

French Impressions Food

150

user-friendly

Fabulous French Regional
Recipes

Brittany Normandy Pays-de-la-Loire
Nord-Pas-de-Calais Picardie Île de France
Champagne-Ardennes Alsace-Lorraine

Donella East

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About the Author

Donella East has been exploring France and collecting regional recipes for more than 20 years while keeping her travel writer husband George in some semblance of order. Amongst her other hobbies she includes making and eating cream cakes and knitting unwearable jumpers for her husband.

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Your menu

I have arranged all recipes under Starters, Main Meals, Puddings, Breads, Cakes and Sundries. The Sundries section is for those dishes which did not seem to me to sit comfortably under any of the other headings. To allow you to browse and see what is on offer, below is the complete 'menu'. On other matters, unless they form part of the recipe I have generally not suggested any specific vegetables or side dishes to go with a main course. There is, though, a potato recipe from each region at the end. Also at the back of the book there's a brief discussion on the main types of pastry featured in the recipes. I've also taken a brief look at the drinks and cheeses to be found in each region. I have used an English version or even Franglais for the name of a dish where I have thought it would help, but usually mention the proper French name in the text before the recipe. Finally, I have listed the ingredients of each recipe in the order in which they are to be used in creating the dish.

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An Introduction to the Ouvrier

I've tested most of these recipes on my husband and other gourmands. In the main they come from French friends or those restaurateurs I could persuade to reveal their secrets. Some are my adaptations of classic or not-so-familiar French regional dishes, and often they are the result of visits to an apparently little-known type of French eating place.

There have been guides galore to France's network of Relais Routier restaurants, and I don't suppose there can be many people who have travelled in France and don't know the way to guarantee a good, cost-conscious lunch is to look for the Relais sign. This book, however, is dedicated to another type of low-budget lunchtime eatery.

For those not familiar with the term, *ouvrier* means any blue-collar worker or what we used to call working man; it also refers to the places where workers can get a substantial and cheap mid-day meal.

It is a long-held and jealously protected tradition in rural France that public or private employers give their outside workers luncheon vouchers which can be redeemed at the eating-place of their choice. French workers are notoriously

fussy about what they eat during the sacred lunchtime, and I have never heard of a docket being redeemed in a MacDonalds outlet.

I have known gangs of workers travel many miles from their temporary workplace to a particularly well-thought-of *ouvrier*. Come to that, I have known their indoor-based bosses join them just to check out that the place was worth the journey.

On the subject of where and how they like to eat out, it has long intrigued me that French people expect to pay so little for a wonderful midday meal, yet are prepared to shell out so much more for a no-better or even inferior one in the evening if the venue has a pretentious name, sneery waiters, damask table cloths and napkins shaped like swans. This aspect of undeniable Gallic food snobbery is even more perplexing when you know what is on offer every day from a thousand bars and restaurants offering an *ouvrier* service.

Unlike the *Relais Routier* system the *ouvrier* is not part of an official network. This means that quality can be very variable, and there can't be any sort of guide to where or how good they are.

Some outlets offering working mens' lunches are major concerns and sited on main trunk roads, but the classic *ouvrier* is usually a small village or roadside bar which may close in the evening as it is not worth opening after the lunchtime trade has departed. The more upmarket examples may have a reputed male chef and put on expensive off-the-menu dishes as the norm, but choose to offer an *ouvrier* service at lunchtime. The most common and attractive (to us) examples are owned and run by remarkable, no-nonsense women of a certain age who think little of welcoming, serving drinks to, then cooking and bringing the food to table for up to fifty hungry and very particular male customers. As to the bill for a three or four course meal, the going rate is usually around ten

euros, and that will often include a bottle or carafe of very respectable red table wine.

Apart from the food, company, service, surroundings and atmosphere, what we find so appealing about *ouvriers* is how they reflect regional or even local culinary tradition and history. Although favourite 'national' dishes will be served up, the best place to see what the customers like to eat at home is at an *ouvrier*.

