

# Wild Garlic, Gooseberries and Me

A chef's stories and recipes from the land



Denis Cotter

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# Wild Garlic, Gooseberries...and Me

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**To the memory of my father, Michael Cotter, a frequent and often unexpected guiding presence during the writing of this book.**

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The greatest service that can be rendered any country is to add a useful plant to its culture.

**THOMAS JEFFERSON**

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# Introduction

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While I was writing this book, most people I know learned not to ask two particular questions: ‘How is it coming along?’ and ‘What is it about?’ Some kept asking anyway, which was actually much appreciated. The answer to the first question was almost always a moan, often very long, sometimes monosyllabic. To the second question I would answer simply, ‘Vegetables,’ and most of the time I really felt that it was enough of an explanation. Caught on a good day, I might have added that the book is also about my relationships with the vegetables I work with as a professional cook, and with the people who grow them. It is also about the place where this happens, and my place in that place.

Now that the book is done, I guess that’s still the answer I would give. Food is life. We all know that intuitively but often forget it or lose touch with the importance of food in our lives beyond the basic need for sustenance. A healthy culture needs a healthy food culture, one that is built on trust and making the connections and relationships that shape a community.

I have been living with the structure of this book for so long that it seems completely natural to me, and I have to remind myself that it may not be quite so obvious to others. The vegetables I have chosen to write about are not listed in alphabetical order nor arranged in a pattern that reflects the seasons of a year. Instead, they are grouped according to shared characteristics, whether that be their colouring, as in the opening chapter ‘It’s a green thing’, or their habitat as in both ‘Wild pickings’ and ‘Growing in the dark’.

In ‘A passionate pursuit’ I suppose the grouping is less obvious, but these are the vegetables that are currently a major source of interest, even obsession, both to me and to Ultan Walsh, the grower who provides much of the local produce we use at Café Paradiso.

Very early, back in that innocent but hugely enjoyable stage of just sitting around talking about a potential book, I visited Ultan often, to pry further into something which I took for granted: the hows and whys of his work as a grower. I already knew that we shared a special affection for certain vegetables, such as the artichokes and asparagus that were thriving on his new farm. I knew too that we were both excited by the possibility of producing vegetables that might be thought of as non-native, or those that are difficult to grow in this part of the world. During those conversations, I came to understand better the deeply personal way in which a grower works with his produce and his specific piece of land. It was when he burst my linear notion of seasonality that I realised I needed to look at the produce from a new angle and to dig deeper into the characteristics of different vegetables and their potential.

The result, this book, is therefore a very personal take on the vegetables I have encountered in a year and a bit of concentrating on the possibilities of one small corner of the southwest of Ireland. It’s a combination of things I know or believe to be true, things I have learned in the process, and some stuff that you might find amusing. Oh, and a pile of recipes that I hope you will find useful in the kitchen if the text gets your juices going.

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# It's a green thing

**I**t all comes down to the rain in the end. Of course it does. How could it be otherwise? Of the many clichés and myths surrounding Ireland, two of the most unavoidably true are that it's a green place, and it rains a lot. These are facts. It's a simple equation. The rain makes the place green. That, and the temperate climate, which means the land never gets scorched in summer or frozen in winter. The damned grass never stops growing.

Coming in to land at Cork Airport, you will still occasionally hear stifled gasps and hushed exclamations at just how green the fields are down below. Not just from first-time tourists – they expect it, they've read the brochure – but also from returning natives who've popped abroad for a spot of weekend shopping and martinis. We Irish may be a moneyed lot these days, but we still get excited at the sight of our little green home.

Those who know and care about these things say that green is the colour of hope. Hmm...I like that. Hope is a very strong force in life, nothing like the wishful thinking it is often taken for. It is a positive, purposeful energy, and in my green-tinged world, that connection makes sense.

Green has long been an obsession of mine. The colour, that is. My eye is drawn to flashes of green in every visual setting. Artwork, furniture, a row of books, crockery on a shelf or shoes in a shop window; clothes especially, whether on a body or hanging on a rack. I wear a lot of green, and feel comfortable with myself in green more than any other colour. I took to it quite young, glorying in its many shades – and there are so many, far more than the forty that the hoary old Irish ballad glorifies.

Some greens are fun in a shocking way, most just merge into the background – literally, in a rural context, of course. The ones in the dark green-black, olive-tinted sphere are almost soberly elegant. Almost. There are dozens that seem bearable when viewed in an indoor mirror, but in the light of day make you resemble a lost American tourist looking for Killarney. I actually love them all, in the way a good parent likes his children equally, or a cat lover pampers every one of her disdainful feline fold.

In the vegetable world, greens have long been lumped together. Mind you, now that I think of it, the political Greens are usually treated in the same way – tolerated, patronised, thought of as vaguely good for you, an off-centre sideshow to the real focus of the political table.

Green vegetables, if they are eaten at all, have very often been taken as if they were medicine, a source of some necessary but unidentified nutrients, and swallowed as such without any expectation of pleasure. 'Eat your greens', that familiar old war-cry, translates into: 'Enjoy your dinner but eat that dull but healthy stuff I put on your plate too; it's good for you.' It was inevitable that this attitude led to greens being cooked as though they were medicine too, with little care given to how they might taste.

In the days before the arrival of modern calabrese broccoli to our shops, the range of greens eaten in most households where I grew up was narrow, and greens typically meant cabbage. Whatever was on the plate in the way of protein, the accompaniment was always cabbage, and the cabbage was 'good for you'. It was no great punishment to me, however. I liked cabbage, but that was just luck, it wasn't why it was fed to me.

It seems to me there are plenty of families now who don't even bother to inflict greens on themselves in this way. Sometimes it's a basic lack of health awareness, despite the burgeoning produce markets and the ubiquitous high-profile foodie campaigners on our TV screens. For those who

do fuss over their nutritional requirements, the options for satisfying these has widened to include supplements, pills, fortified breakfast cereals and milk products, and other horrors. Believe in that lo if you will. Even if we were to accept that these fulfil all our nutritional needs, does it mean the end of usefulness of our traditional medicinal greens?

If anything, I think there is a certain freedom in it. A freedom to not bother, if you're that way inclined. But also, a freedom from thinking of greens as medicine. A freedom, if you like, to love them for the rich and complex flavours they bring to the table.

Eating greens for pleasure; now that's an interesting concept, and a real cause for hope. And yet only realised the extent of my own fascination with greens when teasing it out with another devotee. I have been fortunate in the last few years to be working with Ultan Walsh of Gortnanain Farm, a grower who, like me, has a passion for the food he produces. He grows vegetables that he loves, both as commercial crops and as food to use in his own kitchen. (In theory, he also grows what I want him to grow, even if it's not something he cares for. Somehow we don't get much of a supply of those crops. I must get to the bottom of that one day...)

Ultan and I have often eaten some new variety of greens he has produced, and then launched into a post-mastication analysis of how it stands in the league of greenness, and how it compares to others like it. Does its texture compensate for a certain flatness of flavour? Does it have a wonderfully satisfying taste but look like a pile of sludge on the plate? This ongoing inquest has always existed between us to an extent, but it became a top-of-the-agenda subject when he trialled Chinese kale. The purpose was to check out this exotic vegetable, see how it behaved as a crop and test it in a few recipes. We were also interested at the time to find some new greens to fill those gaps in the seasons when the fields are almost bare. Ultan's first response was to declare it the best green he'd ever eaten. Well, I wasn't expecting that; it wasn't even on the agenda. The 'best'? How do you make such a declaration? What are the qualities of green? What is the vocabulary that speaks of greenness? The world of wine has a native language that allows those inside to speak fluently to each other about the endless intricacies of structure, flavour and all-round character of their subject. To outsiders, it can be an incomprehensible jargon, but there is no denying its fluency and the fact it has the practical usefulness of any proper language. Cheese and chocolate lovers sometimes aspire to creating a language of similar complex usefulness, though they still have a way to go.

