

SLOW-COOKED SAUSAGE PASTA



This is a family favorite taken from River Café Book. We have cooked it the world over, and everyone loves it. It is a regular on the menu at Monkvalley. Living in France we cannot get the spiced Italian Sausage, so we substituted Toulouse sausage, we even used chorizo.

INGREDIENTS Serve 6

2 tablespoon olive oil

8 Toulouse sausage, meat removed from skins and crumbled

2 small red onions, chopped

2 garlic cloves, finely chopped

2 small dried chillies, crumbled (or you could use chilli flakes)

2 bay leaves

100ml red wine

2 x 400g tins peeled plum tomatoes, drained. (Save the juice in case the sauce is too dry)

$\frac{1}{2}$ nutmeg, freshly grated

120g Parmigiana grated

150ml double cream

METHOD

Heat the oil in a large pan and fry the sausage meat, stirring and breaking it up, until the juice from the meat has evaporated and the fat has started to run. Add the onion, garlic, chilli and bay leaves and cook gently for about 30 minutes or until the onions are brown.

Pour in the wine, increase the heat and cook until it has evaporated. Add the tomatoes, lower the heat, and simmer gently until you have a thick sauce, about 45-60 minutes. Season with nutmeg, salt and pepper, then add the Parmesan and cream.

ENJOY

Original recipe from The River Café Cookbook by Ruth Rogers and Rose Gray

ENDIVES GRATIN



Endives wrapped in ham, served in a cheese sauce. This is a very French way of cooking Endives, and interestingly our very first meal we prepared in France.

This is a wonderful rustic French dish, perfect as a main course along with a green salad with mustard vinaigrette.

INGREDIENTS Serves 4

110 g unsalted butter
8 small endives,
Salt and pepper
juice of a lemon

For the Endives Au Gratin

8 braised endives (see above)
8 thin slices of prosciutto
100g Gruyère cheese grated
50gr breadcrumbs

For the béchamel

75gr unsalted butter

50 g plain flour
400 ml whole milk, warmed
4 Cloves
1 large onion
1 bay leaf
150ml double cream
Grated nutmeg
Salt and pepper

METHOD

Preheat oven to 170C

Melt the 110g butter in a oven proof pan over a low heat. Add the endive spears and cook, turning them occasionally, until they are starting to colour slightly. Season with salt and pepper. Add the lemon juice , and allow the endives to bubble. Add a lid and place in the oven. Cook for 2 hours

Wrap each endive with slices of ham. Arrange the endive in a shallow baking dish that holds them snugly; you don't want any space between the endive.

Turn the oven up to 190C

To make the béchamel, melt the butter in a medium saucepan over medium-low heat until golden. Add the flour and cook, whisking constantly, until the mixture smells nutty, about 2 minutes. Continue whisking and add the milk. Bring the mixture to a boil while whisking. Continue whisking until thickened, about 5 minutes. Whisk in the nutmeg and pepper.

Pour the béchamel over the endive and spread to cover them evenly. Bake for 20 minutes.

Remove from the oven, and increase the temperature to 230°C

Sprinkle the cheese and breadcrumbs evenly over the top.

Cook at the top of the oven for a further 5 minute until

golden and bubblin

Original recipe Simon Hopkinson

THE FIRST SIX MONTHS



We must have seemed like a strange bunch driving from Calais to the Vendee, just inland from the west coast above La Rochelle. The car piled high with clothing, and other objects not put into storage. Sat on top of our belongings was Lucy, our Old English Sheepdog, almost pushed flat against the roof of the car! Henry, our cocker spaniel, in his usual position at Sheila's feet.

It was a long journey, and, after a few comfort stops, plus a supermarket shop for steak, salad and wine, we arrived at the Gite we were renting from an English family.

The Gite was a little unwelcoming on a dark rainy November

evening, but, the sound of sizzling meat, the pop of a wine cork soon relaxed us.

The Gite was a long narrow building with 4 bedrooms, a dining kitchen, lounge, and games room. Quite comfortable, and, in an isolated hamlet.,The following morning the first thing on the agenda was food shopping, and, while Sheila unpacked, I set off searching for vital supplies.

Foreign supermarkets had always appeared full of unfamiliar, but interesting produce, seemingly having a wonderful selection of cheeses and wines. So an abundance of these were purchased!

