

MENUUETTE

Life at Les Saumais

FOOD AND
PHOTOGRAPHY
RETREATS

with the Benvis

**LEARNING
THE LAND**

*Successes and
failures in the
vegetable
garden*

Cooking

Getting creative with courgettes

Number 2 | July 2021

Welcome to the second issue of MENUETTE, MENU's little sister—and all my own! We've been cheered by the prospect of hosting Retreats again before the end of the year but are still missing our friends and family "stranded" outside France. So, to cope, we've immersed ourselves in our garden in the bocage and this is the story of our first summer.



making home
First summer



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First summer

ANYONE WHO KNOWS ME will be well aware that I am never happier than when in my kitchen; cooking, baking and making food for anyone who wants to eat it. Every evening the table is set nicely and the candles lit—with or without guests or friends or other family being here—and Niall and I enjoy our meal together. I think it's important to have that time in the day to look forward to, and to know that you have made good food for your loved ones. Now it is summer, we have the privilege of being able to eat outdoors in our garden, which is very special to us. This garden is the same one that, at this time last year, was a wild jungle of brambles and over-grown hedges and weeds. Now, after many hours of hard work, and with kind friends and family gifting us plants and shrubs, the whole garden is transformed. The resident birds which, back in the spring, were eating us out of sunflower seeds and fat balls, all disappeared into the woods to build their nests, and in April and May, the migratory ones returned to form a new orchestra in and around the garden: golden oriole; nightingale; hoopoe; melodious warbler; blackcap; red-backed and woodchat shrikes, turtle doves and bee eaters. It really is special to hear. The lizards startle the grasshoppers and crickets as they scurry around and slow worms are found under most of the roof tiles we've laid down in the garden for them. The butterflies also love it here: brimstones, marbled and black-veined whites; white admirals; gate-



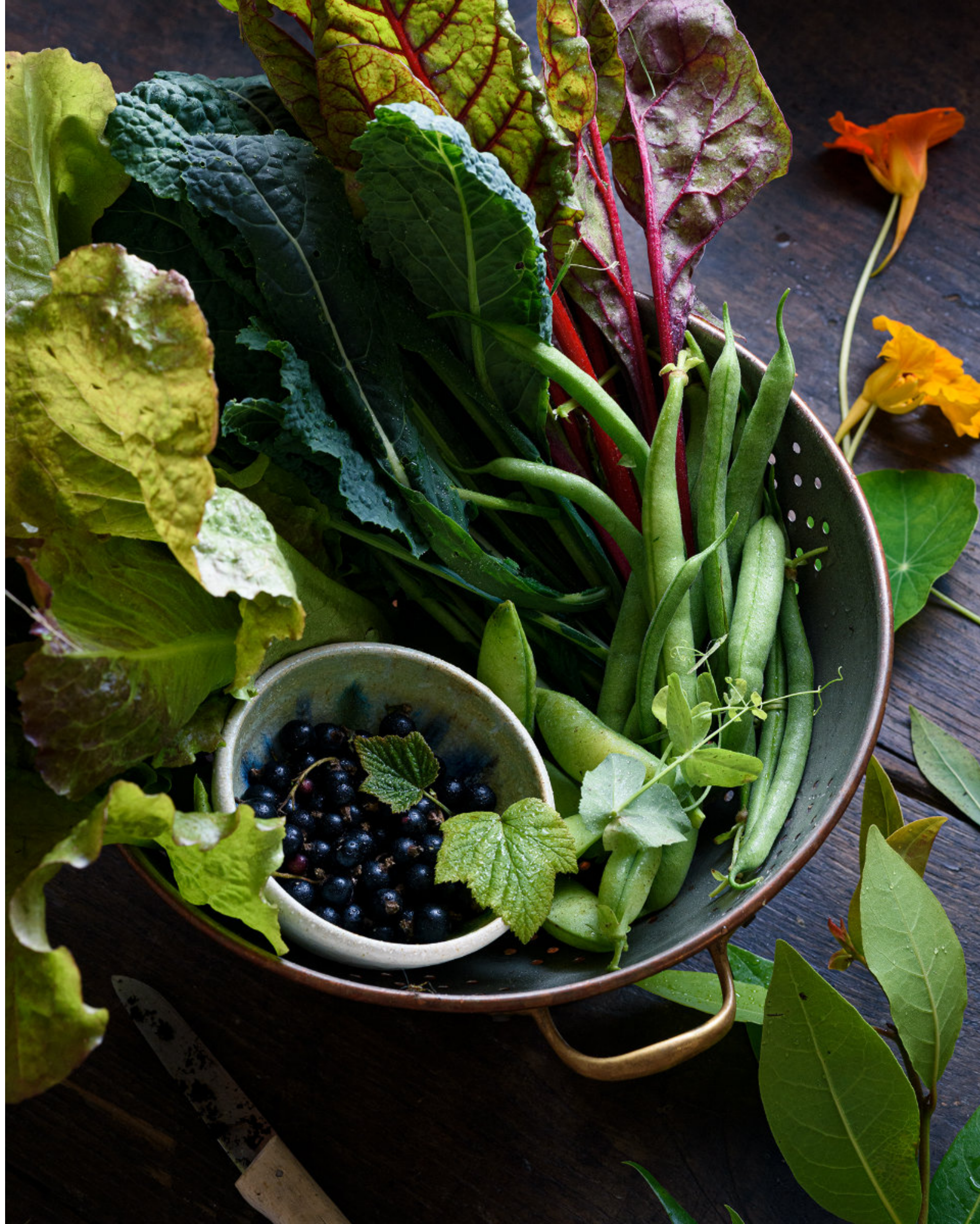
keepers; meadow browns; scarce swallowtails; orange tips and several others. The surrounding countryside here is an intriguing network of hedgerows and lanes, small, chemical-free fields and large trees. It's somewhere we feel truly at home.

