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# INTRODUCTION

It is not just the great works of mankind that make a culture.  
It is the daily things, like what people eat and how they serve it.

• LAURIE COLWIN, *Home Cooking* •

WHEN WE EAT, we travel.

Think back to your last trip. Which are the memories that stand out? If you're anything like me, meals will be in the forefront of your mind when you reminisce about travels past. Tortilla, golden and oozing, on a lazy Sunday in Madrid; piping hot *shakshuka* for breakfast in Tel Aviv; oysters shucked and sucked from their shells on Whitstable shingle. My memories of the things I saw in each of those places have acquired a hazy, sepia quality with the passing of time. But those dishes I remember in technicolour.

As Proust noted on eating a *petit madeleine*\* with his tea, food escorts us back in time and shapes our memory. The distinct flavours, ingredients and cooking techniques that we experience in other spaces and times are also a gateway to the culture in question. What we ate in a certain place is as important, if not more so, than the other things we did there – visits to galleries and museums, walks, tours – because food quite literally gives us a taste of everyday life.

Whenever I go abroad my focus is on finding the food most typical of wherever I am, and the best examples of it. Food typifies everything that is different about another culture and gives the most authentic insight into how people live. Everyone has to eat, and food is a common language.

The late, great American novelist and home cook Laurie Colwin put everyday food alongside 'the great works of mankind' in making a culture. I have

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\*Writers love referencing the Proustian moment – the point in *Remembrance of Things Past* at which young Marcel realises the power of taste to invoke the past – perhaps because it somehow vindicates food, makes it a real 'thing' recognised in literature, not just a sentimental fancy. Here's the quote in full: 'Whence could it have come to me, this all-powerful joy? I sensed that it was connected with the taste of the tea and the cake, but that it infinitely transcended those savours... the whole of Combray and its surroundings, taking shape and solidity, sprang into being, town and gardens alike, from my cup of tea.' Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way*.

to agree. A baguette, the beloved French bread stick, is the canvas for infinite combinations of quintessential Gallic flavours (from cheese to charcuterie and more). It is steeped in history\* and can arguably tell you more about French culture than Monet's lilies. Moroccan food expert Paula Wolfert, a beatnik of the 1960s who flitted from Paris to Tangier with the likes of Paul Bowles and Jack Kerouac, also relates to Colwin's words. 'Food is a way of seeing people' she once said to me – such a simple statement, but so true. Unlike guidebooks and bus tours, food provides a grassroots view of populations as they live and breathe. When we eat from the plate of another culture, we grow to understand – mouthful by mouthful – what it is about.

Eating from different cultures is not just a way of seeing people: it can train a different lens on the food itself, too. I started eating meat again a few years ago after twelve years of being a (fish-eating) vegetarian. But while I was happy to try all sorts of cuts and organs, lamb still troubled me. I've loathed the fatty, cloying scent of roasting lamb since I was a child, an aversion that had become almost pathological. When I met Lebanese cook Anissa Helou for the first time, I casually slipped my antipathy for lamb into the conversation. Her jaw dropped. She told me this was impossible, that I couldn't write a book about the world's food without a taste for lamb. A few months later I was at her Shoreditch flat eating raw lamb *kibbeh* (see page 169) and *devouring* it. Her delicately balanced home-made *sabe' bharat* (seven spice mix) didn't so much mask as complement the strong flavour of raw meat, which we ate with white *tabbouleh*. I might not like British roast lamb, the smell of which wafted around my grandparents' kitchen on many a Sunday, but it turns out I love raw lamb prepared in a Levantine kitchen. Persian *ghormeh sabzi* (lamb stew with herbs and kidney beans, see page 176) was also a revelation. Ingredients take on different guises in other cuisines, and this can transform our perception of them.

In recent years food in Britain has assumed a status analogous to film, literature and music in popular culture, expressing the tastes of society in the moment. Food manifests the zeitgeist. There are now global trends in food. In cosmopolitan cities from London to New York, Tokyo to Melbourne, crowds flock to no-reservations restaurants that serve sharing plates against a backdrop of distressed décor, or to street-food hawkers selling gourmet junk food and twee baked goods. Today's most famous food professionals –

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\*One almost certainly apocryphal account has it that the baguette was developed during the Napoleonic Wars and was designed to fit down soldiers' trousers in order to economise on back-pack space. In fact, long thin loaves have been a feature of French cuisine for hundreds of years, but the now standard baguette probably dates from the early twentieth century.

from the multi-Michelin-starred René Redzepi to neo-Middle Eastern pastry chef Yotam Ottolenghi and TV cook Nigella Lawson – are another facet to celebrity culture. They prize creativity in the kitchen, drawing on many different culinary and cultural influences to make dishes that are unique to them, for which society's food lovers have a serious appetite.

Amidst this enthusiasm for food and the growing fascination with culinary trends (which seem to change as frequently as the biannual fashion calendar), there are gaps in our knowledge about 'pedigree' cuisines. Self-proclaimed 'foodies' may know who David Chang\* is, proudly order offal dishes in restaurants or champion raw milk over pasteurised alternatives, but can they pinpoint what actually makes a national or regional cuisine? How do you define the food of, say, Lebanon or Iran? What distinguishes these cuisines from one another? What are the principle tastes, techniques of cooking and signature dishes from each? In short, what and why do people eat as they do in different parts of the world?

Taking you on a journey around thirty-nine world cuisines, my aim is to demystify their essential features and enable you to bring dishes from each of them to life. Remember: when we eat, we travel. Treat this book as your passport to visit any of these places and sample their delicacies – all from your very own kitchen.

## • WHAT IS A CUISINE? •

US ACADEMIC-CUM-FARMER Wendell Berry once said that 'eating is an agricultural act', drawing attention to the fact that what we eat in a given place reflects the terrain and climate where local produce lives and grows. But this is an oversimplification, taking only geography into consideration.

In fact, a cuisine is the edible lovechild of both geography and history. Invasions, imperialism and immigration solder the influence of people's movement onto the landscape, creating cuisines that are unique to the place but, by definition, hybrid – like that of Sicily, where the Greeks, Romans, Normans, Arabs, Spanish, French and, most recently, Italians have all had their moment of governance. Today, Sicilian dishes express both the peoples that have inhabited the island and the rich Mediterranean produce available there.