I hope you enjoy the virtual journey to and through these largely unsung gastronomic outlets of real rural France. The best tip I can give if you want to find a good *ouvrier* is to count the number of vans and lorries outside well before the magic hour of midday has arrived.

PS. I did not mean to be sexist or non-inclusive or otherwise politically incorrect by referring to 'working-class men' rather than people. The fact is that, in visits to several hundred *ouvrier* outlets, the number of women eating rather than cooking and serving the food could be counted on the fingers of one hand.

Acknowledgements

As is customary with any book which could only see the light of day with lots of help from others, I would like to thank all those who became involved. For a start, there's all the French friends, cooks and *ouvrier* owners who parted with their precious recipes. Then there are British expat friends and correspondents who have passed on their favourite local dishes. I must also thank our ever-tolerant proofreader, food tester and chief researcher, Sally Moore. Finally, there is my

increasingly larger husband and his trenchermen friends for manfully getting through all the dishes served up in the road-testing process.

Featured in this volume of
French Impressions Food are recipes from

Brittany Normandy Pays-de-la-Loire
Nord-Pas-de-Calais Picardie Île de France
Champagne-Ardenne Alsace-Lorraine

(For this first French Impressions cookbook, I have selected eight northern regions, moving from Brittany in the extreme west to Alsace-Lorraine in the east. You might not agree with my herding some neighbouring regions into one for the purposes of the book, but even the people who live in them rarely agree where boundaries should fall - DE.)

Brittany

Surrounded on three sides by water and with its own language and distinct culture, Brittany stands apart from the rest of France in more ways than one. Most of the Bretons I have met seem quite pleased with that arrangement.

The argument over the origins of the Breton race still rages. Some historians claim that Welsh mercenaries were shipped into the region to help the Romans suppress the locals. Others have more complex and even outlandish theories. Undeniably, many Breton words are similar if not identical to the Welsh version, and many Breton and Celtic traditions and legends seem to share the same roots. As to cooking style and content, Brittany is certainly out on its own when compared to any other region or country.

With a third of the total coastline of France it is no surprise that the region is big on fish and seafood specialities. Inland, Bretons like hearty and very filling meals; finesse is not a word in the dictionary of most home cooks I know.

Bretons like their butter well salted and used in large quantities, and a number of traditional recipes recommend eye-wateringly and artery-clogging amounts. For some reason Brittany was exempted from a tax on salt right up to the Revolution, which is perhaps why the residents have always been so liberal in its usage.

It would, I think, be fair to say that many people in other regions of France would not regard Brittany as a culinary hotspot, which makes it a curiosity that there are more crêperies in the rest of France than in the region that invented them.

NB: Because these are French recipes, I have used the metric system throughout. With oven settings, I have given Celsius (Centigrade), and also Fahrenheit and Gas Mark numbers. As to how many people each recipe will serve, I have generally made no recommendations as I do not believe in telling people how much or little they should eat, and only you can know how greedy you and your guests are.

Starters

*Crêpes and Galettes · Terrine de Campagne
Sabayon of Breton Oysters · Onion Johnny Soup
Curried cockle broth · Quéméné Salad*

Crêpes and Galettes

Although I have listed them under Starters, the signature dish of Brittany can be eaten with no more than a sprinkle of sugar and drizzle of lemon, or make a hearty meal if served with a substantial filling.

The basic Breton crêpe is a thin pancake of predominantly buckwheat flour. Traditionally, they were made by whipping the batter by hand, then cooking on a rimless cast-iron pan called a bilig.

Although crêpe is the familiar generic name and both are made in exactly the same way, the word crêpe is generally used to refer to pancakes with sugar and butter topping or sweet fillings, while the savoury versions are called galettes. In the land of their origin, the list of possible fillings is limited only by the imagination, and I know of a place near St Malo which offers more than 300 varieties. The Breton version of a

bacon and egg sarnie can be bought at most markets, and the knack of eating one without decorating your shirt front is a skill which marks out locals from visitors.

