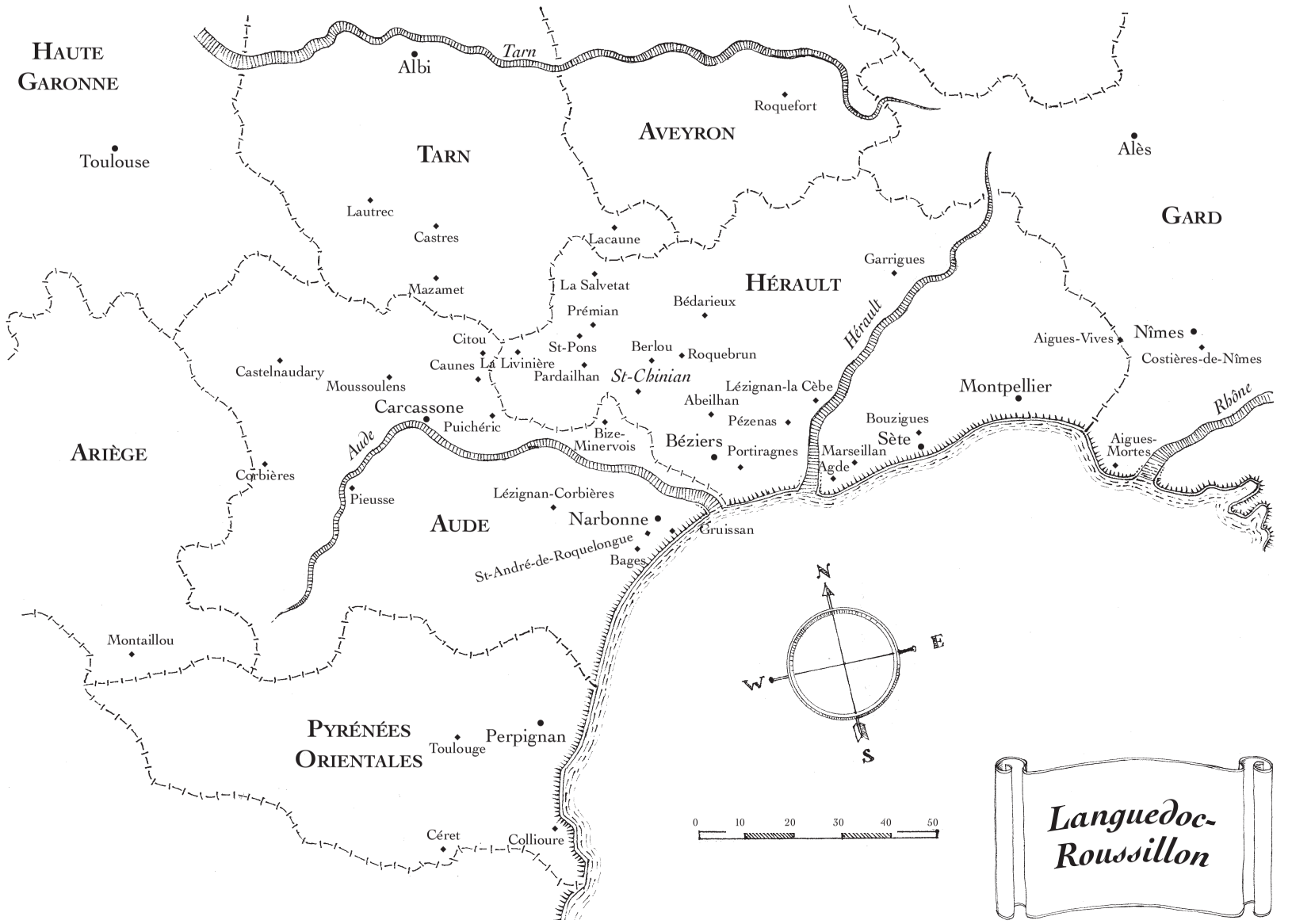


Chapter One

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.