So it is with the matter of greens. When Ultan and I eat some freshly cut Chinese kale or sprouting broccoli, cooked in olive oil with maybe a little chilli and garlic, we gush incoherently in praise of its very fine greenness indeed. 'By God, but that's a damn fine green, that's about as green as a green could get.' And so on, our enthusiasm compromised by a lack of vocabulary.

To me, there is a quality in the finest greens that can't be measured in terms of nutrients or flavour. Other vegetables provide pleasures of taste, but in the inherent pleasure of fresh greens there is what can only be called a 'life force'. It is like going straight to the source, accessing the most primal and vital food. It is engaging with life itself, in a pure and vibrant form that we can absorb but can't quantify. More prosaically, how to define the experience of eating greens must lie, of course, somewhere in the combination of texture, flavour and appearance.

The texture of greens can range from meltingly soft baby spinach to the crisp 'bite' of Savoy cabbage and the satisfyingly chewy kales. Soft is good and I will happily sing its praises later, but the most prized greens in our canon have a tougher textural character.

The flavour is hard to pin down. I call it 'green', but that's not really enough, is it? At the top of the scale, there is some element of a strong cabbagey character, earthy with a little bitterness. However, when cooked these greens reveal a sweet note underneath. This unique combination makes



the best greens – such as sprouting broccoli and black or Chinese kale – a great partner for olive oil, various spices and the sweetness of tomatoes and peppers. Add some sheep's cheese and you have a sense of what my heaven tastes of. Of course heaven has a flavour! How could it not?

In this quixotic search for the ultimate green, colour is very important, and it may be the most telling element. Well, it would be, I suppose, given that we're talking about vegetables that share a name with a colour.

The vegetables that rate highest in our admittedly very subjective quest have, in the raw state, a deep, dark shade of green, intense but self-contained. Toss them in a pan with some olive oil and they become vivid, glowing and translucent, a green unlike almost anything else in nature. Mind you, nature itself can get pretty vivid. One of the most electric greens I've ever seen lit up my journey one spring morning, while I was driving through the West Cork countryside. I was on my way to see my good friend Bill Hogan, to cook a dinner celebrating his wonderful artisan cheeses. I hadn't been out that way in a while, but felt familiar enough with the area not to pay too much attention to the scenery. Just enjoying the drive, listening to Grant McLennan sing his beautiful melancholy. The morning had that peculiar mixture of thin sunshine and comically heavy showers that is typical, yet never quite expected, of West Cork in May. (Why does the rain surprise us? Have you ever met an Irishman with proper rain gear? Do we not expect rain in our lives or do we just not take any notice of it? Never mind, we could get stuck on that tangent forever.) Suddenly, I came to the top of a long rise in the road just as the rain took a short break, allowing the timid but still blinding sun a moment of glory. Unfolding in front of me, as I sped along, was an idyllic rural scene. For some reason, probably the music, my attitude was different and I took notice of my surroundings. Small fields of grass and meadow of the most vivid green, dripping with moisture, lit by striped sunlight, and marked out by hedgerows in which the creamy hawthorn blossom was dominated by the shockingly bright yellow, bright orange of gorse flowers. There is something in the gorse that turns the fields of West Cork to eleven on the monitor. I kid you not. Go look for it if you get a chance.

### **The essential greens are those on your doorstep**

So much for the notion of 'green', and the essence of what it is about green vegetables that turns me on so much. Perhaps it's time to take a look at the specific ones that do it for me. As with all the vegetables in this book, what follows here is a study of those that have been closest to my heart over the past year. Most are long-standing favourites, but even then they have become new again to me in the way that I work with them, which is constantly evolving, and, even more so, in the way that I procure them. Green vegetables, more than any others, have to be fresh to give their best, and the only sure way to get fresh greens is to grow them yourself or to source them from a local supplier who can deliver what you need when you want it. The shorter the journey from field to kitchen, the more we can access the almost magical qualities of foods that, being so recently picked, are simply bursting with life. It is in the forming and nurturing of the relationships essential to that transaction that we can change the way we value our greens. When it comes right down to it, the ultimate reason these vegetables are so important to me is because they are grown close to where I work by people I know and trust.

Here then, from cabbage to watercress, via asparagus and chard amongst others, is a personal tale on the most truly vital ingredients of my kitchen.

### **The iconoclastic lover of heartless cabbage**

Cabbages of all sorts have been playing a huge role in the diets of most parts of Europe for hundreds of years. So I'm told, anyway. They certainly played a big part in my youth, which concerns me a lot more. It may be subjective and provincial, but my youth, despite fading into the past, still affects my relationship with food more than European history does. If the opposite is true for you, I'd love to read your dissertation on cabbage and its role in the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

I know it's an old Irish cliché now, but I did in fact eat a lot of cabbage as a child. I can at least spare you the weary and hackneyed description of the smell of over-boiled cabbage permeating the house, simply because I have no memory of it. My mother never over-boiled cabbage. When she used it in classic bacon 'n' cabbage (yes, we did have it a couple of times a week), it was added to the pot lateish with the lid kept off, and cooked until soft but not disintegrating. How's that for enlightened?

I do, however, have a reference for the type of horrific food smells that can cause distressing memories. No, not from my friends' houses, because everyone in the town was similarly enlightened (Thanks to the town council for sponsoring that comment.) In New Zealand, there is a similar modern trauma amongst the newly sophisticated regarding the smell of long-boiled mutton, often combined with cabbage as well. I knew about it from hearsay before I ever experienced it. Like the cabbage legend on this side of the world, their version is often used as a way to laugh at country cousins or the ignorance of an earlier generation.

When I finally came nose to nose with the olfactory reality, I was living in a small town in the middle of the North Island of New Zealand. One quiet day of many, I went out for a cycle to pass the time. I could have gone swimming or cricketing or rolling bowls around the green like everyone else but I was feeling unsociable. Miles out of town, I was overtaken by one of those serious bike people, decked out in the kind of tight-fitting, outrageously gaudy outfit that would get cyclists thrown out of all but the most hedonistic of gay clubs. He pulled over and made small chat, always delighted to meet someone interested in bikes, and so on. He was not a young man, and thus was very proud of overtaking youngsters. He was also running a small cycling club in a part of the world that didn't care much for the sport, always on the lookout for new members. I wasn't exactly fit at the time, but I was young and had my own bike, so I guess I was fair prey. I was also foreign and way too polite. Against my better judgement, I followed him to his nearby house to sign up to a glittering cycling career.

It was one of those classic Kiwi country homes, a tiny shack of timber with a tin roof and a small front porch on which there is always an old couch with cushions held together by the dog or cat hairs of their usual occupants. While the club chairman went into the back room to get forms, I stood in the kitchen. There was a tall pot on the stove. I recognised it from the legend. In it goes a piece of a dead sheep with plenty of water, and maybe a couple of onions if you're really cooking. On goes the lid, heat turned down low, and off to work you go. When you get home, you call it dinner. Or maybe when you get home, you put the cabbage in – I never did pay enough attention. Anyway, the smell was vile even sulphurous. I wasn't professional enough to do an analysis, but I would swear there was definitely cabbage in this one. The smell wasn't just coming from the pot – every part of the house reeked of it, from the endless daily ritual. By the time the chairman came back with the paperwork, I was a couple of miles down the road, moving a lot faster than when I'd met him. Saved by the reek of long-boiled dinner.

Because I have no childhood odour trauma about cabbage, I have never been uncomfortable with it, which must be why I still find it one of the most useful, affordable and flexible vegetables, both at home and in a restaurant kitchen.

