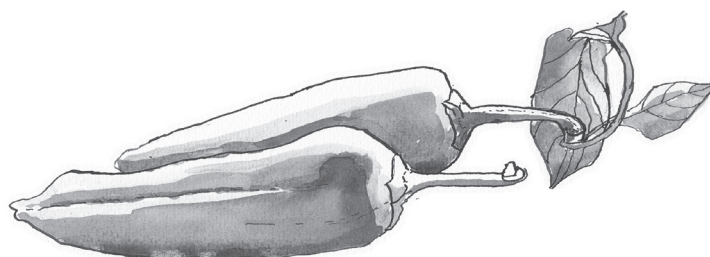
Catalan food includes salt cod, beans and emphatic deep-flavoured sauces. It has anchovies, pigs' feet and snails, grilled onion shoots (*calçots*) dipped in a spicy nut sauce, aubergine and peppers baked in hot wood ash, duck stewed with peaches, paella, potato omelettes, crème caramel, fresh figs, and toasted hazelnuts still warm from the oven. It revels in saffron, nuts and paprika. Every kind of chilli pepper, fresh and dried, mild and hot, green or red or black, makes a contribution and blood sausage and *chorizo* are key ingredients.

The Moors were the eighth-century conquerors of Spain and part of what is now southern France. They brought Arab influences and spices into the kitchens and streets of the western Languedoc. Even in the mountains the smell of cumin perfumed the air; we know this as it is mentioned as a spice brought to the village of Montailou in the early fourteenth century by pedlars. The book about this village, made vivid by Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's painstaking dissection of the

trial documents of the Inquisition as it pursued Cathar heretics, offers a bird's-eye view of home and farm life, right down to what they ate (cabbage soup with bacon, snails, wild mushrooms, ewe's milk cheeses), the way the women carried their bread (on their heads) and the kind of game they preferred for their pies (ptarmigan, pheasant and squirrel).

Catalan cuisine is essentially natural; it is not expensive but it can be quite complex and even quite fiddly – lots of pounding, which is made much easier by using a food processor.

Colman Andrews laments the fact that there is not much of a record of French Catalan food, but food historian, writer and cook Éliane Thibaut-Comelade has documented it thoroughly over the last few decades and she paints a colourful and detailed picture. She describes the legacy left by the Moors as crucial – it has given a taste for meat with fruit, for hot and sweet, sweet and salty and sweet and sharp flavours.



Nuts are often ground and used to thicken sauces; cinnamon and chocolate appear in savoury dishes as well as sweet ones; poultry might be cooked with prawns as in paella; and both meat and vegetables can function as dessert. In several Pézenas bakeries, little pies containing candied lemon peel and lamb, the *Petits Pâtés de Pézenas*, are still available today. Meat with preserved fruit is a popular flavour combination, for example spiced pickled figs or fig or peach chutney are eaten with roasted or boiled meat. These preserves are made with white wine vinegar, preferably home-made (*vinagre d'hostal*), cinnamon, cloves and sugar.

From Spain comes a love of mixing sea and mountain (*mar i muntanya*), shellfish and game birds or chicken, sausage and rabbit with snails,

pork and chicken with squid. Rice dishes cooked in a *cassola* (a large, deep earthenware casserole) or a *cazuela* (an earthenware paella dish made north of Barcelona), such as *costellous au riz*, are ubiquitous; paprika abounds; and omelettes are thick, creamy tortillas (or *truita* in Catalan).

Although Languedoc is a major olive oil producer, Catalans like to cook in a mixture of lard and olive oil. Catalan sausages and black puddings are famously good, as are their ham and bacon – once enjoyed when slightly rancid, though less so today.

Many Spanish and also Italian immigrants ended up in the coastal towns of Perpignan, Narbonne, Agde and Sète. Pasta is indigenous and supermarket shelves are crammed with all shapes including *fideu* (Catalan, *fideo* in Spanish) – a local vermicelli – often cooked in fish stock with paprika, monkfish, calamars and prawns.