A new introduction to the garden this year is a poly-tunnel, like Eve, borne from one "rib" gifted by my parents and completed with an assortment of water piping, wood and breeze blocks dug into the ground, metal rod supports and the odd ratchet strap here and there. The initial conversation went something along the lines of, "Niall, could you build me a small poly-tunnel, nothing fancy or expensive? Just one I can grow some seeds and tomatoes in." "Yes, I'll work out a design and cost it," said Niall. Days later, after lots of muttering quietly to himself, various trips to the local builder's merchant, some serious digging, more visits to the merchant and then an unexpectedly pricey purchase of the polythene (Niall was unusually optimistic when he priced it; I was deeply shocked when I paid for it), an 8 metre long poly-tunnel was created. Okaaaay....so that's a few more plants to grow than I had initially thought of. But it's really a fabulous growing space, complete with old pallets (another gift), makeshift work benches and so on. Seeds were bought and planted and the wait for them to grow began. There is also a long vegetable plot outside

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and as I set-to one morning to plant out some lettuce and other plants, I could hear our resident green woodpecker laughing at me and imagined he was thinking to himself, "Pah! All that hard work to grow things to feed yourselves, when all I have to do is dig out some ants."

Now we are in mid-July, we have already harvested the early potatoes, lettuce and spinach and, eh, the grand total of eighty-seven peas. I counted each one. The thing is, as well as the vegetable plot—hard work on our heavy clay—I still needed more space for plants. I decided to use something rather unconventional to create this: a large wine rack (sadly empty) donated last year by my sister and brother-in-law. Of course, I had the grand idea of filling it and storing it in the cave beneath our house but reality kicked in and we shelved that idea. So, it was laid down on the ground, lined and filled with earth and well-rotted dung, then planted up. With this, I could try out small plantings of different vegetables to see what would grow well. Hence only a few peas—but boy, they tasted good. Between the bed and the plot I now have broad beans, haricot, fennel, various lettuces, radish, baby leeks, beetroot, romanesque cauliflower, kale, courgettes, tomatoes of many different shapes and varieties, and in the poly-tunnel, aubergines, pepper and chillis, strawberries and, fingers crossed, some melons. For a cook, being able to go out and gather some



We won't be giving up on market shopping anytime soon but it's all part of the process of discovering what suits our garden and what doesn't.

of the evening meal in your kitchen garden is beyond thrilling, with the assurance it has all be grown without chemicals.

We've also planted many flowers and we scattered some of the sunflower seed we were feeding to the garden birds in the spring on to prepared plots in the meadow. They are now fully grown and look stunning. We'll leave them so the birds can feed directly from the flower heads—a sort of self-service. I like that thought.

Another addition to the garden is a small seating area at the side of the house where the old vine grows. Niall has trained and entwined it onto a framework and now there is a complete canopy, shading the table and chairs, festooned with many, many bunches of red grapes. So, maybe I *will* need that wine rack back from the vegetable plot after all!

I mentioned earlier about enjoying being able to sit outside on a warm evening to eat dinner and that reminds me of some other residents here at Les Saumais: *la famille Hérisson*, the hedgehogs. Late in the spring, we would quite often be chatting away after dinner when all of a sudden a large hedgehog would amble across the grass nearby without a care in the world. A few weeks passed and to my absolute delight, I heard some scuffling in the undergrowth by the big cypress and there was a young hedgehog, then another, and



another! I love these unexpected surprises and discoveries in our own garden. In honour of our family of *hérisson*, I have a fun addition to my dining kit; a hedgehog-styled brush, used to clear crumbs from the table. Its just another little thing that ties in with my idea of a nice table setting: flowers, napkins, elegant cutlery, unpretentious glassware—and a quirky table brush.