The first book I usually turn to when trying to decide what flavours to pair with a vegetable is Jane Grigson's *Vegetable Book*. Although I've never knowingly cooked directly from it, the book

works as a springboard to an almost endless range of possibilities because of Grigson's passionate but detailed research. True to form, she doesn't hide her disdain for what she considers the coarser greens. On spring cabbage and its inability, or disinclination, to form a heart, she quips that 'heartlessness is never a desirable quality'. It's a fun line she must have enjoyed writing. I would have liked an evening in her company to discuss it – wouldn't even have minded losing the argument, though an argument would have been.

However, she clearly adored some cabbages, and rightfully placed the Savoy at the top of the pile. The Savoy is a highly cultivated vegetable, with a sweet flavour and wonderfully crunchy texture which makes it just as good eaten raw or cooked. Despite the recent trend against long cooking of cabbages, I think the best way to cook Savoy is to braise it for an hour or more in olive oil, wine and stock, with the possible addition of spices and the extra sweetness of tomato. After that you can add anything you fancy that goes with cabbage: I like chickpeas, lentils, seeds such as fennel, coriander, caraway and cumin, sweet peppers, fennel, even potatoes in a reverse of the classic method of adding cabbage to spuds. Not all at the same time, mind. Pick a well-matched two or three. In Paradiso we use it as a wrapping for dolmas and timbales, as well as a braised side dish. Savoy isn't the most obviously smooth wrapping material, but the flavour makes it worthwhile and it only takes a little effort to flatten the leaves if you need to.

Even after losing my imaginary argument with Ms Grigson, I still love spring cabbage, partly for its lovely soft, pliable leaves and its relatively mild flavour, but mostly because it arrives in early spring just when we are tiring of the stored winter foods. Putting away the winter things and moving on is one of the most exciting times in the vegetable year. It changes your focus from the past to the potential future. Spring cabbage has the flavour of new growth, of life and hope and the mad optimism of a new year.

The brassica that divides people most, however, is surely the Brussels sprout – an eccentric name for a gloriously eccentric-looking plant. Brussels sprouts are compact cabbages in mini form, with concentrated flavour. But what an astonishing-looking plant they come from. It grows about 60cm (2 feet) high with a few dozen sprouts clinging to the stalk, while out of the top it puts up what it clearly believes to be a decent attempt at a cabbage. And it's not far wrong. The leaves are indeed good cabbage, and have the advantage, culinarily speaking, of clinging to life when the sprouts and most other winter greens are gone. These should, however, be cooked like winter rather than spring greens. They are tough, having been hanging around all winter, and are best braised or thinly sliced and fried.

The sprouts themselves are as adaptable as the entire range of cabbages put together. They are best known as a simply boiled vegetable – hard or soft, as you like it. But they also fry well, with spices and tomato. They are good in creamy gratins with strong cheeses. The sprouts can also be shredded leaf by leaf and added to salads, soups or stews. Brussels sprouts with chestnuts is a classic combination, one that gets a frequent run-out at Christmas, but they also go well with other nuts, including walnuts, hazelnuts and macadamias. I believe they work with blue cheese too, but not everyone agrees with me. You have to admire that about Brussels sprouts – as much as they are pigeonholed by local tradition, they are also just as happy dressed up in exotic gear.

The thing about sprouts is that very few people can agree on how to cook them. Leaving out those who simply can't abide the vegetable at all, the rest of us who profess to love them – there is apparently no middle ground with sprouts – are very subjective about how they should be cooked, so it is very difficult to say anything other than this is how I like mine. For everyone who likes them light and steamed, there is another who likes them almost mushy, and really loves them that way, so you can't say it's wrong or ill-advised. Every winter at Paradiso I try a new twist on sprouts. The recipe to

follow later with a blue cheese cream and spiced potato gnocchi is this year's model. I love it, but I accept that it's a personal thing.

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There is also a relatively new cabbage that we used for the first time last winter. In fact, it's relatively new to everyone except the Ethiopians. It was only in the late 1950s that it was first brought to Europe and America. It is called Abyssinian cabbage, but you may have come across it as 'Texsel greens', a very unglamorous name given to it by people trialling it as a crop in, er, Texas, would you believe? Ultan first grew it to fill that gap in mid-to-late winter. It can survive outdoors in our summer, but the fields and tunnels are full of greens then. So instead, he grows it in a tunnel in the dull days of November to February, to give us some badly needed variety at that time, something softer and lighter than most winter greens.

We harvest it in two ways for Paradiso: firstly as a cut-and-come crop where small-to-medium leaves are picked from closely sown plants; and secondly as a plant grown to full maturity when the leaves are almost the size of spring cabbage. The younger, cut-and-come leaves are close to spinach in texture, and can be used in almost the same way, bearing in mind that they do have a slightly tangy cabbage flavour. This works well with the sweetness of tomato and garlic, and it is comfortable too with the zing of ginger and some of the sweeter spices like nutmeg, paprika, fennel and cinnamon.

Even at full size, the leaves are relatively soft, somewhere between a coarse spinach and spring cabbage. This is a refreshing food to have in the depths of winter, when you want the flavour of fresh greens but are not in the mood for the full-on hit of kale. You can even eat the sprouted shoots, which cook like sprouting broccoli. The large leaves make a good wrapping for dolmas, timbales and terrines, but they are best cooked simply in any way that works for spring cabbage, especially stir-fried and seasoned with sesame and soy sauce.

### **Flowering brassica – the true cabbage royalty**

When I think of great brassica, however, it isn't the headed cabbages I dream about at all, but the flowering heads of broccoli and the loose leaves of kale. It is astonishing that purple sprouting broccoli has been grown for hundreds of years, yet it has remained relatively obscure in recent times. Meanwhile, the vegetable generally known as broccoli or, properly, calabrese, has taken over the Western world in a mere thirty years.

On the other hand, sprouting broccoli has the drawback of being a vegetable that doesn't accord with the average supermarket buyer's criteria. It has a long growing season, is time-consuming to harvest on a large scale, and it needs to be eaten when very freshly picked. But for the consumer, the flavour of sprouting broccoli has an intensity, richness and complexity that shows up the big-headed green version as the one-dimensional thing it is.

It doesn't take much imagination to see how those attributes can be seen as positive attractions to those whose main priority in food is not mere convenience. This is a vegetable that sits in the ground over winter, then produces the most beautiful and intensely flavoured shoots in late winter, and continues producing more for eight to ten weeks. Its arrival at this lean time of year gives it a very special place in the hierarchy of all vegetables. There are varieties that crop even earlier, depending on the mildness of the winter, and others that go on producing into late spring. This is an area where the breeding of varieties to extend the season can only be seen as a good thing. The autumn in which I wrote this piece was so mild that many broccoli plants due to sprout early, as in shortly before Christmas, were already putting out a crop in early November. What is a grower, or a cook, to do? Scold the plant for unseasonal behaviour and ignore the crop? Or be grateful for such an early treat?

value the principle of seasonality as much as anyone, and I love those vegetables which remain resolutely and stubbornly seasonal. But there is a big difference between growers using their skill and knowledge to extend the season of a plant and a supermarket flying the stuff in from the opposite hemisphere because we can't go a week without it. It is mainly because of this intelligent and useful extending of sprouting broccoli's season that we are finally beginning to see it more frequently in markets and even in some supermarkets.

The last time I wrote about purple sprouting broccoli, in *Paradiso Seasons*, I suggested that the only hope for wider recognition of its virtues was if both the public and the growers viewed it as a vegetable on a par with asparagus in terms of perceived value and price. I didn't know then that in Italy, where it has been loved for centuries, it has long been treated as such when sold at markets. It was even referred to as 'Italian asparagus' in eighteenth-century England.

