FRESH FROM THE GARDEN

THE PERFECT PRUNE

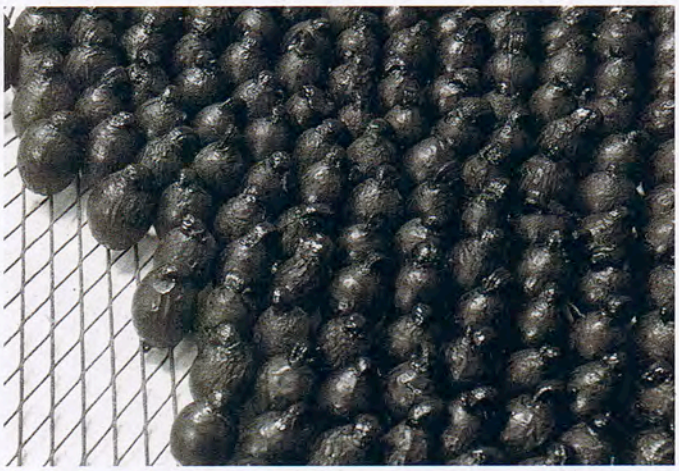
The stewed prune of our childhood, with its medicinal and school-dinners overtones, was merely a poor cousin of the glossy, succulent and highly prized dried fruit produced in France. Barbara Davis traces the history of prune production, from tree to table, in the French industry's centre around Agen. *Photographs by Vivian Russell*

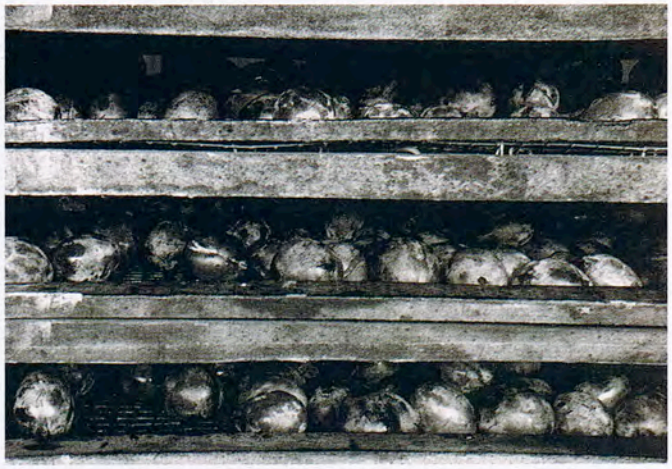
Christian crusaders, returning from the Holy Land to France over 900 years ago, carried with them many treasures. Among the gems and fabrics, herbs and spices, were rare plants, previously unknown in Europe. Destined for the care of monks at the Abbey of Clairac, between Bordeaux and Toulouse, were scions of a fruit tree which would alter the fortunes of the entire region.

Cultivated in China for over 3,000 years, and referred to by Virgil in his writings, the plum is now cultivated in many forms and varieties throughout the temperate world. But the 'Prune of Damas', brought from Syria to the southwest of France by the crusaders, is still the superior variety of *Prunus domestica* cultivated for the production of our humble prune.

By the 15th century, culture of the prune plum had spread to the Quercy and Rouergue, with their rougher terrain and smaller hillside valleys. But the more sprawling, bank-side fields of the Lot and Garonne rivers were always favoured for their deep, rich soil, airy exposure and good light.

The calcareous, clay-rich soil of the Lot-et-Garonne region naturally holds high levels of nitrogen, the most





important nutrient required for the prune plum. However, a wet spring may wash nitrogen down deep and out of reach, or rot the tree's roots. Soggy soil in summer, caused by freak storms or bad irrigation, can cause rapid swelling and split the fruit, ruining a crop.

Though the vexations of farming are many, some traditional techniques have evolved picturesque solutions. Mowing weeds and leaving them to dry under the trees reduces reflected soil heat which can split fruit, and creates a clean cushion for ripe fruit to fall on. Tilling in this mulch in late autumn leaves soil which, when wet, retains much of its warmth, offering protection against spring frosts which could destroy the blossom set.

Today's cultivated prune plum is a grafted tree, with the 'Prune of Damas' plum scion grafted to a peach, almond or 'Myrobalan' plum seedling rootstock, for deeper roots and better soil anchorage. The practice of grafting took hold in earnest around 1815, and the fortunes of the prune-grower surged ahead. France remained undisputed world prune leader in quantity and quality until the following century. An errant Frenchman, Pierre Pellier's importation in 1856 of prune

Opposite: ripe prune plums. Above, top: French, Portuguese and Algerian workers come to pick the prune plums. Below, from left: prunes stuffed with prune crème filling. Plums waiting to be dried on wooden racks.

plum scions to California's Santa Clara Valley helped Californian production eclipse France's by 1930.

