



stir in 3–4 tbsp tahini, 1 tsp dried chilli flakes, 50g plain wholemilk yoghurt and lemon juice to taste (I like a lot – up to 2 lemons' worth). Season and spoon into a bowl to serve, dusted with ground cumin and finely chopped parsley and finished with a trickle of olive oil. Try not to eat it all at once.

The classic, elongated purple-black aubergine is by far the most common, but you can also buy a plump, spherical variety which tastes, arguably, even better and forms lovely slices for frying. The extra silkiness and flavour may be due to the shape: more flesh to skin. I find the increasingly common striped aubergines, often sold as 'Graffiti' aubergines, generally less bitter than black ones. This may be due to the specific variety but I have a hunch it could be down to the pigments in the skin: this is backed up by one of my favourite varieties for home-growing, 'Rosa Bianca', which is white, blushed with pale purple, and particularly sweet. Baby aubergines look wonderful and make for quick cooking without the need for anything more than halving, but I've found their much higher proportion of skin to flesh can sometimes make them bitter.

You may find tiny 'pea aubergines' in the shops these days too; these mini-fruits are popular in Thai cooking in particular, and have a wonderful, almost crunchy texture. They are small enough to be thrown into a curry sauce to cook without salting, slicing or pre-cooking.

## Aubergine

In all cases, when buying aubergines, scent will not help you, but texture will. A good one should be as taut as a birthday balloon.

Aubergines are well worth growing yourself. Don't expect home-grown examples to reach the same dimensions as commercial ones, but you'll be rewarded in flavour if not in enormity. Fresh off the vine they have a particular richness matched only by the very best bought in the shops. Grafted aubergines – where a variety is joined on to a separately grown root system – are increasingly available as young plants, and seem to produce well in our climate. 'Moneymaker', 'Black Beauty' and 'Rosa Bianca' are my favourite varieties – each with its own distinct flavour, rich and complex when cooked. They won't give you much trouble, as long as they get plenty of sun and warmth, and are watered and fed regularly.

### GRIDDLED AUBERGINES WITH SPICED YOGHURT

*A very simple and delicious side dish – fantastic with lamb or as part of a mezze spread. Pre-salt the aubergine slices if you have time (see page 37). Serves 4 as a side dish*

If you are toasting your own cumin and coriander seeds for the dressing, put them in a dry frying pan and toast over a medium heat for a few minutes until fragrant. Tip out on to a plate and leave to cool, then crush or grind fairly finely, using a pestle and mortar or spice grinder. Set aside.

Heat a griddle pan, or a heavy-based, non-stick frying pan over a medium-high heat. Brush a few of the aubergine slices on both sides with oil and sprinkle with salt and pepper, then place them in the pan. Cook for about 3 minutes each side until tender and golden, then transfer to a large serving platter. Repeat until all the aubergine slices are cooked.

For the dressing, mix the yoghurt with the ground spices, garlic, lemon juice, chilli flakes and some salt and pepper.

Spoon the dressing over the aubergine slices and sprinkle with the pumpkin seeds and shredded mint to serve.

**Note** You can use the same ingredients to make a silky aubergine dip: grill the whole aubergines until blackened and soft (as for baba ganoush, see page 37), remove the skins and purée the flesh with the spices, garlic, lemon juice and chilli, then top with the yoghurt, mint and pumpkin seeds.

**4 medium aubergines (about 1kg), cut into 8mm thick slices**

**Olive or rapeseed oil, for brushing**

**Sea salt and black pepper**

#### FOR THE DRESSING

**1½ tsp cumin seeds (or 1 tsp ready-ground cumin)**

**1½ tsp coriander seeds (or 1 tsp ready-ground coriander)**

**150g plain wholemilk yoghurt**

**¼–½ garlic clove, crushed**

**Juice of ½ lemon**

**A pinch or two of dried chilli flakes, to taste**

#### TO FINISH

**2 tbsp finely shredded mint leaves**

**2 tbsp pumpkin seeds**

## LATIN NAME

*Persea americana*

## ALSO KNOWN AS

Avocado pear

## SEASONALITY

Imported all year round

## MORE RECIPES

Kiwi, spinach and avocado smoothie (page 325); Lime and coconut mousse (page 358)

The creamy, crushable flesh of the avocado, rich in vitamin E and monounsaturated fat, is healthy and versatile. It gives you an almost instant dressing or dip, vegan ‘butter’ or smoothie. It is the very thing to put in a raw salad to make it feel substantial – and it can even be whipped into thick, rich, dairy-free mousses, icings and cake batters. For a quick lunch, roughly mash avocado and spread thickly on garlicky sourdough toast with a sprinkling of Parmesan, a trickle of olive oil and some salt and pepper.

Undeniably, there are food miles attached to this fruit. None of us in the UK are likely to buy locally grown avocados. They’re imported, year round, from countries including Africa, Central and South America, Spain and Israel. On the plus side, however, very few these days are air-freighted – most come by ship or by road.

There are several varieties of avocado in the shops. Greenskin types, such as ‘Fuerte’, are smooth skinned and elongated, while ‘Hass’, the most common variety, is plump and round, with distinctive, dark green, rough-textured skin. Its flesh, having a higher oil content than some other varieties, is particularly rich.

Another point in the Hass’s favour is that its skin darkens as it ripens – and anything that helps pinpoint an avocado’s fleeting moment of perfect ripeness is to be welcomed. The disappointment of slicing this fruit open to find it either unpalatably hard or turning softly black is sadly not uncommon. Give your avocado a gentle squeeze at the stem end: if it’s ripe, it should give a little. If it’s completely unyielding, it will need ripening – just leave it in the fruit bowl for a few days, ideally near some ethylene-producing bananas. Any real softness or black patches on the skin signal that it’s well past its best. A perfectly ripe avocado can be preserved in the fridge for a few days.

To prepare an avocado, slice it lengthways through the middle, all the way round, and twist apart. Now take a large heavy knife, and drop it smartly downwards with a flick of the wrist, into the heart of the stone. It should bite and, with a slight lift and twist, you’ll be able to pull the stone out.

For mashed avocado, just scoop it out of the skin. For slices, quarter the fruit and peel off the skin first. That rich flesh quickly discolours so use it up fast. Blending or sprinkling it with lemon or lime juice is the best way to slow down the browning.

## CHILLED AVOCADO SOUP WITH TOMATOES

*Rich, cool and refreshing, this smooth soup has all the flavours of guacamole. Serves 3–4*

Halve, stone and peel the avocados. Roughly chop the flesh and put it into a blender. Peel and roughly chop the cucumber. Add to the blender with all the other ingredients except the tomatoes, oil and salt. Pour in 150ml water and blend to a thick, smooth soup. Taste and add salt and more lime juice as needed.

Transfer to a bowl, cover and refrigerate for at least an hour, to chill and allow the flavours to develop. Meanwhile, cut the tomatoes into quarters or eighths.

Serve within 48 hours, topped with the tomatoes, a little coriander and a trickle of oil.

2 large, ripe avocados

1 cucumber (about 400g)

½ small red onion, chopped

½ garlic clove, finely chopped (optional)

1 medium-hot red chilli, deseeded and finely chopped, or a pinch of dried chilli flakes

Grated zest and juice of 1 lime

3–4 tbsp roughly chopped coriander, plus extra to serve

1 tbsp tamari (or soy sauce)

150–200g cherry tomatoes

Extra virgin olive or rapeseed oil

Sea salt

## MORE RECIPES

Alexanders gratin with bacon and oats (page 14); Dandelion and ricotta salad with bacon (page 232); Baked parasol mushroom with Brie (page 430); Hedgehog mushroom and bacon omelette (page 306); Oat-coated puffball with sage and pancetta (page 507); Spiced liver pâté (page 362); Coley with bacon, apples and hazelnuts (page 197); Slow-cooked turkey legs with bacon and prunes (page 650); Partridges roasted with quince and bacon (page 440); Hare ragu (page 301); Tagliatelle with lamb’s liver, pancetta and sage (page 551); Bacon and maple cookies (page 377)

## SOURCING

dorsetcharcuterie.co.uk;  
peelham.co.uk; trealyfarm.com

In my book, a great British bacon bap rivals the street food of any other nation – from Italy to Indonesia – for sheer, indulgent deliciousness. Tender bread, a splash of tangy ketchup and a few hot, crisp rashers releasing their delectably salty, savoury fat as you dig in. Few, surely, are above such pleasure.

It’s a pitiful shame, then, that this totemic treat is so often ruined by rubbish bacon. Introduce limp, insipid, weirdly pink rashers to heat and they release a mix of briney liquid and sinister white goo that prevents them ever achieving the desired crispness.

If, like me, you expect more of your bacon, you’ve got to start with the pig. Intensive pig farming is a profoundly miserable business (see page 488). And it produces miserable pork: fast-grown, flaccid and flavourless. Such meat is bullied into becoming ‘bacon’ with a dose of preservatives and flavouring chemicals. So if your pack doesn’t have the words ‘free-range’ or ‘organic’ on it, or the RSPCA’s Assured label at the very least, I’d put it back on the shelf. Vote for a better class of bacon, from a happier pig.

If you can, buy your bacon from a farm shop, butcher’s or market where you can chat to the person who actually made it. Find out about the breed of pig, the way it was reared, and the curing process. Bacon is special enough – and pigs are smart enough – to warrant such consideration.

Sample some of the old British varieties such as the sweet-cured Suffolk or the traditional wet-cured Wiltshire and you will be reminded what bacon is: a punch-packing, meaty game-changer. Richly flavoured, salty, sweet and tangy, robust in texture and deliciously crisp when fried, it’s an ingredient so full of character that just a little of it transforms a recipe. Hot shards of sautéed, smoked bacon can season a big dish of veg or pulses, for instance. A whole rasher or two, with nothing more than a slice of bread and a creamy egg, make for breakfast heaven.

Bacon is a very simple thing: pork belly and/or loin, salted and left to cure so that moisture is drawn out of the meat as salt travels in. The salt enhances the flavour and vastly increases its keeping qualities. Salting may be done via a ‘dry-cure’ rubbed on to the meat, or it may be ‘wet-cured’ by immersion in brine.

Dry-curing produces particularly good bacon precisely because it takes longer: flavour develops as the meat matures. It also gives a good, firm texture. There’s nothing wrong with wet-curing, though, as long as you use a good brine and allow it to penetrate slowly. It produces slightly more tender bacon with a shorter shelf life. Commercial bacon production, at its worst, involves injecting additive-laden brine directly into the meat. This speeds up the process but makes for flabby bacon – and liquid forced into the meat in this way is bound to make an unwelcome reappearance in the frying pan.

Streaky bacon is all belly meat. It forms long, narrow rashers that may have as much fat as lean, which makes it a superb ingredient in countless dishes. Chopped and fried, it releases that flavoursome fat to permeate, lubricate and season soups, stews, pasta and risottos. Back bacon includes the loin and a section of belly, giving the characteristic breakfast slice with a large, lean ‘eye’ of meat and a fattier ‘tail’. Either kind may be smoked. Whether you use smoked or unsmoked is entirely up to you. I prefer the simplicity and sweetness of an unsmoked cure in my bacon butties, but I use smoked to impart flavour to soups and sauces, and I particularly like smoked bacon in beany-pulse stews.

Pancetta is Italian-style streaky bacon. It also uses the belly, but the traditional curing process is slightly different. Pancetta may be cured flat (*tesa*), just like streaky, and can be used in all the same ways. Or it may be rolled (*arrotolata*).