Purple sprouting broccoli has a big rich flavour; a little bitter, yes, but with that essential innate sweetness too. It is great in stir-fries with hot spices like chilli and ginger, but is just as comfortable in pasta dishes with the sweetness of tomato or peppers, and herbs like thyme, basil and oregano. It works with most cheeses, but especially soft sheep's milk cheeses like Knockalara, or mild blues. One of the nicest and simplest ways to prepare it is to simmer it in a small amount of water in a covered pan until just tender, and then dress it with olive oil, salt and pepper. This simple dish is equally good whether served at room temperature or piping hot.

Cime di rapa, or broccoli raab, is a somewhat similar vegetable, but it is grown more for its leaves than for the flowering stalks. The leaves are wonderfully bitter, yet cook as quickly and as softly as spinach. When cooked in olive oil, the leaves shrink quickly but become the most darkly vibrant shade of green. The edible stalk is sweeter than the leaves, which makes the combination such a deliciously balanced flavour. The skin of the stalks can be slightly stringy, so it's best to either peel them or chop them finely. As I write, we have only eaten a trial crop, but it is a vegetable I am very excited about for the coming years. It is wonderful in pasta, as a perky side dish for a comforting risotto and cooked with the tomatoes and chillies that complement dark greens so well.

There is a great love of flowering brassica in Chinese cooking, and most of the favourites are from a range of greens going under the general name of choi sum. One that we have taken to using in the restaurant is Chinese broccoli, sometimes known as Chinese kale. (Well, it isn't technically one of the choi sum family at all, but it is grown and used in the same way.) For some reason, faced with the choice of names, Ultan and I decided to go with 'kale' at first. I think he had kale on his mind that week, trying to find ways to make sure we always had a couple of kale varieties on the menu.

To confuse the matter even more, if you are lucky enough to come across this gem in a Chinese restaurant, as I did in a wonderful place in London doing a modern take on dim sum, then it will probably be called 'gai lan'. Probably. Don't bet your house on it. It might be 'kai lan', or any of a number of variations on the two. Outside of horticultural books, these terms can be more casual tools for communication. We choose one and go with it. That way, I know what the grower means, my cooks and floor staff understand what I mean and, hopefully, so do the people eating in the dining room. Nonetheless, when it came to serving the vegetable, I reverted to 'Chinese broccoli'. Next year I'll go for broke and use 'gai lan'. It must be a brassica thing, this confusion over names. I'm sure the rest of the vegetable world is much more conformist.

While not exactly a fast grower, Chinese broccoli gives results much faster than its Western cousins, putting out flowering stems with soft leaves attached. As with sprouting broccoli, these stems are the prized part of this amazing vegetable. It has that classic combination of sweetness and slight bitterness, and the young leaves are delicious too. The texture of the stem, picked at the right time, is

tender and juicy, with a little bite. In the pantheon of greens, it has it all. It is often picked as a young whole plant, when every part can be eaten, and can be presented on the plate as one piece, which looks very striking.

Chinese broccoli has strong enough flavours to carry quite a lot of spices, and works especially well when flavoured with chillies, ginger, soy sauce or sesame oil. But if you think of it as having a character close to sprouting broccoli, then you can see how it can be used with European seasonings, with garlic, tomatoes and herbs, even with cheeses, as well as in the usual contrasting role with risotto and other comfort foods. It is great with eggs too, especially served straddling a soft omelette.

## **The timely revival of lowly kale**

Not fifteen years ago, the only kale to be found was the curly green one. Even then, most people believed it to be fit only for cattle; a tiny minority enjoyed it from their own gardens, but it never showed up on shop shelves. Kale may have suffered from its association with poverty and hunger, something it shares with the wonderful but often derided swede turnip.

There is something tragi-heroic in kale's history, in the way it fell from a dull but important survival food to something looked on with disdain. Kale is a tough character, it survives well in cold weather and in poor soil, and it is a low-maintenance, cut-and-come source of food. Most importantly it over-winters well and can go on through the lean months of March and April, the notorious 'hungry gap' months. So much for the heroic. Foods that nourish through times of deprivation are quickly left behind when the good times roll in. Throwing off the badge of poverty, the survival food is discarded or denied even, and replaced by the exotic, by what can be afforded.

Years ago, I was discussing roots with a German grower working in West Cork, who supplied me with local and imported vegetables, a man who went by the descriptive name of Organic Joe. I was moaning about the high price of imported roots like celeriac and salsify, and the humble turnips too, though I never bought those from him. He said that for a new generation of growers and foodies in Germany, Holland and other parts of Europe, roots were something of an exotic. They had largely disappeared once the post-war economic boom kicked in and people could finally put away the foods that helped them survive when rationing was necessary. As one generation shied away from roots and the associations they brought to the table, the next generation went back to them as something with the dual appeal of being both exotic and traditional. So it may have been for poor old kale in these parts. I don't think this is a conscious thing or an overt snobbery; it just happens that people unthinkingly move away from the things that have associations with the parts of their history they would rather forget.

In the early 1990s, as Ireland became more self-confident due to its increasing wealth, there seemed to be the beginnings of a new lease of life for kale, echoing Organic Joe's theory on roots. Kale, having been rejected by a generation or three, was at once new to us and obviously part of our food history. At first, there was a renaissance for the traditional curly kale. Not long after, other more exotic varieties began to show up. By the late 1990s, we were seeing kale as a newly fashionable ingredient. Put away that dull old cabbage, dear, we're having kale for dinner tonight.

The first of the immigrant kales that I fell in love with was cavolo nero, the Italian variety, and still my favourite. Again, the issue of naming comes up here. We've always called it by the loose translation 'black kale', not for any reason other than that it became the term in common usage between grower and kitchen. I know this can seem annoyingly careless to those who are fastidious about the proper names of vegetables. I'm generally as fussy as the next person about attention to

detail but, in naming things, common usage often dictates the rules.

~~Black kale is a strikingly handsome plant, growing up to 1 metre (3 feet) high, with long leaves fanning out from the stem. The leaves are the most fantastic colour. Definitely a green, but purple too at the same time, a very intense purple that is almost black. Take a look at the water in the pot next time you boil some. It will be a beautiful, bright, shade of green. No purple there at all. Meanwhile the kale itself will have become more intensely dark. What's going on here? Most greens become brighter and more translucent when cooked. This one leaks its green colour, intent on becoming a black vegetable. Cooked in olive oil and stock, its deep colour glistens, and the strong flavour has the perfect balance of bitter and sweet elements.~~

A new favourite is Red Russian, though the colour is really more of a magical blend of a silvery translucent green with pink shading. It has a softer, more open leaf than the black kale, and it cooks faster to give a more tender vegetable. We still persist with the curly green variety too, but I admit it is only as a back-up to the current two favourites. Others we have tried and liked, and will definitely come back to, are Pentland Brig, Red Bor and Raggedy Jack.

All kales can be cooked in the same ways, making allowances for their toughness. If you are using leaves with a thin stalk, simply chop them coarsely. This is especially good when you are adding kale to stews, as the stalks cook down to a softly chewable texture. If the stalks are thicker or seem tough, pull the leaves from the stalks, discarding the stalks, and then take one of two options. The first is to boil the kale in a large pot for anything from four to ten minutes. If the cooked kale is to be part of a dish, such as in pancakes, frittata, tarts or gratins, cool it by dropping it into cold water. Squeeze out the water and chop the kale. How thorough you need to be in squeezing out the water depends on the dish. If you intend to add the kale to a soup or risotto, it's not such a serious issue, but if you are making gnocchi or putting it in a frittata, try to get it as dry as possible. Alternatively, for a simple side dish, wilt the kale by frying it in olive oil over medium heat, splashing regularly with stock or water until the kale is tender. This simple method makes kale a perfect foil for rich food, such as egg or cheese dishes. Most kales are strong enough to take quite a lot of spicing, especially chillies, cumin and coriander seeds, and ginger.