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\* The Korean-American chef and owner of the Momofuku restaurant group. Chang has two Michelin stars to his name and is also the co-editor of *Lucky Peach*. Each issue of the zeitgeisty food quarterly takes a theme like 'Ramen', 'American Food' and 'Before and After the Apocalyptic'.

I have learnt that no cuisine is ‘pedigree’; they are all mongrels, as hybrid as your average hound in the pound. Even those with the most distinctive national and regional character are the result of different human traditions being fused with physical geography and its produce.\* Some cuisines are much younger than others – those of the New World, for example – but our knowledge of the more recent history in which they were formed proves a fascinating lesson in how a cuisine develops.

For example, we’re going to travel to California (see page 287) not only because I have what might fairly be described as an overtly sentimental attachment to the place, but because I believe that it has changed the way we look at food. Much of the food revolution that has taken place in the UK in recent years can be traced back to the Golden State and its distinctive approach to fusing its various inherited cooking traditions. They are the building blocks of something wholly new – derivative yet authentic.

I like to think of cuisines as stews – they often have the same or similar components as one another, but produce wildly different results. Consider how different Indian and Moroccan foods are, despite many fundamental similarities: clay-pot cooking, stewing, and, most significantly, the specific spices they have in common: cumin, turmeric, cinnamon and infinite blends of these and others. As you’ll see on the Spice Route map on pages 144–5, the interplay between terrain and people – geography and history – gives each cuisine I explore in this book a unique chemistry and individual magic.

## • HOW THIS BOOK WORKS •

ESTABLISHING AN EXHAUSTIVE DNA of thirty-nine world cuisines would be no mean feat. This book is intended to be an entry point only, a go-to guide for anyone with a fledgling curiosity about the building blocks that make up some of the world’s key cuisines. It covers flavours and ingredients – which spices are used, whether oil or butter (or no fat at all) is favoured – as well as how things are cooked and served. I’ve highlighted key features of each cuisine in the Larder Lists, your essential shopping list for each cuisine we visit on our journey. I’ve also given you a few really typical recipes from each

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\*There is, however, an important difference between this – the gradual fusion of geography and history to form a cuisine – and self-conscious ‘fusion food’ created by a particular chef in the present day.



place. If you're keen to know more, turn to the Further Reading section on page 339 for suggested books on individual cuisines, by experts.

The Larder Lists are not intended to be definitive catalogues, more an indication of the kinds of things you might want to have in stock (in addition to the Kitchen Essentials – see below) when you cook from a particular tradition. They include ingredients that struck me as unique or localised to certain places – such as Sichuan peppers from the Sichuan province of China, dried limes in Iran or *pimentón* in Spain – and, I hope, will inspire you to read the chapter in question before embarking on your culinary voyage. Assume that, most of the time, the Larder Lists won't include the ingredients I've put on the Kitchen Essentials list unless I want to stress the prevalence of one in a certain place – chickpeas in the Mediterranean, for example, or tahini paste in the Levant and Israel. No matter how important they are to a cuisine, the likes of extra virgin olive oil and garlic don't feature on Larder Lists: they are staples to be found in every well-stocked kitchen, no matter which cuisine you are tackling.

I've always taken a pretty relaxed approach to following recipes. They can be enormously useful in helping us to bring a dish to life, but too many of us are shackled by the idea that a recipe is a set of rules, which is a recipe for disaster. My advice would be to do what feels right. Put in more salt or avoid the fresh coriander if that's what appeals to your tastes, sear the steak or fry the omelette for a couple of minutes more or less if you're so inclined. No one knows your palate and cooking equipment like you do, so exercise some creative licence.

Following the same logic, if you really want to make one of these recipes but can't find a certain ingredient or don't have a piece of equipment, don't let that put you off. Just try substituting the closest possible thing. Not everyone has access to east London's mine of Turkish shops, for example, or owns a tagine pot, and I firmly believe that you can embody authentic flavours without following a recipe to the letter.

You'll find a list of my Kitchen Essentials on the following page – these are the equipment and ingredients I prefer never to be without in my own kitchen. A list like this will obviously differ from one person to another and you may find that mine doesn't reflect how you like to eat, but in my experience the things I have included enable me to whip up something tasty from a number of different culinary canons without too much difficulty.

Though in part a reference book, *The Edible Atlas* is also deeply personal, showcasing my own culinary interests and experiences. It reflects where I've been, the people I have spoken to, and what I like to eat. I've chosen just

thirty-nine of countless world cuisines so there are of course gaps, but I've included those I consider particularly formative in our contemporary eating habits. (One particular revelation was the extent to which Persian cuisine – the ancient cooking traditions of the country known today as Iran – has influenced so many of the major cuisines we know and love: Indian, Turkish, Levantine, Mediterranean. You'll see that Persian influences keep cropping up over the course of this book). For three European countries (France, Spain and Italy), China, India and the USA, I have included more than one region. They seemed to me too established and too regionally nuanced to justify grouping their various culinary enclaves together.

I want this book to be as comfortable by your bedside as it is by your stove-top – as much a book to be read as to cook from. My job as a food journalist affords me the opportunity to meet some incredibly talented chefs, food experts and writers, from whom I've taken inspiration and practical tips in equal measure. In each chapter, you'll encounter an authority about the cuisine in question. They are too numerous to name here, but all have been generous with their time, knowledge and cooking. (I have been well fed while writing this book.)

I hope you enjoy reading and cooking from *The Edible Atlas* and that, with its help, you feel inspired to set off on some international journeys from your kitchen, reminisce about places already visited, or enthuse about travels to come.

*Bon voyage and bon appétit!*



# FRANCE

The French . . . bring to their consideration of the table the same appreciation, respect, intelligence and lively interest that they have for the other arts, for painting, for literature and for the theatre.

- ALICE B. TOKLAS, *The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book* •



THE FRENCH HAVE long seen food as high art. They were perhaps the first to adopt the notion that a dish could, like a painting or a novel, be a masterpiece in its own right.\* And while the rest of Europe has gradually come round to such ideas, *haute cuisine* is still championed and most classically executed by our Gallic neighbours.

