

# *Livre d'Histoires*

Eating is not only filling your stomach. It's all about enjoying and being surprised. Eating doesn't only involve the mouth, oh no, it involves seeing, smelling, and even... feeling. Eating is telling stories and listening to it. A story about the seasons, the land and the people who gave rise to their valuable products; the products you and I may enjoy. In this way, we consider food to be more than just something on a plate. It's something valuable with a story behind it.

Conscious attention to food is not a fashion trend in Esprit Montagne. The French in general and the inhabitants of this valley specifically, have built up a special relationship with food and the preparation of it. We're happy to step in their footsteps. In this small gastronomic encyclopedia we gladly introduce you to a selection of products and dishes.

## **Soup**

The former residents of the Alps made their first soups only with herbs and raw vegetables that were not very tasty or palatable. Indeed, until the Middle Ages vegetables were only used for soup and hardly prepared in a different way. Only much later people started adding grain to it. It was not until many centuries later, that exquisite pasta, like noodles, were added. After that development, people started adding meat scraps and bones to their soups.



The first written soup recipe of the Alps dates back to the fourteenth century. It was recorded in a ledger of a wealthy family. The remarkable thing is that many ingredients in these account books have been found, but there's never been a notice of quantities, nor how the soup had to be made. Many recipes are also transmitted in an oral

culture from generation to generation. Because mountain residents could not travel much, the recipes stayed where they were. This explains the vast amount of "regional specialties" in the Alps.

The first soup recipe «for the people» appeared in 1789 in the magazine « Les Affiches du Dauphiné», entitled «Instruction pour faire un potage et qui sous coutera cent nourrira cents personnes, dans un instant ou un hiver et des rigoureux circonstances funestes reduisent plusieurs citoyens des villes et des campagnes à une misere extrême.» In short: a cheap soup to survive the disastrous winter months!

## Salad

During the 17th century the first salads appeared on the tables. Salads with lettuce, Swiss chard and chicory roots of plants, like our carrots, celeriac and watercress. Before that, these vegetables were only used in soups.

The first time the word "salad" in the Alps was used, was on December 4, 1661 in Grenoble. In the record book of a prominent family we read: "deux salads garnyes ".

However, the “verjus” (sour grape dressings) were already used in the 14th century. At first to add a little acid flavor to sauces, but little by little the dressings tasted better, had a higher quality and price, which made them perfect to go along with vegetables and salads.

## Meat

Previously we lived of meat that was "within reach". Cattle, pigs and chickens. Lambs, sheep and during the hunting season also deer or ibex. The inhabitants of this region had learned early to make the best of their economic resources and to cope with little stock. When an animal was slaughtered, nothing was lost. Everything was used from fat to meat, from marrow bones to blood, organs and muscle tissue. Over the centuries a culinary tradition was being developed, a tradition that nowadays is still considered to be surprising for many foreigners. What would you think about a stew of pig cheeks or the famous black pudding “boudin”?

To maintain the products as long as possible, the meat was smoked, salted, dried or preserved. This is how the now famous “charcuterie” arose. Not necessarily as a delicacy, but just a pure necessity to preserve things longer! Today, these delicacies can be bought anywhere.

# Vegetables

Our ancestors regularly had celeriac, purslane, Jerusalem artichoke and Orach on the menu. Unfortunately, these so-called "anciennes légumes" or "légumes oubliés" went into oblivion over time. This was mainly due to the import of new crops, which grew better and were more profitable. Also, the "légumes anciennes" were not as tenable as the new crops. Little by little, we forgot they even existed.