*Le Ranxo* – carnival feasts, *repas de carnaval* – are organized all over the *Pays catalan*, celebrating omelettes, snails, artichokes, the pig or anything else. They have been going on since the Middle Ages. Special celebration dishes such as *riz ‘à la cassola’* – rice with vegetables, meat and seafood – *escudella* (page 139) and *paella* are their staples.

### Black Truffles (*La truffe*)

Around Christmas and all through January there is truffle mania in Languedoc, particularly in the Gard. There are truffle festivals and fairs scattered across the region and chefs dream all night of new recipes involving truffles. Recent delights have included a hot toasted truffle sandwich fried in olive oil and served with a glass of iced champagne, black truffle macaroons, and truffled soup of *boudin blanc*.

In Moussoulens, north of Carcassonne, the January truffle fair, the *Ampélofolies*, is a fête day. It is often freezing cold and all around the centre of the village are stalls selling local winter produce (confit of duck, duck breasts and gIBLETS, turkeys and other poultry from the Cabardes, nuts from Narbonne, spicy gingerbread, rosemary or lavender honey, huge mountain cheeses, charcuterie, bread, nougat, chocolate with nuts, rose petal jam, live snails, onions and the rose garlic of Lautrec), as well as hot food to keep out the cold (little meat pies, chips, grilled duck-breasts or Toulouse sausages, tripe, hot chestnuts, *millas* or polenta, beignets, oysters and omelettes). Stalls

overflow with plastic cups of local wine, people picnic and snack everywhere, spilling onto the grass roundabout and verges, even into the bus shelter.

At the very centre, under the bare trees, trestle tables are set out, with a rope barrier round to keep jostling customers at bay. At a given time, country men and women (and children) drift in, carrying bags, baskets, holdalls, tins and boxes, from all of which exudes a powerful smell. Small hunting spaniels run amongst the excited crowd. The brushed truffles are laid out in baskets and on boards. 'Tonton a faim', a small marching band, plays loudly, while the buyers decide, from a distance, whose truffles they like best. The Mayor announces that there are altogether 22kg of tubers to be sold. Everyone cheers.

Finally, a figure appears holding a gun which he fires into the air; this is the signal for all the buyers (including me) to duck under the rope and rush forward to their chosen dealer, shoving their way to the front to grab the best truffles. It is hugely chaotic, competitive and exciting.

The knowing buyers choose round, large, smooth truffles which they weigh in their hands and sniff before buying, to make sure they are not worm-eaten and smell sufficiently strong. Some people pick out one, others five or six. Then they are weighed, wrapped in a twist of paper and put into little plastic pouches.

The idea is to take them home and use them immediately in omelettes and so forth, or to make pâtés, or to preserve them for an important occasion, for a truffled sauce for beef or chicken. Many buy truffles to eat at the Christmas or New Year's dinner, but they are at their best at the end of January and the first week in February.

There are quite a few of these small country fairs going on through January but, like the truffle itself, they can be hard to find, partly because of the general air of secrecy that envelopes the trade, partly due to the unreliability of the truffle – some years plenty, some years none – so these markets are not widely publicized. In order to track them down, contact the local Syndicat des Trufficulteurs.

In more sophisticated Uzès, they celebrate 'La journée de la truffe' which starts with 'Une nuit de la truffe', when all the best chefs get together to cook a magnificent truffle dinner, followed the next day by a truffle market. Demonstrations by truffling pigs and dogs show animals who seem to be very happy in their work. There are truffle-cooking lessons by chefs and at lunch time, usually midday in Languedoc, a giant truffle omelette is shared out.

### *Cultivating truffles*

Growing truffles is far from an exact science, but they are cultivated in quite large quantities. They grow in symbiosis with plant roots. They are called mycorrhizal fungi, and they mainly grow on the roots of oak trees. These can be injected with the spores of the truffle and planted out in scruffy plantations where the soil is poor, dry, meagre and calcareous. Because of climate change, these plantations may now need automatic watering systems.