But the wonderful thing about French food is that, for all its pomp and circumstance, Michelin-star† culture is by no means the only thing that matters. The French take great pride in their food at every level of production and consumption, with some of the most distinguished raw materials in the world. From rustic *paté* and wine to crusty, soft, white bread, perhaps dunked in a vibrant *pot-au-feu* (a casserole of boiled beef cuts and vegetables, dubbed ‘soul food for socialists’ by Anthony Bourdain); or *boeuf bourguignon* (the Burgundy stew of beef and vegetables in a sauce of bay leaves, juniper and Pinot Noir), French food culture is one that celebrates great ingredients as much as their plated results.

Look at a good road map of France and it will quickly dawn on you just how many of the world’s celebrated ingredients are French. Numerous towns and villages that have shared their names with a local food product pepper the roads, running like veins through the body of France: Di-

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\* Marcel Proust, arguably France’s greatest writer, is after all, inextricably associated in the popular imagination with a cake – see page 1.

† The Michelin brothers, founders of the Michelin tyre company, produced the first Michelin Guide to restaurants in 1900 in an attempt to encourage enthusiasm for motoring out to eat at their recommendations. In 1926 they launched the star grading system, now the highest and most internationally recognised clue to a restaurant’s credentials.

jon, Camembert, Pithiviers, Cognac . . . the French have gastronomy in their blood, they just get it. I think it's fair to say that on average they have a superior level of knowledge about gastronomy, one that's often noticeably lacking elsewhere, particularly (even after our much-vaunted food revolution) in the UK. For instance, working in restaurant service has an altogether different cachet. Staff are expected to be highly knowledgeable about food and wine in order to answer the more probing questions of punters. What is the chef's technique for making the Béarnaise sauce? Why is one vintage of Côte-Rôtie better than another? And so on.

It was French chef and writer Auguste Escoffier\* who said, 'If it had been an Italian who codified the world of cuisine, it would be thought of as Italian.' Though culinary trends come and go, French cuisine remains the benchmark for other culinary cultures and is endowed with a sense of timelessness. For chefs in the making, a classical training is grounded in French cuisine – its techniques, equipment, flavour and ingredient pairings, the attitude to wine – to which cooks can then add their own flair or, equally, apply to another cuisine. Learn to cook French, and the world is your oyster. Or should I say *huître*?

Arguably, the emergence of Modernist cuisine – think the developments in Spain and Scandinavia (El Bulli and noma respectively) – wouldn't have happened without French cuisine paving the way. Mastering the (simple, yet deceptively tricky) technique to make the likes of sauces and roux as well as presenting their culinary creations immaculately, France set the bar – a precedent on which subsequent culinary developments have been able to build. Coinciding with the decline of the aristocracy, this was the point at which French food became 'codified' (to borrow Escoffier's term), following a surge of restaurant opening by former private chefs. French cuisine as we know it, then, with its heavy sauces and immaculate presentation, developed as a result of shifts in the French class system. Restaurant culture became, and still is, integral to the advancement of French cuisine, allowing people other than the very privileged to buy into culinary advancements that had previously belonged in a noble, exclusive setting.

For a long time French food enjoyed a golden age of international veneration from cooks and eaters alike. In the past twenty years or so, innovations elsewhere – Ferran Adrià's maverick creations at the now closed El Bulli in Spain, for example – mean that French food has been relegated by some for

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\* Auguste Escoffier (1846-1935) is the French chef credited as possibly the most important figure in developing modern French cuisine. *Le Guide Culinaire*, published in 1906, is his best-known work – a recipe and reference book that remains a first port of call for chefs across the world to this day.

being unexciting. But for me, this misses the point. Innovation doesn't really sit at the heart of French food culture. Technique is key – precise quantities and timings – as is having the correct, well-sourced ingredients and beautiful presentation. The ability of the French to repeat this formula time and again is, indeed, an art.

I have covered just four of the French regions, each with culinary offerings reflecting their climate and cultural mix. Normandy, where the landscape and produce are in many ways similar to those of the south of England, where orchards bloom and cream-coloured cattle graze; the Loire Valley, one of France's cooler wine-producing areas, which blooms with wonderful fruit, vegetables and river fish; Rhône-Alpes, the centre of French charcuterie and home to the food capital of Lyon; and Provence, where flavours of the French Mediterranean collide in dishes that taste of the sunshine.

# NORMANDY

It was an opening up of the soul and spirit for me.

• JULIA CHILD •



IN AN INTERVIEW with *The New York Times*, Julia Child\* described her first meal in Rouen, Normandy, thus. She ate oysters and *sole meunière* and drank fine wine, experiencing the freshness and accessibility of just-caught seafood and the heady rush of eating great food in its homeland. Normandy might be just across the English Channel but there is nevertheless an attitudinal step-change around food when you arrive there from England. This ‘opening up’ that Child experienced is a food ecstasy borne of a place to which

food is absolutely central. You have entered France. Food is life, and life is food. *Bienvenue*.

There’s not a huge amount of technique, or even necessarily cooking, attached to recreating an authentic Norman meal. This isn’t the case with other areas of France, so Normandy is the perfect first stop on the home cook’s journey, allowing you to sample authentic French food without too much effort. This is the cuisine of which the best picnics are made: home to some of the world’s finest butter, most famous cheese, most delicious cider and, as everywhere in France, exemplary bread. Normandy draws attention to the fundamental simplicity of good food, the elemental composition of a satisfying meal, and puts the spotlight on the skill of producers rather than chefs. Normandy could be said to have less of a ‘cuisine’ than other regions in France, simply because ingredients are often left to speak for themselves, in their natural state. The elements of Norman food derive from the rolling greenery of the Pays d’Auge, where the *vaches des lunettes* (‘cows with spectacles’ – named for the markings around their eyes) graze, and where razor clams and whelks wash up onto the brooding grey beaches beloved of the Impressionists.

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\* Julia Child was an American cook, author and TV personality who is credited with bringing French food to the US via the publication in 1961 of her seminal book *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*. In 2009, Meryl Streep played the eccentric and difficult Child in the movie *Julie and Julia*, about a blogger’s challenge to cook all the recipes from *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* in a year.