If this is re-whetting your appetite for really great bacon, I'd urge you to take the porky plunge and rustle up some rashers yourself. It's incredibly easy, delicious and one of the most satisfying steps you can take away from industrially produced food.

You need good, fatty pork belly – cuts from rare-breed pigs such as 'Gloucester Old Spot' or 'Middle White' are best. A whole belly divides neatly into three pieces of a good size for salting. But a much smaller single piece, weighing 1.5–2kg, is perfect for your first foray.

Mix a cure of 50:50 fine salt and brown sugar and add some aromatic flavourings: shredded bay leaves, cracked black pepper and crushed juniper berries are my standards. Scatter a generous handful of cure in a deep-sided plastic tray, add the pork belly and rub another handful of cure over it. Cover and leave in the fridge or a very cool place for 24 hours. Pour off the liquid that has leached from the meat, apply a fresh layer of cure and repeat daily for 3 or 5 days. For a sweeter, lighter cure – perfect for breakfast rashers – opt for 3 days. The 5-day cure gives you an old-school farmhouse bacon, which is on the salty side but perfect for slow-cooked soups and stews.

In either case, rinse the bacon well, wipe the surface with a cloth soaked in vinegar, then pat dry. Now hang to dry in a well-ventilated, cool, dry place (or return to the fridge, wrapped loosely in a tea towel) for 5–10 days. Then it's ready to go. Three-day cured bacon should be refrigerated, loosely wrapped, and used within a fortnight. Five-day cured will keep out of the fridge, hung on a hook at cool room temperature, for up to 3 months (getting firmer and drier). If spots of mould appear, just wipe them off with a vinegar-dipped cloth.

Freeze any bacon you don't use within these time frames. But I think you'll be hard-pushed to leave it alone.

### BACON AND CELERIAC TART

*This works equally well with parsnip or swede. Serves 4–6*

Preheat the oven to 190°C/Fan 170°C/Gas 5 and grease a large baking sheet.

Simmer the celeriac chunks in salted water for 10–12 minutes until tender. Drain and allow to steam-dry in the colander.

Heat a large frying pan over a medium heat. Add a splash of oil and the bacon and fry briskly for a few minutes until starting to brown. Add the onion with the thyme, if using. Stir, reduce the heat and cook for about 10 minutes until the onion is soft and golden.

If it's not already rolled, roll out the pastry to a rectangle, about 32 x 25cm and 3mm thick. Lift the pastry on to the baking sheet and score a margin around it, 2cm in from the edge.

Roughly mash the celeriac and spread it over the pastry, leaving the margin clear. Season lightly with salt and pepper. Spoon the bacon and onion mixture evenly on top, trickling over a little of the bacon fat from the pan too; press lightly down into the celeriac.

Brush the pastry rim with milk. Bake for 20–25 minutes or until the pastry is golden and the topping browned. If the topping looks as though it is browning too much, place a piece of foil loosely over it, leaving the pastry rim uncovered.

Leave the tart to stand for around 10 minutes before slicing and serving, scattered with chopped parsley.

400g celeriac, peeled and roughly chopped

Olive or rapeseed oil, for cooking

225g smoked streaky bacon, chopped

1 large or 2 medium onions, finely sliced

Leaves from a large sprig of thyme (optional)

320g ready-made all-butter puff pastry (ready-rolled is convenient)

A little milk, to glaze

A handful of parsley leaves, finely chopped

Sea salt and black pepper





# Baking powder & bicarbonate of soda

Nikki Duffy

## ALSO KNOWN AS

Baking soda (bicarbonate of soda)

## MORE RECIPES

Wild garlic fritters (page 273); Spotted dick with apple-brandied raisins (page 522); Drip scones (page 237); Summer savory scones (page 569); Cherry, thyme and marzipan muffins (page 154); Rye and caraway scones (page 114)

Bicarbonate of soda, aka baking soda, is an alkaline powder that, when combined with liquid and an acid such as lemon juice, vinegar, honey or the lactic acid in yoghurt, releases carbon dioxide. It's quite a powerful reaction, as you can see if you pour a little vinegar on to some bicarbonate in a cup. It's fast too, which is why batters made with bicarb need to be got into the oven without delay. Those bubbles of gas, caught within a dough or batter, cause it to swell and rise. As the heat of the oven sets the crumb, the bubbles are trapped and a light, airy texture is created.

Baking powder, which made its first appearance around 1850, is a ready-blended combination of bicarbonate of soda with an acid. This always used to be cream of tartar but is now more likely to be another chemical such as a phosphate, which will only react once heated. So getting your cake into the oven quickly isn't as important as it used to be.

Baking powder also includes a 'buffer' such as maize or rice flour (occasionally wheat flour) to prevent any reaction happening in the tub. Some reaction will inevitably take place, however, which is why it's not wise to use baking powder that's out of date.

One of the disadvantages of bicarbonate of soda is that if acidic ingredients aren't present in the right quantities alongside it, they won't completely neutralise the bicarb and vestiges of its slightly bitter, soapy taste may remain in the finished item. If you find this, try reducing the quantity of bicarbonate slightly, or increasing the acidic ingredient in the mix just a touch.

Some recipes use a combination of the two agents. Baking powder will do a reliable job of leavening the batter but, as long as there's something acidic in the mix, the bicarbonate will contribute a little extra oomph. In addition, because of its alkalinity, it also contributes to a complex process called the Maillard reaction, which enhances colouring and the development of 'toasty' flavours in food. For instance, a buttermilk muffin made with bicarbonate as well as baking powder will be browner and more richly flavoured than one made with baking powder alone.

## HONEYCOMB

*This classic sweet treat capitalises on the voluminous reaction of bicarbonate of soda when added to a slightly acidic medium (in this case, a solution of sugar and honey). The Maillard reaction is at work here too, contributing to the honeycomb's rich golden colour. Sprinkle the broken comb on creamy and/or fruity puds, or just munch straight from the jar. Makes enough to sprinkle on a pudding for at least 8*

Line a baking tray with a sheet of baking parchment or a silicone liner. Have your bicarbonate of soda measured out ready.

Put the sugar, honey and 2 tbsp water in a medium, heavy-based saucepan. Place over a medium heat, stirring a few times until the sugar has dissolved and you have a dull, pale brown liquid, then increase the heat. Once the solution is boiling, boil it for about 3 minutes until golden brown and just starting to give off a burnt sugar smell.

Immediately remove from the heat, add the bicarbonate of soda and stir vigorously as the mixture foams and froths up. Once all the bicarbonate is worked in, tip the foaming mixture on to the prepared baking sheet.

Leave for half an hour or so until completely set and cold, then break up and store in an airtight container, such as a Kilner jar or plastic box.

1 tsp bicarbonate of soda

100g caster sugar

60g clear honey

# Banana & plantain

Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall

## LATIN NAME

*Musa species*

## SEASONALITY

Imported all year round

## MORE RECIPES

Mango and banana salad (page 374); Upside-down chocolate plum pudding (page 189); Linseed, banana and chocolate muffins (page 359)



I don't think I could ever by-pass bananas, they're a pretty much permanent fixture on my shopping list. I press them into service for breakfast, baking, drinks and even savoury dishes. Their less-sweet brethren, the plantains, are a more occasional but worthwhile purchase – with their many savoury possibilities, they make an interesting tropical alternative to potatoes.

Although botanically almost identical, bananas and plantains are quite different when it comes to eating. Bananas, with their irresistibly sweet and silky flesh, are so good that we eat them raw without thinking (although they can be excellent cooked too). Some of us may reach for a banana two or three times a day. Their flavour is delicately floral and grassy, developing into something rich, honeyed and slightly yeasty as they ripen. Those flavours can be brought out by pairing them with everything from chocolate to chicken.

Plantains are considerably more starchy – you certainly wouldn't want to eat one raw. When cooked, however, their mild sugars and tender texture come to the fore in a very appealing way. If you enjoy sweet potatoes, squashes and parsnips, I'll take a punt that plantains will please you too. You can find them in some supermarkets, but shops that cater to African, Asian, West Indian and South American cooks are the best hunting grounds. There are several different varieties, of varying shape, colour and sweetness, but the general rule is that the greener they are, the starchier they are, and the yellower (or in some cases redder) the sweeter.

Ripeness is of course the key with bananas too. They become sweeter and more deeply aromatic as they develop from green to yellow to speckled to black. When choosing a banana to eat *au naturel*, we all like to intercept that transformation at different points: I'm a just-starting-to-speckle man myself. You can hold that point of perfection for a couple of days, by putting them in the fridge once they've reached (or got very close to) the magic moment. That will slow the ripening right down, though the skin will discolour so they won't look so good. But the joy of bananas is that wherever they're at on the ripeness spectrum, there's always some delicious use to which they can be put.

Starchy plantains ripen more sedately. Green or just-yellow ones are good baked whole in their skins, at 200°C/Fan 180°C/Gas 6 for an hour or so, until black and tender. Slice open the skins and serve rather like a jacket spud: the hot, crumbly flesh trickled with melted butter or good oil and sprinkled with salt and pepper. Fried plantain is another good dish, that works particularly well when the skin of the fruit is yellowish and well-blotched with black – or even heading for over-ripeness.

Whatever stage a plantain is at, slice off the tip and tail. If it is ripe, you'll be able to remove the peel fairly easily. With under-ripe plantains, a small knife may be needed to pare the skin away.

Green bananas can be cooked rather like plantains. They take well to the frying pan and love a bit of spice. I've added them, peeled and sliced, to kedgeree, and to fish in a foil parcel with coconut milk, tamarind and chilli. An over-ripe specimen, on the other hand, is just what you need for cakes, muffins, ice creams and smoothies. The riper the banana, the more flavour and sweetness it will give.

I buy organic bananas when I can find them, and Fairtrade bananas (see overleaf) when I can't. It's gratifying to see how widely available they have become – a great example of the positive changes that happen when conscientious consumers vote with their shopping trolleys.

**Fairtrade**

The Fairtrade mark, which you'll find on many bananas as well as other goods, indicates that the producers have received fair terms of trade and a fair price, whatever the conventional market price. Fairtrade producer organisations also receive a premium to be used for business or social development projects.

Having been largely welcomed since its inception in 1992, Fairtrade has come in for criticism in recent years. It aims to offer better working conditions and a sustainable future for producers in developing countries. 'Normal' trading arrangements keep many such communities in poverty. Growers produce their crops in challenging circumstances and, with scant commitment from their trading partners to their long-term economic well-being, they're at the mercy of volatile international markets and exploitative multinationals who are in a position to push prices very low. For these growers Fairtrade certification can make the difference between destitution and survival.

Some critics argue that the Fairtrade endorsement is misleading, that only a small percentage of the extra money paid for Fairtrade goods reaches farmers and workers in the developing world and Fairtrade focuses on relatively well-off producers so that the poorest miss out. I welcome this scrutiny into the administration and application of Fairtrade resources and I've no doubt there are things that can be improved. But the basic principle of Fairtrade seems to me unshakeably sound.

More subtle economic arguments describe Fairtrade as a short-term solution that could actually harm developing world economies by encouraging producers to maintain their reliance on low-value commodities, such as bananas, rather than diversifying into higher value products, like avocados, or beginning to process their own raw goods (roasting coffee, for example). The answer to this is that there is little hope of diversification or investment (both risky and expensive) if farmers struggle on with non-Fairtrade prices. The resources, long-term trading relationships and stability needed for diversification are exactly what Fairtrade seeks to create.