I know that I am far from alone in my enjoyment of gardening and growing fresh produce, but even if you have no space to cultivate vegetables, or little free time, you can always plant a few lettuce seeds, some herbs (mint, thyme, chives, basil and flat leaf parsley would be my must-haves) and nasturtium seeds (pretty, bold colours and the flowers are edible and look fabulous on the salad platter) in a windowsill box or planter. Wait a little, then take great pleasure in serving them to your friends and family. And in my case, to our guests on our Retreats, as soon as we can all travel safely again. I cannot wait!

I have another idea for you if you have a spare large plant pot or corner in your garden: get a packet of borage seeds. They grow really fast, they are a bee's delight and, when the flowers are just finishing, you can either freeze them individually in an ice cube tray—they look so good in your cool summer drinks—or scatter them fresh over a salad or

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dessert to garnish. I even decorate my chocolate plates with them. Perfect!

So, I think it's safe to say that I love our garden and its fresh produce and that leads me to what I want to cook and share with you all. It's a recipe I've based on one in a French cook book for courgette, pine nut and feta cheese pastries. Since we've had a lot of rain, all the beetroot I grew had to be lifted a little early. As well as pickling some of it for the store cupboard and our Christmas table, I made a delicious fresh beetroot tzatziki and am including the recipe for that too. It will go really well with the courgette pastries and a fresh green salad. In true Charlotte style, you'll be guaranteed plenty of "colour on your plate"!

Enjoy the rest of the summer,
your garden or windowsill box,
good food and good company.

Take care,

Charlotte



COURGETTE, FETA AND PINE NUT PASTRIES

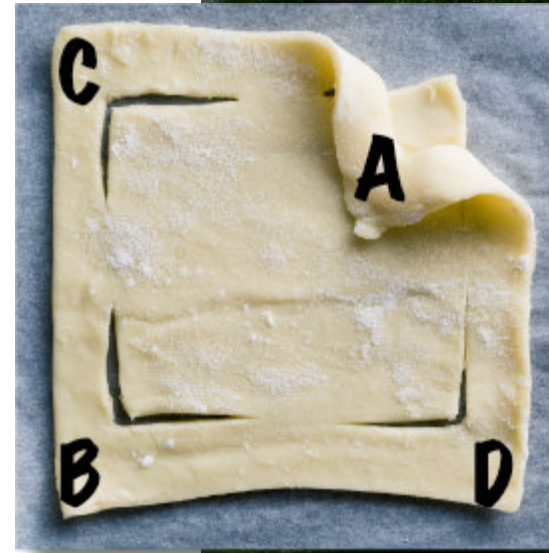
Serves 4 for lunch or 2 for dinner

Ingredients

- 1 pack of rectangular, ready-made puff pastry
- 100 g of Boursin-type cheese
- 2 finely-sliced small courgettes
- 100 g of feta cheese chopped into little cubes
- 20 g of pine nuts
- 1 beaten egg yolk

How-to

1. Pre-heat the oven to 200° C/ 180° F fan/ Gas 6, and set aside a greased, flat baking tray.
2. Cut the pastry into four squares and then cut each square as shown. Cut these lines right through the pastry as they will form the fold over sections later. Chill them in the fridge while you prepare your other ingredients.
3. Retrieve the pastry once you're ready and spread some of the Boursin in the middle of the pastry square then lay five or so slices of the courgette on top. Sprinkle on a few cubes of feta.
4. Egg wash round the edge of the pastry then take corners A and B and bring to the centre of the filled pastry and then do the same with corners C and D. Press slightly in the centre to seal the pastry folds. Brush the pastry sections with the egg wash and then sprinkle the pine nuts over and season.
5. Place on the baking tray and into the oven, and bake for about 20 mins or until golden brown.



BEETROOT TZATZIKI

Nigel Slater's recipe for beetroot tzatziki is my favourite, without any need for "Lottefication". I hope he won't mind me sharing it with you here. It's fresh and bold in both colour and flavour. If you aren't so keen on the flavour of garlic, you can omit it and add a squeeze of fresh lemon juice instead.

Ingredients

- 1 large, raw beetroot
- 200 g of natural or Greek-style yoghurt
- 1 crushed clove of fresh garlic
- a few fresh mint leaves
- freshly-ground pepper and a pinch of sea salt

How-to

1. Peel and grate the beetroot into a large glass bowl. It's a messy job and your fingers will become stained bright pink if you don't wear latex gloves. It does wash out after a while, though.
2. Stir in the yoghurt, garlic and seasoning and mix well.
3. Add a few finely-chopped mint leaves and after mixing these in transfer the tzatziki into a nice serving bowl—one that will show off its vibrant colour.





with the Benvies

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