As France's dairy capital, Normandy is – quite literally – *la crème de la crème*. Cheeses are usually named after their hometowns – Pont l'Évêque, Livarot and, of course, Camembert (a surprisingly tiny village with only a church, museum and a soundtrack of 'moos') – and are memorable for their chunky rinds and pungency, pairing brilliantly with local dry cider. Camembert was developed during the French Revolution by one Marie Harel, a Norman farmer and local cheese maker who sheltered one of the priests taking refuge in the countryside. The priest in question happened to be from Brie. The story goes that he shared with Harel the secret to making brie-style cheese, and the rest is history. It fast became the most popular cheese in France, iconic in its round wooden boxes, which, along with a spray of penicillium to preserve it, enabled the cheese to travel.\* Half a million boxes were purportedly shipped to the trenches each week during the Great War.

Great butter naturally paves the way for consummate pastry. In Normandy, puff pastry is used to make the beloved *tarte tatin* and *douillons*, in which pastry turnovers hug a filling of caramelised apple or pear; sweet crust features in a range of fruit-based tarts (see the recipe below for my mum's Norman-inspired apple tart) and brioche, which can be found all over France, reaches an apogee of deliciousness.

Orchards boasting crops of apples ripening on gnarled old trees create a patchwork of greens across Normandy. Apples can be loosely divided into two camps – those for eating and those for cider or Calvados production. Normandy cider is dry – or it can be, if dry is your thing. I love the smokiness of oak-aged brut ciders made in the town of Calvados, and also Calvados itself – the apple brandy for which the region is celebrated. This is widely used in cookery, as in flambéed *tarte aux pommes*, or sipped as a digestif. If you prefer a lighter, sweeter aperitif you could try *pommeau* – an apple liquor made by most of the little local cider and Calvados producers, which you'll fall upon in practically every Norman village.

Third in Normandy's triptych of great produce is its seafood. *Moules* (mussels) are ubiquitous, caught fresh daily and served *à la marinière* with bright yellow crispy *frites*. Turbot is the region's most prized fish, but sea bass, sole, monkfish and skate are also common and eaten widely. They are served simply, with mashed potatoes and fennel, for example, with a

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\* Camembert varies massively – go to the Camembert museum and included in price of entry is the chance to taste three cheeses of varying maturity – but what all types have in common is their round wooden box with characterful (and collectible) branding on the top. Livarot is a more acquired taste than crowd-pleasing Camembert or Pont L'Évêque (which comes in a distinctive square mould), which has an almost crunchy golden rind.

*meunière*\* sauce like Julia Child's sole or, in the case of oysters, in their natural state. For me, local oysters epitomise the richness of Norman food in its purest form. They were longer and creamier than any I had tried before. It's not surprising the Normans are purists about serving them – a small squeeze of lemon juice to enhance, but not disguise, the salty flavour. Wash them down with a glass of Loire Valley Muscadet, and feel your soul and spirit open up – just like Julia Child's.



**LARDER LIST** • apples • freshly churned butter • cream • cheeses (Camembert, Pont l'Évêque, Livarot) • shellfish (oysters, mussels, clams, winkles, whelks) • fish (turbot, sole, monkfish, skate) • brut cider • home-made pastry

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## • BAKED CAMEMBERT •

I almost didn't include this 'recipe' for fear of patronising you, but seeing as a) Camembert is quintessentially Norman; b) I make this all the time and c) it's bloody delicious, I soon talked myself into it. You can use a range of 'toppings' for the cheese or none at all, depending on your preferences. The Calvados-soaked version I've given below is the most dramatic, and clearly nods to Norman soil but, unlike alternatives such as drizzling some honey and scattering dried thyme over the cheese just before placing it in the oven, it does need to be prepared in advance.

### • SERVES 1–2 PIGS OR 4–6 PIGLETS •

1 x 250g round of Camembert, in its box  
2 tbsp Calvados  
1 sprig rosemary, leaves only  
sea salt and freshly ground black pepper  
French bread and crudités, to serve

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\* *Meunière* sauce, or 'miller's wife sauce', for fish is so called because it involves coating the fish in flour before frying it in brown butter or deep frying it in oil, then seasoning with lemon and parsley.



**1** • Remove the lid from the Camembert box, unwrap the cheese and discard the wrapping before returning the cheese to the box. Pierce the top of the cheese with a fork and carefully spoon the Calvados all over it, followed by the rosemary and seasoning.

**2** • Leave to marinate at room temperature for up to eight hours (if you can marinate in the morning before you wish to serve it, that's ideal), or for as long as you can short of that.

**3** • Preheat the oven to 180°C/160°C fan/gas 4 and bake for 10–20 minutes. I like it super gunky in the centre, so you can break through the white rind into a molten explosion of boozy cheese.

## • APPLE TART NORMANDE •

My mum is an infinitely superior baker to me and excels at dishes in which fruit, pastry and frangipane get jiggy. This tart lasts a good few days in the fridge and bridges that long, lonely stretch of time between breakfast and lunch very well indeed. Try sifting a small amount of icing sugar over the top and serving with some crème fraiche (and a shot of Calvados?).

### • SERVES 8 •

3 medium apples, peeled, cored and thinly sliced  
2 tbsp apricot jam for glazing (optional)

#### FOR THE SHORTCRUST PASTRY

150g plain flour, plus extra for dusting  
2 tbsp golden caster sugar  
100g cold unsalted butter, cubed  
1 egg yolk  
1 tbsp cold water  
1 tsp vanilla extract  
pinch salt

#### FOR THE FRANGIPANE

110g unsalted butter, softened  
110g golden caster sugar  
1 egg, beaten  
1 egg yolk

1 tbsp Calvados  
110g ground almonds  
2 tbsp plain flour

- 1** • To make the pastry, sift the flour into a mixing bowl and stir in the sugar. Lightly rub the cubes of butter into the flour using your fingertips, until the mixture resembles fine breadcrumbs.
- 2** • In the centre of the mixture make a well and add the egg yolk, water, vanilla and salt. Combine to make a smooth dough and gather together into a ball. Cover with clingfilm and refrigerate for at least 30 minutes.
- 3** • To make the frangipane, cream the butter and sugar together in a bowl and then add the egg and egg yolk separately. Mix in the Calvados. In a separate bowl, stir the flour into the ground almonds and then add to the batter mixture.
- 4** • Roll the pastry out onto a floured surface into a 25cm circle about 3mm thick. Lift into a 23cm–25cm loose-bottomed tart tin and then press down into the bottom of the tin and up onto the sides. Chill once again for 10–20 minutes.
- 5** • Preheat the oven to 200°C/180°C fan/gas 6. Place a baking sheet in the oven while it heats up.
- 6** • Spoon the frangipane into the chilled pastry base and distribute it evenly. Arrange the apples in an overlapping spiral pattern, starting from the outside first.
- 7** • Place the tart onto the heated baking sheet and bake for 15 minutes. Reduce the heat to 180°C/160°C fan/gas 4 and bake for another 15–20 minutes.
- 8** • To make the glaze, combine the apricot jam with a little water and then heat gently until runny. Remove the tart from the oven and brush all over with the glaze. Allow to cool in the tin for 5–10 minutes before turning out.



