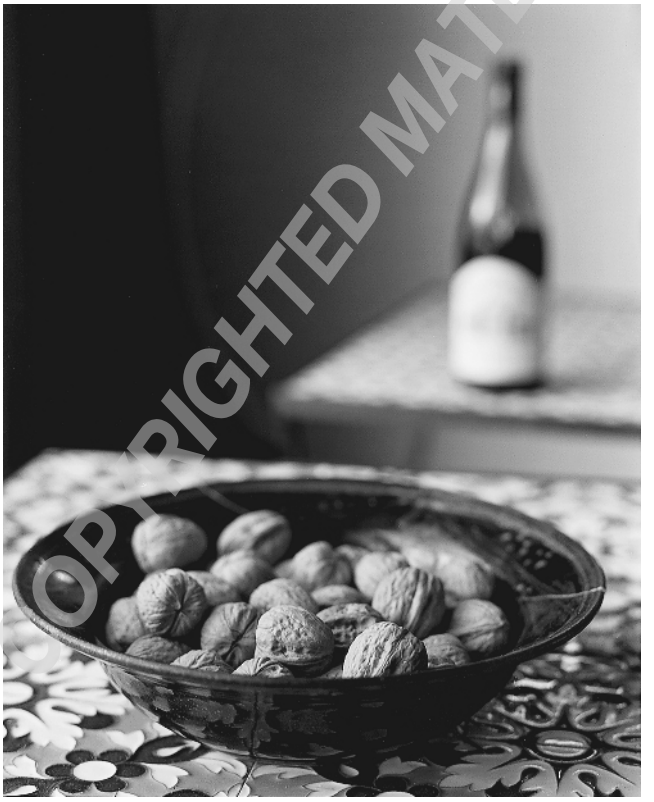
The Tastes of the French Southwest



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Armagnac

On a market day in Eauze, one of the great centers of commerce in Gascony, you can see men buying and selling Armagnac the old way: opening the bottle of brandy, rubbing a few drops into their palms, cupping their hands, sniffing, looking for extraordinary depth and aroma, which are the signs of a great Armagnac. Some say you can find the scent of violets when Armagnac is young, and of peaches and vanilla when it matures.

Others use vivid words like "ripe plums," "crushed hazelnuts," "prunes," "violets," "sun-ripened peaches"—the comparisons spin out. But the words I like best come in phrases more simply grasped: "taste of the earth," "dancing fire," and "velvet flame." For you do not merely drink Armagnac; you sip it, sniff it, and literally breathe it in. The initial excitement comes at the first inhalation. It is here that the *gout de terroir*, or taste of the earth, is experienced. The glass, warmed in the hand, causes fumes to rise from the liquid. And at their first contact with the tongue, you are touched by the "dancing fire."

The Gascons are more than happy to instruct you: Inhale the Armagnac as you chew it, and you will experience the "dancing fire," followed shortly by the "velvet flame." Do not wash the glass afterward, they say, and it will keep its bouquet for another day, a phenomenon called *fond de verre*.

My friend the retired chef Roger Duffour, proprietor of the Relais de l'Armagnac in the Gascon town of Luppé-Violles, competed in a double-blind tasting of Armagnacs and was the only connoisseur to get all the bottles right—twice! Considering how many different vintage bottles circulate in the Gascon countryside, this was considered an amazing feat. He is my authority on the subject. I find his collection astounding, with many bottles more than a hundred years old. He offered me a drink from one, and I experienced the classic sensations from the red-black brandy: the dance of fire on my tongue followed by the velvet flame, a definable perfume of violets, and a slight pepperiness as well.

When I visited Duffour, I found him not only a great connoisseur of Armagnac but also a master at catching small flocks of ortolans in aerial nets. These much-coveted, lark-sized birds of the French Southwest are now a protected species, but when I visited him back in the seventies, I tasted birds he had caught, fattened, and fed Armagnac in bowls until they fell over and drowned. This final "drink" gave them an extraordinary flavor and aroma when roasted on a spit.

With Armagnac, vintage is not as important as blend, but the blend may well include some of these very old vintage brandies. (Bottles from the 1920s and 1930s may cost hundreds of dollars.) Actually, quality in Armagnac is based on four things: the origin, or *terroir*, of the grapes; the distillation process; the length of time the liquid is aged in oak casks; and the brilliance of the cellar-master's blend.

Recently, *Los Angeles Times* food columnist Leslie Brenner published an excellent and up-to-date column with tasting notes of Armagnacs available in the United States. With her permission, I quote her here:

> Château de Laubade VSOP Bas-Armagnac. Vanilla and hazelnut nose; earthy and pleasant, if a little rough.
>
> Château de Pellehaut Réserve Armagnac Ténarèze. Beautiful plum tart aromas with hints of fig, vanilla and ginger.
>
> Francis Darroze Bas-Armagnac Réserve Spéciale. Pretty pear and almond aromas. Bright honeyed fruit on the palate—mirabelle? Santa Rosa plum?
>
> 1979 Château de Ravignan Bas-Armagnac. Lots of ripe late-summer fruit and serious caramel. Velvety and complex, with tremendous length.

In the old days, Armagnac was distilled from local grapes on practically every Gascon farm, in traveling stills hauled about by oxen. These were strange contraptions consisting of a potbellied stove and copper pipes, operated by an expert who would listen to the puffs and gurgles and make adjustments as he saw fit. Copper is still used in alembic stills, which today are mostly owned by farmers' cooperatives. The special hand-hewn and increasingly rare local dark oak barrels in which the raw fermented firewater is aged and smoothed are beautiful objects in themselves and often last a hundred years in service.

The question most often asked about Armagnac is how it differs from Cognac, which is better known and is produced in ten times the quantity 150 or so miles to the north. The Gascons are quick to give you answers ranging from the technical to the poetic. Intellectually, some argue, the distillation process is different. The thinner base wine of Cognac must be double-distilled, while Armagnac is distilled only once, which preserves its earthy bouquet and drier taste. Here are three reflections on Armagnac:

From Alain Dutournier, chef-proprietor of Carré des Feuillants in Paris: "Cognac is dependable, but Armagnac, like the Gascons who make it, is more forceful, more complicated—even excessive at times—and more exciting."

From Georges Samalens, Armagnac producer and author of an authoritative book on the subject: "Cognac gains its distinction by finesse, while Armagnac gains its distinction by its power. We are a bit rougher, but we are closer to the soil, and as a result we need more age."

From a Gascon friend who prefers to remain anonymous: "Cognac is a pretty girl in a freshly laundered smock carrying a basket of wildflowers; she pleases you by the sight of her. Armagnac is a tempestuous woman of a certain age, someone you don't bring home to Mother, someone who excites your blood."

Armagnac is wonderful to cook with—great in daubes, poultry dishes, and desserts. It can be used in sherbets, to preserve fruits, to cut the richness of a sauce of wild mushrooms, to perfume and flavor apples and pears. It will add depth and mellowness, a rich soft quality obtainable by no other means. Only the strongest condiments, such as mustard, capers, and vinegar, do not blend well with it. A touch of Armagnac added to a cassoulet will give that famous dish extra finesse.

Raspberries in Armagnac

Framboises à l'Armagnac

MAKES ABOUT 2 CUPS

THESE RASPBERRIES CAN BE served within two weeks of being soaked in Armagnac and should be eaten within a month. Otherwise, leave them for four to six months, strain through a coffee filter (the raspberries are no longer edible), then add the liqueur to Champagne for an evening aperitif, a "kir royale, Southwest style." For each drink, put 1 ounce liquid in a glass; then fill with chilled dry Champagne.

1 dry pint perfect, but not too ripe, red raspberries

¾ cup superfine sugar

1½ cups Armagnac, or more to cover

1 Wipe each raspberry very gently with a damp paper towel, then drop one by one into a very clean bottle. Add the sugar, then enough Armagnac to cover.

2 Let stand in a cool dark place for 2 to 4 weeks. Shake gently from time to time to help the sugar dissolve. Serve chilled in small glass cups.

Cèpes

Cèpes, to use the French word for the wild mushroom *Boletus edulis*—the same mushroom that is called porcini in Italy or king boletes in the United States, are the least expensive and simplest way to put the flavor of the Southwest into your cooking. While dried cèpes have always been plentiful, these days in the autumn, more and more fresh cèpes appear in markets in all parts of the United States.

In the region of the Landes, I was served very fresh, very small oval-shaped raw cèpes, thinly sliced and dressed simply with lemon and oil. They were extraordinary. But Southwesterners insist that cèpes require long, slow cooking both to bring out their deep woodsy flavor and to become digestible. They claim that many types of boletus mushroom are naturally filled with water and need to go through three stages of cooking: first, drying in a slow oven to rid them of excess moisture; next, a slow stewing in their own juices; and, finally, sautéing to caramelize and develop flavor.

Ads for real estate in France often include the phrase *"terrain à cèpes"* indicating that cèpes sprout on the land in autumn, which makes the property more valuable. People who love wild mushrooms and forage for them often have secret places called *nids*, or nests, they find them year after year. Wild mushrooms should not be gathered unless you're certain you know how to identify them or are with an experienced group that specializes in mushroom gathering. If you do pick cèpes, never pull them out by the stalk (unless you're are going to use them for identification), but cut them off at ground level with a knife, so that they can sprout again next year.

If you do find a nest of cèpes or other choice boletes and an expert in mushrooms has approved their edibility, or if you find a cache of fresh cèpes in your market, here is what to do: Choose only young, firm mushrooms and carry them home in a paper—not plastic—bag. If the stems are firm but tender, peel them and cut lengthwise to check for insects; set aside.

