

Monday 26th May 2014

Bonjour,

Coming to you again from the South of France where the weather has now sorted itself out – glorious turquoise skies, turquoise seas, mellow golden sun and a landscape lush with spring flowers abuzz with insects and cicadas. At midnight last night the warm scent of pines and the birds were singing.

While I have been trying to have a rest, Diane in particular and Lorraine, Eve and Pat have been busy organising the move of our packing operation to Leyburn in Wensleydale. It kicks off there this morning with a new team under Diane's supervision. I am thinking of them ! Here is just one recipe you could try with this week's bags but it is a good one:

Aubergine and Potato Gratin

675g potatoes

1 onion, sliced

½ tsp cinnamon (optional)

350g aubergine, cut lengthways into ½cm slices

500g pot fromage frais

1 free-range egg, beaten

3 tbsp olive oil

1 clove garlic, crushed

400g tin chopped tomatoes

75g hard cheese, grated

½ tsp mixed herbs

Preheat oven to 200C / Gas 6. Place the potatoes in a pan, just cover with cold water and bring to the boil for 5-7 minutes, or until almost cooked. Drain and leave to cool slightly. Meanwhile, heat 1 tablespoon of the oil in a medium pan and cook the onion and garlic for 3-4 minutes until softened, then stir in the cinnamon, if using, and the chopped tomatoes and herbs. Simmer uncovered for 15 minutes until the mixture has thickened. Season to taste. Heat a frying pan, brush the aubergine slices with the remaining oil and cook for 2-3 minutes each side in batches. Arrange half the potato in the bottom of a 1.5-litre shallow ovenproof dish and place half the aubergine on top. Cover with the tomato sauce and half the cheese. Top with the remaining potatoes and aubergines. Mix together the fromage frais and egg then spoon over the top. Sprinkle with the remaining cheese. Bake for 35 minutes, or until golden brown and piping hot. Serve with a fresh cucumber salad dressed with balsamic vinegar.

Whilst the intention was to travel around France, we haven't moved very far at all. We are now in Ramatuelle and renting part of a beach house. Myfa is amazed that the gate at the bottom of the garden leads straight onto Pampelonne beach. We walked the length of it this morning before the sunbathers arrived – just me Myfa and some pink jellyfish which were getting flushed onto the shore. One hundred metres away from the house is Club 55 and an endless stream of the most expensive cars on the planet. Dawn is desperate to see George Michael who is a regular. The Gulf is studded with yachts arriving from Cannes and Monaco now the film festival and Grand Prix are over. I am just about starting to relax now. The weather in the Le Corbusier villa had been dreadful. When it wasn't pouring or overcast we lay by the pool and could just about feel the sun's heat through the relentless Mistral and Tramontagne winds. At any moment one thought one would be picked up with one's sunbed and tossed into the sea below or that a tree would come crashing down on one's head. It gave me a migraine which after two days turned into a toothache but that could also be a result of too much coca cola, hazelnut chocolate, coconut ice cream and almond croissants. In any case it has been very painful and debilitating.

Today the pain in the jaw was easing and after Myfa's walk I went up to Ramatuelle to get bread and baby croissants for breakfast. Dawn was still asleep, I think she fell asleep at about 6pm last night and was still asleep at 9am this morning when I left. Ramatuelle is a beautiful medieval hilltop village with jasmine-scented, cobbled streets. The market was on and I bought fresh apricots and strawberries. I had a 'chocolat chaud' in 'la place' and watched the world go by. It is 'la fete des meres' today so there were men scurrying about with large bouquets, and it is also European election day - elderly people on walking sticks were climbing into organised 'election navettes' to be taken to the polling stations. When I got back to the house at about 10.30am Dawn was still asleep. This afternoon we had a late lunch in the Tropicana up the beach, where a jazz ensemble of old Dutch pros were playing. We came back a couple of hours ago, Dawn said she was going to lie down. I can hear her snoring, it is 6.32pm.

The Dutch lady who owns the house has two fox terriers – Scooby Doo and Foxy Lady. They are now hanging out with us, and with Myfa, the three of them sit next to me at breakfast while I feed them little pieces of buttered baguette.

Liz and David have headed back to England. Liz just texted me that they are at Calais and can't get through the tunnel as there is a train stuck in it.

Nothing much else to report. Before leaving Richmond, I sent Brigitte Bardot an Izzy Lane shawl and told her about the brand and the 600 rescued sheep. I added that I was going to be in France and whilst I understood she didn't receive visitors, that I would dearly love to visit her. The bloke from Parcellforce did a double take on the package to Brigitte Bardot, La Madrague, Saint Tropez. I didn't expect her to respond and she didn't but it was worth a try. In any case we went to find her house, it was like a treasure hunt, we had a few clues - as Liz said – to pay homage to her, not for her beauty, but for devoting her life to animal welfare. We found it, paid homage, I think I saw her in the kitchen. We were told that she is now ailing and in a wheelchair. She wants to be buried at La Madrague which would be illegal and she wants it to become a museum.

I hope this finds you well. I am extremely sorry the weather in England is so poor this week.

Kind wishes,

Isobel