



RACHEL KHOO

MY

LITTLE FRENCH KITCHEN

OVER 100 RECIPES FROM THE MOUNTAINS, MARKET SQUARES AND SHORES OF FRANCE







My Little French Kitchen

Over 100 Recipes from the Mountains,
Market Squares, and Shores of France

Rachel Khoo



Photographs by David Loftus and illustrations by Rachel Khoo


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Introduction

After the whirlwind months that followed the release of *The Little Paris Kitchen* book and television show, my life seemed to go back to normal. I was still living in the same apartment with my kitchenette composed of two gas burners and a mini oven, still no dishwasher in sight. I bought my grocery shopping from the same fruit and veg guy, visited the same baker, and traipsed to my butcher. Little had changed. Aside from my cheese lady's persistent jokey questioning, "Where are the cameras?" each time I picked up a hunk of fruity Comté, life went on in my little kitchen as before. But I could feel a growing rumble in my stomach, and it wasn't because I was craving a piece of French cheese and crusty baguette, my all-time favorite snack.

Just like when I moved from London to Paris eight years ago, I had an itchy yearning for new tastes and discoveries. I still loved Paris (I always will), but I felt I wanted to chart unknown territories in the country I had called home for almost a decade. It was time for me to pack up my cooking kit and discover what lay beyond the twenty arrondissements that piece Paris together.

Deciding where to go was easier said than done. When it comes to culinary culture and history, France is as rich and dense as my chocolate beret cake ([see page 130](#)). My friends asked, "How are you going to visit the whole of France and write about all the food? *Ce n'est pas possible!*" Most of them thought I had bitten off more than I could chew, and I can chew a lot! France has a gastronomic wealth that has been documented painstakingly by many other chefs and Francophile food writers throughout the centuries, from Marie-Antoine Carême and Auguste Escoffier to Elizabeth David and Jane Grigson.

This book took me on an adventure around France by train, plane, bus, car, and bike—at one point, I was even driving a minibus. Up winding roads and down dirt tracks, through howling wind, rain *comme les vaches pissent* (like cows peeing, as the French say), snow, hail . . . you name it, I braved every kind of weather. I was a woman on a mission to discover those recipes, now long forgotten and stuffed in the back of a drawer, made by regional French grandmas. But not just the old recipes; I was interested to see what France looked like today. How was the younger generation eating? Paris, being the capital, is a mecca for new concepts and trends, but I was impressed to see that a movement of young food producers can also be found all over the country, combining old traditions with their new ideas.

France's artisanal food scene, in common with other countries in the Western world, is fighting against the big food corporations. Although France has always prided itself on its strong culinary heritage, as I visited producers, farmers, and local shops it became evident that all is not as rosy as one might think. There are battles against environmental changes and government regulations, combined with the lack of a new generation to take over traditional roles and a sharp rise in production costs. But

despite all these challenges, the passion and hard work that go into creating products to sell with pride shines through brightly in the end result.

After each of my voyages, I would return with my suitcase laden with random bits and bobs I had picked up, from edible souvenirs like special dried herbs and lavender honey to cheese paper wrappers or the odd funny looking spoon. In my little kitchen in Paris, the tasty trinkets would be turned into dishes to eat with friends and family. Each meal telling the story of my trip, allowing me to share my edible exploration and the complexities and oddities of each region's food culture.

My travels took me to many places all across this wonderful country, from Biarritz, the surfers' paradise, with its fiery Espelette pepper and Basque kisses, to the elegant chateaux and rickety but utterly charming oyster shacks in the Bordeaux region. I fell in love with the Christmas sparkle and spice of the Alsatian winter markets, and Brittany with its iconic lighthouses dotting the coast and its delicious giant blue lobsters. And I marveled at the almighty Lyon with its snowcapped mountains and warming dishes, which contrasted with the bright colors in the vegetable dishes of Provence that radiated summer heat.

And so this book is not about the whole of France—even a multivolume epic couldn't hope to do justice to that idea—but it is about the trips I made around French villages and towns; the people who welcomed me into their homes, farms, and food shops; and all the little culinary quirks that I stumbled upon. Each recipe is a postcard from my little kitchen to yours, savoring the flavors, smells, and textures that inspired me, and that I hope will inspire you too. *Bon voyage* on my little culinary tour of France! I hope you enjoy the trip.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rachel". The script is fluid and cursive, with a large, prominent initial "R".