I'd concede that buying Fairtrade is not a cure-all. The issues of supply, demand, workers' rights, market economics and global politics are far too complex to be 'solved' by our choice of one banana over another. For the conscientious consumer, an ideal complement to buying Fairtrade is to research products and companies individually in order to choose those which are most traceable, sustainable and ethically sound.

But, while Fairtrade is not by any means a universal panacea, buying certified products has been shown to have concrete positive effects in individual communities. I don't doubt that if we all stopped buying Fairtrade, things would go backwards. Fairtrade bananas are still going into my basket – along with FT coffee, chocolate, tea, dried fruits and many other products from far-flung agricultural communities.

**BANANA AND PEANUT BUTTER ICE CREAM**

*If you have an excess of ripe or slightly over-ripe bananas, peel, slice and freeze them spread out on a plate. The frozen banana purées to a velvety ice 'cream', which is dairy-free. Peanut butter and honey add texture and flavour, but it works with bananas alone. Serves 3–4*

Place all the ingredients in a blender or food processor and blitz until smooth and creamy, stopping several times to scrape down the sides. It might look unpromising at first, but it will soon come together. Scoop into bowls straight away before the ice cream 'melts', or put it back in the freezer.

**2 large, sliced frozen bananas**  
**80g crunchy, no-sugar-added peanut butter**  
**2–3 tsp clear honey, to taste**

# Barley

**LATIN NAME**

*Hordeum vulgare*

**ALSO KNOWN AS**

Pot barley, pearl barley

**MORE RECIPES**

Roasted beetroot orzotto with lavender (page 68); Walnut, barley, rocket and blue cheese salad (page 666); Minted spelt and tomato salad (page 386); Roast grouse with barley, apples and squash (page 290); Saffron speltotto with black pudding and parsley (page 548)

Barley is one of the world's most ancient cultivated grains and, in Britain, its use can be traced back to the dense loaves of the Iron Age. In recent decades, it has fallen out of favour – suffering from a rather dull image. Most of our barley crop currently goes for animal feed or for making beer and whisky. However, this robust grain is being rediscovered as a thrifty and hearty ingredient. It's certainly a favourite at River Cottage.

Barley grains have a tough, inedible outer casing. To produce pot barley, just this outer layer is removed, while the bran layer is left on. This makes for a nutty, chewy, nourishing wholegrain, albeit one that takes up to an hour to cook.

The barley we use most is pearl barley, which has the bran partially or entirely removed, making it a bit quicker to cook. It needs to be rinsed then simmered in lots of water for 30–40 minutes, until tender. Pre-soaking it in cold water for several hours can knock 10–20 minutes off the cooking time.

Barley is traditionally used for thickening soups and stews. Throw pearl or pot barley into a pan of slow-braising shin of beef and bacon, or into a Scotch broth or mutton soup with greens. You only need a small handful: the grains can absorb up to four times their weight in liquid, taking on all the hearty flavours you cook them with.

Pearl barley is delicious as a substitute for rice in a pilaf or a barley version of a risotto, known in Italy as *orzotto* (see page 68). The beauty of barley is that it's almost impossible to overcook: it seems to just swell and swell, without turning to mush.

Cooked pearl barley is especially good in autumnal salads with mushrooms (see below), and with roasted squash. Cooked barley grains add texture and character to home-made bread, particularly alongside seeds such as sunflower; they're great in stuffings too. Try loosely stuffing chicken or game birds with cooked barley flavoured with cinnamon, honey, thyme, raisins and lemon zest. A grainy barley version of a vegetarian nut loaf works well too, using onion, apple and sage.

Today's lovely malted grain bread flours include nutty, malted barley to lend flavour and sweetness. Steamed and rolled barley flakes can be used in similar ways to porridge oats (but be aware that barley does contain gluten). And barley flour is used to make traditional Scottish flatbreads called bannocks.

**BARLEY AND RAW MUSHROOM SALAD**

*This celebrates the contrast of nutty barley, earthy raw chestnut mushrooms and freshly cut herbs. The aniseedy flavour of dill is especially good here but you could use fennel or chervil instead. Serves 2*

Put the barley into a pan with a pinch of salt and the parsley and mint stalks. Cover with plenty of water and bring to a gentle simmer. Cook, uncovered, for 30–40 minutes or until tender. Drain and leave to cool.

Cut the mushrooms into 5mm thick slices and arrange in a single layer on large serving plates. Trickle with 2 tbsp oil and the juice of ½ lemon. Season lightly with salt and pepper.

Chop the parsley and mint leaves, and the chives, and add to the barley along with the lemon zest, a dash of lemon juice, the remaining 1 tbsp oil and plenty of salt and pepper. Stir gently.

Scatter the dressed barley over the mushrooms and crumble the cheese on top. Finish with a scattering of chopped dill, a final trickle of oil and another squeeze of lemon. Serve with bread or crostini.

**100g pearl barley, rinsed**

**A small bunch of flat-leaf parsley, leaves picked, stalks reserved**

**A small bunch of mint, leaves picked, stalks reserved**

**4–5 large chestnut mushrooms**

**3 tbsp extra virgin olive or rapeseed oil, plus extra to finish**

**Finely grated zest and juice of 1 lemon**

**A small bunch of chives**

**100g ricotta or fresh, mild ewe's or goat's cheese**

**A handful of dill fronds, chopped**  
**Sea salt and black pepper**



# Basil

Mark Diacono

B

**LATIN NAME**  
*Ocimum basilicum*

**SEASONALITY**  
June–September

**MORE RECIPES**  
Razor clams with cherry tomatoes and basil (page 528); Strawberry salad with raspberry basil sauce (page 616)

If any herb encapsulates a season, then surely basil is summer. Its sweet aniseed fragrance and flavour please the nose as much as the tastebuds, and pair with so much of what is good in the hottest months of the year.

Its many natural partners include cucumber, tomatoes and courgettes (raw or griddled) in salads. Basil also has an affinity with a wide variety of cheeses, from the deliciously bland (such as mozzarella or ricotta) to the saltily pungent, such as goat's cheese and halloumi.

The most common basil variety found in the shops is 'Sweet Genovese' (pictured right), named after its coastal Italian home, but there are many others to consider. Most are stronger and more pungent than Genovese and, to varying degrees, can be used as much to add a spicy note as a herby flavour. Rub a leaf up close and you'll find the scent can be really quite cinnamon-like, carry quite a hit of cloves, or be dominated by aniseed. These spicy basils accentuate tomatoes quite differently to Genovese – drawing out their fruitiness in a more dessert-like way. Try a leaf of each of these with a strawberry to see how the varieties take fruit in different directions, and you might well find basil appearing in your fruit salads too. Basil also makes a lovely ice cream or sorbet that goes particularly well with peaches or nectarines, and raspberries.

Whichever variety of basil you buy, trim the end of the stems, stand the bunch in a jug of water, keep it in a cool spot out of the fridge and use it soon after purchasing.

There are a couple of things you really need to know in order to get the best out of basil. The first is that, for all that it loves soaking up the summer sun when growing, it really doesn't take well to heat in the kitchen. A gentle warming-through for a pasta sauce is about the most it can stand, so add it late to cooked food, on serving, to retain the fullness of its scent and piquancy.

The second thing to understand about basil is that Mediterranean heat is needed to bring its spicy aniseed and clove notes to the fore, allowing them to dominate the more subtle, floral tones. This is why it is difficult to replicate the truly amazing pesto to be had in Italy with our home-grown basil.

That's not to say a British basil pesto can't be good but I prefer it cut with other herbs: parsley and basil pesto, for instance, has more character and a better balance. It's also worth using a stronger variety of basil, such as Greek, in conjunction with 'Sweet Genovese' in pesto. The flavour of the oil makes a big difference too: go for a grassy, not-too-heavy extra virgin olive oil, so as not to mask the basil. And if you have time, make pesto using a pestle and mortar rather than a processor, for a more complex, multi-layered result.

## POPULAR BASIL VARIETIES

**Sweet Genovese** With its full but not overpowering flavour this is excellent paired simply with mozzarella and good tomatoes, marrying the two in a way no other herb does. It's also lovely in sweet dishes.

**Greek basil** Tiny-leafed and intensely flavoured, this variety is increasingly available in the shops. It goes even better with tomatoes than Genovese.

**Thai basil** This is so aniseedy, it is almost in a different category of herb. Perfect in curries and laksas.

**Lemon basil** The variety for infusing as tea, it's even better paired with fish (gurnard, especially), or cucumbers.

**Purple basils** These often carry more of a hint of clove than green varieties. Infusing them in white wine vinegar makes an excellent basil vinegar to use for summer salad dressings.





However, a quick pesto can be made in a food processor in seconds: blend together 3 good handfuls of basil and flat-leaf parsley leaves (or just basil if you prefer), a garlic clove and a good pinch of salt. Add a handful of lightly toasted pine nuts and process until fairly smooth, while slowly pouring in a little olive oil until the sauce is thickish and glossy. Once blitzed, stir in a handful of grated Parmesan (or other hard salty cheese, such as Godminster Cheddar or Lord of the Hundreds). Tasting is crucial. Add more salt and pepper, and the juice of ½ lemon, if needed. Taste again and adjust as you like: the key is finding the balance you prefer.

Pistou is a classic Provençal sauce, similar to Italian pesto, although traditionally it doesn't contain pine nuts or cheese (modern versions sometimes include cheese). It is lovely with pasta and in soups. Just prepare the pesto recipe above, omitting the cheese and nuts, and add a little grated lemon zest for an optional edge. Add some grated cheese on serving if you fancy.

Basil grown slowly at home in a pot in the sun will develop greater depth of flavour and aroma than a supermarket herb. This plant needs heat and light. Start it off in modules, from seed, no earlier than May, under cover – on a warm windowsill is fine. Once germinated, give the seedlings as much sunshine as possible, keeping the growing plants well watered too – water the compost (rather than the plant) in the morning, to see them through the warmth of the day. When the roots begin to poke through the base of the modules, transplant them into 9cm pots (or their final place of growing) and re-pot as the basil grows.

### BASIL PANNACOTTA WITH MINTED RASPBERRIES

*Basil's intoxicating aniseed character makes it a wonderful ingredient in sweet dishes. You can replace the raspberries with loganberries or wineberries. Serves 6*

Combine the milk, cream and sugar in a saucepan. Heat to dissolve the sugar and bring to just below a simmer; don't let it bubble. Add the basil sprigs, take off the heat and leave to infuse for an hour. Remove and discard the basil stalks.

Calculate how many gelatine leaves you need to set 285ml liquid (see note). Soak the gelatine in cold water for 5 minutes, until soft and floppy.

Meanwhile, reheat the cream mixture until almost boiling, then remove from the heat. Drain the gelatine leaves and squeeze out excess water, then add to the hot cream mixture, stirring to dissolve.

Leave to cool to room temperature, stirring from time to time. Once cooled, stir in the yoghurt until thoroughly combined. Pour the mixture into six 100ml moulds and chill in the fridge for at least 4 hours, or until set.

Meanwhile, put the raspberries and sugar into a bowl and roughly crush with a fork. Add the mint and set aside to macerate.

To turn out the pannacottas, dip each mould very briefly into hot water to slightly soften the outside of the pannacotta, then invert on to a serving plate and give it a shake; if necessary, run a knife around the edge of the pannacotta to help release it. Serve with the macerated raspberries.