Hard and fibrous stalks should be discarded. Wet, spongy, soft undersides of the caps should also be removed and discarded. Brush the caps clean or quickly run under cool water. Wipe dry and gently press out moisture, or dry out in a slow oven. Then prepare the very traditional dish, *cèpes à la bordelaise*—cèpes sautéed in oil with garlic—a dish that retains their sweet, delicious nutty flavor best (see Cèpes Sautéed in Oil in the Style of Bordeaux, page 338).

There are many kinds of boletes in France, many shapes and sizes and colors; but the best and most coveted is the cèpe de Bordeaux, with its firm, blackish head. This mushroom, which grows as far north as the Périgord and as far south as Spain, has a superb earthy flavor and an aroma of woodlands. I first gathered the cèpe de Bordeaux in the woods of Saint-Jean-de-Marenne in the Landes. We were a group of American cooking teachers; our guide and mushroom expert was the local pharmacist; and our host, the owner of the woods, was an impoverished baron. From his château, on the high ground, we descended into the woods, where strange animals called *pottoks* wandered about at will. These are the descendants of prehistoric horses, harmless creatures often depicted by ancient man on the walls of caves.

There were many kinds of mushrooms in the woods, including three varieties of cèpes and an orange look-alike called by its scientific name *Lactarius deliciosus*, which, to the Catalans, is the best wild mushroom to be found. Its cup is chalice-shaped, and its taste slightly resinous. A Catalan will make sure it's the right mushroom by squeezing the stalk. If carrot-colored juices come out, he takes it home, since even one specimen of *Lactarius deliciosus* will make a fabulous omelet. On this same outing, we found the sought-after coulemelles and the somewhat less exciting russulas, as well as a vast number of various other mushrooms that were either unpleasant or dangerous to eat.

Fresh cèpes are available in season in many markets. If unavailable in your part of the country, you can mail order quality and flavorful cèpes from any number of sources. A typical and easy way to cook them is to trim, wipe dry, and quarter the fresh cèpe caps. Cut the stems into rounds. Heat oil or duck fat in a skillet until very hot. Add the cèpes, stir once, cover, and reduce the heat at once to very low. Cook, covered, for 5 to 10 minutes. Add a traditional *hachis* of chopped garlic and parsley, stir once more, and cook, covered, for 5 minutes longer. Season with salt and serve at once. You will find many more variations throughout this book.

Canned French cèpes are expensive but are available in many grocery stores. The German *Steinpilze* are an especially good variety. A ten-ounce can will serve four people. Drain canned cèpes, give them a quick rinse in a colander, dry them on a towel to press out excess water, then cook as if they were fresh. Cook the caps in oil to render their water; they are ready when the oil is clear, in about 15 minutes.

Dried cèpes (similar to porcini in Italian markets) are available in almost every city and are very reasonably priced in ethnic markets. The best are from France. I've included many recipes that use dried cèpes in this book. Even one ounce of dried cèpes of this type mixed with a pound of fresh cultivated mushrooms will give an extraordinary quality to a dish.

They always require soaking for 30 minutes, and it will not harm them to soak longer than that. You can enhance their flavor by adding a pinch of salt or sugar (or both) to the soaking water and also a dash of Armagnac. Be sure to reserve the soaking water after straining it through a coffee filter or several layers of damp cheesecloth to remove any grit. This tasty liquid can be added to the reconstituted cèpes as they sauté. The cèpes should be rinsed after soaking, then blotted dry and sautéed.

Cèpe-Scented Oil

Huile de Cèpes

MAKES 1½ CUPS

THIS IS A DELICIOUS woodland flavoring to use as an enhancement with cultivated mushrooms and with duck salads and as a basting liquid for lamb and pork.

⅓ cup dried cèpes, in large pieces
12 sprigs of thyme
2 imported bay leaves
1½ cups green-hued French olive oil

1 Wash the cèpes under running water, rubbing them with your fingers to rid them of grit and dirt. Pat dry on paper towels.

2 When they are absolutely dry, place them in a jar. Tuck in the thyme and bay leaves and pour the olive oil over all. Let stand in a cool, dark place for at least 1 month.

Cheeses of the Southwest

I was twenty years old when I ate a great Roquefort cheese for the first time, and I shall never forget the experience. It was my first meal at Brasserie Lipp in Paris. When the cheese was brought out, it was a revelation: not dry and crumbly, as it had always been in the United States, but creamy-soft and spreadable, with the *persillage*—the blue-green mold—distributed evenly throughout. Roquefort is, of course, one of the great cheeses of France, certainly the most important cheese made in the Southwest. The name Roquefort is now controlled to the extent that lawsuits have been filed against producers of other blue cheese who have tried to sell their products as Roquefort.

For me, one of the best desserts imaginable is a luscious wedge of Roquefort, some plump fresh black mission figs, and a glass of chilled Sauternes. The combination of the rich, nectarlike wine, the sweet ripe fruit, and the pungent, salty cheese is as perfect a trio of taste affinities as one is likely to encounter on this earth. An excellent walnut bread will enhance the experience.

Roquefort is made from raw sheep's milk and matured in the famous limestone caves of Combalou, north of Gascony, upon whose cliffs the town was built. These caves are notable in that they maintain a constant temperature and humidity year-round, perfect for the maturation of the *Penicillium roqueforti* mold, the source of the blue veins that give Roquefort its unique taste. (The apocryphal tale of the simple shepherd, who accidentally left behind some ewe's milk on a slice of rye bread in a cave, and upon returning to fetch it, discovered Roquefort has been told all too many times.)

Roquefort, known in France as "the king of cheeses and the cheese of kings," is always salty, but some of the brands seem too salty to me. (Salt is added for flavor, of course, and also to inhibit the spread of molds other than the desirable *Penicillium roqueforti*.) I suggest tasting for saltiness as well as condition before buying and be sure to look for the red, round seal indicating true Roquefort. The cheese should be evenly marbled throughout, moist at the center. Before serving, be sure to let it come to room temperature.

Recently, I tasted Le Vieux Berger. The explosion of tastes and textures was as good as any Roquefort I've ever eaten. This cheese is produced by a small firm and is extremely rich and creamy, a little less salty than others, and its flavor is more complex.

There are other great blues in Southwest France. Look for Roussel's cow's milk Bleu

d'Auvergne, which is wonderfully moist and pungent and slightly sweeter than Roquefort; the full-bodied Bleu des Causses, made from cow's milk in the Languedoc; and Onetik's generous veined Bleu de Basques. Many wines pair well with blue cheese: Sauternes, tawny Port, sweet Banyuls, and late harvest Semillon. Try a ripe pear with a sweet red wine from Banyuls-sur-Mer.

Other sheep cheeses of the western Pyrenees are nutty and rich. One name to look for, Ossau-Iraty, is perfect with black cherry jam or quince marmalade, luscious melted on a potato gratin or tomato tart, or a portion tucked inside a croque monsieur with a thin slice of jambon de Bayonne.

Of course, the Southwest also produces goat's milk cheese, the tangy Cabécou of Quercy being the most famous. Since goat cheese passes through several different stages as it ages, each with its own special qualities, different styles of preparing the cheese has evolved. When first made, fresh goat cheese is very soft—fresh like milk, silky, and sometimes a little cottony, too. There are two problems with fresh young goat cheeses: They don't travel well, and they are at their best in season (i.e., summer). At this stage, they are best served simply with a coating of crème fraîche and a light sprinkling of chopped chives. If a young Cabécou is not available, a good substitute might be a creamy fresh goat cheese from California or Vermont.

As the cheese begins to firm up, it enters the second stage, at which point it is called *affiné*. It becomes more intense, piquant, and almost fruity. A yellowish rind begins to form outside, but the cheese is still silky at the core. At this point, the round can be cooked to great advantage, first brushed with a little walnut or olive oil, then set under the broiler to crust. Or it can be brushed with oil and folded in aromatic grape or fig leaves or flavored with herbs. Broiled goat cheese served on toasted rounds of French bread with a crisp green salad dressed with a smattering of walnut oil is one of the great simple delights of the Southwest French kitchen. Simply drizzled with chestnut honey it becomes a simple but lovely dessert.

Goat cheese at its third and final stage, when it has hardened into dried-out disks that resemble shriveled silver dollars, require some tampering. In the French Southwest, it is soaked in eau-de-vie de prune and white wine spiked with pepper, then wrapped in chestnut leaves for several days before being served with thin slices of walnut bread. My friend Georgie Géry, a great Southwest gastronome, instructed me never to throw out a "dying" goat cheese unless it smelled of ammonia—in which case it would be truly "dead." It can be enjoyed with some of the Muscats from California or the Languedoc, or you can slice it, grate it, or crumble it over oven-ready gratins.

There is a fresh goat cheese called chèvre frais from Poitou, which is available all year round in many cheese stores in the United States. It's sold in a crock, tastes light and fresh, and is so mild that in Gascony it is whipped with white rum or Armagnac, then flavored with sugar until it becomes *fromageon*—ready to be spread on dried bread and served as a snack to children after school.

Not all parts of Southwest France are blessed with great cheese. The land around Bordeaux is marshy, excellent for fisheries and the famous Pauillac lamb, but not appropriate for rearing cows and goats. On the other hand, the Rouergue and the Auvergne, where the food is oriented toward the cuisine of the Languedoc, produce numerous extraordinary mountain cheeses, such as the blues mentioned above. Also, some of the best cheeses for cooking come from this area: Saint Nectaire, Cantal, and its farmhouse brothers, Laguiole and Salers. There are some French gastronomes who place the cheese from Laguiole in the Aveyron so high that they compare it to their beloved Roquefort.

