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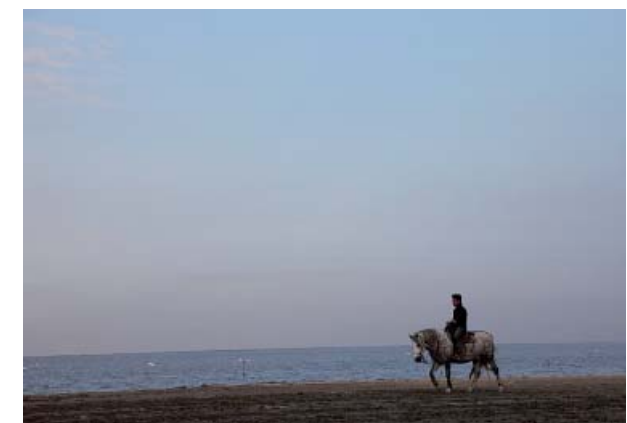
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## THROUGH THE GRAPEVINE

“THE VINE BEARS THREE KINDS OF GRAPES: THE FIRST OF PLEASURE,  
THE SECOND OF INTOXICATION, THE THIRD OF DISGUST.”

DIOGENES, GREEK PHILOSOPHER (C. 412-323 BC)

It is impossible to ignore the grape harvest in this neck of the woods. Every time you hop in your car to drive somewhere quickly, you are reminded once again that no-one gets anywhere quickly in September. September is when gigantic harvesters resembling space ships invade the roads between the vineyards, when old-fashioned tractors transport loads and loads of grapes to the cellars all day long, and when the rest of us in normal vehicles are forced to crawl along behind the farm machinery and tractors at a proverbial snail's pace.

Getting impatient is pointless. No-one ever hoots at a tractor during the *vendange*. Except an ignorant tourist, perhaps. We locals resign ourselves to gnashing our teeth and try to imagine how wonderful the juice from those tractor-loads of grapes will taste one day after being turned into wine ...

Provence's Côtes du Rhône wines are the second most important French products of the vine to carry the prestigious AOC label (*Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée*), after their famous cousins from Bordeaux. One of the world's greatest wines, Châteauneuf-du-Pape, which was praised by the writer Alphonse Daudet as “the wine of kings and the king of wines”, has boasted the AOC appellation since 1929. Other great wines of the region had to wait longer: Vacqueyras, for instance, received AOC certification only in 1990 – although the actress Sarah Bernhardt had raved about the village and its wines many decades before.

The point is that it has never been easy to become an AOC wine. Winemakers have to comply with a slew of rules and regulations. In the Châteauneuf-du-Pape region, for instance, only thirteen varieties of grape may be cultivated for red wine (over ninety per cent of the production) plus a small amount of white wine, but no rosé is permitted. In Tavel, just a little further south down the Rhône, on the

other hand, rosé takes pride of place – it was even popular in the court of Louis XIV. The pink wine of sun kings, you could say I suppose, and the sun king of pink wines.

A mere stone's throw from our house you could indulge in the golden colour and unique bouquet of Beaumes-de-Venise's sweet wine, served ice cold with a morsel of foie gras or a strong, salty blue cheese; or in the robust ruby-red liquid of Cairanne, which makes stews and other comfort food taste even better; or in Rasteau's sweet white or red wine, which is divine with chocolate at the end of a long repast ...

The variety is truly staggering. When I moved here, I made a valiant attempt to get to know just the products of the cellars or *caves* in my immediate area. After dropping my son at preschool in the morning, I would stop at a different *cave* every day to taste their wines. While I did spit out a fair amount of it, as any proper wine taster should, I still managed to consume enough to leave me sleepy and lazy for the rest of the day. Before long I realised that keeping this up would mean never writing another book again – and that I would need at least nine lifetimes to taste all the wine Provence has to offer.

These days I tend to stick to the devil I know. We buy our weekly stock of Côtes du Rhône from the local cellar *en vrac*, which means that the wine is tapped straight from a massive tank – via a kind of hose that looks not unlike the one on a petrol pump – into the plastic jerry can I bring along. At home I decant it into airtight glass bottles, as my kind neighbours have taught me. In this way we are able to drink decent AOC wine every day without having to fork out for the bottle and the cork and the label. A very practical example of the renowned French reason, *n'est-ce pas?*



## SALT OF THE EARTH

“GIVE NEITHER COUNSEL NOR SALT TILL YOU ARE ASKED FOR IT.”

TRADITIONAL ITALIAN PROVERB

# N

ot too long ago a friend and I met for lunch at a bistro. There we were, chatting away, when the woman at the next table started scratching around in her capacious handbag and plucked out ... a salt grinder. We must have stared at her a little too curiously, our conversation having suddenly dried up, because next thing she asked us in a friendly way whether we would like to borrow her salt grinder. I declined her offer because our food was already salted, but was nosy enough to ask why she had brought along her own salt when eating out.