**Note** In order to achieve the perfect, just-set consistency in this creamy, yoghurt mixture, you'll need less gelatine than you would to set the same volume of a simple jelly.

150ml whole milk  
300ml double cream  
50g caster sugar  
3 large sprigs of basil  
Enough sheets of leaf gelatine to set 285ml liquid (different brands vary)  
150ml plain wholemilk yoghurt  
**FOR THE MINTED RASPBERRIES**  
200g raspberries  
1 tsp caster sugar  
1 tbsp shredded mint leaves

## Bay

**LATIN NAME**  
*Laurus nobilis*

**SEASONALITY**  
All year round

**MORE RECIPES**  
Braised white beans with greens (page 55); Potted carp (page 118); Lemon-cured herring (page 310); Roast guinea fowl with onions and sage breadcrumbs (page 291); Braised rabbit with turnips (page 652); Salt beef with carrots and potatoes (page 559); Quince in star anise and honey syrup (page 512); Bay syllabub (page 217)

The idea of running out of bay leaves sends a shiver down my spine. I am well insured against such a prospect, since I have bay trees flourishing both at home and in the River Cottage garden, but still the thought slinks up on me every now and again, to give me the culinary creeps. The antidote is to grab a leaf whenever I pass, and have a quick scrunch-and-sniff hit of aromatherapy. It perks me up every time.

In my book, bay is the undisputed king of herbs. I use it almost every day: tucking a few leaves into the cavity of a bird or fish before roasting; stirring them into a slow-simmered stew; infusing them in milk for a white sauce or even a sweet custard. All these dishes, made without bay, would still be perfectly serviceable, but this perfumed leaf makes them sing.

With its intense, woody, citrus aromatics, caught pleasingly between the herb world and the spice world, bay has the power to deepen flavour, to round out a dish, seasoning it subtly yet significantly. It's the kind of ingredient that turns a plate of food from something workmanlike into something memorable, a way to almost effortlessly ratchet up the deliciousness factor a couple of notches.

Bay's heady perfume has long been seen as mysterious and magical. It was once used as a strewing herb to purify the air in medieval and Tudor homes. And Nicholas Culpeper wrote in his herbal of 1653 that bay, 'resisteth witchcraft very potently... neither witch nor devil, thunder nor lightning, will hurt a man in the place where a bay-tree is.' It's not hard to see how the bay's lovely scent could have been invested with such powers. I am so fond of this leaf that my younger daughter Louisa's middle name is Bay – as she gets older, she may be grateful that my favourite herb wasn't basil or borage.

Were you to pop a bay leaf into your mouth and chew it, the experience would not be pleasant. Sharing flavour compounds with both eucalyptus and cloves, bay in its neat form is bitter and harsh. But if you put the leaves next to, inside or underneath the thing you want to eat, soak them in hot liquid, infuse them in salt, oil or fat, even set fire to them, then you're talking.

My personal passion for it aside, bay is probably the single most versatile – and therefore most useful – culinary herb of all. It is an essential ingredient in a classic bouquet garni, along with thyme and parsley. It goes into every stock I make, whether meat-, fish- or veg-based, and most of my soups and stews too. You can even add it to the water for boiling potatoes. Tomato sauces always benefit from a leaf or two, as do tagines and curries – Indian cooks often crackle a few bay leaves in hot oil with spices such as mustard or cardamom at the very outset of cooking.

Bay is a great pickling spice too, and also lifts and perfumes beans and lentils as they cook. I always add bay to the milk when making a béchamel sauce. I stuff bay leaves into and under joints of meat before roasting and I love to cook them with fish. Mackerel fillets fried with bay and garlic are a favourite of mine: where the bay has contact with the fish skin and gets slightly charred, it creates an amazing, smoky-sweet flavour. This comes out, too, when you thread bay on to skewers between cubes of lamb and vegetables for cooking on a barbecue – or just strew some dampened leaves over the hot coals to imbue your food with its delicious smoke.

Bay also works beautifully in sweet recipes, where it can be infused in a hot liquid such as cream, milk or wine to add an intoxicating, fragrant thread of flavour. Try it in rice puddings, ice creams and syrups – particularly if they are to be served with fruit. Bay is especially delicious with apples and pears.





## Bay

Dried bay used to be the norm in this country – the fragile leaves dropped into a simmering bolognese or bourguignon – but this leaf is even better used fresh. You can now buy packs of leaves in the fresh herb sections of some supermarkets (they may be British but are more likely to be from Spain, Israel or another hot country) but quality is patchy. It's not until you get the packet home, tear a leaf in half and inhale its scent that you'll get a good idea of how perfumed that particular batch is. Still, a couple of mild leaves is better than no bay at all.

The ideal, however, is to grow your own. There is something wonderful about being able to pick the leaves whenever you need them. Native to the eastern Mediterranean, bay trees have spread throughout southern Europe and grow quite well in less balmy northern climates such as ours. They need shelter, warmth and free-draining soil. A young bay tree can be finished off by a few serious frosts or too much rain, which is why it's a good idea to start them off in a pot. Once established, however, bay can grow into a majestic tree up to about 9 metres tall – though you can keep it pruned back as a smaller, attractive evergreen bush in a herb or flowerbed.

Having a tree to hand, whether potted or planted, will encourage you to use the herb often – and in quantity. And that is a boon. Because whenever a recipe calls for a bay leaf, I would use two... or three, or more. No cook should ever be without them.

### BAY-SPIKED PEARS WITH SHALLOTS AND LEMON

*The sweetness and silky texture of these aromatic pears makes them a superb foil to rich meats. Try them with roast partridge, venison or pork. Alternatively, make them part of a warm salad with some bitter leaves such as chicory, crumbled blue cheese and any juices from the pan trickled over. Serves 6 as a side dish*

Preheat the oven to 180°C/Fan 160°C/Gas 4.

Peel the pears, then quarter them and remove the cores. Make a slit down the centre of the curved 'back' of each piece of pear and insert a bay leaf.

Place all the bay-spiked pears in a roasting tray. Scatter over the shallots and lemon zest, and trickle over the oil. Dot the butter around the pears and, if using, add a pinch of chilli flakes. Season well with salt and pepper.

Roast in the oven for 20–30 minutes or until the pears are tender, turning them once or twice with a spatula. Serve warm.

- 6 large, medium-ripe pears
- 24 bay leaves
- 4 small (or 3 large) shallots, thinly sliced
- Finely pared zest of 1 small lemon
- 1 tbsp olive or rapeseed oil
- A large knob of butter
- A pinch of dried chilli flakes (optional)
- Sea salt and black pepper



# Beans, dried & tinned

Nikki Duffy

## MORE RECIPES

Hemp hummus (page 308);  
Roasted broccoli, red onion  
and cannellini salad (page 99);  
Pollack with courgettes and  
cannellini beans (page 484);  
Cuttlefish with fennel and white  
beans (page 228); Squirrel  
and beans on toast (page 608);  
White beans with chorizo and  
tomato (page 180)

## SOURCING

hodmedods.co.uk (for British-  
grown dried beans)

Glossy, compact and beautifully coloured, beans are so full of potential. From the rich, crusted cassoulets of France to the bubbling bean and pasta soups of Italy and the spicy *frijoles refritos* of Mexico, these little pellets of protein are nutritious, filling and cheap – a framework around which the very best kind of everyday eating can be built.

Dried beans are the food of the frontiersman. They can rattle around in your saddle bag (or kitchen cupboard) for months, but can be swollen by an hour or two's cooking into creamy, tender sustenance. While essentially bland, they soak up other flavours and form a lovely, starchy counterpoint to spices, salty meats or earthy greens.

The vast majority of the beans we eat are imported from Africa, Europe, America and China, in particular. Some beans, however, are grown in the British Isles.

Age does matter with dried beans – the longer they've sat on the shelf, the more desiccated they'll be. Older beans will still be usable – they'll just take longer to cook – though if they're really ancient, they may never reach a state of perfect tenderness.

Whereas dried beans need a bit of forethought because of the soaking and simmering they require, tinned ones are ready in an instant because they're already cooked. Use them straight from the tin in salads or hummus, or warm them through in garlicky oil, a brothy soup or a tomato sauce. I prefer organic tinned beans, packed in water alone. It's ok to include the starchy liquid from the tin in a dish but, if you don't like its gloopy consistency, drain and rinse the beans first.

Don't get too hung up about which beans to use for a particular dish. The differences between them, culinarily speaking, are pretty subtle and many are closely related. In most recipes you can happily replace one kind of bean with another. And you can, of course, use freshly cooked dried beans in any recipe that specifies tinned beans.

## COMMON BEAN VARIETIES

**Aduki beans** Oxblood red, these little pulses are much-used in Japan – particularly in sweet dishes. They also work well in salads and other dishes with grains such as rice, or with small pasta.

**Badger peas** A British-grown pulse, also called carlin peas, pigeon peas or maple peas, traditionally eaten in the North on bonfire night, liberally seasoned with salt and vinegar. For a modern take, dress while still warm with a rich vinaigrette.

**Black beans** Also called black turtle beans, these are much used in the US and South America. Make the most of their dramatic good looks in beany chillies or salsas.

**Black eye beans or black eyed peas** These are white, with a black 'eye'. In Hoppin' John, a dish from the southern US, they pair very tastily with rice.

**Borlotti beans** Also known as cranberry beans, these are very similar to pinto beans. Prized when fresh (see page 81), they are a favourite dried, too. Creamy and rich, they are just what you want in a big soup or stew.

**Butter beans** These big, fat pulses are great for crushing and bashing to form a rough sort of mash, best served doused in plenty of olive or rapeseed oil.

**Cannellini beans** A great all-rounder – perfect for simply dressing with oil and serving on bruschetta but also for a lovely, creamy, hummus-style dip.

**Fava beans** The dried form of the broad bean, used to make Egyptian *ful medames*.

**Flageolet beans** A young, slightly under-ripe form of haricot bean (hence their delicate green colour), these are superb stewed with fatty meats.

**Haricot beans** Also called navy beans, these are what you find in a tin of baked beans. Use them in a home-made version for something far richer and more delicious.

**Kidney beans** Dark red, these are traditional in Jamaican rice and peas, and generally used in chilli con carne.

**Mung beans** These tiny green beans are a top choice for sprouting – they're what you tend to get when you buy a pack of fresh beansprouts. But their dinky size and nutty texture makes them delicious in curries too.

**Pinto beans** Popular in the US and Mexico, pinto (or 'painted') beans are so named because of their pretty, mottled skins.

This often gives good results because still-warm, cooked beans soak up dressings and sauces particularly well. To replace one 400g tin of beans, start with 150g dried beans before soaking and cooking. In both cases, the yield of cooked beans is about 250g.

## Cooking beans

Dried beans should be soaked before cooking to partially rehydrate them. Cover them with lots of cold water (they will swell considerably) and leave for at least 8 hours, ideally overnight. Red kidney beans need at least 12 hours' soaking.

A little bicarbonate of soda added to the soaking water will shorten the beans' cooking time by about 25 per cent. Adding salt to the soaking water will also reduce the cooking a little, because it affects pectins in the cell walls. However, it will give you beans with a slightly more fluffy, floury inner texture. In a hard-water area, beans take longer to cook, so bicarb and/or salt in the soaking water is a useful addition. There's no reason not to use both; allow 1 tsp bicarbonate and 2 tsp salt to 1 litre of water. After soaking, drain the beans and rinse (very thoroughly if you've used bicarb or salt).

