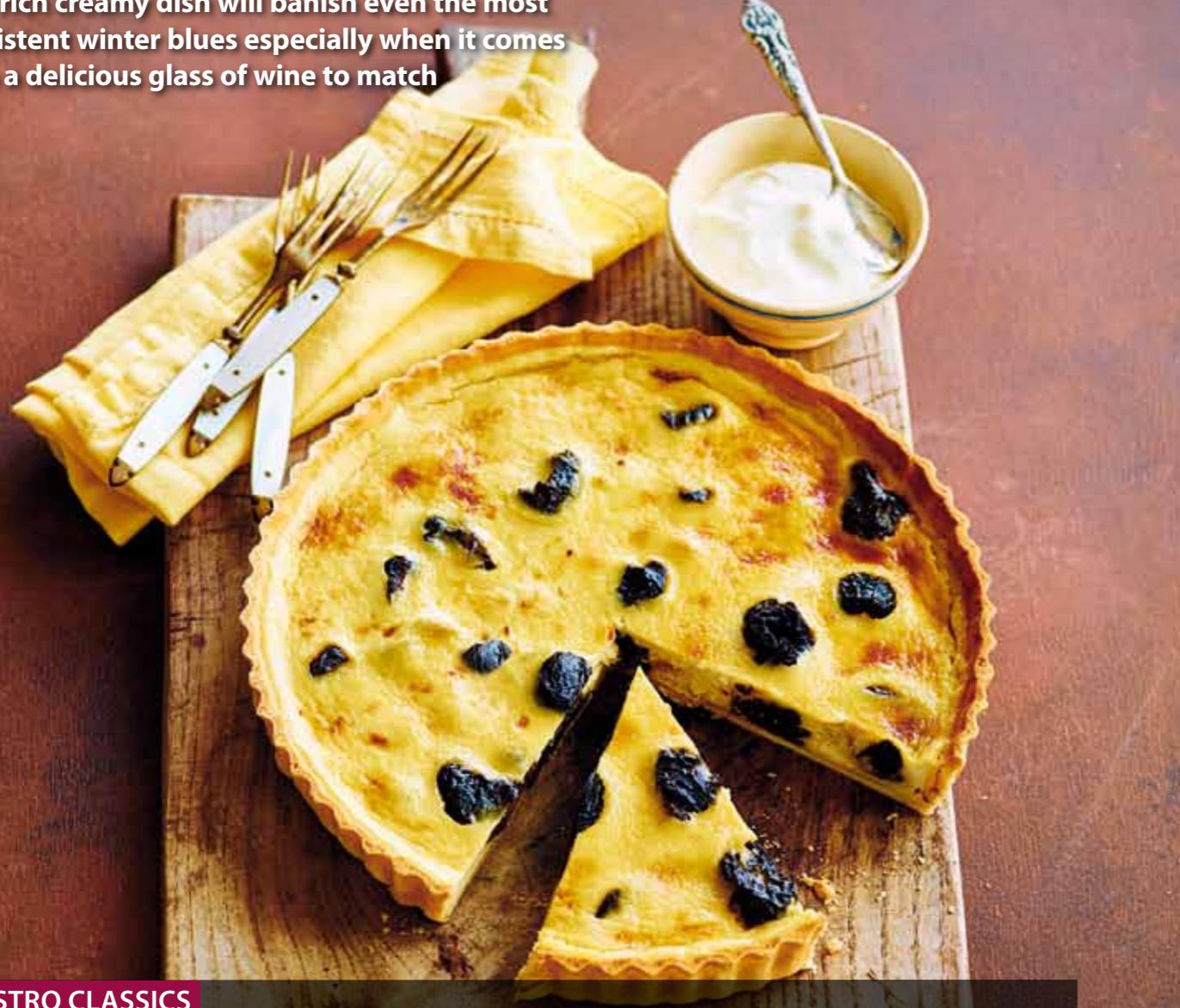


# Flavours of France

## TARTE AUX PRUNEAUX

This rich creamy dish will banish even the most persistent winter blues especially when it comes with a delicious glass of wine to match



### BISTRO CLASSICS

Serves 8

- 1 x packet ready-rolled shortcrust pastry
- 250-350g pitted prunes
- 50ml cognac or brandy
- 600ml (1 pint) double cream
- 1 vanilla pod, split
- 3 eggs, plus 1 extra egg yolk
- 75g caster sugar
- Crème fraîche, to serve

**1** Preheat the oven to 200°C (180°C fan). Line a 23cm tart tin with the pastry, pressing well into the sides. Trim off any excess and prick the base with a fork. Chill for 20 minutes. Line the case with baking paper and baking beans and blind bake for 10 minutes, remove the paper and beans, and bake for a further 10 minutes until the pastry is crisp and golden. Remove from the oven and leave to cool. Reduce oven temperature to 170°C (150°C fan).