In the early days, when all work was done by hand, prune plums were planted widely spaced, like jewels on a chain, between other fruit trees. Today's prune orchards are homogeneously planted with trees about 6 metres apart in rows to accommodate small tractors. Judicious winter pruning, in the time-honoured fashion of the Clairac monks, creates 5-metre-high trees with an open, even branching pattern. Usually, seven years from planting and grafting, the tree is 'in fruit'. With a little spring fruit thinning, and freak weather notwithstanding, the farmer will harvest large, firm-skinned fruit with a high sugar content from August 25 to September 25.

Some Lot-et-Garonne farmers still employ a completely manual picking technique, where fruit is allowed to fall as it ripens onto beds of cut and dried weeds or straw. But this requires the farmers to clear the ground daily of ripe fruit for the month-long harvest. Most have now adopted a partially mechanised technique, whereby the padded arms of a tractor attachment grip the tree's trunk and 'shiver' it. This shakes the ripe fruit onto a tarpaulin. Three tours of the orchard are made this way, instead of 31 by hand.

Fruit is then loaded into transport crates, avoiding bruising or squashing, and taken to a drying facility, or *sechoir*. Two hundred years ago, fruit was dried in the open air on beds of straw or tear-drop-shaped drying racks made of poplar wood called *claies*. But with increasing world demand, mechanisation was inevitable. In 1850 a blacksmith in the small village of Castelmoron-sur-Lot developed a rotating racking system for the *claies*, installed in a tower built of local adobe-like bricks. A metal firebox burnt wood in the tower's base and metal flues rose along the wall of the tower, radiating heat. The prunes dried slowly over a period of 18 hours.

Modern French prune-drying remains much the same, except that the ovens and wooden racks are larger

Top: hand-gathered prune plums. Right: a conveyor belt deposits the fruit into transportation crates.

and are heated by gas fires. Fruit is still carefully sized, as larger fruit takes longer to dry. The fruit passes a 16 to 18 hour period, depending on its size, in an oven about 72°C hot, until it reaches a moisture content of just 21% for storage, or 35% for immediate consumption. Three kilograms of fresh plums will produce 1 kilogram of dried prunes.

For most of the western world, this is really where the story ends, trailing off into bad school-day memories of stewed prunes and custard or grandmother's more medicinal consumption. But this would do a great disservice to the prune and to France's reputation as a nation of gourmets.

In the Lot-et-Garonne, the classic French tomato-and-beef-based daube contains a handful of prunes and Sunday's pork roast will be stuffed with apple, garlic and prunes. And no visit to a local farm is complete unless one is offered a small spoon and a glass containing one or two prunes soaked for months in red wine, Armagnac or eau de vie, which is distilled from prunes.

Many prune delicacies can be bought only in local centres of prune production or through speciality shops,

Top: the spoils of a long day's harvest. Above, from left: once all the prune plums have been shaken to the ground, the plastic sheeting under them is rolled up and the fruit is deposited onto a conveyor belt.

though some producers now advertise on the Internet. What chocoholic could resist *Friandise*, a prune-purée-based sweet, lightly scented with orange or vanilla essence and dipped in white or milk chocolate. Or tender whole stoned prunes covered in bittersweet dark chocolate. Because production is small scale, the quality is high and each family proudly puts its name to its product.

A holiday drive through the prune-producing region of France should take you through the ancient market towns of Castelmoron, Sainte Livrade and Villeneuve, where the purple-skinned and golden fleshed prune plum once reigned. The old river-shipping port of Agen, which was the prime exporter of prunes from around 1860 to 1910, gave its name to the *Pruneaux d'Agen*. Many beautiful country chateaux built by the prune barons of that era can still be seen en route, attesting to the glory days of the prune.

- *See page 106 for regional French prune-based recipes.*
- *See page 115 for details of farms and farm shops in France where you can see prunes in production and sample local prune delicacies.*

Top: ripe fruit allowed to fall naturally is cushioned by dry leaves and straw. Above, from left: dousing in a tub of water washes off dust. Prune plums on wooden *claies*, or drying racks, in the drying oven, or *sechoir.*