Our first real French meal, well actually our first in France meal was ENDIVES GRATIN endive wrapped in ham and baked in a cheese sauce. This has been a simple favourite over the years, but has changed quite a lot since this first attempt. We now cook the endive in butter plus a little lemon juice, until it is wilted and golden, previously we only steamed it. Then instead of plain ham we use Bayonne, or, another similar type. The cheese sauce is now well flavoured, with Gruyere, seasoned with Dijon mustard, and a breadcrumb topping with Parmesan.

Assembled and baked in the oven until golden brown, served with good French bread, and a green salad, it's a delicious autumn, or, winters dinner.



During the run up to our first Christmas in we explored the Vendee, and, the surrounding area. The markets proved to be irresistible. It was, and still is, possible to visit a market everyday of the week in France. The fish markets in Fontenay-la-Compte, La Roche-sur-Yon, and, the wonderful one in La Rochelle, fascinated us with the amazing selection of fresh produce.



Rick Stein's cookery books proved invaluable as did Sophie Grigson's Book "Fish". Sophie, made interesting reading, with her reminiscences of living, and eating in the Loire region, where her parents owned a Troglodyte dwelling.

We were both extremely happy to welcome my mother for a two week holiday, including Christmas. When mentioning to her our plans for moving from England, Mum had looked upset, until we told her it was France. "Thank heavens for that. I thought you were going to say Australia!".

She had loved her holidays in France, spending most of them with my sister Susan and her family.

Chapon (Capon) was our first Christmas dinner in France, but in essence it was completely English! Sheila having made several Christmas puddings the previous year, meant we had one for the occasion.



All supermarkets in France issue catalogues of Menu des Fetes – for Christmas, Easter etc. Meaning you can order your complete meal including wine, ready for the oven/table. While these do look pretty tasty, the pleasure for us is in the

planning, shopping and preparing the dishes. Sheila starts “lists” well in advance, and watch out if I interfere!

It was Mum’s birthday during her visit, and I decided to cook her a dish of scallops in a cream sauce. The scallops were amazingly fresh, and cost a fortune, and, I like to think cooked to perfection. We sat down to the birthday meal, and the dish was eaten in silence, no comment.

The following day we took Mum to the coast, and for lunch, we stopped at a small bistro, and had Moulles aux frites. Cheap, simple and well cooked. Mum finished her meal, and said after a short pause “Well you can keep your scallops, give me mussels any time!”



Mum was our first visitor, and this was important to both of us. However she was not the last to visit us during our 6 months in the Vendee.

One fear we had concerning our move to France, was the possibility of losing touch with our families, and our dear

friends. This concern of course proved to be groundless, and now after 13 years we feel very proud and honoured that all our friends and family will return year after year.

We do feel that In many ways the time spent together is special and has strengthened our relationships.

The plan in starting our new life in France was to explore this region extensively (we knew little about the Vendee, apart from a holiday spent years earlier near La Rochelle) to see if we would like to settle here.

Renting a property close by was another English couple, who had similar plans to ours. They were the same age, and it was good to have this contact in the beginning. To share experiences etc. They eventually purchased a house in the Deux Sevres, close to the Vendee, but, after 10 years they returned to the UK.

Early on we were to discover the laid back attitude of the rural community. The boiler in the gite was always a problem, so it came as no surprise to discover a fire had started in the chimney, and we had to send for the Pompiers (Firemen). The engine promptly arrived, the guys took a quick look at the smoke coming from the chimney, and immediately proceeded to show the old man living next door the finer points of a fire engine. Describing in detail what each piece of equipment did, often accompanied with lots of arm gestures. Eventually they decided that perhaps it would be a good idea to place a ladder against the house and examine it more closely.

They then stood back and had a conversation amongst themselves, which I strongly suspected had nothing to do with the fire.

At this point Sheila appeared with a tray of drinks so this took precedence!

Refreshments over they then tackled the fire.....

Another incident centred around my first visit to a doctor. Over Christmas I had developed a really bad sore throat which was difficult to get rid of so I made an appointment with the Doctor.

Sheila and I set off, and, on the way a dog ran out of a farm yard, and, under the car. We stopped to check if the dog was OK, The farmer came out: We asked: "Do you want us to take him to the Vets, have him checked over?" As you can imagine at this point Sheila and I were very distressed. The farmer replied "Don't worry it does this regularly"! The dog took a last look at us, and ran back to the farm.

Following on from this we were obviously late for the appointment, and, by now my blood pressure was probably through the roof. I explained about my throat, and the Doctor instructed me to take off my shirt, unfasten my trousers, and lay on the couch! At this point, Sheila, who was only just behind a curtain thought: "Best leave them alone after all two's company there's a crowd!!

