

GOURMET RECIPES

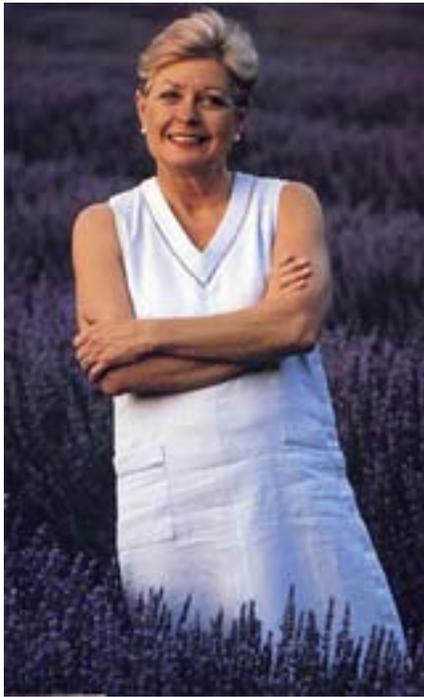
A Trip to Provence

We're off to France next month, and who better to get us in the mood but Patricia Wells! The avidly read and enjoyed restaurant critic for the *International Herald Tribune* took us on our early culinary tours a few years ago with her bestselling *The Food Lover's Guide to Paris* and *The Food Lover's Guide to France*. She delighted us further with *Bistro Cooking*, *Simply French* and *Patricia Wells Trattoria*. She's back again, so forget the rainy summer we've had; her latest, *The Provence Cookbook*, filled our kitchen with the sunny flavours of France and transported us with each wonderful recipe we tried!



Wells and her husband Walter divide their time between Paris and their country home, Chanteduc, in Vaison-la-Romaine. This area in Provence is our favourite as well; we had a glorious couple of weeks just outside the village a few years ago and have always dreamed about getting back. Meanwhile, we've got *The Provence Cookbook* to happily tide us over, as Wells includes 175 enticing recipes that reflect her long and close ties with the local farmers and purveyors who provide such a wide range of high-quality foods. We remember the butcher shop, the fabulous charcuteries and the lovely, gentle chocolatier; we have warm memories of afternoons on the tiny main street sipping a Citron Presse while the world in Vaison ambled slowly by. Oh, Patricia... you've done it again for all of us!

Take a quick trip to France yourself! Tonight, try My Vegetable Man's Asparagus Flan, or season up those fresh beans with aioli and finish with Wells's own Three-Pear Cake. Whatever you choose from this delicious collection, you'll be happily transported to Provence just as we were!



If you're lucky enough to be going to France, pick up the latest Lonely Planet guides. We find them terrific, accurate descriptions of both the great and the gruesome in dining and places to stay. We like to sleep at a reasonable price and then pull out the stops for great meals... this is France, after all, and Lonely Planet gives us just the information we need. The bonus for us is that they're so easy to read and understand, unlike... well, some of the standard guides!

But wait – Ron is calling us to dinner, and tonight, that flan just won't wait any longer. Neither will I!

On today's menu:

- [My Vegetable Man's Asparagus Flan](#)
- [Three-Pear Cake](#)
- [Aioli](#)

My Vegetable Man's Asparagus Flan

Le Flan d'Asperges de Mon Marchand de Légumes

Serves 8 as a first course

Patricia Wells said, "It's funny how merchants in the market generally resemble their produce. The farmer selling gnarled old carrots and turnips always sports hands that advertise his long hard labor in the sun.

The lady offering pristine little rounds of goat cheese manages to reflect a



prim, proper tidy life. Raymond Chapuis, who supplies me with first of season asparagus, tender pear, firm and shiny zucchini and gorgeous fava beans, is always trim, neatly dressed and sporting a well-kept beard and a hearty smile. I see him at the Tuesday market in Vaison-la-Romaine, then again on Wednesdays in Saint-Rémy. His wife, Simone, kindly shared this flavoured asparagus flan. Note that for this recipe you need only the tender tips, which in Provence are sold separately. The stems can be steamed, puréed and blended with chicken stock to prepare soup."

We say this is simply the most exquisite flan you'll ever eat. Treat yourself and some special friends – they will love you forever!

Equipment: a 10½-inch round porcelain gratin dish; a vegetable steamer.

- 1 pound thin green asparagus tips (about 2 cups)
 - 4 ounces smoked slab bacon, rind removed, cut into cubes (1 cup)
 - 1 cup light cream
 - 4 large eggs, lightly beaten
 - Fine sea salt to taste
 - Freshly ground white pepper to taste
1. Preheat the oven to 425°F. Butter the grain dish and set aside.
 2. Bring about 3 cups of water to a simmer in the bottom of a vegetable steamer. Place the asparagus tips on the steaming rack. Place the rack over the simmering water, cover and steam until they are cooked though, 3 to 5 minutes. Drain. Set aside.
 3. Place the bacon in a large skillet and cook, stirring frequently, over medium high heat just until it begins to give off its fat and starts to brown, 4 to 5 minutes. Drain. Set aside.
 4. In a large bowl, combine the cream and eggs. Whisk to blend.
 5. Pour half of the cream and egg mixture into the gratin dish. Scatter the bacon over the mixture. Layer the asparagus tips on top of the bacon. Season with salt and pepper. Cover with the remaining cream and egg mixture.
 6. Place the baking dish in the center of the oven. Bake until the mixture is set and the top is golden, 30 to 35 minutes. Remove from the oven and let cool for 10 minutes. Serve in wedges as a first course, or as a main luncheon dish with a tossed salad alongside.