Like making a soufflé rise to the occasion or plastering a wall, making the perfect crêpe is not hard, but a skill which takes a bit of acquiring. If the mixture is too thinly spread in the pan it will break up when you try to turn your pancake over or remove it. If you have put too much batter in the pan, it will be rubbery when it comes out. Don't despair if your early attempts do not work out well, as this really is a case where practice makes perfect;

There follows a standard recipe and method for crêpe making, and for reasons already given, I have not suggested a suitable filling. In Brittany it is usual to make a big batch of around 30 pancakes, so be sure to invite some friends along to try them (or adjust the measures accordingly to suit your number at table and appetite, as with all the recipes in this book):

Ingredients

175g of wheat flour
450g of buckwheat flour
A teaspoonful of salt
Three eggs
Two litres of full-fat milk
Half a litre of dry cider
Some cold water
Fresh or packet yeast
150g salted, melted butter

Method

Put the flour and salt into a mixing bowl and break the eggs into a well in the centre.

Start mixing the batter with a wooden spoon (or your fist if you want to be faithful to the original recipe) and gradually add the milk and cider.

Finish off by adding some water (if necessary) and the yeast, but beware of making the batter too runny.

Melt half the butter and add to the mixture.

If you do not have a billig, gently heat a small frying pan which has been greased with some cooking oil.

When the pan is really hot, ladle enough batter in to cover the surface of the pan.

Leave for a couple of minutes or until the surface starts to bubble, then turn over and lavish some more butter on it. (Be sure to keep the mixture beaten between the making of each crêpe.)

You are now ready to experiment with fillings, which should be enclosed in the folded crêpe/galette so that the finished article resembles a deflated Cornish pasty.

Terrine de Campagne

I have put this recipe for terrine or pâté under starters, but we have eaten it with Breton friends at the start or the end (or at any stage) of a meal, or as a meal in itself with some crusty bread and a rough and reddy wine. The difference between a terrine and a pâté is contentious, as both are generally made with pounded/minced meat or poultry. Terrines also may be made with vegetables. Generally, terrines are smoother in texture than pâté, but that is not always the case...

Ingredients

1 kg of belly pork

350g pig's liver

Half an onion

Two large cloves of garlic
Some chopped parsley
A liqueur glass of brandy
Some salt and pepper
Two eggs
50g crème fraîche*
2 rounded tablespoons of flour
Some thin strips of pork fat
A bay leaf,
Some thyme

*Crème fraîche is a sort of soured cream, created like yoghurt by the action of live bacteria and with a much lower fat content than double cream. You can make crème fraîche by adding buttermilk to double cream, but it is now commonly available in the UK. Just to clear up any confusion, the scientific definition of the various creams is that half-and-half must be between 10.5-18% fat by weight, while light cream or light whipping cream or table cream must have between 18-30% fat. Cream or whipping cream need to be between 30-36% fat to qualify, while heavy or heavy whipping cream must be above 36% fat. Finally, double cream must be at least 48% and is the easiest to whip thickly for puddings and can be piped. The clotted cream which is the star feature of any cream tea comes in at a whopping 55% milk fat content, which is why we like it so much.

Method

Roughly mince together the belly pork, liver, onion, peeled garlic and parsley.

Add the brandy, salt and pepper and leave the lot in the fridge overnight.

The next day, mix the eggs, lightly beaten, with the cream and the flour and blend into the pork mixture.

Pile it all into a terrine dish lined with the strips of fat, put the thyme and the bay leaf on top of the meat mixture and fold the ends of the fat over the top.

The next bit sounds complicated, but isn't:

Mix a simple stiff flour and water paste and use it to seal the terrine lid.

Put the dish into a bain-marie (or just a larger casserole) with water halfway up the sides of the terrine, and cook for two hours in an oven set at 190-200C°/375-400°F/Gas Mark 5 or 6.

Leave it alone in a cool place for at least twenty-four hours, and preferably three or four days before serving.

