



**17 Charente-Maritime** is famous for its locally produced wine, the Pineau des Charentes and the region is globally renowned for its oysters particularly Oysters from the Marennes-Oléron area, rope grown.

Local dishes make great use of the fleur de sel or French sea salt which is produced in the islands of Ré and Oléron. Other highly rated local produce to be found in this region are honey, asparagus and potatoes.

An above-average number of people work in agriculture, although in general the activity is not highly productive. Wheat, barley, and especially corn (maize) are widely cultivated, with the lowlands around Poitiers and the central and southern parts of the region specializing in these crops. Sunflowers are also a key crop in these areas. Brandy, especially cognac (named for a town in the Charente River valley), is produced in Charente and Charente-Maritime. Beef cattle are raised on the Massif Central and the Massif Armoricaïn, and dairy cows are raised in southern Deux-Sèvres and in central eastern areas of the region. Sheep are grazed extensively in the Montmorillan area of Vienne, while goat cheese is produced around Melle in southern Deux-Sèvres. Shellfish farming, particularly of oysters, is a major activity in coastal areas.

**Bouchot Mussels** are another speciality of the area. The mouclade and the eclade are typical local recipes.

**Shrimps, Crustaceans and Fish Charentaise** Gastronomy takes advantage of all the seafood which forms a basis for many traditional recipes.

**The pibale** is the estuary eel and the glass eel (its fry). They are eaten fresh or smoked. Its rather fatty flesh is traditionally cooked in wine.

**Salt from Île de Ré** The salt marshes are an integral part of the coastal and island landscape.

**Charentaise Seaweed** is a seaweed still unknown in France, even if it is widely consumed in Asia.

**Potato from Île de Ré** Its thin and delicate skin does not allow long storage, and is best eaten whole. Its flesh is very tasty

**Charentais Crickets** is a kind of pâté, made from lean pieces of pork, which are left to marinade for several hours.

**Saintonge Cagouilles** are small grey snails, cooked with wine or Pineau de Charente.

**Charentaise Galette** is a traditional cake from the Poitevin marshes and is flavoured with angelica.

**Cornuelles** are triangular dry cookies, with a hole in the centre, usually offered for Palm Sunday

**Charentais Melon** is very sweet, it can be eaten as a n entree or as a dessert.

**Kiwi Fruit** The climate and sunny valleys are well suited to this fruit which is sweet and slightly tang

**Pineau des Charentes** is a liqueur wine, ideal as an aperitif. Pineau can be red, rosé or white. Pineau blanc tastes of honey and spices while rosé and red Pineaux are more fruity.

**Cognac** is the distillation of local wines and aged in oak barrels for at least two years.

## **Oysters**

In France they are still hugely popular and are a traditional starter at Christmas.

Serves 6

### **Ingredients**

There is a huge variety of oysters. Each has their own unique taste, shape and size.

The most prized in Charente Maritime are the Marennes-Oléron oysters, which undergo a particular process for maturity.

### **Equipment**

Safety is important when opening oysters, so that you don't cut yourself.

You will need a tea towel, to get a good hold on the oyster and a shucking knife.

If you are serious about oysters at home, you can also get a silicone oyster gripper, which holds it securely.

The knives are either a double sided blade or a lever which can be used to nip off a piece of shell if you are having difficulty inserting the knife.

A small paring knife is a good substitute.

## **Shucking Instructions**

Start by checking your oysters to make sure that none are cracked or open in any way, as they could be bad to eat.

Rinse the oysters under the cold tap and brush off any loose bits.

Hold your oyster, with a cloth, with the flattest bit uppermost as you don't want to spill any of the juices when you open it.

Now look for the hinge, which is normally the pointiest part of the oyster, and insert the knife.

When the knife is in far enough and secure, twist the knife to release the seal of the muscle. The noise you hear is called the 'shucking' noise.

Ideally the oysters should be served straightaway, but it will take a time to open all the oysters so use the top shell as a lid to keep them fresh, while you prepare the rest.

## **Serving Variations**

The French often serve the oysters on specially grooved plates so that the oysters sit still on the plate.

Normally, however, they are served a big platter, where everyone can help themselves.

This is much less daunting for anyone who has not tried oysters before.

Start with a layer of crushed ice on a large platter.

Now arrange the oysters and scatter lemon wedges across so everyone can help themselves.

Take off the top oyster shells to serve.

In restaurants you are often given a little 3 pronged fork to loosen the oyster, before tipping it into your mouth.

Normally, though, a grapefruit spoon makes it a much better tool.

They are often served with Tabasco and finely chopped shallots in red wine vinegar.

A little bit of crusty bread and butter always goes down well too.

### **What do you serve with oysters?**

Traditionally, serving oysters is very simple.

Lemon wedges, a small bottle of tabasco sauce and perhaps some shallot vinaigrette, known as mignonette.

It's some finely chopped shallots, black pepper and red wine vinegar.

### **What wine do you serve with oysters?**

A crisp dry white wine such as a Muscadet sur Lie, Sancerre, Chablis or a Sauvignon Blanc.

## **Shrimp Melon, Sesame, Teriyaki Sauce and Basmati Rice**

Have you ever tasted warm melon?

Preparation Time; 15mins, Cooking Time; 15mins, serves 2

## **Ingredients**

1 large melon

350 g peeled raw prawns

1 glass of basmati rice

1 clove of garlic

2cm fresh ginger

4 tbsp. teriyaki sauce

olive oil

fresh coriander

a few sesame seeds for garnish

1 tablespoon sesame oil (optional)

## **Method**

Cut your melon in half, making the wolf-tooth incisions round rim if required.

Remove the seeds and scoop out the flesh using a Parisian scoop.

If you don't have this special spoon, remove the flesh with a tablespoon and cut it into pieces...

Start cooking your rice according to the instructions on the packet.

Peel the garlic clove and remove the germ.

Peel the piece of ginger.

Press everything using a garlic press or possibly use a small grater.

Chop some coriander leaves.

In a wok or in a frying pan, heat the olive oil, add the garlic and ginger and the melon balls.

Let heat for 2 minutes while stirring and add the prawns.

Mix and pour the Teriyaki sauce.

Continue cooking to cook the prawns, they are very pink, add a little coriander and mix.

The sauce should be slightly syrupy.

Drain your rice.

Arrange the melon husks in cups, add a little rice in the bottom and fill in half of the melon hulls.

Divide your melon balls with the prawns, without forgetting the sauce

Sprinkle with a few sesame seeds, add a little coriander and possibly a drizzle of sesame oil.