She gave me a look that said this was the silliest question she had heard in a long time. Because it is *fleur de sel de Camargue*! Why would you sprinkle ordinary white factory salt on your food if you could carry the best salt in the world around in your handbag?

Why, indeed.

*Fleur de sel* means “the flower of the salt”, a typically poetic French name for that most basic of food products formed by water and wind. After so many years in this country I still marvel at how lyrical the language can sound in the kitchen. French food is never simply cooked, it is “made to jump” (the word for sauté is the same as for jump), sweated, drowned in wine or drizzled with butter or oiled, bound or trussed (*trousser*), or handled in other ways that lend the kitchen a faintly erotic S & M atmosphere. Or is it just me seeing sex in everything? Perhaps just more proof that I have become more French than I originally intended.

But let us forget about sex and concentrate on salt. This “white gold”, which has been produced in the Camargue since Roman times, was for centuries so precious that soldiers were paid partly in salt rather than gold. (This is in fact where the word salary comes from; derived from the Latin *salarium*,

meaning salt wage.) Still today, every spring sees huge quantities of sea water being pumped into the salt flats, where it lies throughout the summer months and dries out into a thick crust. In autumn, shortly before the first heavy rains melt it all away, the precious crust is removed from the salt pan piece by piece using machinery, almost like slices of cake being lifted with a giant cake lifter. Then it is washed and dried again, and graded according to the size of the salt crystals.

The characteristic grey colour of the slightly damp *gros sel* or coarse salt is the result of the clay beds of the salt pans, making it an exceptionally pure, mineral-rich product that can be found in posh food emporiums the world over. My sister lived in New York for a few years where she would buy very expensive French *gros sel*. She could not believe her luck when she discovered it was available dirt cheap in any supermarket here. After her first visit to Provence she went home with a suitcase crammed with small packets of grey salt as gifts for appreciative foodie friends.

The “flower of salt” or *fleur de sel* can be seen as the cherry on the salt cake, and is therefore more expensive than ordinary grey salt. The flower is formed by salt crystals being blown to the edges of the salt pans by the legendary Provençal winds – the mistral and the tramontane – where it gathers. The delicate flowers are harvested by hand, left to dry in the sun for a few hours without any further processing, and sold in small quantities. In bags, tins or mills that you can carry around in your handbag.

A word to the wise: Any cook will be offended if a guest spoils a dish by adding too much salt – and reaching for the salt cellar before you have even tasted the food, is plain bad manners. But if the food needs a little salt, then I suppose you could say it with flowers?





## THE PLEASURES OF PUMPKIN

“WE HAVE PUMPKINS AT MORNING AND PUMPKINS AT NOON. /  
IF IT WERE NOT FOR PUMPKINS WE SHOULD BE UNDOON.”

AMERICAN PILGRIM RHYME (CA. 1633)

Pumpkin may not be a traditional Provençal product, but like even the most “traditional” vegetables – tomatoes and aubergines, for example, without which ratatouille and other typically Provençal dishes would be impossible – it was brought here from far-off lands many hundreds of years ago. (And like tomatoes, pumpkins are technically a fruit, but let’s not split hairs about such delicious foods.) The point is that today you can find the most wonderful French *potirons*, such as the large, round *rouge vif d’Étampes*, truly a pumpkin among pumpkins.

The orange “fruit” (which can also be white, yellow or green) is one of the oldest agricultural products in America, where Native American tribes cultivated it centuries ago as one of the Three Sisters. Pumpkin (squash), beans and maize (corn) were usually sown together so that the maize provided something for the beans to climb, while the large pumpkin leaves offered shade and protection for the shallow roots of the maize, and the beans ensured there was enough nitrogen in the soil. Truly an example of sisterly symbiosis. The Native Americans also knew how to use every last part of the pumpkin plant. The flesh, pips, leaves and even the flowers were eaten, the hollowed-out shells used as food and water containers, and the flesh was carved into long strips that were woven together and dried as food for the long, hungry winter months. This “pumpkin biltong” could be kept for years – and the bone-dry pumpkin strips were even used for weaving mats.

The early English Pilgrims learned from the local tribes to appreciate the value of *pompion* – what this strange-looking produce was originally called. In winter especially, pumpkin was often all that stood between a Pilgrim family and starvation, as the anonymous verse quoted above will attest. However, the seeds that Columbus brought back from the New World were anything but an overnight sensation in Europe. Pumpkin was mainly used as feed for pigs and other livestock, and was long regarded as a poor man’s food.

By the seventeenth century a French cookbook did contain a number of recipes for pumpkin soup with cream, butter and nutmeg – which do not sound terribly meagre – but the best evidence that squash was fairly well known in French vegetable gardens by that time, is probably Charles Perrault’s tale *Cendrillon*. A good fairy asks the poor downtrodden Cinderella to fetch a pumpkin from the garden and, with a wave of her wand, transforms it into a fabulous coach – possibly the most original advertising campaign ever created for a fruit or vegetable.

