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La Vie Rustic

La Vie Rustic brings French inspiration home

Sasha Paulsen Nov 10, 2014

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Author, journalist, farmer and francophile Georgeanne Brennan has launched an online store inspired by products she came to know while living in France.

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The autumn sunlight was pouring in through the windows onto the wooden table of the farmhouse kitchen where Georgeanne Brennan, renowned author, journalist, cook, farmer and Francophile, was demonstrating how to make jambon cru.

You can also call this French version of prosciutto “ham butter,” Brennan noted, as she shared samples from a previous batch.

“If you have your own on hand, it’s really easy to cook a delicious meal quickly,” she said. “You can add it to risotto, pasta, salad and pizzas. I can’t tell you the number of times I’ve impressed my children with it.

“It’s expensive to buy just a little piece, but easy to make your own.”

So easy, in fact, she is encouraging people to have a go at it with a kit that is just one of the offerings in a new online store she launched earlier this fall. La Vie Rustic is dedicated to re-creating “the adventure of living in rural France” even if you live in a studio flat in the middle of Los Angeles.

The French effect

People who venture outside of Paris to explore are extremely susceptible to falling under the spell of the French countryside. Stop at a farmhouse bed-and-breakfast where their meal comes from the garden and barnyard or have a never-to-be-forgotten meal cooked

in a pocket-sized kitchen of an auberge that's on no one's list of best restaurants, and one is quite likely to be happily hooked forever.

Brennan famously went one step further, and after studying at Aix-en-Provence, she and her husband bought a French farmhouse, where they raised goats and pigs, along with their children, an experience she recounts in her memoir, "A Pig in Provence."

Today, she spends more of her time on her farm in Winters, where she grows her leeks and peppers and asparagus, and her grandchildren come to play in the orchards of persimmons, apples, quince, figs and lemons. France is not forgotten, however; she and her family still visit there frequently, and now she is combining the best of both worlds in her La Vie Rustic products that reflect "the French aesthetic, made in California."

It's a fun, eclectic mix that's evolving as inspiration strikes Brennan. The website, LaVieRustic.com, includes French lessons, too, for it's divided into sections like *Le Basse-Cour* (the barnyard), *Le Verger* (the orchard) and *Les Champs* (the fields).

Within them you will find unexpected delights like a French-style chicken scratch seed mix (\$7) that will surely cause chickens to put on airs and lord it over their common neighbors.

There are also things to try if you don't have chickens.

For the jambon cru set (\$35), for example, Brennan includes a redwood salting box, a finishing rub of herbs, cheesecloth, string — and perhaps most importantly, instructions. (You do need to supply the inexpensive piece of pork and a bag of salt.)

Teaching comes naturally to Brennan, who has taught cooking classes at her farms in Winters and Provence, in addition to courses at nearby UC Davis.

In this case, however, Brennan's *jambon cru* directions come from her own French teacher, a neighbor in Provence named Marcel, who showed her how to make it, using a box like the one she has re-created in California. You bury the pork in salt, capture the

brine as the salt draws it out of the meat, rub it with spices and let it age. Six months later, you eat it. It takes 30 minutes to set up, Brennan explained, and the result is an abundant supply.

“This is what people do,” she said. “They’ve been doing it for 1,000 years just to preserve their meat.”

Other offerings from La Vie Rustic include hand-stamped holiday cards made from Brennan’s collection of antique lead letters.

A handcrafted sickle (\$45) is a California-made replica of the one she learned to use in France to harvest lavender and alfalfa for rabbits, that her neighbor used to clear weeds from beneath her fig and olive trees. “Holding a fine tool in the garden is like holding a fine knife in the kitchen,” Brennan writes on her website.

For *La Cuisine* — the kitchen — she suggests Sweet Bay Laurel leaves from a tree on her Winters farm (\$6, dried; \$10 fresh) or “purist” mix of Herbes de Provence (\$6), made of “the woody herbs that can be wild-gathered in Provence ... the mixture I learned from my neighbors there.”

She has also created an unusual *Sel de Figue*, French sea salt with chopped dried figs from Brennan’s farm, “an incredibly sweet” Sultan de Maraout tree. This mix (\$10), she notes, is versatile. “There is something about the ability of figs to go with both sweet

and savory,” she notes. It can be used to season duck, pork or game, she said, in vinaigrettes or to sprinkle on brownies or chocolate ice cream.

Cuttings from her majestic fig tree (itself from a cutting of a gift from the Agricultural Commissioner of Algeria to the U.S. in the early 20th century), are also available. They are \$25 and shipped bare-root at appropriate times.

Le Potager — the kitchen garden — Brennan notes, is “an essential aspect of French life,” and so she is providing seeds for a French-inspired garden; they include French lettuce (escarole, frisée), and a French chicory seed collection (\$15). And for your field, should you have one, there is a mix of Red Poppies and Bishop’s Lace seeds, to create “a swath of color and romance to wander through, cut bouquets from, paint or just admire.”

This is just the beginning, Brennan said. Coming up are replicas of favorite pottery dishes, a wood-bowl pepper grinder and a salt pot large enough to fit your hand and sprinkle salt on your creations with true French flair.

“I tell people, ‘Try one thing,’” Brennan said. “Find some aspect that connects you with that life. It’s a lifestyle that’s more about being and living and less about having.”

For more information, visit LaVieRustic.com.

Crab Cake and Butter Lettuce Salad

Leek Soup with Pancetta and Bread Crumbs