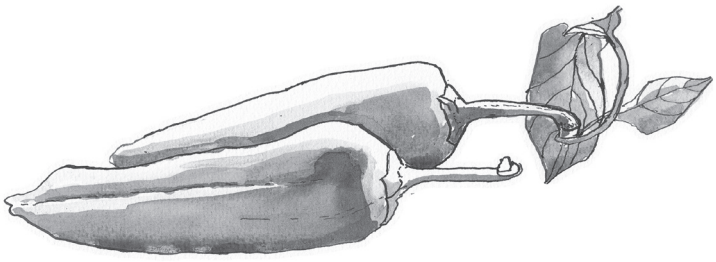
Catalan food includes salt cod, beans and emphatic deep-flavoured sauces. It has anchovies, pigs' feet and snails, grilled onion shoots (*calçots*) dipped in a spicy nut sauce, aubergine and peppers baked in hot wood ash, duck stewed with peaches, paella, potato omelettes, crème caramel, fresh figs, 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 Montaillou 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 'a 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.

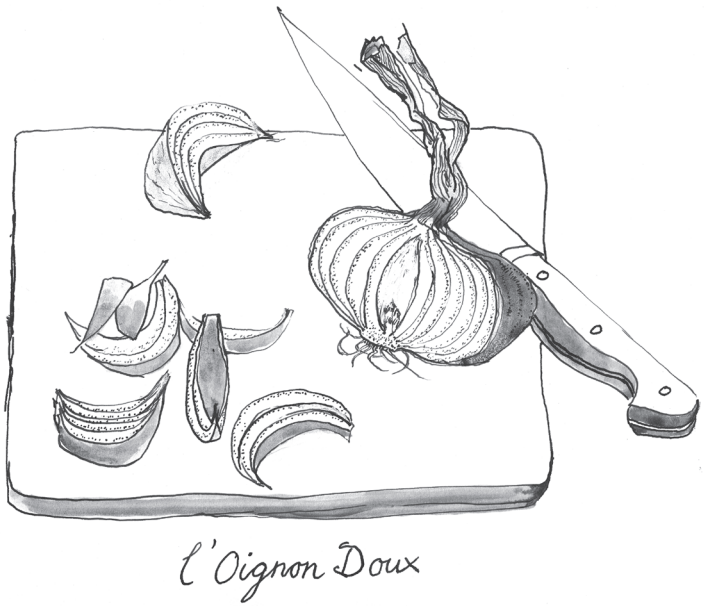
Cooking truffles

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.



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).

Beans

Was cassoulet originally made with dried broad beans? Possibly. I once saw a jar labelled *Févoulet* in Narbonne's poshest grocer, which was just that, and haricot beans, when they first came to France, were often called *fèves* or *fèves de haricot*, so the picture is linguistically confusing. In any case, broad beans, which came from Egypt, and black-eyed beans *(Vigna*) from Africa were staple foods in France long before the beans we now know as white haricots were introduced.

Haricot beans, along with maize and pumpkins, were first brought to Spain from the New World in the sixteenth century and given to monasteries in Seville who gave them, in turn, to the Pope, who no doubt had wonderful, extensive vegetable gardens at his palaces. Pope Clement VII was Catherine de Medici's cousin and he, among others, received, in Rome, some of the new beans.

Reputedly he offered Catherine some seed-beans to take to France; he was certainly present when she married the future King Henri II in 1533. Catherine then inherited the Comté du Lauragais (between Toulouse and Carcassonne); her daughter Marguerite de Valois married the future Henri IV, and it was in their lands in south-west France that the bean was first developed. It soon became a staple and the great bean dish of the region was, and still is, cassoulet.

What counts in a cassoulet is the choice of white bean. In Castelnaudary, the small, round *cocos de Pamier* are considered the best. Highly rated in Carcassonne are *les haricots de Mazères* and in Toulouse *le haricot de Lavelanet*; these small white haricot beans are also known as *le lingot* in Bas-Languedoc. The larger *lingots de Soissons* were considered the best around Béziers, according to Albin Marty, whose grandparents ran a bakery in the area. He can remember the time when everybody brought their dishes of cassoulet, already made-up in pottery bowls or *cassoles*, on Fridays, Sundays and fête days, to be cooked in the cooling bakery oven after the bread was baked.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, particularly in Toulouse, climbing beans were highly favoured; the best were the *haricots de maïs*. One in particular stands out, called *Tarbais* (for Tarbes, whose bishop first introduced the variety in the eighteenth century), a large, flat, very white bean, liked for its creamy texture and thin skin and for the fact that it does not break up in long cooking. Buy them whenever you see them, as they are the best.