If time is short, you can also 'speed-soak' your beans: boil the dried beans (without bicarb or salt) for a couple of minutes then turn off the heat and leave them in the hot water for an hour or so before draining, rinsing and cooking.

Put your soaked, rinsed beans into a saucepan, cover with plenty of cold water and bring to a fast boil. Many beans contain a substance called phytohemagglutinin, which is toxic at high levels. Red kidney beans have large amounts and should be boiled hard for 10–15 minutes, to destroy the toxin, before being cooked at a more gentle simmer. Cannellini beans contain about a third as much of the toxin as red kidney beans, and fava beans have 5–10 per cent. I like to give these the hard-boil treatment too.

Simmer your beans until tender, which could be anywhere between 45 minutes and 2 hours, depending on their age and your water.

## BRAISED WHITE BEANS WITH GREENS

*This is simple, hearty winter food – absolutely delicious finished with a simple chilli- and garlic-infused oil. Serve with bacon or sausages, or with fish. Serves 4*

Preheat the oven to 170°C/Fan 150°C/Gas 3. Drain the beans, rinse well and tip them into a large flameproof casserole. Add the leek, celery, carrot, garlic, herbs and 1.2 litres fresh water. Bring to the boil, skim off any foam from the surface, then boil hard for 10 minutes.

Put the lid on the casserole, transfer to the oven and cook until the beans are tender; this might take as little as 25 minutes, or up to 2 hours. Allow plenty of time and, if the beans are done before you are planning to eat, you can reheat them gently later on. Check the beans now and then and if they look as though they are getting dry, add a little more boiling water. By the end of cooking, there should be 5–10mm cooking liquor in the pan.

Meanwhile, put the oil in a small saucepan over a medium-low heat and add the chopped garlic, chilli and paprika. Fry gently for 2 minutes, then turn off the heat and leave to cool.

Remove the thick stalk bases from the greens, then slice the leaves into 1–2cm ribbons. When the beans are cooked, add the greens, poking them down among the beans. Return to the oven and cook for about 5 minutes, until the greens are tender.

Just before serving, season the beans and greens with salt and pepper. Spoon them, with their savoury cooking liquor, into warmed dishes (pick out the herbs and veg as you go, or eat them!). Trickle generously with the garlicky chilli oil and serve.

250g cannellini, haricot or butter beans, soaked overnight

10cm length of leek, halved lengthways

1 celery stalk, cut into 3–4 pieces

1 carrot, cut into 3–4 pieces

½ head of garlic (sliced across)

2–3 bay leaves

A large sprig of thyme

200g spring greens or cabbage

Sea salt and black pepper

FOR THE GARLIC-CHILLI OIL

4 tbsp extra virgin olive or rapeseed oil

2 garlic cloves, finely chopped

1 medium-hot red chilli, deseeded and finely chopped

1 tsp hot smoked paprika



## MORE RECIPES

Fragrant beef curry (page 350);  
Salt beef with carrots and  
potatoes (page 559); Szechuan-  
spiced venison steak (page 461)

## SOURCING

pastureforlife.org;  
browncoworganics.co.uk;  
cotswoldbeef.com;  
eversfieldorganic.co.uk

If you have ever visited a county show and watched the bulls in the exhibition ring, you will know what powerful and magnificent beasts they are. A prime female example of the species is barely less imposing. Beef cattle are hefty conglomerations of hard-working brawn and sinew, with tongues the size of hobnail boots, and huge hearts that pump litres of blood round their great bodies. Many of our native breeds are resilient and hardy, able to survive outdoors in the harshest of winter weather and to convert grass into kilo upon kilo of muscle and fat. I've always been impressed by fine cattle, and I find the best beef deeply impressive too. With the right care and cooking, it is for me the most show-stopping meat in our culinary canon.

I'm convinced that the best-tasting beef – and the beef that is best for us – is from the highest welfare herds. Generally that means traditionally bred and traditionally fed animals of established native beef breeds. These animals are well adapted to their environment and live outside for at least 8 months of the year (though not necessarily all year round, due to cattle's propensity to churn up wet, muddy ground). Some may get a top-up treat of barley, oats or a compound feed in cold weather or in the last few months before slaughter. But they thrive, for the most part, on pasture: good green grass in the summer, hay and silage in the winter.

In fact, a small proportion of the very best British beef is raised on pasture alone – a great boon since grass-fed animals, in comparison to their grain-fed counterparts, have been shown to produce meat with higher levels of many beneficial nutrients including omega-3 fatty acids and conjugated linoleic acid. If you are after beef from 100 per cent grass-fed cattle, the 'Pasture for Life' label, a fairly new certification issued by the Pasture-Fed Livestock Association, will tell you that your beef was 100 per cent pasture-fed right up until slaughter.

Excellent British beef breeds include 'Aberdeen Angus', 'Hereford', 'Longhorn', 'Shorthorn', 'Red Poll', 'Devon Ruby' (my favourite), 'Sussex' and 'Belted Galloway', though there are many more. When grass-fed, these single-breed 'pedigree' cattle grow relatively slowly but produce beautifully flavoursome and well-marbled meat. Such beef is certainly not the norm. You may see some of those breed names on packs of supermarket meat, but the chances are it isn't from single-breed animals since beef can be described as 'Aberdeen Angus' or 'Hereford' if only the sire (bull) is of that breed.

In fact, the bulk of our beef in this country comes from animals 'finished' indoors on concentrate feeds derived from wheat, maize, peas, beans or soya. This is a way of maximising returns. Feeding these high-energy fodders to cattle means more meat, more fat, and a marketable weight, more quickly.

Some of this meat is from beef-cross cattle, often involving huge Continental breeds such as 'Limousin'. But a lot of British beef – around 50 per cent – is from dairy animals, largely the mainstay breed in the domestic milking industry, the 'Holstein-Friesian'. This meat comes from male calves not needed on dairy farms, or from offspring of dairy cows cross-bred with beef bulls to produce 'dairy-cross' meat.

Much as I value the excellence of traditional, pasture-fed beef, I think we *should* also be eating meat from dairy breeds. At least we should if we're consuming milk, butter and cheese, because the market for dairy beef is helping to reduce the appalling waste of male calves from the dairy industry. Since 2006, the number of male dairy calves retained for rearing in Britain (rather than being sent abroad for fattening) has increased by 58 per cent, and the number of calves being killed shortly after birth has declined by 36 per cent.







## Beef

Dairy beef can be of reasonable – and, if grass-fed, sometimes excellent – quality. It seems like a sensible use of the male cattle (and indeed surplus females) that inevitably arise from the dairy industry. The problem is that for many dairy beef cattle, welfare is compromised. Some are raised completely indoors, without access to open pasture. In the very best of these modern systems, I would accept that much is being done to keep the animals clean and comfortable, but this is not a natural way to raise cattle. And in a worrying new development, some British cattle are being raised on grass-less, American-style ‘feedlots’, where they are outside but confined in large numbers without proper shelter until they have munched enough grain-based ‘concentrates’ to reach the required weight – a sorry consequence of the demand for cheap meat.

### Hanging and ageing

The best beef is richly flavoured, the muscle – even from the leaner quarters – visibly marbled with fat. With correct cooking, any cut, from tail to T-bone, can be made tender and tempting. But before you even get your beef in the kitchen, you can put yourself at an advantage by choosing properly aged meat.

Dry-ageing – hanging the quartered carcass in a cold store – is the optimum way to mature the best, grass-fed beef for the finest flavour. When kept in a cold, slightly humid atmosphere for anything up to a month (I think you can safely hang it longer, and some butchers do), beef undergoes subtle but crucial changes. Enzymes in the meat act on the flesh, breaking down protein, fat and other substances into their constituent parts which, as luck would have it, have an array of rich flavours. As part of the same process, protein and collagen structures are weakened, making the meat more tender.

Because dry-aged beef is left uncovered, it also loses moisture, which concentrates its flavour. That is why a vac-packed joint, even if you ‘hang’ it in the fridge for 4 weeks, will never achieve the same deliciousness as a dry-aged equivalent.

### Favourite beef cuts

**Braising/stewing cuts** Many of the less tender cuts of lean beef respond well to stewing: consider leg of beef, top rump and silverside. Chuck steak is often what’s sold as ‘braising steak’ and can be delicious in a pie or stew, but buy it in the piece if you can. Pre-cut braising steak is often cut too small, meaning that the meat dries out during cooking. In all cases, these relatively lean cuts benefit from lubrication – cubes of fried streaky bacon added to the pot are ideal.

**Brisket** Fatty and flavoursome, this has a beautiful, open-grained texture and makes a fabulous slow roast. Ask your butcher for the thick end of the brisket, boned and rolled, and make sure they don’t trim off all the fat. Brisket is the cut to use for homemade salt beef – a delicacy that I highly recommend – and also for what my grandmother would have called boiled beef. Served with carrots, this simple dish is supremely pleasing. Don’t, however, *actually* boil it – at least not hard or for any length of time. Beef, like any meat, will dry out irretrievably if cooked at a rolling boil. The liquor should remain at a tremulous simmer, no more. You will almost certainly find a foamy ‘scum’ comes to the surface when simmering this, or any meat. This is albumin, a protein – it’s perfectly ok to eat it, or you can skim it off if you prefer.

**Forerib** The ultimate, flag-waving, John Bull roasting joint, this is a spectacular and expensive cut. It’s one for Christmas dinner or a very special gathering. I love to roast



it on the bone: it guarantees more flavour and succulence and looks very impressive too. But a rolled rib joint is still hard to beat and, of course, easier to carve.

**Mince** The best minced beef gives tender burgers, glorious ragus and golden-crustied cottage pies. Basic supermarket mince is too fine and sometimes too fatty for my taste. Minced steak, about 10 per cent fat, is the best option if you're buying it pre-packed, but this can become rather dry and granular in a slow-cooked dish such as chilli con carne. Much better is to buy one of the cheaper cuts, trim it well and mince it coarsely yourself (or chop it finely). Your butcher can do this for you too. For quick cooking – burgers, for instance – I like minced silverside, topside or even rump steak. For longer cooking, such as in a bolognese or chilli, I prefer chuck, leg of beef or top rump.

**Ox cheek** A wonderful, plump piece of meat, the cheek is tough and fibrous in character (you can imagine the work it's had to do, helping that great jaw grind grass into mush). But slow-cooking takes care of that, rendering it spoonably tender and gloriously, beefily rich in flavour. Braise cheeks whole for at least 3 hours (see recipe on page 64), or cube them and use in slow-cooked curries or casseroles.

**Oxtail** Along with tongue, kidney and cheek, this is one of the few beef cuts to retain the epithet 'ox', an Old English word in currency long before the Norman *boeuf* infiltrated the language. The two words reflect the social divide in English society post 1066. Less luxurious cuts kept their old Saxon names while the Norman nobility dined on beef. Like shin, tail is an unprepossessing cut that nevertheless yields superb flavour and texture. A couple of tails will make a fine stew for up to 8 people. Expect to cook it for 3–4 hours. You'll get particularly good flavour if you soak oxtail in well-salted water for 1–2 hours before using. When cooking, it will initially release lots of scum, which you should skim off as it rises to the surface.

