



Jams and conserves

# *Pot luck*

At a Loire valley hotel, guests join an elite breakfast club when they are invited to sample the enticing selection of preserves and marmalades made by Laurent Dutheil. Tonia George meets the French hotelier, who shares the secrets of his passion for jam

RECIPES BY **LAURENT DUTHEIL** PHOTOGRAPHS BY **JENNY ZARINS**



Breakfast at the Hotel Diderot could be mistaken for some sort of jam-tasting convention. Clusters of pots line the tables; long-handled spoons stand to attention; people glide from table to table, scrutinising labels and sampling various fruit flavours, such as melon and peach. The enthusiastic chatter of the guests contrasts with the hushed tones more typical of a hotel breakfast.

The pretty hotel, with beamed ceilings and charming French furnishings, is conveniently situated at the edge of the historic centre of Chinon, in the heart of the Loire valley wine region. The tradition of jam-making goes back to the 1960s, starting with one Madame Lainel, who used fruit from the garden to make jam for her guests. She sold the hotel to the Kazamias family, who continued the tradition. It is now owned by three siblings – Laurent, the jam-maker, and his sisters, Françoise, who does the administration or “zee boring bit”, as she calls it, and Martine, who takes care of the housekeeping. In summer, Laurent makes an astonishing 75 pots of jam every week.

On our first morning, Françoise arrives at our breakfast table with a basket of baguettes, brioches and croissants, with locally made butter, juice pressed from local apples and a pot of coffee. We try a delectable jam of pears poached in red wine and spices, which is reminiscent of mulled wine, and a wonderful apricot one with cassis, the blackcurrant adding a streak of sharpness to the sweetness of the apricots.

When I tell Laurent I love the way his jams are more suited to spooning than spreading, he confesses, “I don’t like English jams. They are always cooked too much and become solid.” The secret, he says, is to macerate the fruit in sugar for several hours before cooking.

“We make a lot of fig and apricot jam because we have two fig trees and an apricot tree in the garden,” he explains. He visits the market daily and, he tells us, thanks to his squeaky trolley, the stallholders hear him before they see him and save their best fruit. I have images of him being ushered behind stalls and covertly bundling trays of peaches into his wheelie bag. Neighbours also pop by with their home-grown fruit; the current exchange rate is one kilogram of fruit to one pot of jam.

Laurent takes us upstairs to his kitchen. It is next to the guest rooms and the smell of fruit wafts through the hotel. “It drives guests wild,” says Laurent with delight. As a pan of tropical fruit marmalade bubbles away, I notice there’s no sign of a sugar thermometer. “I have one, but I never use it,” he says. “You can tell by the bubbles, or I use a cold saucer for testing.” When the jars are filled, the last one of each batch is only half filled. “For maman,” he explains. “She is my best taster.”

None of the jams is for sale. Jars are stored in an old armoire, the door of which is open for only two hours a day at breakfast. Laurent says this is because jams need darkness. I have my suspicions there is more to it: such furtiveness adds exclusivity. So what is his motivation? “When people say ‘mmm’, it’s better than any compliment.”

*WFI travelled with Railbookers (0844 482 1010; railbookers.com), which offers short breaks and holidays to Europe by rail. For more information about Hotel Diderot, call +33 2 47 93 18 87 or visit hoteldiderot.com.*

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### Tropical fruit salad marmalade

Using jam sugar (which has added pectin) helps get the right set without overcooking the fruit.

- **MAKES 4 X 454G (1LB) JARS**
- **PREPARATION: 3 HOUR, PLUS 24 HOURS MARINATING AND MACERATION**
- **COOKING: 1 HOUR-1½ MINUTES**

1.8kg Jam sugar  
 1 Pineapple, peeled and cut into 1cm cubes  
 4 Pink grapefruits, halved  
 4 Thin-skinned oranges, halved  
 8 Clementines, halved  
 3 Kiwi fruit, peeled and sliced  
 1 Ripe mango, peeled, stoned and cubed  
 1 Banana, slightly unripe, peeled and sliced  
 80g Large sultanas  
 1 tsp Finely chopped fresh root ginger  
 80ml Dark rum

Simmer the pineapple in a pan of cold water on a very low heat for 2 hours, until the flesh has softened, then drain. Squeeze the citrus fruit and add the juice to the drained pineapple in a bowl. Scoop out the pips and pulp and place in a *nouet* (a small muslin bag or clean stocking). Tie with string and suspend in the fruit mixture.

