

# Christmas is my day to be a lazy cook!

Novelist Marita van der Vyver chats to Libby Allen about food, family, and the festive season in France

**A**ward-winning writer Marita van der Vyver moved from Cape Town to Provence 15 years ago, where she met her husband Alain Claisse. Together, they have three sons and a daughter. She and Alain have also created two cookbooks together, filled with the hearty, delicious tastes of Provence.

**A traditional Christmas meal is a really big affair in the south of France.** In fact, it's a season of fabulous tastes, as we don't stop feasting from Christmas Eve through to New Year. Our big meal is on Christmas Eve, with an array of delicacies laid out, including loads of shellfish.

**A Provençal Christmas spread traditionally consists of seven main dishes and a whopping 13 desserts.** It's a huge undertaking, and one we only tackle when all our children are at home with us, or friends visit from overseas. It's made all the more lovely because every element of the meal carries an age-old meaning. Three white tablecloths are laid and three white candles lit, to symbolise the Holy

**'We have a big feast at home on Christmas Eve. After that, I'm off duty'**

Trinity. In the desserts, the colours of the fruit and nuts represent the hues of the robes of the four Catholic orders. At the end of the meal, everything that remains on the table is left for hungry spirits that might visit in the night, and the corners of the tablecloths are tied up so that bad spirits can't climb onto the table. I absolutely love all of that ancient mysticism.

**December 25th is the one day of the year we relish being lazy cooks.** We

clean up the spoils of our feast from the night before, then head off to a little restaurant we love. The day is always miserably cold, with the Mistral, Provence's infamously bitter wind blowing, so we'll hurry back home afterwards to light a fire and bunker down for our ceremonial Skype sessions with our family.

**When people think of Provence,** they imagine postcard-perfect fields of sunflowers and lavender, summer holidays and playing boules outside in the sun. So, when Alain and I decided to write our first cookbook, *Summer Food*



**Marita and Alain enjoy walks in the Provençal countryside**

*in Provence* (Tafelberg), about the area and French cuisine, summer seemed the obvious season to choose. People really loved the book, but soon we were being asked what we planned to do for the remaining three seasons.

**I'm a writer by profession, but working on novels is a terribly lonely experience.** Cookbooks, on the other hand, are wonderful, because the whole family gets stuck into creating them, and it never feels like a job. Alain works in education, finding places for disabled children in schools, and a lot of his time at work is stressful. He often comes home weary from a day spent in talks with doctors and parents, and he uses cooking and food to help him relax.

Our latest book, *Winter Food in Provence* (Tafelberg), is packed with the delicious recipes and stories that fill our house during this time of year. Our kids came home over their school and university holidays to be in the photographs, and it was a real family operation. There's one particular picture where our son Daniel is standing in front of a window with a cup of soup, and rain is falling against the windowpane. It was hugely important to us that we get the picture into the book, because it's so evocative of the season – but, of course, on the day of the shoot, it didn't rain. Alain became a special-effects master and stood outside with a hosepipe to create 'rain', while Daniel posed at the window with his cup, and our other son, Hugo, crouched below him with a hot kettle to steam up the window from the inside – we had such fun!

The food for the book was shot on a farm in Somerset West, during one of the worst heat waves the Cape has ever seen. You can imagine how ridiculous it was trying to create a book about winter food in that kind of heat. We wanted lots of beautiful pictures of dishes in front of a crackling fire, but the *bûche de Noël* (Christmas ice-cream log) virtually melted on the spot! The fire looked stunning, but there was just a large blob of pudding in the pictures...

## A DELICIOUS LIFE

Alain taught me how to cook. I used to open the fridge door, stare at what was inside, and eat the first thing I saw. It's so much nicer sitting down to a well-prepared meal. I adore salads, and try new ideas every time I'm in the kitchen. I'll fill a bowl with strawberries and edible flowers, then I'll think, the green and red needs something, so I'll add soft goats'-milk cheese. You eat with your eyes first, so if your plate looks pretty, you're usually set.

## The French aren't big on measuring when they cook.

They say *au pif* – a little bit of this, and a touch of that, as you need it. That's how Alain cooks, and he never uses the same quantity twice! When we wrote our first book, I'd stand beside him at the stove with a notebook, watching him cook. I'd ask, "How much of that did you use?", so that I could write it down. He'd simply reply, "I don't know. It's boring to cook like that." It took forever, but he finally agreed to exact measurements. I can absolutely guarantee that if you're a nervous cook, you can follow the recipes, and they'll work, but we always encourage people to add their own flair.

We don't have pizzerias or Mr. Delivery where we live in the countryside. Eating out is pricey, so we save restaurants for really special occasions. For the most part, we love cooking for ourselves, and eat really well. You can dine like royalty on a pretty modest budget, if you just do a little research into what's in season.

I've got a new book coming out early next year called *A Fountain in France* (Penguin), which tells the less glamorous side of our story, and dispels some of the myths people have about Provence. I'm not living an idyllic life, running through lavender fields with the wind flitting through my hair! The Mistral is dreadful. It blows at 100km an hour and can rage for 27 days in a row. It drives you mad. And, while we live in an absolutely beautiful place, having domestic help is totally unaffordable. With two partners who work, and children, it can be tough.



Two photos used in their latest winter-food cookbook, of *bûche de Noël*, and their son, Daniel



My South African friends often ask how much truth there is to the book, *French Women Don't Get Fat* (Vintage). It's utter nonsense. Some French women are plump, and some are slender, like women all over the world. Some of them dress very well, but others dress atrociously! There's a tiny percentage of Parisian women who are really impossibly chic, but the rest is just a myth. I'm blessed to have my beautiful family but, I must admit, I quite enjoy reminding people we aren't perfect. We pose for lovely photos in our books, but any family knows you're not always smiling and eating delicious food! We have horrendous fights and things go wrong, like they do in all families. Roofs leak and cars break down, but you've just got to keep returning to your sense of humour.

In my bones, I feel South African, and that won't change. But I'm very grateful for the lessons that I'm learning from life in France, and from my French husband. The people have an unbelievably passionate relationship with food, and eating well. Day by day, I'm discovering a certain *savoir-vivre* – I'm learning new lessons all the time. *Winter Food in Provence* (Tafelberg), is out now. **w&h**



Buying fresh produce for a delicious meal