Cantal, a nutty cow's-milk cheese from the Aveyron, is often compared to Cheddar; but while similarly sharp in taste, its texture isn't as dense, and it melts lighter and more evenly. Cantal, Saint-Nectaire, and another farmhouse cheese called Salers are often matched with potatoes, green apples, raspberries, hazelnuts, and lightly grilled country bread.

All of these cheeses have a curious, mellow nuttiness and an unusual ability to melt smoothly. I recently read about a dish in the Auvergne, a regional version of a Swiss fondue, made in the same sort of caquelon, a one-handled, shallow clay pot. The dish is called *la fondue du Mont-Dore*, made with a combination of these smooth mountain cheeses, garlic, wine, seasoning, and nutmeg, all heated slowly while stirring constantly until the cheeses simmer. At this point some ground walnuts and an eau-de-vie are added. When ready, the diner dips slices of baguette into the fluid warm cheese. It sounds a bit ersatz . . . and also quite delicious.

Jean d'Alos, the most famous *affineur* in France (4 rue Montesquieu, Bordeaux), ripens cheeses to perfection in a series of rooms in his shop in Bordeaux. It was there that I tasted another moist and tasty Auvergne cheese, Saint-Nectaire fermier, made from Salers cows that feed on rich pastures. It was a beautifully textured, aged cheese of incredible butteriness and nutty, sweet flavor. Jean d'Alos exports a whole series of cheeses to Artisan Cheese in San Francisco and Philadelphia.

Cheese Terrines

Terrines aux Fromages

SERVES 4 TO 6

ROQUEFORT AND LAGUIOLE are two of the great cheeses of the French Southwest. Put them together, as in this recipe, and you will have something truly sublime. For a slightly less ethereal experience, other excellent blue cheeses can be used in place of Roquefort, and a really good French Cantal or California Monterey Jack can be substituted for the Laguiole. This terrine is not unlike a soufflé, except that its lightness and unusual creaminess derives from the addition of whipped cream. Serve hot or lukewarm with a semisweet white wine, such as a Riesling.

- 3 to 3½ ounces Roquefort cheese
- 2 ounces walnut pieces
- 2 egg yolks
- 2 tablespoons walnut liqueur, or substitute any nut liqueur, such as Nocciole or Frangelico
- Freshly ground white pepper
- ¼ cup heavy cream, chilled
- 3 egg whites, at room temperature
- 1 ounce Laguiole cheese, Cantal, or Monterey Jack, shredded

1 Preheat the oven to 450°F. Butter four 6-ounce or six 4-ounce ramekins. Combine the Roquefort, walnuts, egg yolks, walnut liqueur, and pepper in a food processor. Process until very smooth. Transfer to a mixing bowl.

2 In a cold metal bowl, using chilled beaters, whip the heavy cream until stiff. Gradually fold the whipped cream into the cheese-walnut mixture.

3 In a clean bowl with clean beaters, whip the egg whites until stiff but not dry. Stir one-fourth into the cheese-walnut mixture. Carefully fold in the remaining whites. Spoon a enough of the mixture into each buttered ramekin to fill about one-third full; then divide the shredded cheese among the ramekins and cover with the remaining mixture. Fill each ramekin three-quarters full. Sprinkle any remaining shredded cheese on top and place the ramekins in a water bath of hot but not boiling water.

4 Bake for 8 to 10 minutes, or until the terrines are puffed and golden. Remove them from the water bath as soon as they are cooked. Serve warm.

(continued)

NOTES TO THE COOK

- If the Roquefort is quite salty, use the smaller amount.
- To keep the walnuts from turning into an oily paste, grate them in a nut grinder, or put them through the shredding disc of your food processor.

Chestnuts

It was in a country house in the Dordogne that I first experienced the pleasures of grilling and cleaning fresh chestnuts. Keep in mind that in this region nearly everyone has a chestnut tree in the garden, and this was during chestnut gathering weather, one of the first cold days of autumn. Here's what we did: A small knife with a short curved head was used to slit each chestnut on its rounded side. The nuts were then thrown into a special long-handled skillet with about a dozen holes in its bottom. The skillet was set over hot coals in the fireplace and shaken every so often to stir the nuts about. We knew they were cooked when we smelled their sweet aroma.

As soon as the nuts were roasted, they were placed in a basket lined with a heavy cloth soaked in wine to keep them moist and warm. (Cold chestnuts are impossible to peel.) A cooked chestnut is firm but mealy throughout. I was taught to squeeze each nut with my fingers so that the shell cracked open and the moist, tender nut slithered out. This method is easier than peeling off the bitter inner skin with a small knife. The French have a vulgar nickname for this squeezing procedure—*técot*—local slang for the nipple of a breast when it is full of milk and ready to be pressed.

Much as I enjoyed my lesson in slitting, roasting, and peeling chestnuts, I also learned that chestnuts once played a crucial role in the lives of the very poor peasants who inhabited the rocky, poverty-stricken region of the Cévennes. Before they learned to cultivate potatoes in their poor soil, chestnuts were their staple. One spoke of a chestnut tree as *l'arbre à pain* (the bread tree), since everyday bread was made of chestnut flour. Just as we sometimes speak of a subsistence diet as being one of "bread and water," so the people of the Cévennes are often referred to as those who "live on chestnuts and water."

Roasted whole chestnuts, vacuum-packed in jars or packed *sous vide*, are available in fine food stores and by mail from Frenchselections.com. Fresh chestnuts are available in early

winter. They taste best when "shown the flames." A chestnut-cooking pan—a long-handled pan with large perforations—is available in many cookware stores and specialty equipment catalogs. The Basques' solution to the problem of having to double-peel chestnuts is to drop them into boiling oil—in and out just once.

Peeled Fresh Chestnuts

THE FOLLOWING TWO-STEP METHOD I learned for preparing chestnuts ensures that they won't break apart. It is typical of the shrewd approach to cooking developed in Southwest France.

1 Soak the chestnuts in cold water for about 1 hour to soften the shells. Preheat the oven to 450°F.

2 Drain the chestnuts. Use a small sharp knife, or a chestnut knife if you have one, to slit the rounded side of each chestnut. Bake in the oven for 8 to 10 minutes, until the cut shell begins to separate from the meat. While they are still hot, peel off their shells and inner skins. They are then ready for further cooking.

NOTES TO THE COOK

- Wrap the peeled chestnuts in a thick layer of blanched cabbage leaves, then set in a deep pot with a small quantity of water flavored with stalks of celery or fresh fennel—vegetables that go well with chestnuts and tend to enhance their flavor. Cover the pot tightly and cook slowly for 45 minutes, until the chestnuts are very tender. Discard the cabbage leaves and use the chestnuts in salads, in stuffings or in an autumnal mixed vegetable garnish; or briefly sauté the chestnuts in butter and serve in a side dish.
- When you want to puree chestnuts, simmer them in flavored water until tender.
- Fresh chestnuts may be cooked up to one day in advance. Keep them in the refrigerator, covered, until 15 minutes before use.

The Pelou of Languedoc

Mix 2 tablespoons sweet chestnut liqueur and ½ cup Sauvignon Blanc; chill and drink with Croustade With Apples and Prunes in Armagnac (pages 370–372).

Chocolate

Jews exiled from Spain brought the art of making chocolate to Bayonne, where chocolate has been famous ever since. The Bayonne chocolate of the seventeenth century, heavily spiced with cinnamon and cloves, had an almost diabolical reputation. Madame de Sévigné wrote about it in one of her letters: "Chocolate eventually seduces you, then you are inflicted with a fever leading to death."

In Bayonne's famous chocolate shop Cazenave, under the Arceaux du Port-Neuf, I drank a cup of extraordinarily rich-tasting hot chocolate called *chocolat mousseux* (frothy chocolate), which rose like a soufflé an inch above the top of my porcelain cup. The proprietress served it, not with a glass of cold water to clear the palate, but with two huge slabs of buttered toast!

In traditional Southwest cooking, chocolate rarely appears in desserts. (The only important chocolate dessert I know of is the gâteau de Saint-Émilion, which, to my amazement, is barely known in Saint-Émilion.) But in the Landes, chocolate is used in assorted cakes and other desserts, as in the Marie-Claude's Chocolate Cake With Fleur de Sel (pages 378–379). It is also added to sauces reminiscent of Mexican moles, for rabbit and also for fish dishes of eel, lamprey, or trout. The fish are cooked, then covered in a red-wine sauce with glazed onions, leeks, or prunes. A small amount of bitter chocolate or cocoa is then substituted for the old traditional thickener, blood, to enrich the sauce, as in Fish Fillets in Red Wine and Cocoa Sauce (pages 127–128).

Confits (Preserved Meats and Poultry)

"A Gascon will fall to his knees for a good confit," goes the saying. The citizens of Gascony may be the most extreme devotees of this splendid food, but they are not alone in their passion. Go into any traditional home from Périgord to the Pyrenees—farmhouse, town house, or château. Descend to the cellar and inspect the wines, then ask to see the storeroom. There you'll find shelves lined with stoneware or glass jars embellished with handwritten labels and containing preserved fruits, jams, and, above all, confits, virtually the signature of Southwest cooking.