**2** Place the prunes and cognac or brandy in a small saucepan and heat gently until boiling. Simmer for 1 minute then remove from the heat and allow to cool completely. Drain prunes and reserve liqueur. Arrange the prunes in concentric circles in the pastry case.

**3** Meanwhile, put the cream and vanilla pod in a pan and bring slowly to the boil. Remove from the heat and leave to infuse until cool, then scrape all the seeds from the pod into the cream, discarding the pod. Beat together the reserved cognac liqueur, eggs, egg yolk, sugar and cooled cream. Pour into the pastry case covering the prunes and bake for 30-35 minutes until just set. Remove from oven and cool to room temperature. Serve with crème fraîche.

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## THIS MONTH: Tarte aux pruneaux

**Louise Pickford** prepares one of her all-time favourite dishes

**P**reserving fruits in France has, for centuries, been a domestic pastime as well as a very profitable commercial industry.

Prunes are probably one of the most successfully preserved fruits of all. A little confusingly, a fresh plum in France is called a *prune* whereas in the UK and other English-speaking countries, it is the dried fruit that we call a prune and buy already dried from the supermarket.

Prunes come from a variety of plum known as *prunus domestica* or European prune. It has a deep-purple skin, the stone is easily detached from the flesh meaning it is a freestone fruit (as opposed to clingstone as many other plum varieties are) and it has a particularly high sugar content. This allows the plum to be dried in the sun (or in a drying machine) without fermenting, which would leave it sour and worthless. Once dried, the prune barely resembles the fruit it was before and what we are left with is an inky black, moist, soft and richly flavoured fruit that can be eaten straight from the pack

*The fruit is first soaked in armagnac before being bathed in a layer of rich creamy custard and baked in a sweet pastry shell*

or used in many different types of dishes, both sweet and savoury.

The best prunes in France come from several regions in the south of the country and perhaps the best and most well known are from Agen in Lot-et-Garonne. *Pruneau d'Agen* is the name given to this particular variety, and it was this prune that was first exported to California in the 19th century. Today they produce the world's largest supply of prunes and ridiculously enough, many we buy in France are from California!

Known as the fruit that will keep you 'regular', prunes are packed full of goodness. They are a good source of fibre and are high in vitamin C and vitamin K.

Although I love prunes with meat, especially rabbit and pork, I'm powerless when it comes to a good custard tart, and

what better than combining the two? Here the fruit is first soaked in armagnac before being bathed in a layer of rich creamy custard and baked in a sweet pastry shell. Served with crème fraîche, it's a real delight.

I think prunes are a highly underrated and healthy fruit, and I hope that by sharing this recipe with you, I might go a small way towards spreading the word.

**Louise Pickford** is a food writer and stylist with more than 25 cookbooks to her name. She lives in Charente with her food and lifestyle photographer husband Ian Wallace.

**ON THE MENU NEXT MONTH...**  
... IT'S TARTIFLETTE  
*As the winter chill truly starts to bite, warm up with this hearty mountain dish.*



## What to drink...

Master of Wine **Richard Hemming** suggests three wines to complement tarte aux pruneaux

**R**ules are made for breaking, and for this recipe, I propose defying the most golden rule of them all: matching sweet wines with dessert.

It's a truth universally acknowledged that if you drink dry wines with sweet foods, the contrast is unpleasant. Yet it's apparently perfectly acceptable to drink sweet wines with savoury foods – such as the classic combination of Sauternes and foie gras. With a dish such as *tarte aux pruneaux*, I believe you can get away with serving a dry wine.

The trick is to ensure you choose a wine loaded with bright fruity flavours. In France that means looking south where the warm climate produces grapes with plenty of ripeness. The Rhône Valley is ideally situated in this regard, and it tends to grow varieties that fit the bill too.

Grenache is the main black grape here, and it is characterised by a juicy red-fruit character, like raspberries and strawberries. Grenache often produces



**La Vieille Ferme Rouge 2014 Vin de France**

£7.29 widely available

Spice up your life with this southern French blend, made with Carignan, Cinsault, Grenache and Syrah. The fruit character is juicy and smooth, with all the necessary ripeness to compete with dessert.



**La Vieille Ferme Blanc 2014 Vin de France**

£7.29 widely available

Composed of four local Rhône varieties, this is a classic example of the type, with fragrant stone fruit flavours and plenty of weight on the palate, as well as a subtle cedar note from oak ageing.



**Kuehn**

**Pinot Gris d'Alsace**

£11.70 BuyGreatWine.co.uk

If you don't want to risk a dry wine, this Pinot Gris has nine grams per litre of sugar, making it (almost) demi-sec. It has delicious tinned pear and floral aromas and makes a fine traditional accompaniment to the tart.