Up until now...! Esprit Montagne introduces some of these nutritious, surprising and tasty vegetables in its Menus du Jour. Would you like to experiment at home? Many supermarkets now offer special "forgotten vegetables packages" on display. Through the Internet seeds and vegetable baskets are there to be ordered. A little introduction:



**Jerusalem artichoke** or **Topinambour**: The form of this vegetable reminds you of a ginger root. The taste of the tuber is however slightly sweet and has something of an artichoke. At first glance, the Jerusalem artichoke is not attractive, with its proliferations and sober colors. Misleading, it seems, because the taste of artichoke is really excellent. Among the knobby skin you will find a creamy white, crisp and sweet flesh. Boiled, baked or steamed, the nutty taste reminds you somewhat of artichoke and salsify. The early harvest is also very tasty when eaten "raw"; it's crunchy and sweet.

**Parsnip**: The parsnip is a long, white root with a soft spicy, sweet taste that reminds somewhat of celery and nuts. Before the potato arrived in the West, parsnip was the most popular, nutritious root eaten by the people.

Parsnips can be cooked, steamed, stewed, fried or eaten raw.



**Salsify**: Salsify had become at odds because they've always been difficult to clean. What a shame! Salsify has a creamy, earthy taste between asparagus, artichoke and cauliflower. Esprit Montagne adores this vegetable!

**Chard:** Swiss chard is an old vegetable whose leaves taste similar to that of spinach. You could also recognize the slightly bitter flavor of escarole to it. An ideal vegetable for stewing, baking or stirring it in pasta or casseroles.



## Pasta

Pasta is a generic term for products made from ground grain and water. China, Japan, France and Italy -of course-, they all claim to have invented pasta. Who doesn't want to be the initiator? Pasta is world famous. Some claim that pasta was introduced in Italy by Marco Polo after his tour of China at the end of the 13th century. Others say that the Romans enjoyed pasta during the glory days of the Roman Empire. There's even evidence that the Etruscans were fond of pasta, some 3000 years ago.



The real breakthrough of pasta as “food of the people” was not until the 17th century. The city of Naples suffered from the poor organization of the Spanish rulers, which forced the poor to process dried flour to pasta, which could be kept for months. The pasta was eaten only with a little cheese, by using fingers instead of cutlery. The emergence of the tomato sauce, a

century later, caused an even greater popularity. Simultaneously, the fork, an important tool, made it possible to eat pasta with sauce. Since then, pasta had become the most defining characteristic of the Italian cuisine.

Since the 17th century also the Haute Savoie's known for its pasta: “Les Crozets”. Crozets are small, flat squares of buckwheat flour and water. The name is probably derived from the dialect word “croe” which means “small” in Savoyard dialect. Crozets are to be cut from large pasta sheets, which are a bit similar to lasagna sheets. Each valley in this region has its own recipes, flavors and shapes. Sometimes farmers also used buttery, yellow milk from cows that had calves. This milk gave the Crozet more taste. The “chef de cuisine” of Esprit Montagne doesn't make crozets himself, but the chance is big that he will treat you this week on his delicious “tortellonis”, home cooked in our kitchen.

# Desserts

**Myrtilles:** The bilberry, not to be confused with the blueberry, grows plenty in this region. Together with the raspberry it's one of the healthiest fruits. Like most other fruits, the "myrtille" also has healing capacities. This berry has a positive impact on the urinary tract and our eyes, is cholesterol-lowering and anti-inflammatory.

Originally, the bilberry derives from North America. It was first used to dye clothes and artefacts. The strong color of the juice was very suitable for coloring. Early on, the healing powers of the bilberry were discovered. The Indians started using the berries against colds. They dried the berries, which could then be consumed throughout the entire year. When the Indians came into contact with the settlers, they learned this skill. Nowadays, we use them mainly for our regional "tartes the myrtilles" and as an ingredient in chutneys and preserves.



**Pineapple:** Although the pineapple is an exotic fruit, you see it's regularly used in the mountain kitchens. In fact, the remarkable "bromelain" in the pineapple stimulates the degradation of protein and is therefore good for the digestion. After a copious meal, like a cheese fondue, you may not have an appetite for a cheese platter or crème brûlée, but a refreshing pineapple dessert will make such a difference!