**Shin** This is an inexpensive piece of meat that I regularly turn to for stews and braises. The shin is usually sold in thick cross-sections, sometimes with the bone still running through the centre. It's low in fat but high in tough, connective tissue, which you should leave on the meat, rather than trim off. Long, slow cooking allows that tissue to break down, releasing body into the broth, and the bone gives bags of flavour and body too. You can buy it boned if you prefer, or remove the bone yourself, and leave the meat in thick slices or cut into smaller chunks – say for a beef and kidney pie. Keep those chunks reasonably large though (around 4cm in any direction) so they don't lose too much of their juice as they braise. Shin needs lots of cooking – more than some other stewing cuts. Give it at least 2½ hours.

**Steak** Should you decide to push the boat out and treat yourself to a steak dinner, I'd recommend sirloin as the most fail-safe option, offering the best balance of flavour and texture. Rump can be great too, though if it is not well hung it may be on the tough side. Fillet, for me, is wasted as steak – tender, yes, but flavoursome, no. Far better to roll a whole fillet in something piquant and punchy – like a mix of crushed spices and salt – roast it hot and quick and serve it practically raw in the middle. A skirt steak can be another great choice (see recipe on page 64). Also known as bavette, skirt is lean, open-textured and less tender than other steaks but as long as it is properly trimmed of the membrane that covers it, and rested after cooking, it can be very good.

**Topside** Taken from the top of the rear leg of the animal, this is a lean cut but tender enough to eat as a roast, provided you bard it well with fat and roast it slowly (as low as 150°C/Fan 130°C/Gas 2 after an initial hot 'sizzle'). I vastly prefer it cold to hot, however – it's perfect for beef sandwiches and salads.





**Beef stock**

Beef bones, with all but a few crucial scraps of meat removed, make the most magnificent stock. Full-bodied, dark and beefily savoury, it's too powerful for risottos or soups but will anchor any beef stew, pie or braise firmly in heavenly territory. Good home-made beef stock also makes mind-bendingly good gravy (see right), or a classic beef 'reduction' (see below).

You need fresh beef bones – and lots of them. You can produce a litre or so of stock with as little as 1kg bones, but it makes sense to use as many bones as you can get into your largest pan. Buy a new stockpot if necessary: 5 litres of beef stock is so much more useful than 1 litre, not least because this is such a valuable commodity to keep in your freezer. Raw beef bones can be obtained from your butcher. Some online meat suppliers sell them too – though they can be rather expensive. Rib bones and marrow bones (from the leg) are the best to use.

It is essential to roast at least some of the raw bones, as this will create the rich, caramelised meat flavour that will be the backbone of the liquor. Put the beef bones into a large roasting tray and roast at 200°C/Fan 180°C/Gas 6 for 20–30 minutes until well browned. Transfer the bones to a stockpot and add 2–4 carrots, 2–4 onions and 2–4 celery stalks, all roughly chopped. Add a few bay leaves, a sprig of thyme and some peppercorns. Cover the whole lot with water, bring to a simmer and skim off the scum from the surface. Cook very gently, at never more than a tremulous simmer, for 4–5 hours minimum, ideally 6 or 7.

Strain the stock through a fine sieve, discarding the vegetables and bones. Leave to cool then place in the fridge or leave in a cool place, ideally overnight, so the stock turns to jelly and the fat separates out and sets hard on the surface. Carefully remove all the fat (this beef dripping can be used too, of course).

The stock will keep in the fridge for up to a week or it can be frozen. If you've made several litres of beef stock, it makes sense to reduce it by at least half or two-thirds, for freezing. Defrost and bring back to the boil before using.

**Beef reduction**

Reducing a beef stock (or any stock), to intensify the flavour, is simply a matter of boiling it hard to evaporate some of the liquid. But you should only do this with a stock that is completely 'clean', as any impurities will compromise the flavour. That means removing the fat as above, warming the stock back to a free-flowing liquid, and passing it through a muslin-lined sieve (a fine chinois is not good enough).

Once 'clean' you can boil and reduce your stock as hard or as fast as you like, until you get the intensity of flavour you require. Never add salt (or other strong seasonings) until the end or it will be much too salty.

A classic chef's reduction or 'meat glaze' is the kind of lip-sticking, intense, almost syrupy, dark sauce that is served with meat in high-end restaurants. It is usually made by adding red wine (about 1 bottle to 3 litres stock) and reducing by anything up to 90 per cent. The final tweaks – of salt and pepper, a hint of sweetness (typically from redcurrant jelly), acidity (from wine vinegar), aroma (by dropping in a few thyme leaves, then straining them out again) – add character. A little unsalted butter is sometimes whisked in at the end to add gloss.

**Making gravy**

Although invested with a certain arcane mystery, gravy-making is actually pretty straightforward. It does require the cook to use a little judgement, but confidence in this area is easily built (and no one is going to mind sampling a few roast dinners while you perfect your technique). The key is to start with a dish of very flavoursome meat juices – something you can't really help but create whenever you season and roast any decent piece of meat. So really, the bulk of the work is done for you there. The basic principles, which apply to making gravy from any joint of meat or roast bird, are then to remove excess fat, add volume with more liquid, and season to taste.

After roasting, remove the meat to a warm dish, cover and leave to rest while you make the gravy.

With beef (and lamb, pork, duck and goose), the amount of fat floating on top of the meat juices may be significant – less so with poultry and game. You want a couple of tablespoonfuls of fat, max, to be left in the roasting tin. To remove excess, pour it off, or skim off with a tablespoon. You can also use a gravy separating jug – pouring all the liquor from the tin into the jug, then pouring off most of the fat. Return the juices to the roasting tin.

Put the roasting tin over a medium-low heat and use a spatula to scrape up any meaty residues from the base of the tin, stirring them into the juices. If there's very little juice, add a splash of water or wine to help with this 'deglazing' process.

At this point you may wish to add a little plain white flour to absorb the fat and thereby thicken and emulsify the gravy; I usually do with chicken and lamb, but usually don't with beef and game. Sprinkle in 1–2 tsp flour and work it into the liquid in the tin using a spatula. It is important to 'cook out' the flour at this stage: allow it to bubble, stirring for a minute or two, to form a smooth brown 'roux' (the thickness will vary according to how much liquid you started with).

Now increase the volume of your gravy as necessary by adding good, hot stock. Stock made from a stock cube will do, but it can be too salty and never has the depth of flavour that a home-made meat stock achieves. Shop-bought fresh stock is an option, if you can find a good one. Decent chicken or veg stock does good service for any gravy, but a stock made from the same species you are roasting is of course the perfect choice. Add enough stock to loosen and make generous your gravy, but not so much as to dilute those intense meaty flavours. Taste as you go.

I like to strain my nearly-finished gravy through a chinois (fine sieve) into a small pan. Here I can control the final seasoning, while tasting with a teaspoon. Salt and pepper may or may not be needed, depending on how well seasoned the joint was. As with the chef's reduction (see left), a dash of wine, a blob of redcurrant jelly, a few drops of vinegar (even a few drops of strong coffee, to develop the rich dark flavours) can all be deployed to tweak your gravy to perfection.

About 600g large floury potatoes, such as Maris Piper

Vegetable oil (refined rapeseed oil), or clarified beef dripping, for frying

A piece of skirt steak (about 300g), 2–3cm thick, trimmed

Sea salt and black pepper

### SKIRT STEAK AND CHIPS

*An underused cut, open-textured skirt makes fabulous steak. The chips are great with a rose veal steak too. Serves 2*

Peel the potatoes and cut them into long chips, about 1cm square in cross-section. Put them in a colander and rinse under cold running water to remove some of their starch. Tip into a large pan and cover with water. Add 1 tsp salt and bring to a simmer, then cook for 4–5 minutes. Drain and allow to steam-dry in the colander for 5–10 minutes.

Heat a 4–5cm depth of oil or dripping in a wide, deep, heavy-based saucepan to 130°C (or use a deep-fat fryer); use a cook's thermometer to check the temperature. Carefully add the part-cooked potato chips (they will be fragile). Do this in batches if your pan is not large. Cook the chips for 5–6 minutes, then scoop them out and leave to drain on kitchen paper for a few minutes while you prepare the steak.

Using a sharp knife, split the steak in half horizontally to give 2 thin steaks, 1–1.5cm thick.

Put the chip pan back on the heat and bring the oil up to 180°C. Return the part-cooked chips to the pan and cook for a further 6–8 minutes or until crisp and golden. Scoop out the cooked chips and put them in a bowl lined with kitchen paper. Toss in a good pinch of salt and keep warm.

Place a heavy-based frying pan over a high heat and add a little oil or dripping. Season the steaks with salt and pepper. When the pan is really hot, add the steaks and cook for about 1–1½ minutes on each side for rare, 2–2½ minutes on each side for medium rare, depending on thickness. Rest the steaks on a warm plate for 4–5 minutes before serving, with the chips.

### ALE-BRAISED OX CHEEKS WITH PARSNIPS

*Cheeks are a fabulous braising cut. Simmered in ale, they become forkably tender and form a gloriously rich and beefy sauce. Serves 4*

Preheat the oven to 140°C/Fan 120°C/Gas 1.

Heat a large flameproof casserole over a medium-high heat and add 1 tbsp oil or dripping. Once hot, add the ox cheeks and brown well all over (do them separately if necessary). Place the browned cheeks in a large bowl.

Reduce the heat to medium-low and add a dash more oil to the casserole if needed. Add the onion with a pinch of salt and sweat gently for 10 minutes or so, until softened. Now add the garlic and cook for a further 2–3 minutes. Spoon into the bowl with the meat.

Put the parsnips into the casserole dish and turn up the heat a little. Cook, stirring them around in the oil and juices for 4–5 minutes, until browned lightly. Transfer to the bowl.

Pour the ale into the casserole and turn up the heat a little. Simmer for 3–4 minutes, scraping up any bits stuck to the bottom of the dish. Then add 500ml water, the thyme, bay leaves, orange zest and everything from the bowl. Season with salt and pepper. Bring up to a simmer, then put the lid on, leaving a slight gap.

Place the casserole in the oven. Cook, turning the cheeks occasionally, until the meat is tender enough to separate with a spoon – start testing after 3 hours, but be prepared for it to take up to 4 hours. Be careful not to break up the parsnips when you turn the cheeks.

Remove from the oven, taste and adjust the seasoning with more salt and pepper as necessary. Cut the braised ox cheeks in half. Serve one half per person, with a few pieces of parsnip on the side and the juices spooned over. Accompany with mash and greens.

Olive or rapeseed oil, or beef dripping, for cooking

2 ox cheeks (about 1kg in total), trimmed of any sinew and fat

1 medium onion, chopped

2 garlic cloves, crushed

4 medium parsnips, peeled, trimmed and quartered lengthways

500ml amber-coloured, not-too-bitter ale

Leaves from 4 sprigs of thyme

2 bay leaves

Finely grated zest of 1 orange

Sea salt and black pepper

## Beer

### MORE RECIPES

Pot-roasted mallard with celeriac and watercress (page 241); Ale-braised ox cheeks with parsnips (opposite); Seedy stoneground loaf (page 263)

### SOURCING

camra.org.uk;  
bestofbritish.co.uk

To most of us, beer is for drinking, but the hoppy, malty, slightly bitter character of a good beer adds a unique quality to food too: pleasantly bitter, a little sweet and, most important of all, richly aromatic. However, as with other alcoholic drinks such as wine and cider, the alcoholic effects are sadly negated during the cooking process.