Kept cool, your terrine will last for up to eight days (if you allow it to survive that long!)

Sabayon of Breton Oysters

I am usually of the mind that the best way to eat oysters is dressed in nothing but a simple dressing of vinegar, oil and finely chopped shallots. However, the following regional speciality could make me change my view. A sabayon is what we might call a syllabub and any mixture of eggs and sugar and cream whipped in a bain-marie. In England, the recipe goes back to Tudor times.

Ingredients

28 oysters

200g fresh spinach

Salt and pepper

100g butter

Three eggs
120ml heavy (whipping) cream

Method

Open the oysters and detach them from their shells (or get someone who knows how to do it for you!)*

Collect the liquor and strain it through a fine cheesecloth or suitable fine sieve.

Put the liquid and oysters into a sauté pan over a low heat.

As soon as the liquid begins to bubble, remove the oysters.

Remove the stems from the spinach leaves, and wrap each oyster in a leaf before placing it in one of the shells.

Place them all on a baking sheet and set aside.

Melt the butter in a pan, remove from the heat, skim off the foam and pour off the clarified butter.

Set butter aside in a pan over a bowl of hot water.

Place the eggs and cream into a saucepan and whisk until frothy.

Put the saucepan over another pan of almost boiling water and whisk until the sabayon thickens.

Remove from the heat and gradually blend in the clarified butter.

Add two tablespoons of the oyster liquid and season to taste.

Put the oysters under a grill for three minutes.

Spoon some of the sabayon over each oyster and re-grill until brown and bubbly.

Cover each serving plate with coarse salt and arrange oysters on top.

*Opening oysters is one of those things—like knitting—which looks difficult until you learn how to do it. Like any activity involving sharp knives, it can be dangerous, so don't try this at home unless you feel able, are prepared to get the right

equipment and take your time. If you want to try your hand (and not risk slicing in to it), you will need a special oyster knife, which has a non-slip handle and a short pointy blade. Mine came complete with a simple but effective little wooden device for wedging the oysters in, but you can do it in the following way with a cloth:

Grip your oyster firmly in a cloth, with the flat side uppermost and the hinge showing.

Insert the knife carefully between the two shells and near the hinge.

Give a firm twist to the knife to break the hinge.

Remove the muscle from the inside of the flat (top) shell by keeping the knife flat against the shell and cutting through the muscle. You should now be able to remove the top shell.

Using the tip of the knife, cut around the bottom of the oyster to separate it from the shell.

Onion Johnny Soup

Like so many classic French dishes, the invention of onion soup is claimed by a number of regions. Parisians say it was knocked up as a quick and cheap way of keeping the cold out by porters at the capital's famous Les Halles marketplace. The dish was also said to be the soup of choice of poor labourers in Lyons' silk industry. Predictably, many cuisiniers in this region claim that it should correctly be known as Breton rather than French Onion Soup. As it is universally recognized that the best onions are Breton and there is an Onion Johnny museum at Roscoff, I think we can give this region the honour of claiming the soup's invention. Whatever its true origins, this dish gets top marks from all perspectives including cost,

speed and simplicity of preparation and cooking; and, of course, taste:

Cook's comments: The make-up of the Breton version differs mostly because cider rather than white wine is added to the stock. Also, the Breton cheese of choice for the topping is Emmental. This is because, due to a name registration error by Switzerland, Brittany now produces more than half the Emmental-style cheese consumed in France. Although this is not how it is done in most Breton circles, I like to fry rather than toast the bread rounds as it makes them crisper. I also like to spread a layer of mustard on them before adding the cheese.

Ingredients

Six red or yellow onions, peeled and thinly sliced

Some butter

A little sugar

Two cloves of garlic, minced

Two litres of beef stock

200ml of dry cider

A bay leaf

A little dry thyme

Seasoning

Eight rounds of toasted French bread

Plenty of grated Breton Emmental-style cheese

NB: Some recipes recommend olive oil as the medium for cooking the onions off, but as you will by now have realised, Bretons will always use butter at the thinnest excuse.