We speak from experience that it's normal to get served a slice of canned pineapple for dessert in Swiss restaurants. Very traditional and typical of the Alps indeed, but we prefer to give it our own twist.



**Crème brûlée:** The ultimate classic French dessert: a velvety vanilla cream with a caramelized, golden sugar layer. The first recipes for crème brûlée date from the seventeenth century. It is unclear where this dish was first made: in England, France or Spain. The first French recipe was found in a French cookbook written by Massialot, late seventeenth century.

François Massialot was probably not someone's employee, but worked independently for elegant, special occasions. He cooked for among others the Duke of Orleans, brother of Louis the fourteenth, Princess Liselotte, the crown prince, dukes and other royalty. In short, he was in high places and chose only the best products. We like to follow his example and add to his traditional recipe a modern variant.

**Tarte Tatin:** Tarte tatin is a creation of the two Tatin sisters, Stephanie and Caroline. Stephanie was a particularly talented (but sometimes absent) cook: her specialty was an apple pie with a caramelized crust that would "melt in the mouth". One day she put the cake upside down in the oven with the dough on the top and the apples at the bottom. Nevertheless, the cake was served, approved and thus became one of the most famous desserts of all time.

The chief of Esprit Montagne gives his own twist to the tarte tatin. The apples he uses, for example the very fruity Chanteclèrs, have so much flavor that it would be a pity to spoil this taste by adding a thick layer of caramel. You'll experience it; it's a sophisticated dessert with a pure taste.



## Cheese

If you think of the Alps, you think of cheese. There are two main reasons why the mountain people have produced so many cheeses. In the beginning there was only one important thing for farmers: to look after its herds and thus an ensured regular milk produce. This excellent milk had a delicious taste of fresh grass and alpine flowers. The second reason was the transportation problem. A farmer who lived high up in the mountains went not easily from village to village. So he sought a way to preserve milk and transformed it into the longer-lasting form of "cheese". The cheeses gave the farmers the opportunity to travel some more and sell their products elsewhere.

**Abondance:** The Vallée d'Abondance is not only very popular with winter sports enthusiasts, but also with people that appreciate a good piece of cheese. In the valley of abundance the ancient mountain Abondance cheese has been produced and sold hundreds of years. The most important condition for its taste is the altitude of the meadows, where the Abondance cattle graze. To name a cheese a mountain cheese, cattle should graze above 800 meters and is made exclusively from the whole raw milk from cows of Abondance, Montbeliard and Tarine. The maturation period is a minimum of 90 days.



Abondance dates back almost 700 years. The cheese has been a member of the A.O.C. family since 1990. It has a smooth surface smeared rind, showing the marks of the cloth with an amber color. Abondance cheese is firm, has a strong smell and a distinct and complex flavor; fruity and with hints of hazelnut. The paste is soft and fluid with an ivory to pale yellow color and has small holes, similar in taste to Comte or Beaufort.

**Tomme de Savoie:** Rooted in the history of the Duchy of Savoie, Tomme de Savoie is the oldest and the most popular of all Savoie's cheeses. In former times it was made in every farm. Many regions produce a cheese they call "tomme". The name "Tomme de Savoie" is strictly reserved for cheeses that are produced entirely – milk, cheese-making and maturing – in the "départements" of Savoie and Haute-Savoie.

Tomme de Savoie offers a wide variety of colours, forms and tastes, and is produced with fat contents ranging from 20 to 45%, as well as from full-cream milk. The cheese has a delightfully nutty flavor and a smooth paste that melts in your mouth. The hard, powdery rind has an earthy aroma and is usually speckled with many types of indigenous and harmless molds.

**Reblochon:** In 1958, Reblochon became one of the first cheeses in France to obtain an AOC. It originated in the Thônes Valley, in Haute-Savoie, in the 13th century as an early form of tax avoidance. In fact, very few farmers in the Middle Ages owned the land they worked and they had to pay the landowners grazing rights for their cattle.