Confit—from the French *confire*, "to preserve"—is simply preserved meat (duck,

goose, pork, hen, wild birds, turkey, rabbit, or whatever) that has been salted to draw out the moisture, then cooked in and put up in fat. When you preserve a meat, you change it, creating an entirely new taste and texture. Confit is a phenomenon that has no close counterpart in the rest of French cuisine.

The method is applied most often to the splendid duck, goose, and pork of the Southwest. So clearly has it left its stamp on great reaches of the Southwest that you can construct an accurate map of culinary boundaries simply by the presence or absence of confit. Where there is confit, you'll find a constellation of other ingredients and approaches adding up to the uniquely rich and vigorous culinary style of the Southwest.

Confit-making was devised so that the local poultry and pork butchered in the late autumn could be preserved and enjoyed throughout the year. In past generations, it was an intrinsic part of the farm kitchen routine, a way of making use of every part of the animal, from good pork shoulder and meaty duck legs to such humble odds and ends as duck and goose gizzards, wings, and necks, or the tongues and ears of pigs. The process enables you to transform such bits of meat and poultry into the stuff of innumerable dishes, some of which, incidentally, can be produced in minutes—once you have confit on hand. When large quantities are involved, confit-making also provides by-products, such as crackling and rillettes, as well as generous amounts of good cooking fats.

Confit will add another dimension to any dish in which it is used. Those who have tasted some of the great Southwest classics know how telling its presence is. To many Southwesterners, cassoulets are not worthy of the name unless they contain a piece of confit. Confit also often appears in that magnificent regional dish called *garbure*, a soup that is based on cured pork (ventrèche or pancetta), cabbage, and beans and has innumerable local variations enriched with other meats and vegetables.

The secret of a great confit lies in a fortuitous combination of factors: the choice of meat, the choice of seasoning; the length of time spent in marination; the temperature at which the fat and meat are cooked; the length of time the meat is left to ripen; and the method of reheating. Freshly cooked confit can be superb; one-month-old confit is even better. As time passes, the flavor deepens. You can keep confit up to six months in the refrigerator.

Despite the large amounts of rendered fat used in the preparation and storage of confit, there is nothing fatty about properly made confit. Rather, the texture is nutty, silky, delicate, and almost fat-free. One secret is gentle heat and patient cooking. Traditionally,

confit was cooked in an earthenware crock or iron pot set in the dying embers of the hearth. Slow methods are still the best. A good principle to follow—one taught to me by chef Alain Dutournier—is to gradually raise the temperature of the fat along with the pieces of meat, allow the confit to cook evenly, and then cool it in the fat as slowly as it was heated.

The slow initial heating allows much of the fat under the skin to melt out, the slow cooking inhibits stringiness, and the slow cooling prevents the meat from falling apart or losing its shape. (Incidentally, it is the meat of mature, rather than young and tender, animals that makes the best confits, since such meat is firmer and less likely to break down during cooking.)

When handled with this kind of care, the rendered fat can be reused for several batches. It stores well in the refrigerator or freezer and is excellent for sautéing and braising. But like all animal fats, confit fat is fragile and burns much faster than oil. Once the fat gets hot enough to smoke, it is "spent" and not usable again in cooking. To duplicate the best qualities of the ember method and keep the fat at a gentle simmer, I suggest that you use an electric slow cooker or poach the confit in a very low oven.

Though the versions of confit presented in this book are intended to be kept in the refrigerator, the method long predates refrigeration. In the Southwest, confits were traditionally kept in heavy stoneware jars in cool, dry cellars or storage rooms. If you have a storage area that will remain at a constant low temperature without fluctuation, you may let your confits ripen naturally, embedded in fat in tall stoneware containers, for several months. But be sure you have not overlooked anything; I know of one batch of confit that was ruined because the cook had forgotten about the heat of the basement furnace!

To remove confit from a jar of fat, gently heat the opened jar in a pan of warm water and carefully pull out the pieces with a pair of tongs or two forks. To remove confit from a boilable pouch, run the pouch under warm water until the cold fat breaks away from the duck flesh. Immediately open the package and separate the meat and fat.

You might think that the tastes and aromas of different types of confit would be enhanced if each kind of meat were cooked in its own fat. Surprisingly, this is not the case. If goose, duck, and pork are cooked together in a mixture of duck and pork fat, they will be all the better, and the fat will be tastier.

See pages 201–203 for the Confit of Duck recipe, page 213 for the Confit of Goose recipe, and pages 292–295 for the Confit of Pork recipe.

Confit of Pork Rinds

Confit de Couennes de Porc

MAKES 6 ROLLS

IF YOU ARE LOOKING for the balance, luminous taste, and satiny texture of Southwest French cooking, you should have some confit of pork rind on hand. You can make it up in batches, then freeze small rolls of it. This will provide you with a rich, addictive, and smooth addition for lentil and bean dishes; meat, poultry, and fish stews; soups and salads with a strong vinegar dressing and bitter greens; or whenever a recipe calls for pork rind or salt pork. Pork rind confit is also one of the secrets to a great cassoulet.

You can purchase a whole pork belly with the rind on, remove it, and cut it into 4-inch by 8-inch strips. Use the pork belly to make the Salt-Cured Pork Belly, pages 301–303—one of my favorite new recipes.

You will need a scale to prepare this dish properly.

3 pounds pork belly rind with fat
2 cups rendered pork or duck fat
4 to 5 tablespoons coarse kosher salt

1 Lay the rind out on a work surface. Use a long, thin-bladed knife to cut away most of the fat. Cube the fat; place it in a heavy saucepan. Add ½ cup water and up to 2 cups rendered pork or duck fat to cover the cubes. Slowly cook over very low heat until the pork fat cubes are rendered and the liquid fat has turned a golden color; remove from the heat. Strain the fat, let cool, and reserve for cooking the rinds two days later.

2 Meanwhile, divide the pork rind into 4-inch-wide strips and lay cut side up on a flat pan lined with paper towels. Sprinkle coarse salt over the rinds. Cover the strips with paper towels, refrigerate, and let cure for 3 to 4 days.

3 Wipe the salt from the pork rind strips. Roll each strip, as if you were rolling a carpet, and fasten tightly with string. Heat the reserved pork fat in a wide, heavy saucepan. Add the rolls and cook slowly, covered, until the rinds are tender enough for a toothpick to penetrate easily, about 3 hours. Cool the packets of pork rind in the fat. Remove and discard the string. Pack each roll individually in a small self-seal plastic bag with a little of the strained fat. Vacuum-pack and refrigerate or freeze. The confit of pork rinds will keep for up to 6 months.

Adapted from a recipe in La Mazille's La Bonne Cuisine du Périgord.

Fats of the Southwest

Classically, the food of France breaks down into three culinary zones, each with its corresponding cooking medium: olive oil (Provence), butter (Normandy and the North), and goose, duck, and pork fat (the Southwest). It's important to understand how to cook with these animal fats to obtain good-tasting results without fears of contributing to high cholesterol levels.

"Sans beurre et sans reproche," said Curnonsky of Périgord cooking—"without butter and above reproach." He meant it as a compliment. There is a cliché, and a false one, that Southwest food is greasy and heavy. In careless hands, it can be; but at its best, good Southwest food is actually enhanced by the fats it is cooked in.

I often use these animal fats for taste, the way I use a cinnamon stick in a red-wine compote of fruits: I add it for flavor in the cooking but take it out before the fruits are served. Goose, duck, or pork fat is employed to give flavor to a sauce, but almost all of it is removed before serving, so that the food is actually extremely lean.

This is possible because many of the elements that give the flavor to fats are, in fact, water-soluble; that is, they can be separated from the fat itself. My friend Dr. Adam Drewnowski, prominent in the field of public health and nutrition, puts it this way: "Animal fats contain volatile flavor molecules that may be soluble in both lipid and water. When fat is removed after cooking, the water-soluble flavors remain. When most of the fat is gone, the remaining fat emulsifies (think skim milk), but there is still enough to hold the flavor molecules in lipid-water phase."

I discovered an interesting fact in the U.S. Department of Agriculture Nutrient Database: Rendered poultry fat (goose, duck, and chicken) contains only 0.1 percent cholesterol, and lard contains a bit less than that. Butter contains twice as much cholesterol. When it comes to saturated fats, another dietary bête noire, duck and goose fat win webbed feet down, too: Butter is one-half saturated fat and duck fat is only one-third. Since you'll need less poultry fat, oil, or lard than butter to sauce meat or vegetables, you'll ingest far less saturated fat if these cooking media are used.

Many cooks recommend browning in a mixture of oil and butter to avoid burning. My suggestion is either to use poultry fat alone or to mix it with oil, and forget the butter for the true taste of the French Southwest.

I use grapeseed oil for high-heat searing for lamb or beef sauces or for pan roasting (as in the Fillet of Beef With Roquefort Sauce and Mixed Nuts, pages 258–260). Since this oil has a slightly odd taste, I dilute it with poultry fat in a ratio of two to one (oil to fat).

Garlic

Robert Landry, a French writer on herbs and spices, offers a *truc de trucs* for neutralizing the effect of raw garlic upon the breath: Chew three cardamom seeds for four minutes. Of course, if you cook any *Allium*, its strong odor and taste will disappear. However, if you want to eat garlic—or any *Allium*—raw, it's better to chop than to crush. Food and wine writer Matt Kramer offers the following explanation:

> The pungent aroma of garlic is contained in an odorless compound called alliin. When the garlic clove is intact, this compound is stable. But when the clove is chopped or crushed, it comes in contact with an enzyme that hangs around in another part of the clove. This enzyme converts alliin into three parts: ammonia, another sulfur compound, and pyruvic acid (which resembles acetic acid or, in the vernacular of the street, vinegar). It is the sulfur compound that is ultimately responsible for the characteristic odor of garlic. In short, chopping brings less of the alliin into contact with the enzyme, which sets all this into motion; crushing creates a more intimate mingling, the result being an unpleasantly strong garlic flavor and aroma.