In the spring, it was always the women who did the job of planting this crop. The beans had to be sown alongside maize kernels, and in order to make this easier, the planters wore special aprons with two pockets, one for beans, one for maize. The haricots would then clamber up the standing maize plants and, in return for their support, would provide them with nitrogen. The widespread use of weedkiller on maize crops more or less put an end to these excellent beans.

The name *mongette* or *mogette* is likely today to be applied to either *coco* or *lingot* but was originally the local name for black-eyed beans. (*Cocos* have round beans, *lingots* longer beans, while *flageolets* have smaller beans and *sabre* have kidney-shaped beans.)

Flageolets verts, green dried beans, are varieties that can be picked early on in their development and which retain their green colour when they are dried. They are at their best with roast lamb.

In the mid-twentieth century, food snobbery started to set in, even in rural areas. Fresh green beans were considered, together with asparagus, to be an altogether finer, classier food to serve than dried haricots, which were regarded as a shade too rustic and associated with harder times, along with potatoes and the good, healthy cabbage. Young green beans – bush (*haricots nains)* and climbing (*haricots à rames*) – known as *haricots verts* or as *barraquets* in the south-west, and delicate *haricots beurres,* yellow podded beans, were finer, took less cooking, and could be preserved by salting, bottling and canning. The fact that, once preserved, they bore no resemblance to the freshly picked bean did not seem to matter.

When deep-freezing came along, many took to the freezer to preserve their green bean crops, but there are still whole shopfuls of preserving jars. Even supermarkets carry them and older people still grow and bottle their own beans, peas and tomatoes as well as home-made *confit* and pâtés. A wonderful nineteenth-century photograph shows a young girl in a kitchen stuffing peas and beans into empty wine bottles ready for sterilizing.

At one time, the indigestibility of haricot beans was much discussed: 'refined' people could no longer tolerate the vulgar farting that usually follows the eating of beans. So from having been a staple food, served in soups, cassoulets and in other ways at least twice a week, dried beans are now barely eaten once a month and most growers have succumbed to concentrating on the modern, easily cultivated hybrids.

However there are still a few of the older sorts to be had. In autumn and early winter one can still find *cocos de Pamiers, cocos roses* (similar

to borlotti or pinto beans) or *Tarbais* beans at good grocers and in the markets. From August they can be bought fresh – as *haricots à écosser* or *haricots en grains,* and they make the most wonderful soups.

If you buy these semi-fresh early in the season, say in November or December, they will take less time to soak and cook – they get more recalcitrant with age. More than a year old and they may never get really tender. It is sometimes suggested that the beans must be cooked in rainwater as hard water toughens them up; another tip introduces bicarbonate of soda to the cooking water.

Foie Gras

Foie gras, fattened goose or duck liver, is one of the main treats on every menu in Languedoc. Produced in traditional poultry farms, mainly from *mulard* ducks (a Muscovy/Pekin hybrid), it is a food that has become controversial in some parts of the world. Animal-rights activists object to the production methods involved and in America, after a now-repealed ban in Chicago, its sale is forbidden in California from 2012. Other places, for example Turkey and Argentina, do not permit the production of *foie gras*, although there is no restriction on its sale.

These criticisms have done some harm to a traditional practice, but *foie gras* producers and others, in order to set the record straight, have now done a great deal of research into *gavage* (the feeding of large quantities of food directly into the bird's stomach) to see if it really is harming the birds. Below are some of the facts set out by Ariane Daguin, the daughter of three-star Gascon chef André Daguin and an expert on the subject. (Incidentally, I personally have seen a cormorant swallowing a whole, enormous live eel, with difficulty but obvious enjoyment, and I am convinced that the *gavage* does not cause pain or discomfort.)

> *Fact no. 1*: Ducks have no gag reflex and their oesophagi have a tough lining so they can swallow huge fish or other prey without pain. As the National Audubon Society states: 'birds have a remarkable ability to expand the mouth and stretch the esophagus to swallow large prey.' *Gavage* takes advantage of a natural trait of the bird – its ability to swallow large volumes of food without feeling pain. Veterinarians use this same feeding technique to save the lives of waterfowl, and parent birds use it to feed their young by plunging their long sharp beaks into their baby bird's oesophagus. Nature

does not operate according to the animal rights agenda, and numerous videos attest to the capacity of ducks to swallow whole prey.

