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No other nation's cuisine has given as much to the world as France. It's a country where food is the very glue that binds society together, where restaurants were invented and where the term 'cuisine' was first coined. Served the world over, French food conjures up images of sophisticated bistros in Paris and sun-drenched terraces in Provence, with such iconic dishes as beef bourguignon and lemon tarts bringing people the taste of France wherever they are.

Trace these dishes back to their source and you'll find a treasure trove of stories, told by passionate cooks, chefs and bakers. They'll tell you about the produce grown in their land, the legends that accompany the recipes, and the generations of families who have perfected these recipes over centuries.

We've gathered together 63 recipes that tell those stories, with the help of the people who know them best. The dishes, from simple starters to sophisticated desserts, are drawn from France's wonderfully varied geography, climate and terrain, which results in a bounty of produce from the wild, western tip of Brittany to the golden shores of Provence.

The French term that describes the total of these conditions is terroir and, as any chef will tell you, it is as important for raising cattle and growing vegetables as it is for making wine. Each region’s terroir dictates its regional culinary identity, which is why, for example, you find dairy-rich dishes in Normandy, wine-infused stews in Burgundy and vibrant vegetables at the heart of Provençal cuisine. Even Michelin-starred chefs, whose reputations may be national or even global, are bound to the terroir of their region and use produce that is grown nearby, sometimes just a few steps from the kitchen door, just as it was in homes centuries ago. Although kitchens have modernised and a variety of food has become readily available, many of the best chefs will still use ingredients and techniques that were born in simpler times, because flavours and combinations have been perfected over centuries and still make the mouth water.

Of course, French food is renowned for its sophistication, its elegance and its multiple accolades, including the revered Michelin stars, but what all chefs and cooks will tell you is that good food is what brings people together here, whether it’s a family around the dinner table, a group of friends at a restaurant or the chance for neighbours to chat over the boulangerie counter and the market stall. Restaurants play a big part in the daily tempo of life here, with families working together to serve their customers, while cooks at guesthouses make their tables d’hôtes (hosts’ tables) a chance for guests from around the world to share some of French cuisine’s most rustic dishes.

These dishes may well lead you on a journey to discover the foods in the places they originate, as well as try them at home. So whether the recipes inspire you to make a simple cake to share with friends over coffee, or an ambitious dish for a dinner party, there is something here to fit every occasion and all are provided by chefs and cooks who are passionate about their food, their ingredients and their region.

Bon appétit!
The fishing ports, apple orchards and dairy farms of Brittany and Normandy offer up some heart-warming classics, while Lorraine’s much-loved baked goods date from centuries ago. In Paris, the classic bistro cuisine includes some of France’s most iconic dishes.

1. Crèmeux de Chou-fleur, Saint-Jacques caramelisées, Piqués de Roscoff Cream of cauliflower soup, with caramelised scallops & pickled Roscoff onions
2. Rillettes de Sardines Sardine pâté
3. Camembert au four, flambée au Calvados Baked Camembert, flambéd with Calvados
4. Ramequins avec trois fromages Normands Ramekins with three Normandy cheeses
5. Baguette French bread
6. Soupe à l'oignon gratinée French onion soup
7. Galettes Breton Breton pancakes
8. Poulet de Vallee de l’Auge Auge Valley chicken
9. Le Saint Pierre avec girolles et abricots John Dory with chanterelle mushrooms & apricots
10. Quiche Lorraine
11. Gratin dauphinois Dauphinois potato gratin
12. Kouign-amann Butter cake
13. La Teurgoule Rice pudding three ways
14. Tartelette pomme rhubarbe Apple & rhubarb tartlet
15. Macaron à la fraise et yuzu Strawberry yuzu macaron
16. Madeleines Madeleine cakes
17. Île flottante ‘Floating island’
18. Baba à l’Armagnac Brioche-style cake with brandy
19. Crème brûlée Crème brûlée

Northern France
There can be few areas of France more spoiled for choice of ingredients than the northern tip of the Finistère département (county) in Brittany: not only is its port town of Roscoff known for the sweet, pink onions made famous by the ‘Onion Johnnies’, but the area is rich in other produce. In the fields that lie around the pretty harbour town, artichokes, cauliflower and asparagus grow in plentiful supply.