Try this test: Slam a garlic clove with the flat side of a knife or cleaver to peel it and slice another clove in half. Smell and taste the difference. The smashed garlic is much more pungent. Since so many dishes in the Southwest French kitchen call for strewing hand-chopped raw garlic over food, it requires more delicate handling so as not to overwhelm the food.

In winter, you'll often find a green shoot protruding from each clove. This shoot, or "germ" as it is called in France, is thought by many garlic eaters to cause indigestion. If you ask a Mediterranean cook if she takes it out, nine times out of ten she'll tell you she does.

One does not live by how one eats, but by how one digests.

Southwest French saying

Roasted Garlic

Ail au Four

THE CONCEPT OF an entire head of garlic roasted in embers will appeal to all garlic lovers. In France, the round white garlic of the Limousin and the flatter, white variety from Lomague in Armagnac are roasted when the heads weigh about four ounces. They are served as a sweet and creamy "vegetable" accompaniment to grilled meats and stews. Restaurateur Huguette Melier roasts them in embers to accompany meat and hearth-roasted potatoes. I've eaten them with fresh whipped goat cheese and have found them delicious with any kind of peppered cheese and toasted bread.

The best time to make this dish is late spring when plump young tender white garlic bulbs become available. Avoid using elephant garlic, which does not taste very good when cooked; also avoid garlic heads that are dried out.

ROASTED GARLIC I

SERVES 1

1 whole head of garlic

Coarse kosher salt and freshly ground pepper

1 tablespoon butter, cut into small pieces

1 Preheat the oven to 350°F. To prepare the garlic for roasting, carefully cut away the outside paper skins of each head with a small knife, starting from the top and stopping halfway down, leaving just a thin skin around the upper portion of each clove so that it will not dry out during roasting.

2 Place the garlic heads in a buttered shallow baking dish just large enough to hold them snugly in a single layer. Sprinkle with salt, pepper, and chips of butter; place in the oven to roast. When the heads are lightly colored, after about 20 minutes, add ½ cup hot water. Continue to roast the garlic for a total of 1 to 1½ hours, depending upon the size of the heads, basting with the cooking juices in the pan every 10 minutes and adding more hot water whenever necessary.

ROASTED GARLIC II

SERVES 1

1 whole head of garlic

1½ ounces fatty prosciutto ham, finely chopped

1 teaspoon butter, cut into bits

Coarse salt

Freshly ground pepper

Dried thyme

Sugar

2 teaspoons chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley

1 Preheat the oven to 350°F. Place the heads of garlic in a saucepan filled with enough cold water to cover. Bring to a boil; drain and rinse under cold running water. Return to the saucepan with fresh cold water to cover and repeat; drain. Using a sharp paring knife, peel the skins back from top to bottom, leaving a single layer of papery skin on each clove as protection against the oven heat.

2 Scatter the ham on the bottom of a lightly buttered shallow baking pan just large enough to hold the garlic heads snugly. Arrange the garlic heads, root side down, in a single layer on top of the ham. Dot with the butter and season lightly with a pinch each of coarse salt, pepper, thyme, and sugar. Sprinkle the parsley on top.

3 Set in the oven and roast for 15 minutes. Add ½ cup hot water and continue to roast the garlic for a total of 1 to 1½ hours, depending upon the size of the heads, basting with the cooking juices in the pan every 10 minutes and adding more hot water whenever necessary. Serve with the bits of ham and the pan juices.

Inspired by an unsigned article in the Quercy *magazine entitled "Les Produits de Nos Terroirs."*

Bayonne Ham

Jambon de Bayonne

There is a famous anecdote about a wet nurse from the Béarn who went to the Louvre to visit her former charge, the grown-up King Henry IV. Noticing that there were no hams hanging from the ceiling, a sign of wealth in a Béarn home, the nurse exclaimed, "Henri, my Henri, you must be so hungry! I'll send you a ham as soon as I get back home!"

Ah, the Basques and the Béarnaise and their fine-textured jambon de Bayonne! It has been famous since the Middle Ages; on the portal of the Église Sainte-Marie in Oloron I saw sculptures of a man slaughtering a pig and then preparing ham from its legs. Contrary to what has been written about Bayonne ham in many source books, it is not smoked; it is a salt-cured country ham dried over a period of at least a year.

We eat Bayonne ham raw like prosciutto or Serrano ham, but the Basques like it best cut into thick slices and sautéed (see Cured Ham With Vinegar and Caramelized Shallots, at right). Another favorite Basque dish consists of eggs fried in goose fat, served with sautéed ham sprinkled lightly with vinegar.

The taste of the peppery ham permeates many dishes in the Landes, the Béarn, and the Pays Basque. Often dishes are accented by the addition of a regional version of *hachis*, a mixture of hand-chopped raw garlic, chopped fresh parsley, and chopped-up fatty bits of Bayonne ham, which is simply strewn over food. The bone of a Bayonne ham is so highly regarded that it will be used again and again to flavor soups and stews.

The justified fame of Bayonne hams depends upon the use of two different salts, each with its own special properties. The first is the famous salt from Salies-de-Béarn, reputed to have been discovered by accident by a boar hunter in the eleventh century. This salt is rubbed into the pork legs for three days, preserving the meat, imbuing it with an extraordinary flavor, and giving it color.

The second salt is a gray crystal variety called sel de Bayonne, which is used in the giant salt boxes where the hams are kept while being cured. After curing, the legs are lightly rubbed with piment d'Espelette, a local moderately hot red pepper, and air-dried.

You will not find true Bayonne ham in America, as it is illegal to import it. The real stuff is always labeled with a red seal, *Marque Déposée Véritable Jambon de Bayonne*. This

means it has been treated with the specific salts and then air-dried. However, you will find some delicious approximations, one prepared in the New Jersey city of Bayonne, excellent though lacking some of the velvety smoothness I remember. This ham can be purchased from several sources in this country. The best substitute hams I've come up with for my recipes are the mild Serrano ham from Spain or quality brands of prosciutto.

Cured Ham With Vinegar and Caramelized Shallots

Jambon Poêlé aux Échalotes

SERVES 2

2 slices (2 ounces each) jambon de Bayonne or Serrano ham

1½ tablespoons milk, if using Bayonne ham

12 small whole shallots (5 ounces) plus 3 tablespoons coarsely chopped shallots

2½ tablespoons rendered duck fat or butter

1 sprig of thyme

1 imported bay leaf

1 whole garlic clove, peeled and halved

3 teaspoons sugar

1 tablespoon very fine red wine vinegar or quality sherry vinegar

1 To remove excess salt from the Bayonne ham, soak the slices in a mix of milk and 2 tablespoons water for 2 hours. Drain and pat dry.

2 Meanwhile, preheat the oven to 200°F. Place the whole shallots in a 10-inch gratin or other flameproof baking dish greased with about ½ tablespoon of the fat. Add the thyme, bay leaf, and garlic. Cover with foil and bake for 1 hour.

3 Remove the foil. Sprinkle 1 teaspoon of the sugar over the shallots and continue to bake, uncovered, until they are soft and golden brown, about 30 minutes longer. Remove the shallots from the baking dish and cover with foil to keep moist.

4 Put the ham slices in the gratin. Set over low heat to slowly fry the slices, turning once, for 10 minutes.

(continued)

5 In a heavy medium skillet, heat the remaining fat over moderate heat. When it sizzles, add the chopped shallots and sauté until golden, about 2 minutes. Sprinkle on the remaining 2 teaspoons sugar and stir once. Add the vinegar, 2 tablespoons water, and the cooked whole shallots. Bring to a boil, stirring to heat the shallots and coat them with the glaze, pour the contents of the skillet over the ham.

Wine Mustard With Grapes

Moutarde Violette

In the region called the Corrèze, I tasted a wonderful whole-grain black mustard, which looked like caviar. This particular mustard was an old recipe from the fourteenth century that somehow got lost in time, but in the past thirty years the Denoix family, who produce great walnut products, brought it back into the marketplace. The condiment is made from black grapes cooked, strained, and left to form a must that is then mixed with mustard powder.

A dollop of this heady mustard is splendid on grilled duck breast, veal chops, or black sausage. Another great use of *moutarde violette* is as an accompaniment to pot-au-feu and charcuterie. It also makes an extraordinary vinaigrette. Keep an opened jar in the refrigerator, and don't heat this mustard for too long because it loses its taste.

Mâche Salad With Moutarde Violette

SERVES 4

1 tablespoon *moutarde violette*
1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice or *verjus*
3 tablespoons walnut oil
Salt and freshly ground pepper
4 large handfuls of mâche, rinsed and dried
1 cup walnut pieces, lightly toasted

Whisk together the moutarde violette, lemon juice, and walnut oil. Season with pinches of salt and pepper to taste. Toss with the mâche and sprinkle the walnut pieces on top.

Salt

My old friend the Gascon chef Maurice Coscuella once remarked to me: "Have you noticed there are some salts that don't actually salt?" He went on to explain that some salts are much saltier than others, some are merely salty, and others have a real flavor.

