CHESTNUTS OF PROVENCE

"I'm so glad I live in a world where there are Octobers"

BY CAREN TRAFFORD

Photo: H. Zell

AS Anne of Green Gables, the beloved character created by L.M. Montgomery, said, "I love October." The air is crisp, the light is intense and the leaves crunchy. What better way to celebrate the tenth month of the year than enjoying an autumn day filled with all things chestnut? So here's a two-minute guide to everything you need to know about this wonderfully versatile nutty fruit.

To start with, a pop quiz: What do chestnut trees produce – chestnuts or marrons? It's a trick question because the answer is both, in varying quantities.

This is how it works: if a chestnut shell contains one large nut, it's a marron, whereas if it contains three smaller nuts they are chestnuts or *châtaignes*. So a chestnut tree is only so named when there is more than 12% divided fruit inside the shell; if the proportion is less than this magic number, it's a marron tree. Why 12%? Only the French know!

In France, the largest production of sweet chestnuts comes from Corsica, the Ardèche and right on our doorstep, the Var, where the magnificent chestnut trees are located in the bewitching hinterland Maures hills that lie between Hyères and Fréjus. The highest point of the Massif des Maures is around 800 metres, but the quick succession of ridges, the sudden drops and views, and the curling, looping roads, are pervasively mountainous. Cyclists love it! In the centre of the Maures is Collobrières: known as the sweet chestnut capital. Surrounded by more than 5,000 acres of chestnut forests, it is this quaint hillside village that dedicates the last three Sundays of the month of October to the celebration of this small, sweet, versatile fruit.

Chestnuts have been part of tradition in these parts for more than 1000 years. The cultivation of the sweet chestnut tree was introduced by the Carthusians in the 10th century. The trees became popular as the fruit enabled the large poorer population to survive, as the chestnut was often the only food available during long periods of the year when nothing else could grow. Their versatility meant that chestnuts could be ground into flour and used in the preparation of many of the local specialties. Historically, as not all regions of France had access to wheat flour, the chestnut was one of the few readily available sources of carbohydrates because when dried it could be kept to provide meals through the year. The flour was also was used to make a thick, hard bread; nowadays, chestnuts are even used to make a rich, golden craft beer.

The thousand-year-old tradition of chestnut production threatened to collapse 50 years ago, when the collection fell from 4000 metric tons at the beginning of the 20th century to only 500 tons in 1980. Consumption declined after the Second World War, when many locals associated them with "war food": a little