Fact no. 2: In nature, web-footed birds gorge themselves and store calories as fat in their livers before migration. The effect is reversible, proving that a fattened liver (*foie gras*) is a natural propensity in ducks and geese. When waterfowl arrive at their migration destination, the fattened liver has returned to normal size, after being reabsorbed by the body for energy. Likewise, the liver of ducks fed for *foie gras* will return to normal if the feeding is halted.

Anyone who has been to a winter Foire au Gras will have seen the enormous pride that the people take in producing the best *foie gras* for the Christmas and New Year celebrations. It is sold raw or cooked, and is easy to cook at home.

The best buy is raw, vacuum-packed goose or duck *foie gras*, ready to cook. To cook it yourself, see the recipe of page 96. A slice or two of the classic, silky, just-cooked *foie gras*, lightly flavoured with pepper and Armagnac, together with toasted *pain de campagne* and a glass of sweet muscat wine, sets the perfect mood at any feast. Muscat de St-Jean-de-Minervois and Beaumes-de-Venise are popular, as is Sauternes. I prefer a glass of chilled Blanquette de Limoux, light and clean and sparkling.

Garlic

The rose-coloured garlic of Lautrec

The romantically named *ail rose de Lautrec*, plaited into silvery pink tresses, is endowed with two qualities that make it sought-after – it is delicately flavoured, sweet, concentrated and juicy, and the bulbs keep better and longer than any other garlic; in the right conditions (cool, dry and dark – think barn or wine cellar), they will last for up to a year.

The Tarn village of Lautrec, a steep, ancient *village perché* close to Castres, is the hub of the garlic growing industry, whose abundant, pink striped bunches – 4,000 tons of them each year – shedding the thinnest of papery integuments, find their way into every market and most barns, outhouses, kitchens and, eventually, on to tables throughout the region.

Lautrec has a market on Fridays where the garlic is on sale, and once a year, at the beginning of August, they hold a garlic fête, complete with

sculptures of snails, castles and swans (all in garlic) competing for a prize. There is street dancing, and a typical, creamy garlic soup served *al fresco* at midday.

Buyers are keen but choosy. They know what to look for – clean, firm, plump, rosy garlic with no signs of bolting (green shoots) or of mould. They buy several kilos at a time, piling it into the boots of their cars, and they will use it all over the winter and early spring. Then the immature, new season's garlic comes and they will enjoy that for a month or two, until, in August, the main crop is perfectly ripe and ready to store again.

Purple garlic

L'ail violet is plump, juicy and attractive to look at. If pungency is what you are after, it can also be extremely strong. It is grown near Toulouse, Cadours being the centre of the growers' syndicate. At their garlic festival they build all sorts of decorated little houses, follies and even lighthouses out of garlic to show it off.

Chocolate

Cocoa beans came to Spain with Cortés in 1528 and were at first available, crushed and pounded, as a stimulating, seductive chocolate drink, a drink too good for common people and kept only for the nobility of the Spanish court. It was not until 1585 that it escaped into the wider world. The first record of Jewish chocolate makers in France was in the

early 1600s. Their relatives who, like them, fled from the Portuguese and Spanish Inquisitions, had landed in South America, Curaçao and Jamaica and there they learned how to cultivate and process cocoa beans. They were soon ready to market them in Europe, and a number of these enterprising plantation founders decided to form trading companies to export the beans that would make a drink so irresistible it would seduce all the Catholic ladies of Spain and south-west France .

These refugee Jewish families in South America shared their knowledge with French relations, who learned how to roll and crush the beans to a paste, to make a drink, and to flavour their frothy chocolate with sugar and cinnamon and sometimes vanilla, not a bad combination. They kept all the details of the process secret. According to the food historian, the late Sophie Coe, what then happened to the Jewish chocolatiers is 'the dark secret'. This is a précis of her research.

> The Musée Basque, located in Bayonne, France, has an interesting exhibition which shows how, as early as 1609, Jewish immigrants roasted cocoa beans in a small oven and then ground them with a roller on a heated concave table … to make a thick paste. This table was dragged by its owners from house to house in order to prepare the hot chocolate drink.
>
> Eventually, the secret of preparation was let out and in 1681 Catholic chocolatiers, who had learned the lengthy process of making the chocolate drink, united and had the local leaders issue ordinances against the Jewish chocolatiers in order to make it difficult for them to trade. … Before long the Jews could not own or rent any properties and had to pay special taxes. By 1761 eleven French and Spanish chocolatiers had formed a Guild of Chocolatiers. This gave them the exclusive right, according to the statutes of the guild, to be the sole chocolatiers licensed to sell chocolate or own stores. This was annulled in 1767 by a court in Bordeaux. However by 1802 only two Jewish chocolate makers remained.

