



Apples & Aqua Gym

by Jacqueline Brown

This term I have bravely joined a new aqua gym class where not only am I the only new face, but also the only one who isn't French.

I was a bit nervous to begin with, not about the class as I'm the youngest there by quite a few years, but about fitting in with the French ladies in a group that have been together for over four years. I know from past experience at the school bus stop that they can be a tough lot to break into; however, I needn't have worried. I have fortuitously found myself included within a hilarious bunch of energetic ladies who never stop talking or larking around, even during the class. It is as much a vocabulary lesson that exercises my brain, as it is a surprisingly good workout. It has been quite a few years since I've done aqua gym and the communal changing room packed with damp bodies takes me right back to my school days, especially the constant noise of excited chatter and laughter, and I'm thoroughly enjoying it.

I have noticed that the most popular topic of conversation is, unsurprisingly, often food related. The first few weeks of term it was all about the meals created with tomatoes and other summer crops from their potagers, but as the weather has turned they are now discussing where to find the best walnut and chestnut trees, as well as what to do with their foraged haul. I could have done with their top tips for apples as this year we had a bountiful harvest



and we don't even live in the apple heart of Deux-Sèvres. I have to admit that it was only a mini adventure this summer, where we bravely headed north through our department (ashamedly for the first time in eleven years), that we discovered the undulating roads surrounded by apple orchards with trees hung heavy with fruit. Our harvest was superb and although they are eating apples, they have quite a tart flavour which means the windfalls are perfect for cakes and tarts while the ripe ones are delicious eaten from the fruit bowl. At Ed's request I am baking him my autumn apple cake to take to Lycée each week for his emergency snacks; although with breakfast, a three course cooked lunch, an afternoon snack and a three course cooked dinner provided every day, I'm not sure how he can be hungry, but that is teenage boys I guess.

It has become routine to enjoy a coffee with the aqua gym ladies after class, where there are no exercise distractions to disturb the flow of conversation. At the moment I am doing more listening than talking, but I have added my own contribution to the coffee; a bar of dark chocolate to share that was very well received. I'm hoping my homemade mince pies will be just as popular in the next few weeks; I've made the mincemeat, it is maturing nicely and Christmas will be here soon.

Recipes for my autumn apple cake and others can be found at www.frenchvillagediaries.com - Cherry mincemeat can be seen opposite...

- ▶ www.frenchvillagediaries.com
- ▶ Email: frenchvillagediaries@gmail.com

JACQUI'S CHERRY MINCEMEAT

- 700g (4 1/2 cups) mixed dry fruits; sultanas, raisins, cherries
- 150g (1 cup) glacé cherries
- 100g (1/4 cup) cut mixed peel
- 250g (1/2 lb) cooking apples, peeled and cored
- 100g (1/4 cup) shelled walnuts
- 250g (1.2 lb) shredded suet
- 450g (2 cups) demerara sugar
- 2 tsp mixed spice
- Cognac to mix (or rum or sloe gin)

Coarsely mince or finely chop dried fruit, peel, apples and nuts. Add the suet, sugar, spice and enough Cognac to give a moist mixture. Stir well and leave to stand, covered, for 2 days. Stir well again and put into sterilised jars. Cover as for jam and leave to mature for at least two weeks (but longer if possible) before using.



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