# LOIRE VALLEY

They were wonderful days for us, days that I wished would last forever, swimming in the Loire or catching crayfish in the shallows, exploring the woods, making ourselves sick with cherries or plums or green gooseberries, fighting, sniping at one another with potato rifles and decorating the Standing Stones with the spoils of our adventuring.

- JOANNE HARRIS, *Five Quarters of the Orange* •



DURING THE SUMMER of 2012 I spent five days cycling through the Loire Valley with a friend. Our ride began in Tours and ended in Angers, and we pedalled from one famed wine region to the next – the Touraine, Chinon, Saumur Champigny, Anjou. We didn't make it to Sancerre or Muscadet, but you get the picture: this area of three hundred square miles along the Loire river is internationally celebrated for great wine and known for its distinctive expressions of Sauvignon Blanc, the unique Chenin blancs of

Vouvray and for mastering the notoriously difficult Cabernet Franc grape. I didn't know much about the food scene in the Loire before I went, but – on the basis that such good wine would surely be matched by great food – I wasn't surprised to find culinary prowess that equalled its viticulture.

Respect for local wine is key to cooking in the Loire kitchen. Food and wine are almost yin and yang, designed for one another, and many of the sauces with which meat and fish are eaten contain wine produced nearby. The emblematic *beurre blanc*, for which you'll find a recipe at the end of this chapter, is an obvious example.\* To borrow Fernande Garvin's words from *The Art of French Cooking*,<sup>†</sup> 'Wine makes a symphony of a good meal.'

Abbeys, *chateaux*, convents and pastel farmhouses punctuate the landscape and stud the banks of the Loire. This delicate balance of nature and the

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\*Cooking with wine is common across France, of course, with the likes of *boeuf bourgignon* and *boeuf en daube* in Burgundy and Provence respectively.

†Published in 1965, *The Art of French Cooking* is a delightful paperback filled with classic French dishes like Coq au Vin and Croque Monsieur – simple, elegant dishes which impress without being too fussy.

man-made encapsulates something effortless about rural France: quaintness erring on the right side of twee. Fruit trees from which fairytale red apples and ripe plums dangle are commonplace, as are fields of sunflowers standing to attention like ranks of smiling soldiers. With more sun than Normandy further north, fruits like apples and pears are sweeter here, and farmed for food rather than drink. We cycled past patchworks of allotments boasting a glorious stench of onions, green and white beans, carrots and leeks, mushrooms and asparagus, pumpkins and *primeurs* (early season baby vegetables).

The Loire river is extensive, stretching from its source in the Rhône-Alpes (see page 33) and travelling alongside Burgundy before taking a sharp left towards the Atlantic Ocean. The Loire Valley region is surrounded by very varied, mineral-rich soils as well as different microclimates. Both food and wine take on an ultra-local character here as a result; each city has its own food speciality and the attributes of local wines change dramatically from one village to another. Two-wheeled travel was the ideal way to experience this, enabling us to make regular stops to taste local wines, charcuterie and pastries.

The three '*rilles*' are the region's signature meat dishes and make a mean accompaniment to a local dry white wine: *rillettes*, a pork-based paste from the Tours and Saumur areas; *rillons*, cubes of belly pork preserved in fat, from Touraine; and *rillauds*, slow-roasted chunks of belly pork from Anjou. As we will see once we get to the Rhône-Alpes, French cuisine has long championed the use of offal and offcuts of meat. In the UK we might think of this in terms of chef and bastion of British cuisine Fergus Henderson's concept of 'nose to tail eating', but in France eating the whole animal isn't a concept, it is common practice. Typical of the Loire and western France is pig's head soup, a recipe for which appears in the 1929 book *Les Belles Recettes des Provinces Françaises* ('Beautiful Recipes from the French Provinces'), contributed by one Madame Meunier from L'Oie in La Vendée, just south of the Loire. She instructs us to boil a salted pig's head for just under three hours with kale, stale bread, peppercorns and garlic before serving the broth over more bread and eating the head separately (with cabbage that has been cooked in cream). This is the kind of food still eaten in Loire villages. In Britain, using the whole animal might be a tradition to which we have returned, but in France it is one that they never lost.

The Loire felt to me like a landscape of storybooks and fairytales, with knights on colourfully decorated steeds, damsels with plaited hair and courtship in the mazes of the immaculate *chateaux* gardens. I imagine medieval huntsmen returning from the forests to *chateaux* kitchens bearing spoils of deer and wild boar, which chefs would prepare with wild mushrooms

and sauces *a la crème*. The good table wine and hearty meals you find in the region today are part of a long tradition.

As well as the abundance of the forests, the river itself is brimming with food: freshwater fish such as pike, trout, salmon and eel. They are delicious in dark soups or stews like *matelotte d'anguille* – eel stew, rich in local red wine, cognac and shallots – or more simply served with a *beurre blanc*. This is a classic sauce of the Loire Valley, prepared by reducing butter with shallots, vinegar and Muscadet, a simple dry white wine native to the zone surrounding the city of Nantes (and made from the Melon de Bourgogne grape).

Goats' cheese from the Loire is iconic and a good example of local food produced to complement the region's wine. Pyramid-shaped, ash-dusted and made with raw goats' milk, Valençay is perhaps the most famous, but Chabichou du Poitou, Crottin de Chavignol and Poulligny-Saint-Pierre (all from the Berry region between the Cher and Indre rivers) are also well-known. Most local wines would accompany these beautifully, but I had a particularly ecstatic experience with a chilled St Nicolas de Bourgueil and some Valençay.