The taste, aroma, and texture of salt differ from place to place around the world and also within regions. Since some commercial salts contain additives that leave a strange aftertaste, I suggest you use pure salt, such as Diamond Crystal coarse kosher salt for cooking all the recipes in this book unless the ingredient list states otherwise. If you use the same salt, my salt measurements will be exact.

In the French Southwest, large quantities of rock or large crystal salt are also used to encase whole ducks, duck breasts, lamb shoulders, and chickens in a crusty shell in order to seal in the flavors during cooking. The hot salt also forces seasoning and aromatics deep into the meat's flesh. After cooking, the meat will stay warm in its crust for up to 30 minutes. Often it is brought to the table in its shell, then cracked opened before the diners (see Duck Breasts Baked in Salt, pages 183–184).

SEA SALTS

When cooking fish, I prefer to use sea salt, which is available in most supermarkets. Since it dissolves well in vinegar and creates a fresh briny flavor, I also use sea salt in vinaigrettes. When finishing a dish as opposed to seasoning it before cooking, you will want to use one of the recently available coarse salts from France for added crunch and zip. The finest salt in the French Southwest is farmed on the flats of the Ile de Ré in the neighboring Charente-Maritime. The first skimming of this famous salt is referred to as the fleur de sel, an immaculate rosy-white salt, treasured on account of its wonderful flavor, crisp texture, and delicate aroma. I often sprinkle it on at the last moment to bring a dish into harmony and to add a little crunch. Gourmets come to the Ile de Ré from all over the world to taste this salt with the local fresh fish.

Potatoes Baked in Sea Salt

Pommes de Terre en Sel

SERVES 4

OF ALL THE POTATO DISHES I know, this is the easiest. Small new potatoes, or *primes* as they are called on the Ile de Ré, are washed, dried carefully, and then placed in a closed pot on a small bed of sea salt. As cooking proceeds, a reaction takes place. The hot salt releases an aromatic steam that penetrates the flesh of the potatoes, augmenting their flavor with that of the sea and keeping them moist.

Traditionally this dish is cooked in a *diable charentais*, an unglazed earthenware potbellied utensil with a fitted cover. If you happen to own one, let it heat up slowly over a flame tamer for about 10 minutes; then raise the heat and cook, shaking the pot often, until the potatoes are done. (By the way, the *diable* is never washed; before using, its insides are rubbed with garlic, which the Charentais believe inhibits rancidity and strengthens the pot.) Lacking a true *diable*, please don't substitute the sort of unglazed pot that needs to be soaked. Instead, use an enameled cast-iron casserole. Considering the price of French sea salt, I combine a little bit of grey salt with ordinary coarse kosher salt, layering them so the grey salt is in contact with the potatoes.

On the Ile de Ré, a home cook will accompany these potatoes with a spread made from a whole head of garlic cooked in hot coals, peeled, then kneaded with a little fresh butter and white cheese. These potatoes are also served locally with fresh sardines that have been rolled in grey sea salt, then grilled over thick grapevine cuttings—a combination I can only describe as divine.

1½ pounds small creamer potatoes

1 cup coarse kosher, pickling, or rock salt

½ cup coarse sea salt, preferably grey sea salt from the Ile de Ré

Butter

1 Preheat the oven to 450°F. Wash and dry the potatoes. Spread the coarse salt in an even layer on the bottom of a wide casserole. Top with the sea salt, and arrange the potatoes on top side by side. Cover and bake 45 minutes to 1 hour.

2 Remove the pot from the oven. Set the cover askew and let the pot stand 5 minutes. Remove the potatoes and brush off the salt. Serve hot with butter.

NOTES TO THE COOK

- If using an unglazed *diable,* cook on a flame tamer over low heat for 45 to 60 minutes.
- The salt can be reused. Reheat it in the hot oven, covered, for 15 minutes, let cool, and store separately until the next time you wish to cook potatoes this way. Always add some fresh sea salt to each batch.

Salt for Confit

In the Southwest French kitchen, salt must be precisely weighed and measured when preserving meat and poultry for confit. If you have made confit and found it too salty, the fault may have been the salt rather than the amount. The same is true when brining pork belly, duck breasts, and other meats, starting the aging process with cheese, and flavoring and storing ham.

Note the differences in weight between common salts in the marketplace.

- 1 tablespoon fine table salt equals 21 grams
- 1 tablespoon Morton kosher salt equals 17 grams
- 1 tablespoon Maldon sea salt equals 14 grams
- 1 tablespoon Diamond Crystal coarse kosher salt or grey sea salt from the Ile de Ré equals 12 grams

Truffles

Here is Colette on truffles; it is the most eloquent passage I've read on this wondrous subject.

> If you love her, pay her ransom regally, or leave her alone. But, having bought her, eat her on her own, fragrant, coarse-grained, eat her like the vegetable that she is, warm, served in sumptuous portions. She will not give you much trouble; her supreme flavour scorns complexity and complicity. Soaked in a good very dry white wine, not oversalted, peppered discreetly, she will cook in the covered black pot. For twenty-five minutes, she will dance in the constant bubbling, trailing behind her in the eddies and foam—like Tritons playing around a black Amphitrite—some twenty pieces of larding bacon, half-fat, half-lean, that fill out the stock. No other spices! Your truffles will come to the table in their court bouillon; take a generous helping, the truffle stimulates appetite, aids digestion. As you crunch this jewel of impoverished lands, imagine those of you who have never been there, the desolation of its realm. For it kills the wild rose, saps the strength of the oak, and ripens beneath barren rocks. Imagine harsh Périgordian winters, the grass whitened by the hard frost, the pink pig trained to its delicate prospecting. . . .
>
> *Passages et Portraits*

There is a famous saying about truffles: "Those who wish to lead virtuous lives had better abstain." The gist being that something so magnificent will, inevitably, corrupt. Well—truffles will certainly ruin your bank account, but if you're lucky your virtue will emerge unscathed!

What's all the fuss about? What tastes so good that it sells for upward of $700 a pound? After all, it's only some strange kind of underground fungus that must be sniffed out by pigs and dogs. All true—and if you've just tasted a little bit in a pâté or a sauce you may have good cause to wonder. But if, at least once in your life, you take Colette's advice and eat a Périgordian truffle as a vegetable, then you, too, may begin to rhapsodize.

I ate my first whole Périgordian truffle *(Tuber melanosporum)* at the Château de Castel Novel in the Corrèze, the very place where Colette spent some of her latter days. It was baked in a salt crust and served on a doily. The waiter cracked the salt crust open with a small mallet, releasing the powerful, penetrating bouquet. I sliced the truffle myself and ate it on

toast, with a light sprinkling of walnut oil and a pinch of salt. As I ate I sipped a glass of Médoc.

That truffle seemed to me like earth and sea. I felt at one with nature, my mouth was filled with the taste of the earth. There was ripeness, naughtiness, something beyond description. A gastronomic black diamond, it was total luxury and simple earthiness combined.

Another time I ate a whole truffle raw, the way one eats radishes and butter. I sliced it thin, spread salted country butter on the slices, and gobbled it up. Of course, such a feast on the most expensive lump of dirt in the world cost me a small fortune, but it was wonderful—an experience I shall never regret.

Truffles range in size from as small as a pea to as large as a small melon. They range in color from black to white; they can be as fleshy as a mushroom or as firm as a nut. Their taste will vary greatly: Some are bland, others taste almost like garlic, and the best taste faintly nutlike, yet not like any ordinary kind of nut.

I went to Cahors to visit Jacques Pebeyre, one of the leading truffle harvesters in France. A tall, trim, balding man with large blue eyes, he comes from a family of famous *trufficulteurs*. His land, studded with craggy oaks, is perhaps the richest truffle ground in the area.

It was too early in the year to observe a truffle hunt, but just a look at that land was a revelation. The area surrounding each gnarled oak was absolutely bare to a radius of twenty feet—a bit like a baseball mound. "You always know where the truffles are," Pébeyre explained. "They eat up all the vegetation around the roots, so that if there are truffles, you won't ever see a single weed near the tree."

Some twenty-five varieties of truffle grow in his fields, but the only good ones, the ones he harvests, are *Tuber melanosporum*, the famous black truffles of Périgord. "It's humble work," he told me. "I plant a tree and wait ten years and often the truffles will not come." And then, when they do come, he still needs trained dogs or pigs to find them. The animals smell them out, and then are distracted while the hunter scoops them from the earth. Another way to find truffles is to look closely at the ground to see if any golden flies are hovering about, since they, too, are attracted by the truffle smell. If a man just digs around looking for truffles by himself, he'll likely disturb and break up those too young for harvest and thus waste a precious commodity.

Truffles are hunted every day during the season, collected at just the moment they are ripe. If they're too ripe, they turn soggy and cannot be sold. A good truffle must be firm and untouched by insects.

An expert truffle buyer will choose by aroma. The best market is in Périgueux in January, though in December there's an important market in Sarlat. If you buy canned Périgord truffles (a generic term; Quercy actually produces more truffles than Périgord), look for ones marked *surchoix* or *1er choix* (the latter tend to be irregular in shape).

Monsieur Pébeyre is quite annoyed by so-called summer truffle breakings *(Tuber aestivum)*, which have barely any taste or aroma and yet are frequently palmed off as the real thing. These second-rate truffles are exported in large quantities to America, where, unfortunately, many restaurants use them and people purchase them because they seem to be a "buy." They're black on the exterior, but white and yellow inside. At the great truffle markets in France, truffles are notched so the purchaser can see they are black through and through.