Patricia Wells's wine suggestion: This delicate spring flan calls for a floral white, perhaps one with a Viognier base. Try the vin de pays from the reputable Châteauneuf-du-Pape vineyard Domaine de la Janasse.

Three-Pear Cake

Gâteau aux Trois Paires



In *The Provence Cookbook*, Patricia Wells tells us that "One of the very first things I did once we acquired our farmhouse in the early 1980s was to plant a trio of espaliered pear trees. I had always admired the perfectly trained and tended trees in the Loire Valley, at Versailles, and in the Luxembourg Gardens in Paris, and I carried around a naively romantic view of my very own verger or orchard. The trees were planted and staked, but somehow neither I nor Walter, nor any of the successions of gardeners we have hired over the years seems to have the proper espalier pruning knack. The three different varieties of pears – Poire William, Passe Cressagne, and Bon Chrétien – have grown and grown and produce volumes of fruit, but in honesty most people would not recognize them as espaliered. Trees.

"Also never having grown pears, I had no idea how difficult it was to gauge their ripeness.

"Unripe, they totally lack flavor. But once they are ripe and fall from the trees, all manner of insects and critters come to devour their share. What I have finally learned to do is to pick them just before they begin to fall from the trees, store them in a dark, cool place to ripen then begin cooking as many pears as I can in the shortest amount of time."

Oh, who cares about espalier? Pears are coming in and we love the idea of cooking as many as possible immediately. We started with Patricia Wells's lovely gateau and haven't slowed down yet. Except for warm slices with fresh whipped cream...

Serves 8 (or four, around our house!)

Equipment: A 9-inch springform pan

- Butter and flour for preparing the pan
- 1/2 cup all-purpose flour

- 1/3 cup sugar
- 1 Tbsp baking powder
- 1/8 tsp fine sea salt
- 1/2 tsp pure vanilla extract
- 2 large eggs, lightly beaten
- 1 Tbsp vegetable oil
- 1 Tbsp pear eau-de-vie
- 1/3 cup nonfat plain yogurt
- Grated zest of 1 lemon
- 4 large pears (about 2 pounds), peeled, cored and cut lengthwise into 16ths

The topping:

- 1/3 cup sugar
 - 1 large egg, lightly beaten
 - 1 Tbsp pear eau-de-vie
 - Grated zest of 1 lemon
1. Preheat the oven to 425°F. Butter the pan and set aside.
 2. In a large bowl, combine the flour, sugar, baking powder and salt, and stir to blend. Add the vanilla, eggs, oil, eau-de-vie, yogurt and lemon zest, and stir until well blended. Add the pears and stir to thoroughly coat the fruit with the batter.
 3. Spoon the mixture into the prepared cake pan. Place the pan in the center of the oven and bake until 1 fairly firm and golden, about 40 minutes.
 4. Meanwhile in small bowl, combine the sugar, egg, eau-de-vie, and lemon zest and stir to blend. Set aside.
 5. Once the cake is firm and golden, remove it from the oven and pour the sugar mixture on top of the cake, evening it out with a spatula. Return the cake to the oven and bake until the top is a deep golden brown and the cake feels quite firm when pressed with a fingertip, about 10 minutes more, for a total baking time of 50 minutes.
 6. Remove to a rack to cool. After 10 minutes run a knife along the side of the pan. Release and remove the side of the springform pan, leaving the cake on the pan base. Serve at room temperature, cut into thin wedges.

Patricia Wells's wine suggestion: A pear eau de vie.

Aïoli: Garlic Mayonnaise

"There is no such thing as a little garlic," said Alfred Baer. We agree wholeheartedly and thought you would savor this recipe from *Patricia Wells at Home in Provence*, published a few years ago. It's a warm, wonderful scrapbook of her most loved recipes; it has become one of our favourite resources, as it includes not only this classic Aïoli sauce, but Rouille, my personal favourite, combining garlic, saffron and red pepper mayonnaise. Use this on everything possible – a spread for breads, dipping artichokes, on toast with a fish soup, or just plain and simple with chilled garden greens. You'll wonder how you even lived without Aïoli...



Thank you, Patricia Wells!

Makes about 1 cup

Equipment: A mortar and pestle

- 6 plump, fresh garlic cloves, peeled and minced
 - ½ tsp fine sea salt
 - 2 large egg yolks, at room temperature
 - 1 cup extra-virgin olive oil
1. Pour boiling water into a large mortar to warm it; discard the water and dry the mortar. Place the garlic and salt in the mortar and mash together with a pestle to form as smooth paste as possible. The fresher the garlic, the easier it will be to crush.
 2. Add the egg yolks. Stir, pressing slowly and evenly with the pestle, always in the same direction, to thoroughly blend the garlic and yolks. Continue stirring and gradually add just a few drops of the oil. Whisk until thoroughly incorporated. Do not add too much oil in the beginning or the mixture will not emulsify. As soon as the mixture begins to thicken, add the remaining oil in a slow, steady stream, whisking constantly. Taste for seasoning. Transfer to a bowl and serve immediately. The sauce can be refrigerated, well sealed, for up to 2 days. To serve, bring to room temperature and stir once again.

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We also wish to thank Foodland Ontario for permission to photographs of Ontario Asparagus and Pears. For more information and delicious recipes from Foodland Ontario, go to www.foodland.gov.on.ca.

Happily tested by Helen Hatton and Ron Morris.