BLUE-AND-WHITE STRIPES, BUTTERY DELIGHTS, AND COASTAL COOKING

Le crachin, as the Bretons refer to the so-called spitting rain, was almost constant when I visited the region in the early months of the year. The persistent drizzle wasn't the only thing that was like home: the lush green pastures, neatly trimmed hedges, and pretty stone country cottages reminded me of the verdant British landscape around where I grew up in Berkshire. It is easy to see how Brittany acquired the nickname "Little Britain."

Brittany is one of France's most iconic regions, being the home of many of the country's most popular foodstuffs, as well as the sartorial export of blue-and-white stripes. Butter, galettes, crêpes, caramel, *fleur de sel*, dairy and all its derivatives are entrenched in the food culture.

Thanks to this abundance of dairy and other such delights, Brittany is one of the best places in France to have breakfast. French breakfasts are often an afterthought,

usually consisting of a cup of black coffee and a flaky croissant at best, and a toasted leftover baguette at worst. However, I enjoyed some exemplary homemade breakfasts during my stays at various B&Bs around the region, including homemade jams and breads as well as the thickest, creamiest homemade yogurt, which inspired my recipe on [page 53](#). One of the most epic versions featured the legendary golden, caramelized *kouign-amann* ([see page 42](#)), Brittany's greatest pastry.

Now, crêpes and galettes were nothing new to me; Paris has a *crêperie* on every corner and around the Montparnasse area there are plenty of Breton *crêperies*. However, what I found rather intriguing was what they filled their buckwheat pancakes with. Not the usual egg and cheese, but a grilled, quite spicy (for the French) sausage. Simply popped whole into the middle of each galette, then wrapped tightly to make a sort of galette hot dog. At the morning markets of Dinan and Rennes, this unlikely breakfast treat was de rigueur from the various food trucks sandwiched between produce sellers.

Markets are among Brittany's highlights. The *Marché des Lices* on Saturdays in the center of Rennes is probably one of the best I've been to in France. Unlike most Parisian markets, where the selection is excellent, but resellers (not farmers) operate most stands, in Rennes the producers themselves run the majority. Being in a coastal corner of France, the choice of seafood is out of this world. I have never seen such big lobsters, oysters in every size and shape possible, cockles, clams, razor clams, mussels, scallops, and fish fresh off the boat, glistening on ice.

More secrets were discovered on a trip to Saint-Malo, the beautiful town on the coast set within a medieval wall. Down a cobbled street I found the king of butter, Yves Bordier, with his renowned boutique and restaurant, complete with butter museum. Bretons love their butter, and Yves Bordier reigns supreme on the menus of the finest restaurants in France and abroad. His butter looks like little yellow bricks flecked with sea salt, seaweed, smoked salt, or even yuzu.

The rugged beauty of Brittany's coast is awe-inspiring. Lighthouses pop up on rocky cliffs with stretches of sandy beaches sandwiched in between. Cap Fréhel lies on such a cliff, with its majestic green-tipped beacon in a protected nature reserve. Small rocks jut out of the wet sand at low tide, revealing wild mussels and seaweed. The salt in the air has you licking your lips, stirring up an appetite for a picnic or some cooking on the beach.

Sea salt is big business in Brittany, but also a very time-consuming one. It is carefully harvested mainly around Guérande, the southwestern corner of Brittany where they produce the famous *fleur de sel*, a sea salt prized by chefs and food enthusiasts. Salt is harvested in the summer months, but requires meticulous attention throughout the year in preparation, as well as a great deal of savoir faire adapting to the whims of the weather at any time. Clay walls are built and maintained inside ponds for the salt water to be ushered through, and it is eventually raked into piles to dry. The *fleur de sel* are the delicate crystals that develop on the top of the water and they are pulled aside.

From the knob of butter that sizzles in the pan to the understated sprinkle of salt that brings an entire dish together, the gastronomy of Brittany may not have sophisticated Parisian glamour, but it is responsible for produce that is fundamental to dishes created in renowned restaurants around the world. From moist sea bass baked in a saffron crust to buttermilk lamb to choux pastry lighthouses with butter caramel sauce (see [pages 16, 30, and 46](#)), the recipes in this chapter draw their inspiration from those little touches and apply them to dishes that can be cooked in any kitchen (whether home or Michelin-starred). I hope you fall for the food of Brittany as much as I did.

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