The most thorough examination for a sore throat ever!

Back to house hunting.

We viewed many houses, always accompanied by an agent, but nothing appealed to us, and apart from the coastal region the area did not "grab" us. So, we decided to extend our search.

One very wet and foggy January day we set off to look at houses in the Loire Valley, centred around Saumur.



So the next stage in our journey begins

THE FOOD STARTS HERE



What are my

earliest recollections?

Grandma Wilton introducing me to chips and ketchup when I was about 5.

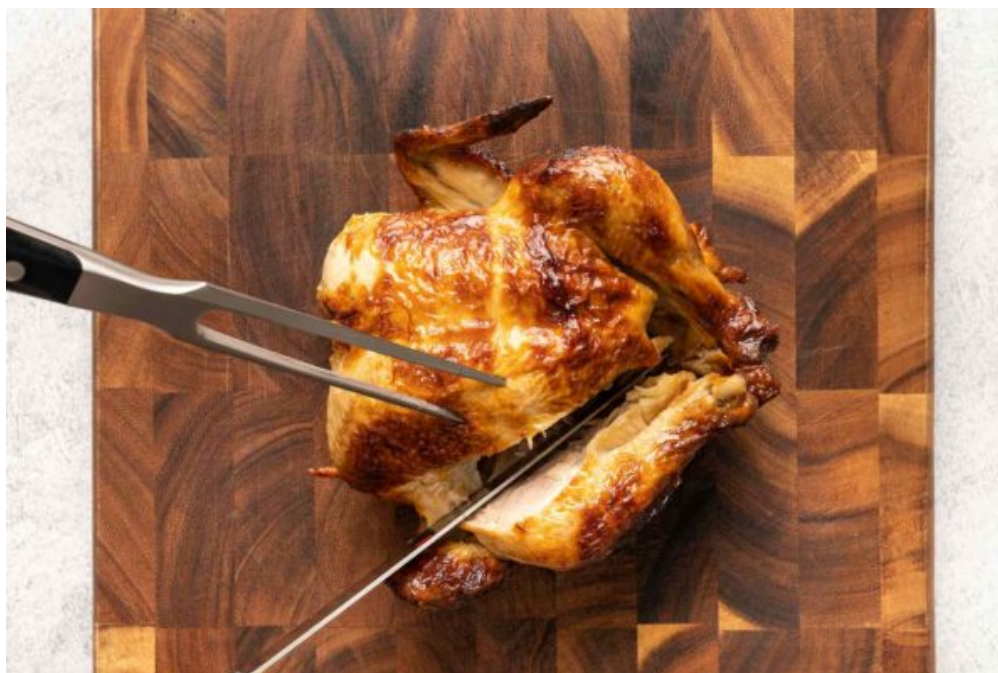
My first banana – I think after rationing had ended following the War.



Orange juice and cod liver oil at Infant school.

Hating drinking tea because I thought it was obligatory to have it sweetened.

Having chicken only at Christmas and loving eating the leg like my dad did.



Mums home made raspberry and blackberry jams for tea on, sometimes home-made, white bread thickly spread with butter.

All simple stuff but things that I think gave me the desire, some say ability, to eat anything, to try anything new.

Some of our French friends refer to me as a “Poubelle de Tables”, a literal translation being “Dustbin of the table”. Strangely enough I look upon this as a complement.

As long as I can remember I have liked the idea of trying new things – when we moved to Buckinghamshire many years ago I remember the local green grocer calling on Mum with a couple of Avocado (can never figure out what his motives were ?). Avocado was a pretty strange creature to us, but we gave it a try – it was hard and unripe and we thought totally disgusting



Now this is another “talent” that I possess – to try something, not enjoy it, but to return to it over and over again until my taste buds surrender, which is rare, or when I like it.

What don’t I like in food?

Tripe! But I will not surrender!

WHERE DO I BEGIN



Where do I start with this Blog?

From the moment we moved to France?

When I first became interested in food?

To begin with I accept that this is nothing unique, there are quite a few Blogs with similar themes. Over the years I have played at keeping a daily diary, unlike Sheila who has been religiously keeping diaries since school days. But my resolve on the other hand is not as strong and those scribblings soon dried up.

The media appeals to me because not only can I share the experience of my life in France but, with a liberal sprinkling of the previous 50 years!

The “audience” is mainly our respective families, and our dear friends. If occasionally a new “friend” or contact jumps on board all the better.

Meeting and chatting to new people is always, well almost

always, a pleasure.