Kale is traditionally a winter crop, and, as such, it is a vital part of our repertoire during those lean months. However, we also use it in summer, sometimes even from plants grown in a tunnel. Kale in a tunnel? In summer? That may seem to go against the accepted thinking on the subject of kale, and indeed on the whole notion of serving vegetables according to their season. Over the years, Ultan has developed growing patterns to ensure that we always have a variety of different greens to work with. In fact, because of kale's affinity with different ingredients and flavourings (it loves tomatoes and herbs, but also chestnuts and potatoes), I like to have one or two varieties around most of the year.

In the early summer, when the spring greens are disappearing, kale from the tunnel is very welcome, and is followed by outdoor kale which crops through the summer. The kale of deepest winter is the hardiest, with the toughest leaf and the strongest flavour. Kale grown in a tunnel is a different beast. It grows quickly, producing softer leaves. These cook faster too, giving a softer texture and a sweeter, milder flavour. The Red Russian is particularly successful this way, finishing up close in texture to coarse spinach than to winter kale. It's a lovely summer green, simple as that, and very welcome on my plate and in my menus.

Another misleading theory about kale is that it is bitter in early winter before the first frost. Bitterness in greens is a good thing, but the theory suggests that at this time of year it is not balanced by any sweetness when the vegetable is cooked. The frost theory is applied to other brassica too, especially Brussels sprouts. Some go as far as to say these greens need a few weeks of frost. (Weeks

of frost? Brr...no, thanks.) I would agree that the first outer leaves of kale in early winter are not as sweet as the inner ones later on, but they are far from unusable or completely lacking in balance. To rigidly await the arrival of frost only makes sense in a location where the weather patterns are predictable and there are plenty of alternative greens. Many vegetables with a long season go through changes in flavour and texture during their picking time. This is something to be celebrated and savoured, even if some adapting of recipes is called for. The best analogy I can make is with the Sungold tomatoes that Ultan grows all summer long. Through the season, their flavour moves across the spectrum from acidic to sugary sweet, and few people agree on when they are at their best. They are, however, always good. In any case, while the climate in West Cork may not be a sub-tropical nirvana, the winters here are not very cold. If we were to wait for a decent number of consecutive frosty nights before we picked the crop, then some winters we'd never get to eat kale at all.

Whether growing kale or doing any other kind of gardening, you can only ever take a manual or instruction book as a guide, not a bible. The rest depends on your own circumstances, as well as your needs and tastes. This is true of cookery books too, including this one. Ultan puts it succinctly when he says that every locality, every field or side of a hill, every tunnel or glasshouse is a micro-climate. In her classic book *Grow Your Own Vegetables*, Joy Larkcom says that all gardeners need to be experimenters who have to co-operate with the conditions and requirements of their particular garden as well as with the local weather patterns. By the same token, all cooks in their own kitchens have to be experimenters too.

### **Asparagus, perennial king of a gardening renaissance**

I received an e-mail from a man I know, let's call him 'Harry', who contacts me occasionally with proposals for business opportunities. Mostly they involve me working very hard and him adding to his stash. Still, I like looking at projects, fantasising about dream kitchens with more chefs than I need or can afford, turning out food I haven't yet imagined. I can even get as far as thinking about what I'll do with my share of the millions. Alas, the projects never happen, yet each time I mull over the possibilities with the same enthusiasm.

However, this most recent e-mail opened with news of his asparagus bed. Doing well, apparently, and giving the best asparagus in the world of course, though the slugs are causing sleepless nights. Now, Harry is young and wealthy. He knows the ways of the business world and has the tough streak needed to function in it. He also takes a good chunk out of life and is equally partial to a New York nightclub or a weekend's ice-climbing. So, this e-mail was a new twist. (By the way, one of the many methods used by organic growers to deal with slugs is to crawl around at dusk, snipping them in half with decently sharp scissors. Now, that takes character. Good preparation for the cut-throat world of business, I would think.)

I tell this story to illustrate the fact that gardening, especially the growing of vegetables, is becoming fashionable, infecting people's imaginations like some sort of virulent contagion. I have been told by people who give talks about vegetable cultivation that the audience is growing and the age profile is dropping alarmingly. Encouragingly, I should probably say. It is surely a bit ironic that while we cram our modern cities with hideous shoebox apartment blocks, those who have access to land, even a tiny piece of earth to dig, are turning to the ancient activity of growing food. There is a different focus this time round, however. Sure, people are growing a few spuds and onions, but there is a greater emphasis on speciality and 'heirloom' vegetables, on the varieties that you can't get in shops as well as on those vegetables that need to be eaten very fresh and which are therefore usually in poor



condition by the time they appear in a shop. Even where potatoes are being grown, the focus is on early varieties that are immeasurably better to eat when freshly dug. This new gardening is more about a love of food than saving on the household budget.

In a sense there is a new model being created for the kitchen garden, where the old staples are being replaced by vegetables further up the hierarchy; higher up the social ladder, one might say. Opinion on the aristocracy of vegetables may vary, but in almost everyone's list you will find asparagus. In a rapidly growing minority, you will also find sea kale. Both asparagus and sea kale require a commitment of time and energy that gives a return that can't be measured in volume, only in depth of pleasure. This makes them more than a mere luxury, because they can only be had through work and careful attention. And I say this as someone who doesn't garden but who envies those who engage in this primal pastime.

It is ironic that, for such a classy vegetable, an asparagus bed is not much to look at during its productive season. The beautiful shoots poke their heads up, quickly grow to a size worth picking and eating, and then they're gone, cut down and off to the kitchen to make someone's day. Your typical asparagus bed, therefore, is a brown patch of earth with a mixture of a few short juvenile spears and some long grassy stalks, the ones that were never fat enough to pick, waving in the breeze.

The first time I saw an asparagus bed, however, it was a thing of beauty indeed. The bed was in its first year and Ultan had sensibly picked none of the shoots for eating, instead allowing them all to grow as they wished. The spears had grown to be long, delicate fronds, almost 2 metres (6.5 feet) high and they were a pretty sight. Letting the asparagus grow would strengthen the plant below ground and set it up for good cropping in later years. The following year, he did it again, though I suspect he cheated a little this time, sneaking the occasional tea-time treat. We finally got some for Paradiso in the third year, although he picked for a fortnight only. It was worth the wait. Fresh asparagus has an intensity of flavour that might shock a palate used to pale supermarket imitations.

Freshly cut asparagus, from a variety grown for flavour as well as for yield, is indeed the king among aristocrats. It sets a benchmark for the flavour of other vegetables. How often do you hear or read that a certain vegetable has a hint of asparagus? Usually it is said in hope or bluff more than truth. And yes, good asparagus does have an element of primal green in its complex and intense flavour. It also has a definite earthy sweetness that leaks easily after picking, which is one of the best reasons to buy locally grown asparagus when it is available.

Asparagus has a proud history. It has been cultivated for close to forever, at least as far back as Roman times, and was produced on a large scale around Venice in the sixteenth century. All that time and continuing today, it has been the jewel in the vegetable market of every culture lucky enough to be able to grow it, and smart enough to embrace it. It is shocking, then, to think of how, in Ireland, it went from being the most exclusive exotic to the mundane in what seemed like the vegetable equivalent of the speed of light. As well as shocking, it is perhaps a wry reflection on the values of a newly rich society.

Asparagus certainly played no part in the Ireland in which I grew up. Years later, it was rumoured to be occasionally available in the finest restaurants. Or, you might come across it on your holidays in France. (If, that is, you were the sort to take holidays anywhere other than the nearest beach.) There may have followed a short time when Spanish asparagus appeared in good greengrocers (remember them?) for a short season and at a high price.

If there were such a time, it was brief and quickly shoved aside by the scenario of mediocre asparagus on the shelves all year round. Usually European in origin for the traditional six- or eight-week season of May to June, for the rest of the year it is imported from Peru. So, before we even had

chance to divide ourselves into those who could afford or appreciate asparagus and those who couldn't or wouldn't, the beautiful vegetable has been reduced to a bog-standard ubiquitous imitator. Think about this: has anyone ever gushed excitedly to you on a cold winter's morning about the amazing asparagus they had for dinner the night before, and which they bought cheaply at Tesco? Not likely.

