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Pasta pesto? Oui! What the French ate in lockdown

Tony Tumbull meets the chef Cyril Lignac, who took the French back to basics on his daily pandemic cookalong

The French are better lovers, better dressers and better cooks than us Brits. They conduct their affairs, dash home in their Chanel suits and whip up their cordon bleu dinners without so much as smearing their make-up. Or so popular imagination has it.

Cyril Lignac makes no comment about the first two, but he does question the third. As the chef who guided France through lockdown with his TV cookalong, *Tous en cuisine*, he should know. "People think that all the French know how to cook. Well, let me tell you, they know how to eat but not necessarily how to cook."

There is a lost generation, he says, who didn't inherit the skills of their parents or grandparents. "The older generation of mothers and grandmothers would stay at home to cook and look after the children, but in the Eighties mothers went out to work," he says. "They didn't have time to cook as well, so they started to buy ready meals. Now we have a generation who have never been taught to cook."

So in their hour of need, with restaurants closed and shopping opportunities limited, the 43-year-old chef stepped in. From March to June last year he posted a shopping list online every weekend and during the week that followed would talk more than two million viewers through a simple recipe each day from his kitchen in Paris. He'd make simple French dishes — quiches, soufflés, omelettes, crepes with ham and cheese — but also more exotic things, for the French, such as fish pie, pesto pasta, prawn curry and chilli con carne. "The French like to eat international food, but if they organise a Mexican evening, for example, they'd buy it all in. I just wanted to show them how to make it from scratch. It was about giving them different ideas and broadening their repertoire."

"The French love crepes but not a lot of people know how to make good breakfast pancakes," Lignac says. His most popular dishes were Thai-style salmon and spring rolls. "It was things they'd normally buy ready made from the supermarket that they really wanted to learn to make. Now everyone has gone back to work and they've forgotten," he half-jokes.

Lignac was christened the French Jamie Oliver after he was spotted by a TV producer and invited to front a new format that had just been imported from England, in which a charismatic chef would train up a group of underprivileged apprentices. Sound familiar?

Seven years later he went from French Jamie to French Paul Hollywood, taking

Chef's pesto

Ingredients

1 garlic clove, peeled and minced
55g ground almonds
50g parmesan, finely grated
Juice of 1 lemon
40g basil
8 tbsp olive oil

Method

1 Put the garlic in the blender with the ground almonds and parmesan, pulse to blend, then add the lemon juice and mix again.
2 Finely chop the basil and add to the blender. Pour in the olive oil and mix for a final time. Season to taste.

the lead critic's role in *Le Meilleur Pâtisier*, the French version of *The Great British Bake Off*. "It's exactly like the British show — same format, same coloured tent. The only difference is instead of rewarding a good bake with a handshake, I'll give them a hug," he says. The show is in its tenth season and Lignac, who trained under the pastry chef Pierre Hermé, says the standard is getting higher. "Last year the winner made a chocolate mousse flavoured with ceps and truffles. It was incredible."

Lignac would rather be judged by what he does in his restaurants than what he does on screen, though. "I like Jamie, I follow him on Instagram and I watch his shows because it's my industry and I need to learn English, but my job is in the kitchen," he says.

He was brought up in Aveyron in southern France and his childhood ambition was to be a fireman, but when he saw the pleasure his mother's cooking gave to her friends, he changed course. "I thought, if I cook well, everyone will love me and no one will shout at me."

He moved to Paris, worked for Alain Passard and the Pourcel brothers, and opened his first restaurant in 2005, at the same time that his TV career took off. He now has four restaurants and some pastry shops in Paris, but he credits the launch of *Le Bar des Prés* in Saint-Germain five years ago for freeing him of his celebrity tag. "Before I opened the bar I was the guy from TV. After *Bar des Prés* I was a chef."

Its relaxed atmosphere and fusion of Asian, Indian and French flavours made it an instant hit with the fashion and film crowd. He organised dinners for Chanel and Louis Vuitton, catered for Quentin Tarantino at Cannes, and some nights it's like the wrap party after the filming of the cult Netflix hit *Call My Agent!* Monica Bellucci, Vincent Cassel, Juliette Binoche and Marion Cotillard may be tucking into plates of sushi and sashimi or spiced crab galette with avocado. Pharrell Williams and Keira Knightley are regulars.

Now Lignac has taken the next step and opened a *Bar des Prés* in Mayfair, for which, alongside the raw dishes the Paris restaurant is famous for, he has developed new recipes such as Dover sole with miso, and satay beef with lime. He aims to split his time between the two cities. "I've always loved London for its culture and energy," he says as he offers up a slice of impossibly good vanilla mille-feuille with pecans and praline. "Plus it's the best place in the world to open a restaurant."

Bar des Prés, 16 Albemarle Street, London W1 (020 3908 2000; bardes-pres.com)

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The chef Cyril Lignac

The easiest tart

Serves 4

Ingredients

Butter, to grease the dish
4 eggs
150g caster sugar
200g plain flour
1 pinch of salt
500ml milk
2 tbsp kirsch
400g fresh cherries, stalks and stones removed

Method

1 Preheat the oven to 180C/gas 4.



Easy cherry clafoutis

2 Generously grease a pie dish/fluted dish with the butter
3 Crack the eggs into a

bowl, whisk them a little, then add the sugar, half the flour and the salt. Mix well. Then add half the milk, whisk together, then add the remaining flour and milk. Whisk together,

then add the kirsch.
4 Put the cherries into the greased dish, then pour the batter on top. Cook for 35 min.

French-style chilli con carne

Serves 4

Ingredients

2 tbsp olive oil
1 peeled and diced onion
1 tsp minced garlic
150ml white beer
1kg minced beef
1 tsp ground cumin
2 tsp paprika
Salt and freshly ground

black pepper
400g tin chopped tomatoes
2 tbsp tomato passata
1 tbsp cider vinegar
500g cooked kidney beans
1 jalapeño pepper, finely chopped
1 tin sweetcorn

A few sprigs of fresh oregano

To serve

Tortilla chips
2 avocados, peeled and mashed
4 tbsp crème fraîche (optional)
Fresh coriander leaves
4 wedges of lime