These grazing rights were calculated as a function of the quantity of milk produced by the herd. In order to reduce the amount of tax they had to pay, farmers did not milk their cows fully, stopping while there was still some milk left in the udder. When the landowner had gone, the remaining milk was taken. The creamy milk obtained behind the owners' backs could not be conserved and the fraud had to be masked. To do this, the farmers produced a cheese, which they named "Reblochon" after the local dialect word "re-blocher", which means "squeeze the cow's udder again".

## Herbs & Spices

**Verveine:** Verveine is also called Lemon verbena. The plant grows in the lush Alpine meadows. The herb supports proper digestion and has a relaxing effect, when you're suffering from stress. No wonder the French drink a regular cup of verveine thea after their meals or at bedtime.



Fresh verveine is also very suitable for cooking. It gives a slightly sour taste and brings very sweet or savory recipes a good balance.

**Piment d'Espelette:** A relatively new phenomenon in France: the piment d'Espelette. This is a small, thin pepper that smells like paprika, tastes like pepper, but isn't overly hot. Only 10 villages have been granted to bring this French pepper on the market since 1999. This is done under the AOC label and thus under strict conditions. The chief of Esprit Montagne loves using this spice to give your dish a subtle verve.

**Reine de prés:** Meadowsweet is a good candidate to grow in moist meadows or near bodies of water, where the herb blooms from June through August. And while the versatile herb can grow in full or partial sun, in boggy soil where summers are cool, or in latitudes where summers are warm to hot, meadowsweet does require some attention.

The herb is probably best known for its chemical components, which have made it popular throughout history as a remedy for aches and fever. Meadowsweet was the key headache-busting ingredient from which aspirin was synthesized; Bayer Pharma-ceuticals used dried meadowsweet leaves for its original methyl salicylic acid formulation. In Colonial times, meadowsweet was used as an anti-inflammatory to reduce the symptoms of arthritis and rheumatism. And, because the herb is gentle on the stomach, it also was used to treat stomach upsets, feverish colds, diarrhea and heartburn



And throughout history, meadowsweet has maintained its usefulness in the home. Housewives used the plant in their cleaning routine, drying clusters of tiny white florets and placing them on the floor and in cabinets to mask unpleasant odors. Cooks used the herb to flavor beers, meads and wines and added it to soups for an interesting almond flavor. As a cosmetic, it was soaked in rainwater and used as astringent and skin conditioner.



Use fresh leaves to flavor sorbets and fruit salads. You can infuse the flower to make a mild diuretic tea. Meadowsweet has a sharp flavor, somewhat like burnet, so you can drop a leaf into a cup of claret wine and enjoy the bite it offers. When making tea, cover the brew and let it steep to bring out the salicylic acid before serving to guests. No one will leave with a headache.



**Polypode:** The oak fern, another plant with medicinal secrets. The rhizome stimulates a good bile operation. In the old days, farmers used the rhizome especially for coughs and colds. In France, the Polypode is also known as 'Reglisse Sauvage': Wild licorice. Not only because the sweet taste of both roots are very similar, but because the same 'vertus' healing powers.

**Gentiane Jaune:** The Yellow Gentian is a well known bitter substance plant. In the mountain pastures above the hotel it flourishes abundantly, and it continues to grow despite the innocent, but clumsy cows legs. All that doesn't seem to bother the strong roots, which grow deep in the rocky soil. In autumn, the farmers harvest the medicinal root, they dry it and use it to make liqueur or bitters. Harvesting is no fun.



Because the plants should be at least five years old and are harvested late in autumn, the farmer must really struggle to recover the roots, covered in the snow, and buried deep in clayey rock. But ... once that job is done, then the winter may start, with a glass of Suze in his hand.

Bitter is a flavor that is undervalued in our modern society. In the kitchen of Esprit Montagne we always search for a harmonious taste balance. Bitter Substance Plants in the kitchen are therefore easily combined when the sweetness predominates.