It is usually possible to buy bunches of inoculated oak, evergreen oak or hazel saplings at the truffle markets to establish your own plantation. You may have to enclose it with electric deer fencing, as much to protect the ground against human, as faunal, incursion. There have been a number of cases of truffle-rustling in recent years – in one an intruder was shot dead: and serve him right, say the truffle growers.

Out of 32 types of edible truffle, these are the five main varieties in France.

*Tuber melanospermum* Vittadini. Known as *truffe noire* or *truffe de Périgord* or *du Tricastin*. This is a fine black truffle with violet-black flesh, veined with white. The aromas include black radish, hazelnuts, woody humus and damp woods.

*Tuber brumale* Vittadini. This is dark blackish brown outside, greyish black inside. Its aromas are strong, musky, a little bitter and earthy.

*Tuber uncinatum* Chatin. Known as the *truffe de Bourgogne*. This is blackish outside, deep brown with white veins inside. It tastes of mushrooms and of hazelnuts when ripe, and is faintly bitter.

*Tuber aestivum* Vittadini. Known as *truffe blanche d'été* or the *truffe de Saint Jean*. This summer truffle is the most prolific but the least sought-after; it has beige flesh with white veins and a faint mushroom aroma, it tastes bitter and earthy.

*Tuber mesentericum*. This is a small truffle, black outside, brown inside. It has a strong and not particularly pleasant aroma, but tastes good if a little bitter.

*Truffle know-how*

Truffles can be kept for up to a week, wrapped in a loose piece of kitchen paper, in an airtight box, in the refrigerator. They may also be kept in a paper bag with eggs, which absorb the truffle flavour, ready to make a delicious omelette, or in a jar of rice. Truffles transpire, breathing in oxygen and breathing out a mixture of gases, including carbonic gas, which carry their aromas; keeping them at 0°C reduces this transpiration to a minimum. However it is best to eat them as soon as possible.

*Preserving truffles*

*Truffes à l'huile* is a way of preserving them in oil for up to a fortnight – any longer and off-flavours may develop. Slice the truffle and put it into olive or grape seed oil in a sealed jar. The oil can be used in a salad dressing, trickled over eggs or onto a steak.

*Truffes à l'alcool* is another way of keeping truffles. The cleaned tuber can be steeped, whole or sliced, in pure white alcohol or brandy or even Armagnac. If using a commercial preserved truffle, use it within a day or two of opening the tin or jar. The alcohol and the truffle can be used in omelettes or pâtés or for flambéing shellfish.

*Cooking truffles*

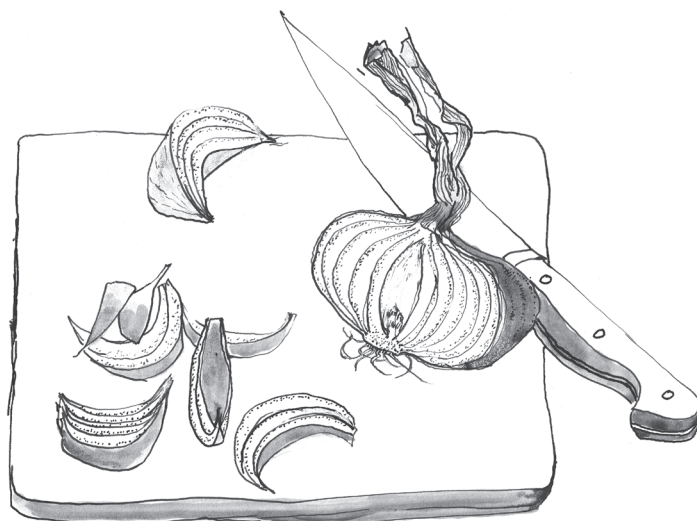
The first rule is they should be cooked as briefly as possible. Cook them with such things as eggs, chicken, fillet of beef, pasta, rice or potatoes, to provide a rather gentle background for their perfume, rather than with ingredients with strong flavours, which will smother them.