How can you buy a quality truffle? It's best to purchase from a trusted source, such as Plantin America (see Mail Order Sources, page 417), during the winter months when they can be bought fresh. Other times of the year they're sold packed in tins.

The "poor man's truffle" is the imported Chinese variety *(Tuber indicum)* that appears almost identical to the untrained eye, smells milder than the true *Melanosporum*, and even has some feeble flavor when consumed raw but tends to become tasteless when cooked. Chinese truffles are one-twelfth the price of the top French and can be used in some recipes for a colorful and flashy-looking garnish. (For example, I use them in my adapted version of the brothers Pourcel's Carpaccio of Pig's Feet, Celery, and Black Truffles, pages 86–88.) You can purchase them from Frenchselections.com.

Baked Whole Truffles in Salt

Truffes au Gros Sel

SERVES 4

FOR DREAMERS AND TRUFFLE "rustlers," here's a dish you'll remember all your life. Serve along with a cruet of imported walnut oil and a good bottle of Médoc.

- 4 small whole raw truffles of similar size, or substitute 4 canned truffles, preferably *première cuisson* (first cooking)
- 4 paper-thin slices pork fatback, blanched if salted
- ¾ pound coarse kosher salt
- 2 large egg whites

1 About 35 minutes before serving, preheat oven to 425°F.

2 Wrap each truffle in a slice of fatback.

3 Line four brioche molds with aluminum foil.

4 Mix the salt and egg whites in a bowl. Make a layer of the salt mixture about ½-inch deep in the bottom of each mold. Place a truffle in each and spoon the salt mixture around the sides of each truffle, pressing the mixture with your fingertips to pack. Spoon at least a ½-inch layer of the salt mixture over the tops of the truffles. Press firmly with your palm to completely seal truffles in salt. Flatten the salt so that when it's turned out, the casing won't wobble. *(The recipe can be prepared to this point 1 to 2 hours ahead.)*

5 Bake 25 minutes for medium-sized raw truffles, 15 minutes for canned (cooked). Remove from the oven; turn out and remove the foil.

6 Place each truffle on a serving dish. Crack each casing lightly and remove the truffle. The truffles will not be salty. In fact, you will probably need to season them with a pinch of salt.

NOTES TO THE COOK

- To preserve truffles raw, or once you've opened the can, place the unused quantity in an airtight bottle with a light olive oil to cover. The truffles will keep for a month. Truffles pass on their aroma to fats and oils better than to alcohol. (Often people store truffles in Madeira or port or Cognac, but Monsieur Pébeyre advises against this, calling it wasteful.) You can get good use from the olive oil afterward in salads, on cold cooked leeks flavored with fresh mint, or simply on some blanched thin slices of celery root.

(continued)

↣ To preserve whole fresh truffles, keep them packed in raw rice for 1 to 2 weeks in the freezer or refrigerator. (The rice can later be used in a wonderful risotto.) Freezing for long periods is not a good idea, since truffles tend to dry out. If you do freeze them, do not defrost. Use them straight from the freezer just as you do herbs.

Truffled Scrambled Eggs

↣ *Œufs Brouillés aux Truffes*

SERVES 6 TO 8

IN THIS DISH, the truffle is not merely decorative, nor is its purpose to convey a sense of luxury and ostentation. Gently heated with the eggs, it endows them with an earthy taste and aroma. Since these scrambled eggs are cooked in a double boiler or in a heatproof bowl set over simmering water, they have a creamy, almost curdless consistency. Close to a tablespoon of butter per egg makes for a rich dish, but served in small quantities in little porcelain ramekins, these eggs make a mouthwatering light supper dish or first course.

Be sure to cut the truffles into very small cubes so that you can eat a little bit with each spoonful of scrambled egg. And remember the Quercy tradition: "The truffle is a delicate lady"—apart from salt, no other seasoning except a hint of pepper is needed.

2 black truffles, fresh or canned, peeled if necessary

10 jumbo eggs

6 to 8 tablespoons unsalted butter

½ teaspoon fine sea salt

Pinch of freshly ground white pepper

2 tablespoons heavy cream

1 About 1 hour before serving, finely dice 1 truffle. Cut the other into 8 or 10 thin slices; reserve for garnish.

2 Break the eggs into a fine wire sieve set over a bowl. Gently crush the yolks with the back of a wooden spoon. Let them drip through; this takes about 1 hour.

3 Lightly butter the insides and bottom of the top of a double boiler or a 2-quart ovenproof glass or porcelain bowl, and set over a saucepan half-filled with barely simmering water. Add the eggs and 2 tablespoons of the butter. Cook over low heat, stirring constantly with a silicone or wooden spatula, for 1 to 2 minutes.

4 Add the salt and white pepper and continue to cook, stirring, for 7 to 8 minutes longer, until barely thickened. Be sure to move the spatula along the sides and bottom of the pan where the eggs tend to settle. Rather than stirring in circles all the time, make a figure "8" through the eggs. Gradually add the remaining butter, 1 tablespoon at a time.

5 When the eggs begin to hold together with as few curds as possible but are still very creamy, stir a little faster. Whisk in the cream and the diced truffles. Cook for 1 minute longer.

6 Spoon equal amounts of egg into 6 to 8 small warmed ramekins. Garnish each serving with 1 truffle slice.

Vinegars and Verjus

VINEGARS

The vinegars of the French Southwest include apple cider vinegar, red and white wine vinegars, and raspberry vinegar. Cider vinegar is used in poaching liquids for fish and shellfish, for cooking the famous apple dishes of the Limousin, and in vinaigrettes for vegetable salads in the region of the Périgord and the Quercy.

Red wine vinegar is used for salads and for deglazing duck dishes. White wine vinegar is employed for game marinades, fish dishes, and the famous sauce béarnaise. And raspberry vinegar, which for a time became something of a cliché among chefs, is still used in Southwest France, especially for deglazing sautéed duck breasts. In the 1929 edition of *La Bonne Cuisine du Périgord*, author La Mazille suggests adding a teaspoon of it to cold water to make a refreshing summer drink.

Vinaigre de Banyuls is another Southwest product now imported into the United States. One of my favorite condiments, it's comparable to sherry wine vinegar but has a sweeter component, which provides a very smooth flavor. It is wonderful for deglazing after sautéing duck and in walnut oil-dressed salads, too.

VERJUS

Summer is the season to make *verjus*, the juice of sour grapes. But there is no closed season for using this wonderful condiment to enhance the flavor of chicken, salads, foie gras, beans, game birds, river fish, and stewed wild mushrooms, or just to deglaze a sauté pan to make a sauce.

Unlike vinegar, *verjus* is wine friendly. With its subtly sharp, refreshing taste, it has always played a prominent role in regional Southwest French cooking, especially in the Périgord, and it is now making a comeback, despite the fact that the proper grapes—bourdelois, gressois, and farineau—are no longer grown. I recently purchased two extraordinary bottles of *verjus* from the Périgord and another from California (see Mail Order Sources, pages 415–417). All three served me well in updating and retesting the recipes for this book. You can also make your own, if you can obtain sour green grapes.

To make *verjus*: Choose the sourest green grapes available, still in the midst of ripening. (If the fruit is too ripe, its liquor will be too watery; if it is too "green" and not ripe enough, the fruit flavors will not have developed enough in the grapes, and your *verjus* won't taste good.) Holding a bunch of grapes by the thick stem, dip into boiling water for three seconds to kill the yeasts. Remove at once and drain on a clean kitchen towel. Repeat with all the grape bunches. One by one, roll each bunch of grapes in the towel while removing the grapes from the stems. Discard any blemished grapes. When dry, place the grapes in a food processor and puree for 10 seconds. Strain, pressing down on the grapes to extract all the juice. Let stand for 10 minutes, then ladle the juice into a sieve lined with damp cheesecloth and strain again. Use at once, or freeze in plastic ice cube trays. When hard, store the cubes in a sealed plastic bag in the freezer for up to 3 months. For maximum flavor, use frozen or immediately upon defrosting.

Walnuts From the Périgord

The Southwest concept that no part of any ingredient should go to waste is summed up beautifully in a peasant's aphorism from the Périgord: "Nothing is lost of the walnut except the noise when it is cracked!"

Since walnuts are foraged, they must be carefully used, or else the labor of their gathering cannot be justified. The shells are ground up and used for fuel. A digestif is made

from the tender walnut leaves by infusing them with old red wine, sugar, and some marc. Another drink is made by macerating fresh walnuts in 90-proof eau-de-vie. (This is an excellent aperitif, by the way, served over ice; it is also makes an interesting ice cream.) The walnuts themselves are employed in salads, cakes, and candies, with green beans and fish, and joined with Roquefort or endives. In the Corrèze, neighboring the Périgord, I once ate an extraordinary dish of sautéed duck in which the pan juices had been deglazed with the black juices of unripened walnuts.

In the Périgord, there's a class of elderly women who specialize in shelling walnuts. Called *les énoiseuses* (the nutcrackers) they travel from house to house, village to village, during the walnut harvest season, bringing their special wooden mallets and round wooden boards upon which they rhythmically crack open the nuts, five to the minute, without ever smashing one to powder.

Some people prefer their walnuts peeled, believing the skins are indigestible. This is easily done by pouring some boiling water directly over the nuts, after which the skins may be slipped off easily.

Freshly shelled walnuts are available in the fall. Store walnuts in the freezer. Out of season, I always purchase them vacuum-packed. In the old days in the Southwest, housewives resuscitated walnuts by burying them overnight under about a foot of soil, then using them right away. Another *truc* of the Southwest is to soak them in milk. Still another way to resuscitate them is by sprinkling them lightly with sugar, then warming them in the oven.

