



# The bread tree

## *A matin castagne, a megiudi pestumi, a seira castagnon*

*In the morning, chestnuts; at midday, chestnut crumbs; in the evening, dried chestnuts . . .*

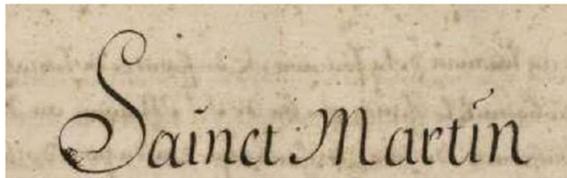
- saying from Triora, in the western Ligurian mountains

Over much of the last 600 years, especially in times of war, plague, and famine, chestnuts have been vital for the survival of the inhabitants of our valley. Even if locally chestnuts didn't comprise the 90% of the year round diet, as was the case to the east in parts of the Cévennes, it is still likely the inhabitants would have eaten little other than chestnuts during winter months – and chestnuts would have remained a vital staple of the diet throughout the rest of the year.

Chestnuts were not just a food of the rural highlands. In the 16th century Felix Platter, a Swiss doctor, wrote that in Montpellier “all winters long by the fireside, the young girls gorged themselves on roasted chestnuts until it made them ill”.

Chestnuts not only filled the stomach, but they are highly calorific with a high content of carbohydrates, contain vitamins, and are a good source of mineral salts. They are not however a complete food as they are low in protein. People may have survived on chestnuts but it didn't necessarily mean that they thrived - malnutrition was known in northern Italy, even as recently as 1960, in babies who were weaned on food made of chestnut flour.

Another drawback to a very high chestnut diet is they known to cause severe flatulence . . .



*Compoix were the periodic post-medieval tax assessments for Southern France. These specified, by taxpayer and by village, the size and usage of each piece of land. From the 1671 compoix we can see that a full 40% of the arable land of Saint Martin de Clemensan (now Saint Martin d'Orb) was devoted to growing chestnuts. Of the remaining land, another 40% was planted in cereals, 1% was household gardens – and the remaining, almost 20%, was planted in grape vines.*

[Research to be published on this site once peer reviewed](#)

Thanks to the humble chestnut the local population would have experienced a far lower death rate during the periods of war (when other crops were often destroyed, or never planted), and famine (generally caused by disease to other crops and poor weather).

Times when it is known that chestnuts were particularly important for survival were during the period of chaos following the fall of the Roman empire, the population booms prior to the Black Death of 1348 and during the first half of the 16th century, the wars of religion in the late 16th century, the mini ice age of the 17th and 18th centuries, and the years just before and after of the second world war.

It is reported that in the first part of the nineteenth century the average daily consumption was 2 kg of raw chestnuts per adult. To peel this amount of chestnuts took about 40 minutes, or about three hours for a family of five! And then there was the cooking - the chestnuts were put in a pot at dawn, along with any available vegetables, and boiled until the midday meal.

Our forebears ate chestnuts raw, roasted, in soup, and ground into flour that was made into a bread (that was coal-black in colour). The wood of the trees was used in construction (the roof beams of the author's house for example), staves for barrels, and the bark was an important source of tannin used for the tanning of leather.

#### Wine barrels – oak or chestnut?

*The wooden barrel is said to have been invented by the Gauls, and was used for storing tuna, salted anchovies, and sardines. For over 2,000 years it has also been the vessel of choice for transporting and aging wine. But what makes the best wine barrel, oak or chestnut?*



*In the 13<sup>th</sup> century attempts were made to outlaw chestnut wood for barrels as it "putrefies the wine". Two centuries later it was oak that was out of favour and chestnut was preferred as it "didn't lend any odour to the wine". Chestnut then dominated until the 19<sup>th</sup> century before oak once again regained ascendancy – this time because chestnut was said to be porous and allowed in oxygen which shortened the wine's shelf life. Until very recently, if chestnut casks were used at all, they were lined with paraffin to keep them airtight. Now however, with a move towards artisanal and more traditional methods of winemaking, chestnut barrels are slowly making a comeback.*

### *The chestnut season*

Chestnuts were typically harvested over about a three week period starting late September or early October. Each tree produces 30 – 100 kg of nuts, up to 300kg in exceptional cases, so collecting them was a significant undertaking that involved the whole family. If outside help was required payment was typically in chestnuts, with the helpers keeping half of what they collected.

