

In the kitchen



Paola Westbeek explains why puy lentils are known as poor man's caviar...

Although many of us start the new year with the determination to make up for the excesses of the festive season, it isn't surprising that halfway through the month of January, the need for comfort food often overrides the best of intentions.

I am certainly no exception. After a few gruelling weeks of soups and skimpy salads, the day will inevitably arrive when my short-lived health stint comes to a delicious end with a *petit salé* and a fleshy, well-structured Brouilly. A winter classic in Auvergne and a fine example of *cuisine du terroir*, this hearty peasant dish consists of rustic hunks of salted pork, sausages, bacon and green lentils. Not just any green lentils though, but *lentilles vertes du Puy*.

Puy lentils are cultivated in 87 *communes* in the heart of the Haute-Loire department and have been a part of the regional diet since Roman times. Though tiny in size (about one-third as big as regular lentils), *lentilles du Puy* are far superior in taste and texture. The area's mineral-rich, volcanic soils not only impart a slightly peppery, earthy flavour to the lentils, but the arid climate with long, hot summers means that they dry naturally and are harvested before reaching full maturity. This results in lentils that are less starchy, cook faster, retain their shape and don't become mushy, making them ideal for warming casseroles as well as more refined cuisine. In regional



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A tasty Puy lentil and plum salad accompanied by a *Côtes d'Auvergne*

restaurants you'll often find them in dainty verrines crowned with smoked fish, cooked into delicate *veloutés* or served as an elegant side dish to rabbit or duck confit.

Sustainably produced without the use of fertilisers, Puy lentils are rich in B vitamins and trace elements such as calcium, magnesium, iron and zinc, making them perfect for vegetarian cooking. I've used them as a meat replacement in shepherd's pie and pasta sauces or burgers seasoned with cumin, coriander, spring onions and red chilli. One of my favourite ways to prepare them is in a spicy stew with butternut squash and wild spinach. They're also wonderful in robust winter salads with ingredients like blue cheese, pear, smoked ham and red onions.

Lentilles vertes du Puy received AOC certification in 1996 (AOP in 2008). Quite a few varieties on the market shamelessly flaunt the name 'Puy' on the label, but don't be fooled. The real deal is dark green with slate marbling and will have the red and yellow AOP seal of authenticity on the package. Once you try them, you'll understand exactly why they're also referred to as the 'poor man's caviar'! ■

serve with...

Complement a rustic *petit salé* with a well-structured red from the Beaujolais region. A bold Brouilly (its southernmost cru) with herbal notes and a lively acidity will pair well with the dish's smoky, robust flavours.