There are two main sources of the flavour in beer: malted grain, which gives sweet, toasty, chocolatey, caramel notes; and hops, which are bitter, fragrant and sometimes citrusy. Both can contribute to the flavour of a dish. Which particular beer you use is a matter of judgement and culinary instinct: there are thousands to choose from.

Bear in mind that medium to strong, amber-coloured beers (for example bitter, IPA and porters) will always be sweet and aromatic; stouts will be very bitter with burnt qualities; and light beers such as pale ale and lager are likely to be fizzy and, in the case of pale ale, hoppy as well. I suggest light beers for batters, stout only for the darkest of beef dishes and amber-coloured beers for everything else.

Beer is classically used in stewy, braised things: beef and ale pie, for instance, because the sweet and bitter notes in the beer complement all that rich meatiness so well. It is also very good in a bread dough (where it helps the rise), and superb with cheese in sauces, fondues or rarebit toppings.

Beer is usually reduced during the cooking process, which intensifies its aromatic qualities but also its bitterness. For this reason, it should be combined with other liquids such as stock or water, or even milk or cream, to soften and round out its flavour.

In a sweet dish, one can emphasise those aromatics by using hops late on in the cooking process. For beer toffee, for example, I make a standard butter toffee but use concentrated ale instead of water, adding a muslin bag containing a tablespoonful of hops (available from home-brew shops) a couple of minutes before the toffee reaches setting temperature. Even better is the following beer ice cream. Hand on heart, it is the best ice cream in the world.

### BEER ICE CREAM

*This caramel-coloured ice cream is fragrant and aromatic with a bittersweet quality. It works best if you use a beer that is not too bitter to start with, so taste it beforehand. The hops are optional but they do make the finished ice cream particularly stellar. Serves 6*

Pour the beer into a saucepan and boil until reduced to about 75ml of intensely flavoured beery liquor. Add the milk and cream to the beer, along with the hops, if using. Bring back to a gentle simmer.

Meanwhile whisk the egg yolks and sugar together in a large bowl. Pour the hot, beery cream through a fine sieve on to the egg mixture, whisking as you go.

Pour this custard back into a clean saucepan and cook over a moderate heat, stirring continuously, until thickened. Don't let it boil or it will 'split'. Pour the custard into a bowl and cover the surface directly with baking parchment or cling film to stop a skin forming. Leave to cool and then chill.

Churn the mixture in an ice-cream machine until soft-set, before transferring to a freezer container and freezing until solid. (Alternatively, freeze the mixture in a plastic container for about an hour until the sides start to solidify, then mash with a fork, mixing the frozen sides into the liquid centre; put back in the freezer for another hour. Repeat this at hourly intervals until soft-set then let the ice cream set solid.)

Either way, transfer to the fridge about 30 minutes before serving to make scooping easier.

330ml full-flavoured beer

300ml whole milk

225ml double cream

1 tbsp dried hops (optional)

6 medium egg yolks

135g light muscovado or soft light brown sugar





## Beetroot

Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall

### LATIN NAME

*Beta vulgaris*

### SEASONALITY

May–October; stored roots are available until February

### MORE RECIPES

Beetroot, strawberry and rocket salad (page 537); Spiced horse mushroom and beetroot ‘burger’ (page 315); Quinoa with cumin-roasted roots and parsley (page 514); Foil-baked trout with baby beetroot and spring onions (page 647); Hot mackerel, beetroot and horseradish sandwich (page 373)

Beetroot sits uneasily in our culinary canon. It’s never quite gained the everyday status of its rooty brethren, the potato and the carrot (not that it’s related to either, being a member of the spinach family). We seem to approach its shocking purple hues with instinctive caution. Many wrinkle their nose at it; it’s almost an assumption that children will not like it. I have encouraged mine to get over their infant antipathy by declaring a ‘purple tongue competition’ every time beetroot comes to the table. It’s worked in 3 out of 4 cases (4-year-old Louisa has yet to be convinced).

The national suspicion of beetroot has been a wasted opportunity of epic proportions. So I’m pleased to note that we seem to be getting over it. We must. For beetroot – sweet, juicy, richly flavoured, superbly versatile and of course stunningly coloured – is one of the finest vegetables we have.

It’s true that this venerable root does have a distinct pungency and responds far better to some treatments than others. One of the main reasons it’s fallen out of favour in some circles is that cursed, vinegared stuff in jars that used to blight salads in the 1970s. No vegetable could be expected to come out of such an experience well.

But it’s not hard to hit the right note with beetroot. Firstly, consider size. Young roots – golf ball to snooker ball size – are the sweetest and mildest. Though traditionally an autumn/winter root, modern plant-breeding and seed-sourcing have expanded the growing season, and beetroot is now a summer ingredient too. Small, succulent roots are easy to find as early as late May in good grocers and farmers’ markets. Beetroot continues to be harvested up until October, by which time it develops a certain, not unwelcome, earthy bitterness. The roots on sale through the winter come from store.

Those first sweet little roots are delicate enough to eat raw. And raw beetroot is a revelation: sweet, nutty and aromatic. The crucial thing is to cut it fine. Big chunks of it are hard to negotiate, but grated or slivered into round purple wafers, its texture becomes deliciously crisp and crunchable. I love it simply dressed with good oil, lemon juice, salt and pepper. Combine it with a little garlic-laced yoghurt, perhaps some dill, a scattering of crunchy walnuts, a posy of watercress and you’ve got a sumptuous salad starter. Raw beetroot is great for juicing too.

Cooked beetroot, of any size, has a much deeper, more rounded flavour and is again wonderful in salads or blitzed into a soup with stock and soured cream. It’s also excellent as a side dish in its own right, especially with pigeon or other game.

You can boil it, but roasting it in a foil parcel is my preferred method. It concentrates the flavour and sweetness. Add a little roughly bashed garlic, perhaps a couple of bay leaves or a sprig of thyme to the parcel, along with a splash of oil or butter and some salt and pepper. Put it in a fairly hot oven – around 190°C/Fan 170°C/Gas 5 – and give it at least an hour, maybe 1½ hours, to become yielding and tender. Leave to cool a little, then peel the skins from the cooked roots (a gloriously messy job), dress them with the purple, buttery juices and use warm or cold.

If you see bunched young beetroot with the leaves still attached – and those leaves look lush and healthy – grab them. These beet tops are a fantastic vegetable in their own right, a lot like Swiss chard (which is a different form of the same *Beta vulgaris* species). Separate the stems from the leaves because they cook at different rates. Sauté the chopped stalks with garlic for about 10 minutes, then add the shredded leaves and wilt them down for a further 5 minutes or so. This delicious combination can be dished up just as it is, lubricated with a little cream as a pasta sauce, topped with breadcrumbs and cheese and gratinated, or used in a tart filling.



Beetroot has a high sugar content for a vegetable, and the practice of using it in sweet dishes – an avenue we’ve explored with great success at River Cottage – is a fruitful one. Cooked then grated or puréed, it adds an uncloying sweetness, a delicate moistness and a whisper of distinctive aromatic flavour to puddings and cakes. It pairs particularly well with chocolate: beetroot brownies and beetroot chocolate ice cream are two of my favourite sweet beet treats.

These days, it is the dark purple-crimson, globe-shaped beetroot that is most familiar to us (though this type was only introduced in the seventeenth century). Its extraordinary colour makes it my personal favourite and its visual appeal should not be underestimated: that deep, dramatic red will turn a risotto into a talking point and a soup into a spectacle before you’ve even tasted it.

But other forms of beetroot are available. Rather hard to resist is the spectacular ‘Chioggia’ variety, which reveals pink-and-white layers like psychedelic tree rings when sliced open. There are white and egg-yolk yellow beets to be had too. All taste similar to the classic deep red beet and look very beautiful, particularly when combined, raw, in a glorious multi-coloured salad. They regularly crop up (so to speak) at farmers’ markets and are also widely available as seeds if you fancy growing your own.

### ROASTED BEETROOT ORZOTTO WITH LAVENDER

About 500g small or medium beetroot, scrubbed  
 3 tbsp olive or rapeseed oil  
 50g butter  
 1 onion, finely chopped  
 2 garlic cloves, finely chopped  
 A few strips of finely pared lemon zest  
 300g pearl barley, or pearled spelt, rinsed and drained  
 A glass of dry white wine  
 1 litre hot chicken or vegetable stock  
 1 tsp finely chopped lavender leaves (or rosemary)  
 200g soft goat’s or ewe’s cheese, crumbled  
 A little extra virgin olive or rapeseed oil, to finish  
 Sea salt and black pepper

*Orzotto is like risotto, only made with pearl barley rather than rice (pearled spelt works well too). Fragrant lavender has a great affinity with earthy, sweet beetroot but rosemary or one of the savories will be equally complementary. Serves 4*

Preheat the oven to 190°C/Fan 170°C/Gas 5.

Place the beetroot in a small roasting tin, season well with salt and pepper and trickle with 1 tbsp oil. Cover with foil and roast for 1–1½ hours, longer if necessary, until tender. When cool enough to handle, remove the skin from the beetroot. Cut the flesh into cubes or slim wedges.

Heat the remaining 2 tbsp oil and half the butter in a large saucepan over a medium heat. Add the onion, garlic and lemon zest and cook gently for 10 minutes until the onion is soft but not coloured. Add the beetroot and stir well. Now add the barley or spelt and cook, stirring occasionally, for a further 2 minutes.

Pour in the wine and let it reduce, stirring until it has bubbled away to almost nothing. Now start adding the hot stock, a couple of ladlefuls at a time, stirring as you go, adding each new addition after the previous one has been absorbed.

It should take about 40 minutes for all the stock to be incorporated and the barley to become tender (spelt will cook more quickly). If your barley is stubborn, just add a little more stock or hot water and keep cooking until it is done. Take the orzotto off the heat. Sprinkle the lavender and half the cheese over it and dot with the remaining butter.

Cover and leave the orzotto to stand for a few minutes before stirring in the lavender, cheese and butter. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Serve with the rest of the cheese crumbled over the top and a final trickle of extra virgin oil.

## Bilberries

### LATIN NAME

*Vaccinium myrtillus*

### ALSO KNOWN AS

Blaeberries, huckleberries, whinberries, whortleberries

### SEASONALITY

August–September

### HABITAT

Heathland, moors and open woodland in the north and west of the British Isles, with a few populations in the south

### MORE RECIPES

Chicken and blueberry salad with coriander dressing (page 77)

Why just sit around on a piece of heathland in August and September enjoying the fine weather when you could be usefully employed picking bilberries? Gathering this fruit, characteristic of acid uplands across the British Isles, is a foraging task that takes some time as each bilberry bush will generally bear but a few fruit, and they are considerably smaller than the brazen cultivated blueberry (see page 76). However, there are likely to be several thousand of the shrubs in any one location, so a substantial collection can be made with a little dedication.

If your intention is to take them back for tea you’ll need the self-control of a saint not to eat every last one on the spot, and it is true that not a single bilberry among the thousands I have picked has ever made it home. But I have a dream that one day I will bring back sufficient to cover a cheesecake or previously cooked flan. It would certainly be worth it – these berries are quite superb.

With thicker skins and less juice than their cultivated cousins, bilberries are more intense, sharper and richer in the mouth. They are bracingly delicious raw but also cook well – with a splash of water and a sprinkling of sugar to make a versatile compote. For more elaborate recipes, turn to *Jane Grigson’s Fruit Book*, which contains one of the most erudite paeans to the fruit you’re likely to find, celebrating the traditional bilberry pies of the English North as well as French dishes for mountain *myrtilles* – including ices, sauces and pastries. Bilberry jam is exceptional too, I am told, but the idea of ever gathering enough for the preserving pan must remain, for me, a fantasy.