Discard the skins, reserving 4 clementine, 1 grapefruit and 2 orange rinds. Scrape the pith off and chop the peel into 2mm pieces. Add to the mixture with the rest of the fruit. Weigh; add 600g sugar for each kilo. Cover; leave in a cool place for 24 hours, stirring halfway through.

Marinate the sultanas with the ginger, rum and 50g jam sugar in a covered bowl overnight.

Sterilise and warm 4 jars in an oven preheated to 140°C/gas 1. Bring the fruit to the boil and cook for 20 minutes on a medium heat, stirring until set – to check, place a drop on a chilled saucer; it should form a skin visible when gently pushed. Remove from the heat, discard the *nouet* and stir in the sultanas. Pot immediately, tighten the lids and upturn each jar until cool.

**PER TABLESPOON** 46 KCALS/TRACE FAT/TRACE SATURATED FAT/TRACE SALT/11.6G SUGARS



**In the kitchen of the Hotel Diderot, Laurent simmers fruit, top left, and removes the flesh from a mango stone for tropical fruit marmalade, far left. His sisters Françoise, on the left [chk], and Martine, often take time out from their other hotel duties to help out, above. Jars of Laurent's jams are stored in an old armoire, bottom right**







### Strawberry and Sichuanese pepper conserve

Softer than the jams you are used to, this will be runny before it cools, as strawberries are low in pectin. It works best if you use unforced strawberries that have been grown during the British season, as they contain less water than imported ones. If lots of watery juice accumulates at the end of maceration, drain it off and reserve half of it to add to the jam; the remaining syrup can be used to flavour fromage fraîs. The pepper adds a little bite and warmth to the sweetness.

- **MAKES 4 X 454G (1LB) JARS**
- **PREPARATION: 40 MINUTES, [CHKING W TG] PLUS 8 HOURS MACERATION**
- **COOKING: 15-20 MINUTES [CHKING W TG]**

2kg Strawberries, stalks removed  
1.5kg Granulated or jam sugar  
1 tbsp Sichuanese peppercorns  
4 Lemons, juice

Cut any larger strawberries into halves or quarters lengthwise, leaving smaller ones whole. Put all the strawberries in a large bowl, add the sugar and cover with a clean tea towel. Leave in a cool, dry place for 8 hours, until the fruit is soft and the sugar dissolved.

Preheat the oven to 140°C/gas 1. Sterilise and warm 4 jam jars in the oven. Use a pestle and mortar to crush the peppercorns; do not grind them. Add the lemon juice to the strawberries and transfer the fruit and juices to a large saucepan or preserving pan. Bring to a simmer over a low heat for 30-40 minutes, stirring occasionally. To check on the progress of the jam, lift the spoon up and see how quickly the jam runs off – when the setting point is reached, the last drop should hang off the spoon. When it's ready, take off the heat and stir in the pepper.

While it's still hot, spoon the jam into dry, warm jam jars. Screw the lids on, then turn the jars upside down until cool. Store in a cool place for up to 6 months.

**PER TABLESPOON** 43 KCALS/TRACE FAT/0G SATURATED FAT/  
TRACE SALT/11.1G SUGARS

### Apricot jam

This is the easiest jam to make. Apricots have a medium amount of pectin, so they don't tend to underset or overset. Adding a teaspoonful of dried, lemon-scented pelargonium leaves at the end of cooking gives it a twist.

- **MAKES 2 X 454G (1LB) JARS**
- **PREPARATION: 15 MINUTES, PLUS 18 HOURS MACERATION**
- **COOKING: 15 MINUTES**

1kg Apricots, just ripe  
700g Granulated sugar

Cut small apricots in half and large apricots into quarters and discard the stones. Mix the fruit and sugar together in a large container, cover with a clean tea towel and leave in a cool, dry place for 18 hours.

Place a few saucers in the freezer to use for testing later. Preheat the oven to 140°C/gas 1, then sterilise and warm 2 jam jars in the oven.

Put the mixture in a pan and bring to the boil on a high heat. Reduce to a medium heat and cook for about 15 minutes, stirring occasionally. Test the jam when the juice has thickened and the bubbles are large – the setting point has been reached when a drop placed on a chilled saucer forms a skin when lightly pushed. Remove from the heat and ladle into dry, warm jars. Tighten the lids immediately and turn each pot upside down until cool. Store in a cool place for up to 6 months.

**PER TABLESPOON** 42 KCALS/TRACE FAT/0G SATURATED FAT/  
TRACE SALT/11.1G SUGARS

*'The secret of making jam soft enough to spoon is to macerate the fruit in sugar before cooking'*