These days a wide variety of pumpkins and squashes are a colourful autumn feature of market tables in Provence. The cheerful orange “fruit” are especially popular around *Toussaint* or All Saints’ Day on 1 November, still a public holiday in France, when the graves of loved ones are adorned with orange, yellow and white chrysanthemums. Although Provençal pumpkins are not hollowed out and used as candleholders like the American Halloween tradition – here *potirons* or *citrouilles* are cultivated for food, not as silly stoep decorations – Halloween celebrations have started to make inroads in the French countryside over the past decade. Children in fancy-dress costumes going trick or treating door to door, festivities involving witches and monsters held in town squares, pumpkin soup and pumpkin pies and other pumpkin dishes that are sold at these events ...

In our kitchen too we start conjuring with pumpkin around *Toussaint*. Our children do not like mashed pumpkin or pumpkin soup. Even those favourites of my Afrikaner childhood, sugary pumpkin fritters, leave their French taste buds cold. We tried pumpkin stew and pumpkin curry, we tried everything, believe me, but they refused to take our pumpkin bait. After numerous failed attempts we finally hit on a couple of dishes they would eat with as much relish as those bags of Halloween sweets they go and cadge off the neighbours. And that, as any exasperated parent will tell you, is almost as unbelievable an achievement as turning a pumpkin into a fairy-tale coach!



## THE BIG CHEESE

“WHEN MY BRAIN BEGINS TO REEL FROM MY LITERARY LABOURS, I MAKE AN OCCASIONAL CHEESE DIP.”

JOHN KENNEDY TOOLE, AMERICAN NOVELIST (1937-1969)

Our friends from other countries are always slightly surprised to learn that even cheese is eaten according to the seasons in France. There are summer cheeses and winter cheeses, just like there are summer vegetables and winter vegetables. The season of the cheese depends on where the cows, goats and ewes graze and what they eat there – because this determines the taste of their milk and ultimately the taste of the cheese made from that milk – as well as on the length of the maturation process.

The most popular winter cheeses are the creamy blues, Roquefort and the like, and the firm sheep’s milk cheese such as Ossau-Iraty. Then there are the cow’s milk cheeses from the previous year’s summer milk that have been allowed to mature gently for a long time (Comté or Beaufort for instance), and the versatile goat’s milk cheeses, which can in fact be enjoyed whatever the season. A good example of the latter are the small round cheeses from the town of Banon that are wrapped in chestnut leaves like little gifts.

And then there is the special Mont d’Or (golden hill), available only from autumn until early spring. This fantastic cheese can be spooned like soft and runny ice cream from its round container to conclude a festive meal in the appropriate manner.

Besides these, any kind of melted or baked cheese is a winner when the temperature starts to fall. A firm favourite when the French want to offer their friends a relaxed meal, is Raclette. This is a pale yellow, salty cow’s milk cheese with an orangey brown rind, but has also become the name of a social meal during which slices of cheese are melted on an electric grill in the centre of the communal table. Guests melt their own slices of cheese, which are then spread on cooked potatoes and eaten with smoked ham, gherkins and other vegetables and smoked meats.

The idea is similar to the Swiss fondue, but it is easier and above all, less messy. (No bits of meat and breadcrumbs landing in the pot and turning it into a

lumpy, unappetising mess.) Tradition has it that this type of meal developed in the French-speaking part of the Swiss Alps, among shepherds and cowherds who would spend the night outside with their animals. Pieces of cheese that happened to be left on stones close to the campfire, started to melt, and because the herdsmen had no wish to waste food, they scraped it off the stones. And so a star meal was born, with a readymade name, because raclette is simply a derivation of the French verb *racler* (to scrape).

Like most French families we have an electric raclette grill, which comes with cute little wooden spatulas so that each guest can *racler* to their heart’s content. But if you’re a South African without such a grill, bear the origins of raclette in mind next time you’re gathered with friends around a large campfire on a cool evening. Wrap some potatoes in tinfoil to bake in the coals, open a jar of gherkins or pickled onions, and melt slices of any firm, salty cheese on clean, flat stones around the fire. This is a welcome variation on the eternal braai – and for those who cannot fathom a fire without a bit of meat to go with it, you could always serve some biltong on the side, I suppose.

In our kitchen we have a repertoire of melted cheese that is second to none. It is very seldom that a good cheese becomes too old to eat; firstly because Alain and the boys demolish cheese faster than I can buy it, and secondly because a cheese really has to become stinkingly off before a Frenchman regards it as “too ripe” for his taste. But on those rare occasions when Alain doesn’t fancy a particularly elderly piece of cheese, he would definitely not throw it away. Absolutely not, because it can be melted and used as a filling for a savoury tart or pancakes, or in a rich sauce for steak or pasta, or on a pizza, or ...

We also always have grated cheese on hand in the fridge to sprinkle in an omelette or over soup, or as a gratin to top a baked dish, or in white sauce, or ... In short, we cannot imagine life without melted cheese. Especially not in winter.