One of the finest qualities of asparagus as a crop is the way it resolutely sticks to its seasonal pattern. By the same token, one of the worst qualities of the people purchasing for supermarkets is their myopic belief that you, the punter, will only be interested in a vegetable if it is in the same place on the same shelf every day of the year. And going cheap. When almost all vegetables have been manipulated, teased and tricked into lengthening their productive seasons, the few that have remained unbendable hold a special place in the hearts of those who enjoy the pleasure of taking part in a feast that passes by briefly, and only once a year. And I think that, deep down or otherwise, that's most of us.

If it is true that there is a rebirth in the art of growing food, there may yet be another heyday for asparagus, and a better one. The smartest gardeners will take the trouble to make an asparagus bed a part of their future. When this happens, it should go a long way to helping us to see asparagus as the outrageously bountiful vegetable it is when in season. Whether you grow your own or have access to a decent crop in late spring, do try to feast on it at least a couple of times while it is around. I mean really feast on it – cook a couple of kilos and call it dinner, served with some melted butter and a few new spuds if you need the carbs.

In recipes for asparagus, you will often find references to thin and fat spears, and many food writers seem to favour thin ones. I don't really get this, unless you are after a very delicate flavour. I rarely am. A good spear of asparagus should have the thickness of your little finger, at least, and is often better if it is the size of the next one along. At this size, the flesh inside has a juicy, nutty sweetness that is balanced by the texture of the skin and its green, almost grassy, flavour. Thin asparagus spears, however, can be fantastic in salads or strewn over softly cooked eggs, especially if the asparagus is raw or merely introduced to boiling water for a few seconds. A simple way of approaching this is to think about the proportion of skin to flesh. The thin skin of asparagus coats the sweetly succulent flesh with a mildly astringent, truly green flavour. At a certain point, there is a perfect balance, and it's not at the skinny end of the scale.

There is, too, disagreement about peeling the stalks. Here again, I go for the simple life, and rarely peel at all. Simply snap the spear just above the point where it changes colour. However, if the spears are very fat or it is obvious that the skin is tough, then peeling is the only solution. And it is worth it, because the flesh inside is usually still tender and juicy. Never say never.

There are two basic ways to prepare asparagus, three if you count eating it raw. And, definitely, very fresh asparagus is fantastic raw, either as an indulgent snack coming back up the garden path, as finger food with a dip, or thinly sliced in salads. Once indoors, asparagus can be boiled, steamed, fried, roasted or grilled. Boiling or steaming leaves the flavour pure and fine, and this is best if the asparagus is to be used in cooked dishes like tarts, gratins, pasta, risottos or pancakes. I like asparagus lightly cooked and still crunchy, so I would cook it for no more than three minutes. That's a subjective matter, though, and you have to find your own way. Always serve it immediately, or plunge it into cold water to cool it down if you are adding it to a dish later.

If you are serving the asparagus on its own or with a dip, perhaps as a starter, then you can get a more intense flavour by grilling or roasting it. Lay the spears on a flat oven tray, sprinkle them very lightly with olive oil and salt flakes, and roast in a hot oven for four or five minutes. Cooking them under a grill, on a griddle pan, or on a barbecue, works too, but I think the oven gives a juicier result.

Done either way, the asparagus will be crunchy, slightly browned and somehow more intense and sweeter than when boiled. You can't leave it hanging around at this stage, nor can you cool it in water so be sure that everything, and everybody, is ready before you put asparagus in the oven or under a grill.

When asparagus takes a partner, it really marries well. Classically, asparagus has an affinity with new potatoes, butter, lemon, chives, tarragon and with eggs of all kinds cooked any way. Asparagus is comfortable with a surprisingly wide range of cheeses, but has a special affinity with hard mature cheeses with some sweetness or the mellow sharpness of fresh goat's or sheep's cheeses.

Asparagus also loves a hint of rosemary or lemon thyme in an olive oil-based aioli for dunking. In a twist on this, we sometimes replace the herbs in the aioli with blood orange juice. It makes a striking starter that will make you appear to be very clever and modern. Be careful whom you try to impress, however, as quite a lot of people already know that this is not a new trick at all, but a classic combination from Malta. We found the inspiration for this version in Jane Grigson's *Fruit Book* while looking for interesting things to do with blood oranges. The combination of orange and asparagus also works beautifully in a salad.

### **Seakale, a prince from the shoreline**

Asparagus will remain at the top of the aristocratic pile for a while yet, but if there is a vegetable with the potential to match it for unique flavour and appearance, it is surely seakale.

Seakale has a dual personality of extreme characteristics. It is at once ancient and modern, both highly cultivated and utterly wild. It was eaten as a prized wild seashore plant around the coasts of much of Europe long before it was cultivated, and it has persisted as a favourite wild food still, for those lucky enough to know where to find it and who still appreciate its rugged qualities. And yet, it has for centuries also been grown as an exquisite garden vegetable. This transformation from rugged and wild to delicate and cultivated is achieved by the gardening practice known as blanching, whereby the young shoots of a plant are covered to keep the sunlight away. The stalks grow long and thin, with little foliage, and, most importantly, with a subtly delicious flavour and tender texture.

Perhaps in the renaissance of domestic vegetable growing, seakale will become once again, along with asparagus, one of the prized jewels of those who love to eat as much as they love to grow. However, I would urge anyone growing seakale to leave some of the plants uncovered, to be enjoyed as one of the most intense and succulent winter greens. This dual role is why seakale is the only individual variety of vegetable to feature twice in this book, both here and in the chapter 'Growing in the dark', where I look at the blanched version in more detail. If I had found any in the wild, it would have been featured in the 'Wild pickings' chapter too, but it has become very scarce in Ireland.

Although I did some research for this book (those who know more than me will have noticed, and I look forward to some witty letters), I tried not to do so much that it would discolour my approach to the vegetables I love. To be honest, after a while I had only a small handful of trustworthy books close by when I felt in need of facts. I'm a lazy reader, but still I began to see patterns of repetition in reference books, patterns that made me nervous.

The myth about seakale, repeated in so many books that it has practically become fact, is that it is 'bitter and inedible' as a green vegetable. This may be because it is so sublimely unique when blanched – an understandable extension of thought, if you like, but the myth is actually untrue. It is a myth that must have been promulgated by those who have never eaten unblanched seakale. Surely if you are going to say that something that grows easily in your climate is bitter and inedible, you should

take a bite of it first?

~~Of course, it is necessary to accept the validity of expert sources when writing history or science~~ and there is a lot of both in gardening and food reference books. So there is bound to be repetition. But as little as I know about gardening, I came to realise very quickly the importance of trying to get to original sources of information. In that context, Joy Larkcom's books, especially *Grow Your Own Vegetables* and *Oriental Vegetables*, are so idiosyncratic you just know that there is nothing in there that she hasn't tested in her own field. Literally. Joy never wrote of seakale, but knowing her love of greens, you can be sure she would not have been able to resist testing it in the end.

I might well have gone on to propagate this notion too if I hadn't had a call from Ultan, way too early one damp Monday morning in March. He had been diligently leaving the first year's crop of seakale to grow out, unblanched. All the books tell you to do this simply to strengthen the crowns below ground, and so he did...sort of. Being a fiend for good greens, he kept looking at them, thinking they must be edible. In my interpretation of the scene, I imagine him drooling a little, maybe even a lot. Anyway, the night before (a wet, boring Sunday) he ate the damn things. No, not all of them, but enough to know the truth. Again, I imagine there was drooling, maybe even slobbering. I would have known about it immediately, except that I was out at a 'fine' restaurant eating crap food. Ah, the glorious joys of urban life.