Puddings, patisserie and sweets put the vibrant fruits of the Loire Valley to good use and inspire Joanne Harris in *Five Quarters of the Orange*.<sup>\*</sup> French staples like *chausson aux pommes* (apple turnover, one of which my mother would buy me every Saturday on her unlikely baguette run in Streatham, where I grew up), and tarts filled with *crème patissière* and crowned with strawberries, line shop windows alongside local favourites like *tarte tatin*. This tart of caramelised apples turned upside down on pastry is said to have originated at the Hotel Tatin in Lamotte-Beuvron, a town between the Loire and the Cher. Meanwhile, Angers is known for its plum cake, *pâté aux prunes*, which is not unlike a *tarte aux quetsches*<sup>†</sup> and the city of Tours produces a nougat with almonds, cherries, apricots and candied orange. The local *moelleux* or *doux Vouvray*, sweetened by noble rot,<sup>‡</sup> would make a beguiling partner for either one of these – if you're indulging in dessert.

Stock up on freshwater fish, some ripe vegetables, Muscadet and the wherewithal to whip up a *beurre blanc* on your first kitchen trip to the Loire Valley, and imagine yourself riverside: your bike propped on its side, the breeze in your face, booze on your breath, surrounded by wild flowers . . . and the stench of onions. Just the right side of twee, indeed.

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<sup>\*</sup>The third in her food trilogy, in which the main characters are all named after fruits or fruity products – Framboise, Cassis and so on.

<sup>†</sup>*Tarte aux quetsches* is a plum tart considered to be a speciality of Alsace.

<sup>‡</sup>Noble rot, otherwise known as Botrytis, is a grey fungus that grows on ripe grapes which is actively encouraged by winemakers to produce sweeter wines like Sauternes.



**LARDER LIST** • freshwater fish (pike, trout, salmon, eel) • local charcuterie (rillons, rillettes, rillauds) • local cheese (Valencay, Chabichou du Poitou, Crottin de Chavignol, Pouligny-Saint-Pierre) • fruits (apples, pears, plums, strawberries) • vegetables (shallots, carrots) • good butter • home-made pastry

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## • SALMON AND BEURRE BLANC •

In theory a *beurre blanc* is simple. In practice it is a little harder, but making one is a skill well worth honing. It's the typical sauce of the Loire region and perfect served with river fish such as salmon. You'd be mad not to use a (good value) Loire Valley wine to do the region justice. Muscadet almost always comes at a decent price, is usually tasty and/or inoffensive (depending on your views on Muscadet – I love it), and isn't wasted on cooking.

### • SERVES 4 •

2 shallots, finely chopped  
15g flat-leaf parsley, chopped  
4 salmon fillets (150g each)  
juice of ½ lemon  
sea salt and freshly ground black pepper

#### FOR THE BEURRE BLANC

1 shallot, chopped  
125ml white wine, preferably a Loire Valley one  
such as Muscadet  
½ tbsp white wine vinegar  
5g flat-leaf parsley, chopped  
110g unsalted butter, cubed  
sea salt and freshly ground black pepper

- 1 • Preheat the oven to 200°C/180°C fan/gas 6.
- 2 • Line a casserole dish with foil and lay a bed of shallots and parsley across it, then place the salmon fillets on top. Squeeze the lemon juice and sprinkle the seasoning over the fish, then put another sheet of foil over the fillets, securely.

- 3 • Bake the fish in the oven for 20–25 minutes until it just starts to flake.
- 4 • Meanwhile, make your *beurre blanc*. Put the shallot, white wine, vinegar and parsley together in a pan and bring to the boil, then reduce to a simmer over a medium heat. Leave simmering until the sauce has dramatically reduced in volume (it will thicken, too) to about two tablespoons of liquid. Turn the heat to very low and whisk in the butter, a little at a time. Season with salt and pepper.
- 5 • Strain the sauce through a fine sieve into a heatproof bowl. Discard the shallot, parsley and seasoning sediment and then place the bowl with the liquid into another bowl half-filled with boiling water to keep the sauce warm until you are ready to serve.
- 6 • Place the salmon, shallots and parsley onto plates. Spoon the *beurre blanc* over the fish and serve with boiled new potatoes or rice.

## • UPSIDE-DOWN PLUM CAKE •

I was determined to pay tribute to the garden fruits of the Loire Valley and especially the plums, since I am an ardent lover of plums in all forms: fresh from the tree, in jams, compotes, puddings and, best of all, my mother's *pièce de résistance*, the plum shuttle, in which she sandwiches tart prunes and almond frangipane between two pieces of puff pastry and bakes it in an egg wash. The typical pastry of Angers (the end point on my Loire Valley cycle trip) is known as *pâté aux prunes*, a similar plum and pastry arrangement. I felt the apple tart *Normande* would suffice for French pastry, however, so have instead taken inspiration from Angers and included this fantastic plum cake recipe from Eric Lanlard's book, *Home Bake*. *Merci beaucoup, Eric!*

### • SERVES 8 •

200g unsalted butter, plus extra for greasing  
 200g golden caster sugar  
 5 medium eggs  
 200g self-raising flour  
 300–400g fresh plums, stoned and halved  
 1–2 tbsp light brown sugar  
 sprinkling of mixed spice  
 50g golden syrup

- 1 • Preheat the oven to 180°C/160°C fan/gas 4. Grease a shallow 22cm spring-form cake tin with the extra butter, and then line it with baking paper.

**2** • In a large bowl, cream the butter and sugar together until light and fluffy. Whisk in the eggs, one by one, until well combined. Sift in the flour, then fold it in gently.

**3** • Put the plums in a roasting dish and sprinkle with the light brown sugar and mixed spice. Bake in the oven for 15 minutes or until the fruit is soft and sweet. Drain off the excess juice.

**4** • Place the roasted plums in the base of your prepared cake tin. Add the golden syrup, then spoon the cake mixture on top. Bake in the oven for an hour or until the cake is cooked through. Allow to cool in the tin, then remove. Flip the sponge onto a serving dish, so the fruit and syrup are visible.





# RHÔNE-ALPES

In a dining establishment in Lyon, you can eat pig fat fried in pig fat, a pig's brain dressed in a porky vinaigrette, a salad made with creamy pig lard, a chicken cooked inside a sealed pig's bladder, a pig's digestive tract filled up with pig's blood and cooked like a custard, nuggets of a pig's belly mixed with cold vinegary lentils, a piggy intestine blown up like a balloon and stuffed thickly with a handful of piggy intestines, and a sausage roasted in a brioche (an elevated version of a 'pig in a blanket'). For these and other reasons, Lyon, for 76 years, has been recognised as the gastronomic capital of France and the world.