A smooth-tasting, slightly bitter cooking ingredient from the Périgord is walnut wine *(vin de noix)*. Since it isn't fermented, it isn't really a wine. Rather it's a beverage made by soaking chopped green walnuts and their shells in eau-de vie along with red wine, vanilla, cinnamon, nutmeg, and sugar. After ninety days this mixture is filtered and bottled. It tastes similar to a good port and is often served as an aperitif. Nostalgie, a walnut liqueur made by a California winery, Domaine Chambray, is similar, but sweeter and stronger. In the English version of *The Walnut Cookbook* by Jean-Luc Toussaint, steeping warm walnuts in sweet vermouth is suggested as a substitute.

You can make your own very simple vin de noix during the month of June when green walnuts are available. You'll need about half a dozen. Crack them open; place the husks and nuts in an earthenware crock; pour over a bottle of red wine; cover with cheesecloth, and let stand for 6 weeks. Strain and discard the walnuts. Add about ¾ cup eau-de-vie or vodka to the wine along

with ½ cup sugar and a few spices, such as cinnamon and nutmeg, to taste. Stir to dissolve the sugar, bottle, cork tightly, and leave for at least 3 months. Southwest cooks use this wine to flavor sauces for fish, game birds, and poultry. One of the nicest uses is to use it for poaching pears.

One of the great by-products of walnuts is their extraordinary oil—"all of the Périgord in a bottle," in the words of Zette Guinaudeau-Franc, author of *Les Secrets des Fermes en Périgord Noir*. Soft, fragrant, green, and golden-hued, this oil is delicious on salads. But please remember, some French walnut oil is very strong tasting, and you might want to dilute it. Two parts olive oil or French peanut oil to one part walnut oil is an excellent formula. And once opened, always store in the refrigerator. Try a few drops on white beans or add some to a cassoulet.

And if you get to the Southwest, consider making a visit to a walnut oil mill. I especially recommend the hundred-year-old mill in Sainte-Nathalène outside Sarlat. There, they make stunningly delicious walnut oil. This stream-driven mill cracks open the walnuts by gentle crushing. The crushed nuts are then placed in a wooden cauldron and heated to about 120°F before being pressed. The resulting oil is then directly bottled.

Languedoc Walnut, Garlic, and Oil Liaison

↠ *L'Aillade Toulousaine*

SERVES 4 TO 6

THIS SAUCE IS CALLED *Alhada Tolosenca* in the Languedoc dialect. It is made with a good handful of freshly shelled walnuts pounded in a mortar with sweet and aromatic soft-white or pink-hued garlic, then made into a smooth paste by the addition of cold water. After the paste is seasoned with salt and pepper and a tablespoon of fresh chopped parsley, walnut oil is slowly beaten in. Often the flavor is enhanced by the addition of a splash of *verjus* or mild cider vinegar.

If you suspect that your walnuts are not fresh enough, heighten their flavor by toasting them in a 325°F oven for 10 minutes. Let cool before using. The sauce is usually served with fish, duck breast *(magret)*, or veal chops grilled over charcoal or grapevine cuttings.

Though it is not authentic, if you make this sauce in a food processor, you might want to an add an egg yolk as a binder; the sauce will come out a good deal fluffier.

3 ounces broken walnut meats

4 to 6 garlic cloves, peeled

¼ teaspoon coarse kosher salt

Pinch of freshly ground pepper

½ cup French walnut oil and ¼ cup French peanut oil

1 tablespoon chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley

A few drops of *verjus* or cider vinegar

1 Grind the walnuts in an electric blender or food processor for 30 seconds, stopping and scraping down the bowl twice. Add the garlic and 2 tablespoons ice water and process for 5 seconds longer. Season with the salt and pepper. With machine on, add the oil in a slow, steady stream.

2 Transfer to a bowl and fold in the chopped parsley. Taste and, if desired, add the verjus or vinegar. Let stand at room temperature for 1 hour before serving.

The Périgord Paradox

The statistics are stunning: The people of the Southwest lead the rest of France in general good health and length of life. You've heard of the "French paradox," but what about the "the Périgord paradox"?

Jean-Luc Toussaint, the author of a book devoted to cooking with walnuts, coined the phrase because he believes the protective properties of walnuts are a major contributor to the good health of Périgourdines. The Périgord diet, which consists largely of confit, pork, wild mushrooms, and river fish, features numerous appetizers, salads, sauces, and desserts that employ walnuts.

A Few Words About the Local Wines

The wines of the Southwest include some of the greatest and most illustrious ever produced, as well as hundreds of brands never seen beyond the bounds of their domains. Bordeaux wines are readily available in the United States and are the classic accompaniments to many dishes in this book. For an excellent treatment of the great whites and reds of Bordeaux, I refer readers to *The Wines of Bordeaux: Vintages and Tasting Notes 1952–2003* by Clive Coates.

Madiran, an intense, solid, inky, and very tannic wine, is often the choice on the Gascon table. Made from Tannat grapes, often blended with Cabernet Sauvignon, Madiran keeps well and improves markedly with age. It has recently become more widely available in the American market and pairs wonderfully with the rich, hearty food described in this book. When a Madiran is unavailable, try a hearty Syrah from the Rhône Valley, such as Cornas or Hermitage, or an earthy old-vines Zinfandel from Amador County in California.

I have a special affection for the intensely aromatic local white wine, Pacherenc du Vic-Bilh (the old name for Madiran is Vic-Bilh), which I drank every night during my annual research sojourns at the Hôtel de France in Auch, to accompany my evening bowl of *garbure*. Unfortunately for Americans, almost all Pacherenc du Vic-Bilh is consumed locally. Try a white wine from Rueda, Spain, a Riesling from Australia's Clare Valley, or an Alsace Gewürztraminer with your *garbure*.

Cahors, the famous "black wine" of the Quercy made mostly from the Malbec grape (known locally as *Auxerrois*) blended with Merlot, is wonderful for picnics. It is very tannic and creates a compelling, intense contrast with goat cheeses, rillettes, and other charcuterie. As they age, Cahors wines become acceptable mates for rich meat dishes, mushroom dishes, game, and fowl. If you can't find a Cahors, ask your wine merchant to order one, but while you're waiting, try an oak-aged Malbec from Argentina.

The region of the Béarn produces a soft, velvety, sweet wine called Jurançon, famous for its yellow color. Made from grapes so overripe that they are almost raisins, Jurançon is a good match for rillettes and cheeses. The legend, which everyone who lives around the area will be quick to tell you, is that when Henri IV was christened, his lips were rubbed with garlic and moistened with a few drops of this wine. If you can't find Jurançon, try a Coteaux

du Layon from the Loire Valley, a semidry Riesling from the Finger Lakes in New York State, or a Moscatel de Setúbal from Portugal.

In the Landes, there is a special appreciation of the aromatic, very dry white Tursan, made from the local grape, known as "baroque," which has the reputation of being able to "knock you to your knees." And there is a curious and barely known Landais light red, smelling of violets and tasting "meaty," that is grown in sandy soil, such as the vin de table from the Domaine de Mallecare. If you are looking for a dry white with a knockout punch, try a white Condrieu from the Rhône Valley, made from the Viognier grape.

Sweet red wines are rare in the Southwest. A good one from the Languedoc-Roussillon region is the Banyuls produced at Domaine de la Rectorie, which enhances anything made with dark chocolate. It is also excellent with blue cheese. It is hard to replace Banyuls, but try a Recioto della Valpolicella from Veneto, Italy, a Mavrodaphne of Patras from Greece, or Quady "Elysium" from California.

If you travel in the region, you'll find numerous good local wines served with the local cuisine. The vineyards of the Périgord are at least as old as those of Bordeaux, though far less known. The best among the reds are the Bergeracs, many of which are light in body. Look for the Domaine du Haut Pécharmant, which ages beautifully. The white sweet Monbazillac from the Dordogne is called the "Sauternes of the poor;" look for the Château Ladesvignes and try it with foie gras or Home-Cured Duck Ham (pages 82–84). On the left bank of the Garonne, on the hillsides west of Agen, you'll find some of the new "star" red wines of the Southwest, notably the Bordeaux-style Buzet (formerly Côtes de Buzet).

The Basques in Southwest France produce reds and rosés called Irouléguy, which are full-bodied and acceptable with the local food. Irouléguy is rarely available in export markets, but try a Spanish rosé from the Basque province of Navarra, or the most famous rosé in the world, Tavel, from the southern Rhône Valley, as a stand-in.

The Human Touch

I've often heard the assertion that in the best wines grapes must be crushed by human feet. It was only when I read *The Generous Earth* by Philip Oyler that I found this fascinating explanation:

"No machine can equal human feet, which are scrupulously washed of course before operations. These do not squeeze out too much acidity from the skins nor break the grape pits, which give a disagreeable flavor to the wine. Moreover, the mush is aerated better and the ferments mix more thoroughly with the juice."

When a recipe calls for a red table wine, I usually cook with a food-friendly wine such as a Syrah or a California Pinot Noir. The wine you cook with does not have to be as expensive as the wine you drink, but a good basic rule is never to cook with a wine you wouldn't happily drink. Any inferior wine won't get better as it reduces, concentrating its flavor, during cooking; it will only get worse. Another guideline: "Wine in the sauce, wine in the glass." For example, if you braise with Syrah, serve Syrah with the dish, "bridging" or "echoing" the food and the wine.