Method

Sauté the onions in the butter for as long as it takes to turn them a nice golden colour, adding the sugar about ten minutes into the process to help with the caramelisation.

Add the garlic and continue to sauté for another minute or two, taking care that nothing burns.

Now add the stock, bay leaf, cider and thyme, partially cover and simmer until all ingredients and tastes are nicely blended.

Season to taste and remove the bay leaf.

Transfer the soup into individual bowls or one large ovenproof receptacle.

Put in your slices of toast (or mustard-spread fried bread), cover liberally with the grated cheese and grill until the Emmental is bubbling and screaming for mercy...

Curried cockle broth

From the sublime to what might appear to be the ridiculous in soup or broth terms, but this is a real recipe and works surprisingly well. The little canal-side town of La Gacilly boasts any number of craft workshops, and there is a genuinely bohemian feel to the commune. Apart from all its other artistic endeavours and expositions, La Gacilly is also the setting for an annual soup-making contest. Below is a popular entrant we tried a few years ago, and, believe it or not, was one of the more restrained recipes.

Ingredients

500g cockles

100g butter

3 shallots*

300ml white wine

300ml crème fraîche

A teaspoon of curry powder

2 small apples

*A cook's wheeze to make shallots much easier to peel is put them in a bowl, pour on boiling water and leave for a few moments.

Method

Put the cockles in cold water for at least two hours. Wash in plenty of water and drain.

Peel the shallots and chop finely. Put the shallots and white wine into a saucepan, bring to the boil and add the cockles before covering.

When steam escapes, take lid off and stir. Re-cover and cook for five minutes before taking the saucepan off the heat.

Remove the cockle flesh from shells and place in six soup bowls.

Pass the cockle juice through a very fine sieve so any grains of sand are unable to pass through.

Add the cream and the curry powder and boil for five minutes.

Peel the apples and dice and divide them amongst the soup bowls.

Now add the butter to the cockle broth and emulsify* in a mixer.

Finally, pour your broth over the cockles and apples.

*To emulsify in food terms is to use an ingredient to bind others together. In this case the butter is used as an emulsifier.

Quéméné Salad

As a child, a frequent Saturday afternoon treat was a bowl of cold chitterlings. This may be why I took so readily to a dish which can be as off-putting to uninitiated Britons as it is

popular in France. The classic andouille is a sort of sausage made from chitterlings (pig's or sometimes cow's intestines), with onions, wine and seasonings, wrapped in beef casing and in some regions hung up to dry for nine months before smoking over oak or beech. There is a yearly fete devoted to andouille in the town for which this dish is named, and the traditional way to eat it is sliced on a bed of mashed potato. This is an unusual 'salad' if ever there was one, and I was won over to it in a remarkable *ouvrier* on a main road into the lovely little town of Guéméné. It was not on the menu that day, but when I said I had not tried the famed local andouille, the landlady/barmaid/cook/waitress refused to let us leave until we had tried some, cooked especially for us on the open fire.

Ingredients

A cauliflower

500g andouille.

A handful of shallots

Some cider vinegar

Some cooking oil

Some parsley

Some salt and pepper

Method

Cut the cauliflower into florets, then boil in salted water for around a quarter of an hour before straining and leaving to cool.

Remove the skin of the andouille and chop the meat into cubes.

Peel and chop the shallots and put them in a bowl, mixing in the vinegar and seasoning and a little oil.

Sprinkle with finely chopped parsley, then add the sausage and cauliflower and serve and eat warm or cold.

Main Meals

*Cotriade · Matelote d'Anguille · Sea Bass in Salt Crust
Kig ar Farz · Hunter's Return Rabbit
Lower Brittany Christmas Turkey*

Cotriade

As bouillabaisse is to Marseilles and fish chowder is to New England, cotriade is to Brittany, and particularly southern Brittany. It is believed that the word 'chowder' comes from the old French for a cooking pot, and was introduced to the New World by Breton fishermen who were following the tradition of throwing off-cuts and any odd bits of the day's catch in to a chaudière.