‘I call it a big garden,’ says Loïc Le Bail, who returned to his native Finistère after several years training with top chefs in Paris. ‘There’s a strong history of growing vegetables and there is so much here. As well as the fish and the seafood, there are lots of different seaweeds that we use in the kitchen. It wasn’t till I came here that I got to know these products. In Paris, there’s nothing like that.’ Central to his recipe is the cauliflower, ‘I use a summer cauliflower, it’s smaller and has a subtler flavour,’ says Loïc. ‘The flavour is stronger in the winter.’ Also in his recipe is the product for which locals hold most pride: the Roscoff onion. It’s celebrated throughout the town with a festival every August, there’s a confrérie (a brotherhood, or guild) devoted to promoting them, and even a small museum dedicated to the Onion Johnnies’ history. So what makes them so special?

‘When you look at a Roscoff onion,’ Loïc says, ‘it’s handsome, it’s nice and round. You feel like biting into it, like you would an apple. You can eat it raw, too, as it’s quite sweet.’ Despite his passion for the ingredient, Loïc explains it doesn’t have to be the central ingredient to his dishes, ‘I don’t think of it as a vegetable, it’s a condiment,’ he says. Pickled, the onions provide the pièce de résistance to his dish: the sweet, sharp taste cuts through the smooth and welcoming flavours of the soup and, together, it’s the perfect recipe to encapsulate this beautiful corner of Brittany.

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CRÉMEUX DE CHOU-FLEUR, SAINT-JACQUES CARAMÉLISÉES, PIGLENS DE ROSCOFF

Cream of cauliflower soup, with caramelised scallops & pickled Roscoff onions

The stereotypical image of a Frenchman – with a striped jersey, a bicycle and a string of onions – is thanks to the Onion Johnnies of Roscoff who came to England in the early 20th century to sell their delicately flavoured pink onions. Here, they’re combined with cauliflower to produce a deliciously warming soup.

Chef // Loïc Le Bail
Location // Hôtel Brittany, Roscoff
CRÉMEUX DE CHOU-FLEUR, SAINT-JACQUES CARAMELISÉES, PIGLENS DE ROSCOFF

Cream of cauliflower soup, with caramelised scallops & pickled Roscoff onions

Serves 6

**Preparation and cooking time: 45min (not including soaking time for onions)**

**For the pickled onions**
3 small Roscoff onions
500ml (17 1/2 fl oz) white vinegar

**For the soup**
1 medium-sized cauliflower
salted water, for boiling cauliflower
40g (1 1/2 oz) butter, plus 2 tbsp for frying scallops
1 large onion, finely chopped
tip of a garlic clove (approx 2mm/¾in)
250ml (8 3/4 fl oz) milk
250ml (8 3/4 fl oz) single cream
300ml (10fl oz) thick cream
salt, to taste
pinch of cayenne pepper
12 scallops
crostons, to serve
chervil (or half flat-leaf parsley/half tarragon), to serve

**Tip**
For a midweek meal, the soup can be served without the scallops. Loïc prefers to add a pinch of cayenne pepper, rather than black pepper, as it gives a warmer flavour.

1. Peel the Roscoff onions and slice them thinly. Put them in a bowl of white vinegar for two hours, then drain and blot them on absorbent kitchen paper. The vinegar should be pink, having taken the colour from the onions. Set the pickled onions aside to garnish the soup.

2. Cut the cauliflower into large florets. Bring a pan of water to the boil, add a sprinkle of salt and the cauliflower florets, and cook for ten minutes. Drain and set aside.

3. Melt the 40g of butter in a casserole dish, add the chopped onion, the garlic and the cauliflower florets.

4. Mix together the milk and single cream, then pour into the casserole dish to just cover the cauliflower. Simmer for 15 minutes then blitz the mixture with a hand blender/liquidiser.

5. Add the thick cream, heat through and add salt and a pinch of cayenne pepper.

6. In a separate pan, fry the scallops in 2 tbsp of butter for one minute on each side.

Serve the soup in a dish, placing the scallops, pickled onion slices, croutons and springs of chervil on top.

‘Why onion “Johnnies”? Well, because back then, all the men were called Jean-this, or Jean-that, so the English just started calling them all “Johnny”.’

Loïc Le Bail

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Why onion “Johnnies”? Well, because back then, all the men were called Jean-this, or Jean-that, so the English just started calling them all “Johnny”.

Loïc Le Bail
The sun-drenched vegetables of Provence combine to create some of the Mediterranean’s most vibrant dishes, while the hearty cuisine of the mountains soothe the soul. In France’s gastronomic capital Lyon, the menus tell stories of days gone by.

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