The world is a big place.

- BILL BUFORD, *Observer Food Monthly* •



MUCH OF THE French food we are exploring concentrates on the masterful manipulation of raw materials, or indeed the raw materials themselves. As Bill Buford\* notes, these take on a particularly carnivorous character in this nook of south-east France, which is encircled by five other French regions including Provence (see page 40) and Burgundy, as well as Switzerland and Italy to the east. Welcome to the Rhône-Alpes, home to Lyon, France's second largest city and charcuterie capital.

The region of Rhône-Alpes is a confluence, most literally, of two rivers: the Rhône and the Saône, but it is also where many of France's agricultural and culinary kingdoms meet, giving the region a wide range of ingredients on which to draw. In *French Country Cooking*, the Roux brothers† cite Charolais cattle, Auvergne lamb, trout from the Alps and dairy from Bugey and Dauphine as among the riches of the area, to which I would add the white truffles from Tricastin and Drôme (a vast majority of the French truffle harvest), as well as produce from Provence to the south (think seafood and endless herbs)

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\* Buford liked it so much in Lyon that he moved his family there and took on an apprenticeship in a boulangerie, an experience he recounts in his book, *Heat*.

† Michel and Albert Roux set up Mayfair's legendary French restaurant Le Gavroche in 1967 and are uncle and father respectively to the restaurant's current chef patron (and star of *MasterChef*), Michel Roux Jnr.

and Burgundy to the north (Dijon mustard, Epoisses cheese and fine wines).

Lyon typifies France in all its rustic glory, in all its perfected coarseness, in all the polished simplicity of cheese and charcuterie, bread and wine eaten off a crumby gingham cloth. This is the food I remember over Michelin-starred meals. It is usually delicious, very often gruesome and always real. Local food like some of the charcuterie outlined by Bill Buford above is often enjoyed in *bouchons*, typical *Lyonnais* taverns. Meat products including *rosette* (pork salami), *andouille* (smoked sausage with garlic, wine and onions), *andouillette* (fried sausage of small intestine stuffed with tripe), boiled sausage with potatoes, and *Jésus de Lyon* (the fat, knobbly hard sausage not dissimilar to the *rosette* or *andouille* but with meat chopped more coarsely) are all central to the *bouchon* experience. *Quenelles* are another favourite, small oval dumplings of minced fish or meat bound by egg yolk and breadcrumbs then poached. In Lyon these are typically made of pike sourced from the Rhône and served in a white sauce not unlike a béchamel, making for comfort food of the freshest, most local sort.

The *Lyonnais* and people of the Rhône-Alpes at large take great pride in local food, much of which has achieved AOC status.\* This includes the chickens from Bresse (*poulet de Bresse*) – often described as the Dom Perignon champagne or Beluga caviar of the hen world – which are almost an emblem of the *Tricolor* flag with their white feathers, red crown and blue feet. Many chefs say this is the most tender poultry out there.

AOC wine and cheese go hand-in-hand in the Rhône valley. Syrahs such as Crozes-Hermitage and blends such as Côtes du Rhône (which use grapes such as Carignan, Mourvèdre and Grenache blended with Syrah), are world famous. The region also produces some beautifully crisp Viognier for blending. Mixed breed cattle such as Abondance, Tarine, and Montbéliarde graze the luscious pastures. Given the prominence of foraged items such as chestnuts (from Ardèche) and hazelnuts and walnuts (from Grenoble) in the cuisine of the Rhône-Alpes, it comes as little surprise that the grasses produce a consistently nutty flavour in cheese made from cows' milk, regardless of the texture. Cheeses like Vacherin, Reblochon and Raclette are some of the well-loved results.

Raclette – from '*racler*' meaning 'to scrape' – is a hard, dark yellow cheese often served melted over boiled potatoes and eaten with charcu-

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\* AOC stands for *Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée*, a government awarded certification granting products from certain geographical areas protection. This means that sparkling wine producers from outside Champagne can't call their wines champagne, nor can any chickens reared outside the Bresse AOC be termed 'Bresse'.

terie and pickles (the perfect antidote to a cold day spent on the Alps) while Reblochon's name derives from the verb '*reblocher*', 'to squeeze a cow's udder again', and harks back to the Middle Ages when farmers were taxed on their milk yields. They would avoid milking each cow of every last drop until the landowner had measured their yields. Reblochon – the cheese of the re-milked cows, was made from the second milking. This was also the cheese known as *fromage de dévotion*, the cheese offered to Carthusian monks by farmers after their land had been blessed. Vacherin, that wonderful, stinky cheese mess sold in wooden rounds, also originates in the Rhône-Alpes (although there is a Swiss version, too).

Cheeses are fashioned into a rich array of dishes such as *gratin Savoyard*, native to Savoie (an eastern area of the Rhône-Alpes), which is cooked in meat stock with fresh hard cheese (often Swiss cheese, like Gruyère, from just over the border – see recipe on page 38). Cheese fondue also expresses the slightly more Germanic tendencies of the Rhône-Alpes cuisine. Fondue, which is said to have originated in Switzerland but is also popular in Austria, is a specialty in and around Savoie and Lyon. The local variety might contain a mix of melted Comté, Emmental, Vacherin or Beaufort. Bread spiked with long forks is dipped into a big bowl of hot melted cheese shared between eaters.

Speak to someone who has spent an extended period in Lyon and they'll probably say they gained weight – and that's hardly surprising. Add sweet goods to all this cheese, meat, cream and wine and the calories keep on coming. There's *Viennoiserie*, pastry and patisserie products that, as the name suggests, originally came from Vienna, but which have been perfected by the French – *brioche aux pralines*, *pain au chocolat*. The chestnuts of the Ardèche are made into *crème des marrons* for use in cakes, tarts and pastries or are glazed with sugar syrup (to make *marrons glacés*), sometimes used in puddings such as a Mont Blanc (chestnuts and whipped cream). There's France's best white nougat from Montélimar,\* and then there's brioche. Brioche is one of those foods that straddles savoury and sweet to make a versatile canvas for fruit, cream and the likes of *cocon de Lyon* – little pastry parcels with sweet almond cream – but equally for meat and cheese. This confirms my suspicion that, in the Rhône-Alpes, you're never far from some meat. It's a great place to be piggy, but perhaps not to be a pig.