Ingredients

1.5 kg of mixed fish
About two litres of water
450g of potatoes
Three onions
Three cloves of garlic
A bouquet garni
Some parsley
Seasoning to taste
110g of butter
Some coarse bread

Method

Clean the fish well and reserve the heads.

Boil the water in a big pan.

Peel and chop the potatoes and onion and peel the garlic.

Fry the onion in another pan until golden, then add the potatoes and mix well.

Pour the boiling water over, then add the garlic and bouquet garni and parsley and season.

Cook for twenty minutes before adding the fish pieces and heads and simmering for a further quarter of an hour.

Taste and adjust seasoning if necessary before sieving and pouring into a pot.

Remove the bouquet garni, and fish heads, put the potato and fish pieces into individual soup bowls and pour the broth over before adding the buttered bread.

Matelote d'Anguille

Matelote d'Anguille sounds a lot more exotic than eel stew with prunes, but tastes just as well in either language. The dictionary defines 'matelot' as a sailor, and 'matelote' as a hornpipe, or in culinary terms, a fish stew.

Ingredients

10 small onions

200g brown mushrooms

4 eels of approx 500g each

100g butter

100g lardon cubes*

A bottle of red wine

A bunch of thyme

A bay leaf

12 prunes

*Lardons are used a great deal in French cooking, and are small cubes of fatty bacon, either smoked or unsmoked. They are available nowadays at most supermarkets.

Method

Peel the onions and remove the gritty parts of the mushrooms, then quarter.

Clean and skin the eels and cut into round portions.

Brown the eel in very hot butter, then remove from heat.

Fry the lardons quickly with the small onions, dust with flour and moisten with some of the red wine.

Add the thyme and bay leaf and season. Put the eels into the sauce and add the prunes and wine.

Fry the mushrooms in oil and add to the stew before cooking at the top of the oven for half an hour.

Sea bass in salt crust

It still rankles with many Bretons that a large swathe of their southern territory was hived off to help create a new region in the late 20th century. A significant loss to the Duchy of Brittany was the ancient walled town of Guérande. In Breton, the town's name means 'white land', and the great sea marshes surrounding it are famed for the quality of the salt taken from them. If you are the sort of person who thinks things must be better if they are dearer, you can buy fleur de sel in a fancy container at up to 50 euros a kilo. That would make the following recipe rather extravagant, but last time we were in the area, we bought a huge sack of the genuine article from a roadside dealer at a knockdown price.

Ingredients

One large sea bass, gutted but with head and scales left intact

1.5 kg of grey sea salt
Three dessertspoons of court bouillon*
Some pepper
A handful of seaweed (optional)

Method

Preheat your oven to 250°C/485°F/Gas Mark 9

Clean the inside of the fish carefully to remove any traces of blood or debris.

Season with pepper.

Cover a baking dish with cooking foil, then blend the court-bouillon with the salt and spread a third of the mixture over the foil.

Put the fish on the bed of salt and cover with the remainder, pressing in well.

Bake for forty minutes, then dress the dish with the seaweed. It is traditional to show off the crust to the guests before*Court-bouillon means 'short stock' and is a basic preparation mainly used for poaching fish and other seafoods. A typical preparation would consist of a litre of water, 100 ml of white wine, a bayleaf, some chopped onion, celery and carrot, some sliced lemon and some parsley and thyme, combined and brought to the boil then simmered for half an hour.

ore breaking it and revealing the fish.

(This dish goes rather well with white butter sauce from Nantes, the recipe for which can be found in the Pays-de-la-Loire section.)

Kig ar Farz

I could not compile any list of Breton dishes without including Kig ar Farz, which broadly translates as ‘stuffed meat’. Actually, completely stuffed is how you feel after eating a couple of platefuls. By any other name, this gargantuan meal is basically a beef stew with dumplings. And a pork stew with dumplings. And a lamb stew with dumplings. Winters can be nippy in Brittany, and country people