Leaving whatever ingredient you are going to use in your truffle recipe inside an airtight box with the truffle allows the aromas to start working their magic. This works extremely well with eggs (particularly if you wash the shells first to make them more porous) and with rice, but you can also, for example, put slices of the washed truffle inside or under the skin of an uncooked chicken for a few hours or overnight in the refrigerator.

Clean the truffle by washing and brushing it, if necessary, paring the skin off as thinly as possible. The peelings can go in a jar of brandy to flavour it.

Slice the truffle thinly and use it in a simple recipe – scrambled eggs or omelette are two favourites in the south of France, while my personal choice is for tiny baked potatoes topped with sliced truffles heated in cream.





*L'Oignon Doux*

### Sweet Onions and Calçots

Onions have a special meaning in Languedoc. They are grown and eaten in huge quantities, and villages such as Citou and Lézignan in the Hérault have their own varieties. One of the two settlements bearing the name of Lézignan is actually called Lézignan-la-Cèbe (Cèbe being a Frenchification of the Occitan *ceba*, onion). In the Gard, a wedding was not complete unless the brothers and sisters of the bride and groom ate raw onions, to ensure that they would meet their sweethearts in turn. The symbolic onion also meant that the marriage would be a happy and long one.

Raw onions provide a prized flavour in the region – large quantities are strewn on every salad, which may be why they have developed the most delicate and delicious sweet onions, cultivated from special local seeds, saved each year and guarded jealously. These are the most important varieties.

*Cèbes de Lézignan*, in season from June to August, are the largest sweet onions you are likely to come across – prize ones weigh up to 2kg, and they are said to taste as mild as bread. Grown competitively in the *potagers* and commercially in the alluvial soil of the plains, they are



flattish globes of pale, tender, translucent flesh that can be eaten just as happily raw as cooked. Because of their high water content they do not keep over the winter. People like them raw with tomatoes, peppers or potato salad, baked whole in the fire, the oven or, traditionally, in a *diable* – an unglazed terracotta pot similar to a chicken brick.

The delicate pink onions of Citou, which grow amongst the cherry, apple, apricot, peach and pear orchards above Caunes-Minervois, are sold from open barns up and down the main street in August and September. Their shape is flat, with a sweet, mild flavour. They are eaten raw in green salads, *anchoïade* or with tomato salad. They are excellent for cooking too.

*Rayolettes*, also known as *oignons doux des Cévennes*, are the large, rounded, sweet onions of the Cévennes and from the northern Gard. They are grown on high and dry terraces once used for growing mulberry trees for silk worms. Their chief characteristic is their long keeping quality; they stay fresh from September to April. They are delicious baked in the embers of a wood fire or in the oven, and then served warm or cold with a vinaigrette.

The sweet onions of Toulouges (in the Pyrénées-Orientales) are ruby red and can grow to an enormous size. Local people make a wonderful onion tart with them, but they are also very good raw. They are cultivated east of Perpignan, where water from the mountains is plentiful; because of their high water content, they do not keep well.

*Calçots* (see the recipe on page 113), pronounced *calso*, are a passion in the *Pays catalan*, appearing at almond blossom time, starting in February. They are eaten with friends or in a crowd, an occasion called a *calçotada*, a hugely jolly, noisy feast, where people wrapped in anoraks and fleeces put on bibs and gorge on these fat juicy onion shoots, grilled over flames and dipped in a special red sauce, until the juice runs down their chins. And, as Irving Davis says, 'If it snows, so much the better'. They are available in London during the season from Tayshaw Ltd., Seasonal Produce, 60 Druid Street, SE1 2EZ – (0207 378 8666).