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\*Nougat is thought to have come into France with the Greeks and examples of it can be found across the Mediterranean and Middle East, from Spanish *turrón* to *gaz* in Iran. The nougat of Montélimar is a purer sort, however, made with just honey, eggs, sugar and almonds.



**LARDER LIST** • charcuterie (andouille, andouillette) • good quality chicken (if you can't get an AOC poulet de Bresse then no matter, just get the best organic chicken you can find, preferably from an independent butcher) • quenelles • cheese (Vacherin, Reblochon, Raclette) • butter • olive oil • brioche • nougat • marrons glacés • crème des marrons • wine (Syrah, Viognier)

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## • GREEN SALAD WITH VINAIGRETTE •

*Alors!* So this dish is hardly unique to the Rhône-Alpes, but given the proliferation of porky products in the region, this simple salad would be a respite from meat-eating and the perfect side to accompany *quenelles* or *andouille* with good French bread. Few things beat a really well-executed green salad doused in garlicky dressing, and I fear I'd be short-changing you if I didn't provide instructions on how to make an authentic French vinaigrette, one that will linger on your breath for the rest of the day after eating it. This is very similar to my grandmother's version, except I have swapped in Dijon mustard (infinitely superior to all other mustards, in my view) for the dry Colman's that Granny used (ever faithful to Norfolk, she was). Dijon mustard also marks this dressing as local to south-eastern France, if not to the Rhône-Alpes then just a short distance north in Bourgogne. The salad can be as basic or elaborate as you want. I prefer to go for garden veg, avoiding the radicchio and frilly lettuces of further south in Italy. Round lettuce or lamb's lettuce are lovely and soft. Sliced radishes, grated carrot and chopped chives make nice additions.

### • SERVES 3–4 •

4 tbsp extra virgin olive oil  
1 tbsp white wine vinegar  
1 loaded tsp Dijon mustard  
juice of ½ lemon  
2 garlic cloves, very finely chopped  
big pinch sea salt and freshly ground black pepper  
salad leaves of your choice

1 • Simply put all the ingredients other than the salad leaves into a jam jar and shake vigorously. The vinaigrette matures well so make in advance for an even better dressing.

2 • Douse your salad in vinaigrette just before serving. (Don't do this bit in advance or you'll be left with soggy lettuce.)

## • A NOT-QUITE-CASSOULET •

I created this simple recipe that showcases *andouille*, the smoked sausage of the Rhône-Alpes, but without using duck, as in a regular *cassoulet*. (Expensive + greasy + cute = duck just isn't my favourite meat to cook with.) It combines the other basics of the classic dish – haricot beans, bacon lardons, lots of garlic and bay – into a stew that's crying out to be washed down with one of the region's Syrah or Syrah/Grenache blends.

### • SERVES 6 •

400g dried haricot beans (or cannellini),  
soaked overnight  
200g pork shoulder, diced  
200g bacon or pancetta, diced into lardons  
2 bay leaves  
2–3 tbsp olive oil  
1 stick celery, roughly chopped  
1 onion, roughly chopped  
1 carrot, roughly chopped  
6 garlic cloves, finely chopped  
1 bouquet garni (two stems each of thyme  
and rosemary, tied together)  
300g andouille, cut into 1 cm slices (if you  
can't find andouille, use another smoked  
sausage such as chorizo)  
juice of ½ lemon  
2 whole cloves  
sea salt and freshly ground black pepper

TO SERVE

45g fresh breadcrumbs, toasted

30g flat-leaf parsley, roughly chopped  
drizzle of extra virgin olive oil

- 1 • Preheat the oven to 140°C/120°C fan/gas 1.
- 2 • Drain the beans of their liquid and put them in a large saucepan, covered with water. Add the pork shoulder, bacon lardons and bay leaves, bring to the boil and simmer together for 15–20 minutes on a medium heat. Then drain the mixture, keeping back about 200ml of the cooking liquid, skimmed of any foam.
- 3 • Heat the olive oil in a large frying pan over a medium heat and fry the celery, onion, carrot and garlic for five minutes or until the onions start to turn translucent. Do not let the garlic burn.
- 4 • Add the bouquet garni, andouille and the mixture of beans and other meats. Put the reserved cup of cooking water over them, plus more water to cover, then add the lemon juice and cloves and bring to the boil.
- 5 • Transfer to a casserole dish and cover with foil or a lid, then place in the oven for two and a half hours. Fish out the bay leaves, cloves and the bouquet garni and season to taste. Serve spooned into bowls with a scattering of toasted breadcrumbs, parsley and drizzle of olive oil.

## • GRATIN SAVOYARD •

This piggy potato dish makes a great appendage to many of the pork products for which the Rhône-Alpes is best known, as well as roast dinners. It's even delicious on its own with some green salad. It is native to the Savoie region (hence its name) and for true authenticity Beaufort cheese is used, though given that this isn't exactly ubiquitous, most people make it with gruyère. I prefer to use chicken stock and always add the nutmeg, which builds in a delicate layer of warming spice.

### • SERVES 4 •

1 kg potatoes (preferably waxy, but any suited to boiling will work), peeled and sliced into 3–4mm discs  
1 garlic clove  
45g butter  
150g gruyère cheese, grated  
½ tsp ground nutmeg (optional)  
sea salt and freshly ground black pepper  
150ml beef or chicken stock

- 1 • Preheat the oven to 220°C/200°C fan/gas 6.
- 2 • Crush the garlic with the back of a spoon to release the flavour and rub it all over a wide ovenproof dish. Then grease the dish with one third of the butter. Place half of the potato slices in a layer in the bottom.
- 3 • In a bowl, mix together the cheese, nutmeg, salt and pepper. Sprinkle half of this over the potatoes. Take another third of the butter and break it into little bits. Dot these over the potatoes and cheese, then layer the rest of the potatoes on top, followed by the rest of the cheese and the final third of the butter. Pour the stock into the dish.
- 4 • This last stage is optional, but if you're a garlic freak like me, I recommend slicing whatever's left of the clove super finely and sprinkling over the top. Bake the gratin in the oven for 30–40 minutes and leave to stand for five minutes before serving.