The next day I collected some green seakale and cooked it for the first time. I admit I was a little nervous, especially of feeding it to my fifteen-year-old son. He's a willing guinea pig, though I wouldn't go so far as to say he trusts me completely. I even warned him that the literature describes this stuff as inedible in its green state.

In fact, there was no more than a trace of the bitterness that is written of in those dozens of books. All good greens have some bitterness, so if anything, the taste was a little milder than many of my favourite greens, such as sprouting broccoli or black kale. Seakale has the essential vibrant colour and a softly melting but chewy texture. Sprouting broccoli is a good reference point for seakale. Pick it young, when the stems, the soft leaves and the budding flower heads are all edible. Discard the tough leaves and cook the rest in an open pan with a little water, just enough to keep it moist. When it is tender, dress it with olive oil, salt and pepper. Don't leave any juices behind in the pan when you serve. Until you become bored with that, nothing more is called for. And yes, the fifteen-year-old liked it.

Next year we will have both green and blanched seakale. How cool is that?

## **Watering the cats and putting manners on the plants: the rainbow chard diaries**

I spent ten days in late spring minding the house of friends who had gone off to France in a camper van that I didn't expect to make it off the ferry. Oh well, to each their own sense of adventure. Mine was to live alone for ten days in their lovely old farmhouse with an acre or so of garden near the coast in West Cork. 'Garden' might be a bit of an understatement. It is more an exquisite arrangement of plants, the edible and the purely aesthetic, blended together in deliberate patterns but not fussily pristine. Parts of it are handsomely geometric, but look as though it might have happened by happy chaos, that it is simply the inherent beauty of nature that has caused it to fall together so perfectly. I know how much work goes into achieving that look. I say that as someone who fusses over plates and the appearance of food, and who likes the result to look as if it fell on to the plate in a pleasing but slightly off-centre sort of way.

Up at the very top of the garden, in the pink and purple area (yes, indeed) was a chard plant

almost 1.8 metres (6 feet) tall, flanked by two purple-tinted kales, slightly shorter. All three were the previous season's crop, which were allowed to carry on growing for their statuesque beauty and fabulous colours. In fact, the stem and leaf stalks of the chard were close to a screaming shade of red with just enough hint of pink to qualify for the theme of the area. (This is one of chard's great qualities as a garden vegetable. It is very beautiful, especially if you grow varieties with different-coloured stalks.) Elsewhere in the garden there was a patch of the more sedate but classic white-stemmed chard, and in another corner still a scattering of what is known as a 'rainbow mix', with yellow, orange, white and pink chards mingling vividly. And all this beauty provides such good, and easy, food.

I was in the house for the peaceful environment and to find the time that I had been wilfully wasting in the city, for writing and reading. But this was to be a mutually beneficial arrangement, so I had chores as well. Two duties mainly: the cats and the garden. The cats were easy. I moved them out of the house, lecturing them on the potential joys of getting in touch with their inner tiger. The catflap, their portal between wild nature and indoor pampering, was temporarily sealed. Not wanting to be totally heartless, I gave them access to a tiny hallway where there would be mats to sleep on, and food to eat, albeit smaller rations than they were used to. Well, I reckoned, quickly getting up to speed on cat evolution, a fat lazy cat has no chance of finding that tiger. She needs some hunger motivation. Some great wise (and probably very rich) old man is bound to have said that.

The garden was another matter. I don't garden. I admire and love those who do, and I know a lot of the theory, but I've never really got my hands dirty in one. Not the best person to leave in charge, then. I can do chores, if they are clearly laid out. So I did what I do in the restaurant kitchen – made a checklist for every day, with space to tick off jobs as they were completed: watering, ventilating the greenhouse, moving plants here and there for light and shade, covering and uncovering new plantings depending on weather, recording temperature and rainfall levels. (Golden rule: never go to bed with an unfinished checklist.) Yes, that's right: I was Met Man for West Cork briefly.

The first night, it lashed down, heavy rain falling in bucketfuls. The wind whipped around the house and every door latch twitched noisily all night. In my few fitful snatches of sleep, I imagined it was the cats coming for me, all tigers up. In my more frequent wide-awake state, I felt a tiny bit sorry for them. Next morning, there was more water in the rain collection jar than had fallen in the entire previous month. The cats were alive and dry, if a little sorry for themselves. I took a ramble round the garden, trying to be masterly but not really knowing what I was looking for. I mean, in the city I would have been looking for roof tiles and broken downpipes, maybe glass everywhere. So, to my untrained eye, it all looked fine, a bit windswept maybe, but fine, until I came to the chard. One entire plant had fallen over. It wasn't broken, more like it had stood up to the wind and rain for a long time, then gradually tilted sideways until it lay flat on the ground, dejectedly unable to fight any more, yet relieved that the battle was over. It reminded me of seeing Spencer Tracy in *The Old Man and the Sea*, putting a gloomy downer on one Christmas holiday afternoon in my youth. Watching the film, you cheer him on for an hour or so, but then, seeing that he is dying a slow death, you just want it over and done with. I did the only thing a self-respecting cook could do – snipped off a handful of leaves for lunch (just a simple dish of wilted chard flavoured with lemon and pine nuts). Two days later when the plant had made no recovery, I took the best of the rest and made a very tasty gratin.

Chard grows willingly and can be harvested by taking a few leaves at a time. It will kindly go on producing more. It has never made much of an impact as a commercial crop, except in farmers' markets to a small extent. This is not necessarily a bad thing. It really does need to be used very fresh. This is true of the softer greens in general, but especially of chard because the stalks start to become

tough and stringy in a day or so after picking, and the leaves lose their sweetness. It's worth mentioning too that while the coloured chards will add to the beauty of your garden, their stalks are thinner and tougher than the white variety. I rarely cook the coloured stalks at all.

Spinach is a good starting reference point for what to do with chard, though the leaves are coarser and hold their texture and substance better than spinach. This makes chard leaves really good in tarts, frittata, stews, soups and pancakes, and as a wrapping for 'parcels' like dolmas and timbales. The flavour also has a stronger, earthier element than spinach.

Chard stalks are a vegetable in their own right, and it is worth thinking of them as such once the stalk is about 3cm (1 1/4 in) wide below the leaf. If the stalks seem stringy, it is possible to peel away the thin layer of stringy film. At that size and beyond, I like to trim the leaves off and braise the stalks by slicing them across 2cm (3/4 in) thick, then putting them in a heavy pan with olive oil, white wine and stock to barely cover, and cooking over a low heat with the lid on until the stalks are soft and succulent. In soups or stews, the stalks don't need to be cooked separately, of course, but just added earlier than the leaves.

Chard, whether using leaves, stalks or both, is wonderful with eggs, tomatoes, earthy Puy lentils, olive oil and spices, and with almost all cheeses from strong blues to feta, and from hard, aged cheeses to soft fresh ones. It is also great in any variation of hearty Italian soups and stews, rich as they are with olive oil and herbs, and often laced with lemon juice.

Back at the farmhouse, there was one other chore, which I never managed to tick off. (So much for the golden rule of the checklist.) I was to kill snails and slugs at dusk, the scissors method being optional. I tried it the first evening, bolstered by a few glasses of wine. But I managed to fool myself that I couldn't find more than a half dozen of the enemy, that the problem was exaggerated, and I admit to simply chucking those few over the fence. I went on fooling myself on that one for the rest of the tour of duty. At least I was honest enough not to tick the checklist.