Chestnuts were in fact a de facto currency in the medieval and post medieval period and were bartered for wheat, cheese, olives or salt.

*"the wealth of my poor native land . . . hard as stone, yellow as gold, it is sold to merchants who, every year, around December, make their appearance in the mountains of Orb . . ."*

Ferdinand Fabre - "Monsieur JEAN" - 1898

All trees were, of course, privately property and the owners not only pruned the trees but kept the ground around them clear so that the nuts could more easily be collected.



*Secadou, chestnut drying house, Saint Martin d'Orb*

After the harvest was deemed over, the poor were often given permission to scavage for leftovers.

As harvesting was closely followed by All Souls Day (le Jour des Morts, 2 November) chestnuts have long been associated with the dead, and chestnuts were traditionally placed under the pillow as an offering.

Another tradition was based on the belief that on this day the dead returned to the house in which they had lived. To facilitate this, the inhabitants would leave their doors and windows open, set the table with roasted or boiled chestnuts, and then visit the cemetery. Of course, any nuts left by the dead would have been a welcome snack on their return . . .

[Though these are known French traditions, it must be said the author doesn't know if they were practised in the Orb valley. If you know of any family traditions along these lines, we would love to hear of them.]

Once harvested the nuts needed to be preserved, as raw chestnuts are prone to fungal infection and weevil infestation. Some protection can be achieved by leaving the nuts in water for 8 – 9 days and then drying, or while still in the husks, piling them up on a clean floor and covering with chestnut leaves and stones. Both methods lead to slight fermentation which preserved the nuts for several months.



A more effective method is drying, which preserved the nuts for up to several years. This is where the region's ubiquitous secadou, or drying house, comes into play. These stone sheds are typically only 2 to 4 square metres in floor area.

The nuts were spread out on a rack and a small fire was lit at ground level to smoke them. As secadous have no chimneys, the smoke escaped through the small window installed for this purpose. As this process took two to three weeks the fire had to be kept going for the whole period. The next step was to take the dried nuts – from 5 to 10 kg at a time – put them in a sack and beat them against a hard surface until the nuts separated from shells.

## *The spread of the region's chestnut forests*

*Chestnuts are native to the Mediterranean but in pre-history they were not as prevalent as in our forests today. The Greeks and Romans were initially responsible for the nuts' wider distribution. They valued them for their perceived medicinal properties but reportedly had mixed views as to their desirability as a food source. Often then, as in France over the following millennia, they were looked down upon as a poor peasant food.*

*Chestnuts though had a huge advantage in that they would grow where other crops wouldn't and, liking acidic soils and an altitude of 300 – 800m, they were an ideal crop for the hills that surround our valley.*

*With the population booms of the 13<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries – when people were said to be breeding like “like mice in a grange” – it became necessary to cultivate ever more marginal land. This led to the construction of the terraces, requiring unimaginable labour, that are now collapsing on our hillsides.*

*This is where chestnuts came into their own. During the 16<sup>th</sup> century landowners were encouraged, in some cases required, to plant 12 chestnut trees a year, which meant that any one family could well have planted over 1,000 trees just in just one century. The result was extensive chestnut forests throughout the foothills of Languedoc.*

*These forests were long established by the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but the last 150 years have not been kind to them. First in 1870, there was 'la maladie de l'encre' (black ink disease), followed by the milling of chestnut trees for their tannin, rural depopulation, a price collapse in the 1930s, bark canker (about 1960), and finally groves being felled and replaced with maritime pines.*

*Our forest is now returning to a more natural equilibrium and, fortunately, we still have chestnut groves scattered throughout our hillsides, and still the opportunity to collect our own nuts to roast on an autumn evening.*



*Every year on the first weekend of November, Olargues celebrates the Chestnut with a festival*

<http://www.amisdelunas.fr/petit-patrimoine/bati/ptpatrimoine-secadou.htm>

<https://www.monaconatureencyclopedia.com/castanea-sativa/?lang=en>

<https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ch%C3%A2taigne>

Les Paysans de Languedoc (English edition), Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie

Chapter 2 : Population, Subsistance, Income