It is not an edifying story. What did remain was great expertise in the making and eating of chocolate. Yves Thuriès at Cordes in the Tarn, winner of the Meilleur Ouvrier de France Award, is an example of the legacy of fine chocolate-making left by the Jewish chocolatiers.

Rosé des Prés

Ceps and Other Fungi

Wild mushrooms in all shapes and colours are an ancestral food in Languedoc. Any recipe called *à la languedocienne* is more or less guaranteed to have dried or fresh mushrooms in it somewhere. There is a huge variety, and the following are some of the most popular.

Rovellos

One of the most sought-after mushrooms is the milk cap, *Lactarius sanguifluus* (*lactaire vineux*), a Catalan favourite growing mainly in limestone areas. Known locally as *rovellos* or *sang de Christ* (blood of Christ), these are fragrant milk caps of a reddish-bronze colour, which weep a tiny tear of strange, blood-red milk when they are cut. You will find them piled up on the market stalls in autumn, looking a little alarming, as they bruise so easily.

Roussillous

Another local milk cap, good but not quite as good, is found in spruce or pine woods and appears in autumn, vividly piled on market stalls at Carcassonne and elsewhere. Look for conical, amber-coloured mushrooms, stained blue on the cap. It's the *Lactarius deliciosus*, also known as *barigoule* or *catalan*. Spicy and crisp, these are much appreciated straight from the grill, although they may also be pickled before they are eaten, to remove the bitterness. See the recipe on page 257 for marinated mushrooms with raisins.

Roussillous and *rovellos* are often grilled over vine prunings, with drips of lard or bacon fat poured onto them to crisp them up. Another method of barbecuing them is the *Roussillonade* – the fire composed of pine-cones. You have brought with you a small metal grill, some olive oil, salt, bread and a fresh sausage, about 250g for each picnicker. Place the grill over the embers and grill the sausage and the mushrooms, lightly sprinkled with olive oil and salt. A scattering of chopped garlic and parsley is also good with any wood-grilled fungi.

Another fine Catalan dish combines *roussillous* or *rovellos* with black pudding; the mushrooms are fried with garlic and a few lardons in olive oil, then black pudding, cut in pieces, is added to the pan (see page 234).

Girolles

Often called *chanterelles* in other parts of France, the apricot-scented orange-yellow *Cantharellus cibarius* is a strong contender in the mushroom popularity contest, and occasionally even has its own weather forecast on a sideshoot of the French *metéo* map. It comes relatively early in the season, in August; is frequently found in great masses; and is probably one of the most delicate, delicious and appetizing of all mushrooms. You may find them in troops, large and small together, under beech trees. They emerge in fortnightly cycles, so if you walk to your chosen spot and pick them all, when you come back a fortnight later, more will have grown. They tend to be gritty. To prepare them see page 259.

Cèpes

My first mushroom hunt, or *cueillette de champignons*, took place in the Montagne Noire with Lionel and Françoise Raviat, friends and fine cooks from the neighbouring village of Caunes-Minervois. This Montagne is in fact a range across the south-western corner of the Massif Central, rising at its highest to over 1200 metres, and straddling the boundaries of the Tarn, the Aude, the Hérault and Haute-Garonne. After a lifetime of hunting and identifying edible fungi, it was extremely humbling to find out how much I did not know.

We set out early on a chill but fine September morning to meet at their house, a wooden cabin with many mod. cons., high up in the Montagne Noire, where they spend the whole summer to escape the heat. We had espresso coffee from their machine and set out in a van, driving up higher and deeper into the interior of the chestnut, beech and pine forests that cover the mountains, called black because there was once a charcoal industry there, although they do also look very black from a distance, if the rain is coming and the light is clear.

We were looking for ceps. There are many different varieties in the *boletus* species, each one with its own particular habitat, growing close to, and symbiotic with particular trees. Birch, beech, pine, fir, oak and hornbeam are all host trees.