### **Popeye's fighting fuel – spinach or whiskey?**

While we were diligently eating our cabbage here in Ireland, children in other parts of the world, particularly America, were shovelling back the spinach. Nutritionally, its strongest card is iron, which it has in spades, if you'll excuse the pun, and is surely what that crazy fiend Popeye was supposedly benefiting from when he glugged down those cans. Was that guy invented by a committee of lunatic nutritionists? I know it must have seemed like a good idea to have a cartoon character that encourage kids to gobble up their greens, but couldn't they have come up with a role model with rather more admirable characteristics? Popeye was a rough sailor, not the brightest fish in the sea either, with a shockingly poor grasp of grammar and vocabulary. OK, he loved his girlfriend, and that's a sweet message, but I can't help thinking she might have been better off with someone else. Whenever there was a problem, and sometimes when he merely imagined there was one, he lashed back a couple of cans of spinach and came out, fists blazing, walloping people clear out of the scene with ferocious violence. Whiskey would have had the same effect. (In fact, he surely must have been drinking off screen, in one of those seedy waterfront dives populated by cartoon lowlife.)

As it turned out, the information that fuelled not only Popeye but also the enormous canned spinach industry was erroneous. Big time. When the US research of the 1890s was retested by German scientists in the 1930s, it was found that the original results had put a decimal point in the wrong place, multiplying the potential benefits of spinach tenfold. Just in time to start a huge industry. Oh, dear. You wouldn't want to be cynical, would you? If only Popeye's foes were aware that he was

fuelling himself on a fallacy.

~~Spinach is still a highly nutritious vegetable, even so, and it does have a decent amount of iron.~~ But even if it wasn't so healthy, we would still eat it for its flavour and all-round usefulness. Spinach is, in many ways, the ultimate green. Granted, in the company of some of the other greens here, it may not seem a big hitter, having neither the complex flavour nor the strong texture of the likes of sprouting broccoli and black or Chinese kale. But that is not what spinach is about. It has a mild flavour and a soft texture, which makes it easily the most useful, multi-functional green. Available all year round now, spinach is almost always on the menu in Paradiso, often in more than one dish. There is always spinach, the other greens come and go.

Spinach is also the benchmark of leaf greens, the one that the others are judged by. Is this or that kale softer or tougher than spinach? Sweeter or more bitter? Longer to cook? Easier to grow? Can it step into classic recipes that call for spinach or is it too strong, bitter or tough?

Recipes for spinach? There are thousands. For hundreds, and in some cases thousands, of years, it has been served in tarts both sweet and savoury, curries, soups, inside ravioli, as a component of pasta dishes and even as a colouring for the pasta itself; in gnocchi and other dumplings, omelettes and endless egg dishes, pancakes, salads, and much more besides. Not forgetting that it is also wonderful served on its own, whether in the English style with butter, or with olive oil, as the Italians prefer.

There are many varieties of spinach, but it's best to think of them as two types. The soft 'true' spinach, as it is sometimes called, can be used raw in salads, especially with the likes of soft cheeses or hard sweet ones, fennel, oranges and oily nuts such as walnuts or pine nuts. It can certainly also be cooked, and has a meltingly soft texture and beautifully dark, glossy colour. However, you have to be very careful, as it cooks very quickly and reduces to less than a tenth of its volume. The other type is generally known as 'perpetual' spinach. It has much larger, thicker leaves of a lighter shade. For general cooking, I prefer to use this one. The flavour is less exquisite, but it carries, and stands up to, other flavours very well. It also loses much less volume when cooked. Oh, it shrinks all right, but not so much that it breaks your heart and sends you scurrying to the shops for more.

There is one variety that needs to be looked at in its own right, however. It goes by the name of 'New Zealand spinach' or 'tetragonia'. Although I have spent a bit of time in New Zealand, I have no memory of this vegetable there. However, it is documented that the great (or terrible, according to your perspective) Captain Cook brought it back from his first voyage down under. Or perhaps I should say it came back on his ship. I don't know if Cook was that interested in plants, but he was lucky enough to have someone on board who was – a certain Joseph Banks, a botanist with an appetite for exploration.

Back on this side of the world, however, despite its flavour and suitability to the climate, New Zealand spinach is still very rare, and little used as a vegetable. Unlike other spinach varieties, this one can tolerate dry, and even hot, conditions. This has sometimes been mistakenly believed to be because it doesn't go to seed as easily as the others do when stressed. The truth is that the plant is forever going to seed, hence those beautifully sweet buds that add greatly to its flavour and texture. New Zealand spinach grows well in a tunnel or glasshouse in spring and autumn, and has proven to be perfectly happy outdoors during our warm but often damp summers. In fact, the only conditions it really doesn't like is a combination of very hot and very wet. Should be safe as houses in Ireland, though. We can do wet with gusto, but hot is rare enough to be a tale for the grandkids. Both together would mean the whole island had slid down to the equator.

There are, I think, a couple of reasons for the lack of success of this spinach variety. New Zealand spinach grows as a creeping plant and covers the ground in a fiercely territorial way. The tips of the

shoots, with the top few leaves and the tiny bud attached, are the best parts to pick and cook, though the lower leaves are excellent too. Because of the way it grows and the way it is harvested, it is never going to be well enough behaved to be of any use to supermarkets. And so it remains a defiantly domestic vegetable or, at a stretch, one grown by dedicated professionals for specific customers. I always admire that in a vegetable – one that is clearly great homegrown but can't be tamed for the convenience market. When people ask in the restaurant where they can find this gem of a green, it is great to be able to say that the best thing is to grow your own.

The second drawback is that there comes a time when the sweet little buds become too coarse and tough. The leaves are still good at this point, but the work involved in preparing the vegetable, picking off the buds, is almost doubled. I've tried asking Ultan to do it, but only by leaving a phone message as I didn't really want to hear his reply. It is no problem doing this at home for a small number, but in a restaurant kitchen, preparing for multiple meals, the cooks quickly grow to despise the chore. When it comes to that, it's time to give up on the troublesome vegetable. A grumpy kitchen is no fun, and not much good at the sensitive job of cooking dinner either.

So why persevere with New Zealand spinach, then? Although it is very close in character to standard spinach, and it can be used in any recipe that calls for the latter, it has two important advantages. Texture and flavour. Yes, those two! The matter of flavour is subjective, of course, and I may well be taken to task for saying it, but New Zealand spinach is somehow richer and greener than other spinach varieties, yet still sweet and without any of the bitterness of the coarser greens. It really stands alone in terms of texture. The shoot tips, with a tiny bud and some leaves attached to a thin stalk, hold their shape beautifully when cooked, as indeed do the other individual leaves. This is a wonderful asset to a restaurant kitchen, where the aesthetics of food is always high on the agenda. A good-looking vegetable that doesn't sacrifice flavour is a restaurateur's dream.

### **Taking to the watercress: the holy herb**

Watercress has been gathered from the wild for thousands of years, providing a source of essential vitamins and iron long before these qualities were isolated and recognised. Watercress is one of those foods that are so overtly good for you that it really doesn't take a scientist to explain it. You can see it in the vibrant green colour and taste it in the punchy flavour: this is a loaded vegetable.

It has traditionally been picked from flowing streams and ditches and can be found all year round, except that it doesn't really like extremes of temperature and often disappears temporarily during the coldest part of winter and the hottest summer months.

Because the plant will absorb any water-borne pollutants, especially agricultural slurry washing off nearby fields, I am not advocating the consumption of wild watercress. Liver fluke is a particular worry as it seems to thrive in watercress, and can pass to humans. While the idyllic image of collecting wild cress is attractive, it is essential that you really know the source and are certain that the water in which the cress grows is free from any pollution. For most of us, that means it is simply not a good idea to eat watercress from the wild. Similarly, if you are buying watercress from a market stall, do make sure you can trust the source.

Most watercress is now commercially grown in carefully controlled flowing water beds, an industry that already goes back over two hundred years. The watercress we use in Paradiso comes from a source that is somewhere between the wild and controlled. It is grown in a deep pond in the bend of a stream on a small vegetable farm in West Cork. The pond was created in the late 1970s by a number of very enlightened blow-ins who began their lives here as self-sufficiency advocates, moved



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