When mushroom hunting, it is important to have the right kit; a sleeveless jacket is good, leaving your arms free to grab a branch as you slide down a bank, although all too often the branch snaps off in your hand and you fall down anyway.

You need a basket, and a folding knife to cut the mushroom and to slice the stalk in order to inspect suspect fungi for worms and to cut off the dirty bits of each specimen as you pick it, so it does not soil the others. Some of these knives have a little brush at one end to brush off leaf-mould and grit, and it is correct to fasten the knife to the basket with a leather thong so it does not get lost.

The basket has two purposes, one is that it lets the mushrooms breathe; in a plastic bag they squash and go soggy. The second is more interesting – as you walk through the forest, spores, drifting from the undersides of your mushrooms, fall through the basket onto the ground, where hopefully they may start to grow. This is cited as one reason why you often find more mushrooms along the sides of rides (wide tracks used by foresters and hunters) – another is that the ride is usually a bit sunnier and warmer than the dark spaces under the trees.

Seasoned mushroom hunters often take a long stick; this is to steady you as you jump across ditches, climb up banks and generally scramble about, and it is useful for pushing plants aside in order to look underneath. It may have a forked end, which can be used for lifting brambles out of the way and, of course, for dealing with adders. In Mazamet, a town on the north side of the Montagne Noire, they traditionally have walking sticks with baskets attached, but this is cumbersome.

Mushroom hunting in this part of the world is very serious. Children are taught to identify the edible ones at school. Every chemist has charts on show and you can take your pick to the pharmacist, who will identify them and take out any that are poisonous or suspect.

We were given to understand that if a car with number-plates from another department were to park near someone else's mushroom patch or *nid*, the tyres might be slashed.

The fascinating thing about mushrooms is that when they come, they sometimes come in big quantities – Françoise once picked 40 kilos in one morning.

But what can you do with so many mushrooms? You can sell them, which means either standing on the side of a busy road with your basket, or having an outlet, usually a stall at one of the markets – Carcassonne Saturday market is a particularly rich hunting ground for buying wild mushrooms of all sorts. Or you can dry them – slice them and perhaps thread them on a string to hang near a fire (the dying Louis XIII passed his last hours stringing fresh mushrooms for drying), or place them on racks or *clayettes* in a dryer or the plate-oven of a stove.

Wood-fired drying racks were traditionally used to dry prunes and chestnuts as well as mushrooms and imparted an extra dimension, smoke, to the flavour. Wormy mushrooms can be used for this purpose as all the worms fall out as they dry.

The better specimens can be frozen. This is an art in itself. The cleaned and sliced mushrooms are spread out on waxed paper and frozen. They are then taken out, the ice-crystals brushed off and they are packed in bags in the freezer. When you want to use them, they can be eaten fried in lard, olive oil, butter or goose fat until they are a light golden colour, then sprinkled with parsley or a mixture of parsley and garlic.

There are numerous different ceps, each one with its own particular habitat, texture, flavour, colour and smell. The best of all is the *Boletus edulis*. They are firm, plump and crisp when young, with hazelnut brown caps wrapped tightly over bulbous, white-fleshed stalks. The caps soon open to reveal a pale spongy underside. With ceps, firmness and freshness are everything; they lose some of their allure as they soften and the sponge-like gills become rather slimy and not so good to eat.

When choosing them make sure they are firm and solid, with no traces of worm holes. Young ceps can be eaten raw in salads or with thinly flaked Gruyère cheese and olive oil, older ones are sliced and fried with *persillade* – goose fat is a good medium – they also make a good soup, tarts and potato dishes.

Confits, Poultry and Meat Preserved in Duck or Goose Fat

As you drive through the countryside of Haut-Languedoc, you will often see green meadows, sheltered by trees, scattered with flocks of white and grey geese and ducks. They are enjoying their freedom but they are shortly destined to be fattened up by force-feeding, in order to provide marvellous things to eat – *foie gras*, duck breasts (fresh, cured and smoked), goose and duck fat for cooking and legs and wings for *confit*. Every butcher in Languedoc sells *confit de canard* or *confit d'oie*, often displayed in large trays, with plenty of creamy fat adhering to it.

Crusty and golden preserved duck or goose legs, fried slowly in their own fat until crisp on the outside and meltingly tender inside and served with ceps scattered with *persillade*, potatoes sautéed in duck fat or Puy green lentils, is one of the great dishes of the region. The other splendid