### PEAR AND BILBERRY CRUMBLE TART

*This makes the most of even the smallest haul of bilberries (or blackberries, or cultivated blueberries), which go exceptionally well with pears. The addition of thyme gives a delightful, sweet fragrance, but it is optional. Serves 6–8*

For the pastry, put the flour, icing sugar and salt into a food processor and blitz briefly to combine (or sift into a bowl). Add the butter and blitz (or rub in with your fingers) until the mixture resembles breadcrumbs. Add the egg yolk and just enough milk or water to bring the mix together into large clumps. Knead lightly into a ball, wrap in cling film and rest in the fridge for 30 minutes. Preheat the oven to 180°C/Fan 160°C/Gas 4.

Roll out the pastry to a circle, 3–4mm thick, and use it to line a 20cm tart tin, about 4cm deep; leave the excess overhanging the rim. Prick the pastry base with a fork. Stand the tart tin on a baking tray and line the pastry case with baking parchment and baking beans. Bake for 15 minutes, then remove the beans and parchment and return the pastry case to the oven for about 10 minutes until it looks dry and lightly coloured. Trim away the excess pastry. Turn the oven up to 190°C/Fan 170°C/Gas 5.

For the filling, peel, quarter and core the pears, then cut each quarter into 2 or 3 wedges. Lay the pear wedges in the pastry case. Scatter over the bilberries, sugar and thyme leaves, and trickle over the honey.

For the crumble topping, put all the ingredients into a bowl and work together with your hands until you have a well-combined, lumpy mix. Spoon this over the pears and bilberries (if you have a little left over, freeze it for another pud).

Bake the tart in the oven for 25–30 minutes or until the crumble is golden brown. Allow to cool slightly, or completely, before serving with plain yoghurt or cream.

### FOR THE PASTRY

200g plain flour  
 35g icing sugar  
 A pinch of salt  
 100g cold unsalted butter, diced or coarsely grated  
 1 medium egg yolk  
 2–3 tbsp cold milk (or water)

### FOR THE FILLING

4 ripe pears  
 100–200g bilberries  
 1 tbsp soft brown sugar  
 Leaves from 1 sprig of thyme  
 2 tbsp clear honey

### FOR THE CRUMBLE TOPPING

100g plain flour  
 80g cold butter, cubed or coarsely grated  
 75g porridge oats  
 50g caster sugar  
 25g walnuts, crushed or chopped



# Black pudding

Gill Meller

B

**ALSO KNOWN AS**  
Blood pudding

**MORE RECIPES**  
Saffron speltotto with black pudding and parsley (page 548); Roasted sprouts with black pudding and chestnuts (page 102)

**SOURCING**  
pipersfarm.com;  
trealyfarm.com

Black pudding is, for me, one of the most delicious products a pig can provide. It is made with their blood (although some varieties of this traditional sausage are made with the blood of sheep or cows). Today, black pudding tends to be made with dried, powdered blood, which is practical and economical on a commercial scale, but it's never quite as good as puddings made using fresh blood. At River Cottage we make fresh blood pudding every time we send a pig to slaughter. The blood is collected in a clean container and stirred to stop it coagulating. Once cool, it can be used.

In a traditional English recipe, the blood is thickened with cereals such as oatmeal and barley, as well as rusk or breadcrumbs, flavoured with plenty of spices and combined with a generous amount of chopped pork fat, which lends moisture and richness. The River Cottage recipe includes mace, coriander seed and cayenne pepper, as well as finely chopped onions, brandy and double cream. We fill the mixture into casings, usually beef intestines, known as 'runners'. Once tied at the ends, the sausages are steamed or poached to cook the blood, then cooled.

*Boudin noir*, the French version of black pudding, does not include cereals, so it's particularly rich. *Morcilla* is a Spanish blood sausage which may be thickened with rice.

Good black pudding has a light, just-firm texture and a deeply savoury, slightly spicy flavour. It is usually cooked further before serving. You'll typically have it sliced and fried as part of a full English breakfast – it pairs well with eggs and tomatoes. However, this rich sausage has a multitude of other uses. Like other forms of highly seasoned pork, it goes beautifully with seafood, particularly seared scallops or squid.

In the colder months fried black pudding is delicious in salads with roast squash or sweet root veg, crunchy nuts and bitter leaves such as radicchio. And it has a wonderful affinity with fruit, including apples, rhubarb, gooseberries and peaches. It also makes a fantastic alternative to sausagemeat in Scotch eggs.

All the welfare issues attendant on pork are of course relevant to black pudding (see page 488). There's not a huge range of organic or free-range black pudding to be had, but it is out there. The alternative, of course, is to make your own. If you keep your own pigs, or know someone who does, then getting hold of fresh blood after slaughter is straightforward. Otherwise, ask your butcher if they can source some for you. Dried blood is available online, but there's generally little information on its provenance, and it may well come from abroad.

## BLACK PUDDING AND GOOSEBERRIES ON TOAST

*The fresh acidity of raw, ripe gooseberries both cuts the richness of blood and pork fat, and complements their sweetness. Serves 4*

Combine the gooseberries with 3 tsp sugar, 1 tbsp vinegar and the parsley. Season with a little salt and pepper, then taste. If your gooseberries are particularly ripe, you might need a dash more vinegar; if they are very sharp, a sprinkle more sugar might be in order. You are looking for a pleasantly sweet-sour balance that will contrast with the richness of the pudding. Set the gooseberries aside to macerate for 20 minutes.

Heat a medium frying pan over a medium heat and add a dash of oil. When hot, add the black pudding slices and cook for 3–4 minutes on each side. Meanwhile, toast and butter the bread.

Pile the black pudding on to the hot buttered toast, top with the gooseberries and serve.

200g gooseberries, topped, tailed and halved  
3–4 tsp sugar  
About 1 tbsp cider vinegar  
1 tbsp chopped flat-leaf parsley  
A little olive or rapeseed oil  
350g black pudding, thickly sliced  
4 slices of bread  
Butter, for spreading  
Sea salt and black pepper





# Blackberries

John Wright

B

## LATIN NAME

*Rubus fruticosus*

## SEASONALITY

July–October

## HABITAT

Widespread throughout the British Isles except the Scottish Highlands, in woods, hedgerows, gardens and on waste ground

## MORE RECIPES

Wineberries with peaches and custard (page 317); Damson ripple parfait (page 231); Pear and bilberry crumble tart (page 69); Raspberry almond streusel cake (page 526); Peach slump (page 448)

The humble bramble on which the blackberry grows is amongst the most giving of wild foods, providing free fruit by the kilo and endless opportunities for the cook to experiment. Picking such large quantities takes time and a certain amount of dogged fearlessness. Heavy-duty apparel is advisable, and an assortment of buckets, baskets and crooked walking sticks for reaching those really fat, juicy berries that are just a little too far away. Since brambles sport backward-pointing thorns of vicious intent, I don a leather gardening glove on my left hand to hold the fruit-bearing stem and pick with my right.

The blackberry has a long season, from as early as mid-July to as late as mid-October. Weather and location play a part, but there is also the innate variability of our native plants. The bramble is an apomictic species encompassing over 300 micro-species in this country alone. Each reproduces without resort to messy sexual mechanisms and its offspring are clones. The upshot of this is that there are over 300 different types of bramble, each with its own characteristics of fruitiness, berry-size, sweetness and season. If you find a good bush, remember where it is and go back next year.

The cultivated blackberries you find in shops are usually monsters compared to their wild counterparts but pretty juicy and tasty enough. There's nothing wrong with them apart from their high price but, in season, I would much rather eat wild fruit. And out of season, I'd rather eat something else altogether. Garden-grown blackberries can be a nice option though: many modern varieties are thornless, sweet and fecund.

One thing I never worry about is the nonsense about not picking blackberries after Michaelmas, which falls on 29 September, though the superstition probably refers to Michaelmas by the old calendar, which was 10 October. The devil is said to spit on the berries and turn them bad – infected with the grey mould *Botrytis cinerea*. Since mouldiness is perfectly obvious, I will not be swayed by timetables and sometimes keep picking until early November.

Wild blackberries do not keep. Even a day in the fridge is too much for them, so it is worth planning their culinary destination even before you set off to pick them.



Squashed, they will barely make it through the day, so collect in several containers, not all piled into one. It is possible, of course, to freeze them, but there are much better ways of preserving blackberries – bottling the whole berries in sweetened blackberry juice, or with sugar and cheap whisky, for instance. The juice can be served with the blackberries, the blackberry whisky partaken of at leisure and the whisky-soaked berries used in a trifle.

The enormous quantity of blackberries that results from an entire family spending an afternoon in their pursuit can overwhelm even the most inventive cook. Of course, the very best blackberries (usually the fat one at the end of the stem) are best eaten raw on the day they are picked, in a fruit salad, but what to do with the rest? Well, lots.

Blackberry jelly made with *real* fruit tastes divine. Crush the raw blackberries and push them through a fine sieve. Warm the juice in a pan with sugar to taste and add leaf gelatine (about 1 water-softened leaf for every 120ml juice, but do check because brands of gelatine vary). Pour into wine glasses, leave to set and serve with cream.

Blackberry mousse is another favourite, made by adding a little gelatine to cooked, sieved blackberry juice then whisking it into an egg-and-sugar mousse with a generous amount of double cream. But there is no end to the blackberry's potential: fool, sorbet, soufflé, summer pudding, blackberry and apple crumble, muffins and pancake filling.

Finally, a country wine: blackberry is one of the few really exceptional home-made wines. Make it when the fruit is abundant: you will need 1.5kg for a 4.5-litre demi-john. It is among the easiest of country wines to make and I have never known it go wrong.

## BLACKBERRY YOGHURT SOUFFLÉ CAKE

*This melt-in-the-mouth cake is an elegant treatment for blackberries (or their hybrids, such as loganberries and tayberries). The tangy-sweet accompanying sauce is also lovely trickled over ice cream or pancakes. Serves 6–8*

Preheat the oven to 150°C/Fan 130°C/Gas 2. Grease a 23cm springform cake tin and line the base and sides with baking parchment.

Using a stand mixer or electric hand whisk, whisk the egg yolks with 65g of the sugar for 4–5 minutes until the mixture is very thick, pale and creamy; it should be thick enough to 'hold a trail' when you lift the beaters.

Carefully fold in the yoghurt and lemon zest. Now sift the flour over the mixture and fold this in too. (Don't worry if you can't get rid of every little lump of flour at this point.)

In a clean bowl, whisk the egg whites with the remaining 35g sugar until they hold soft peaks. Carefully fold the whites into the batter then fold in about two-thirds of the berries.

Tip the mixture into the prepared cake tin, give it a shake to level it out and dot the remaining blackberries over the top. Bake for about 50 minutes until risen and golden with a slight wobble.

Leave to cool completely in the tin (it will sink, but don't worry), then refrigerate.

Meanwhile, make the sauce. Put the blackberries, sugar and lemon juice into a pan and heat gently, stirring, until the juices start to run, then simmer gently for about 10 minutes; the fruit will release lots of juice. Leave to cool in the pan, then rub through a sieve into a bowl; you will have a thick, smooth blackberry sauce. Taste: it should be nicely tangy, but if it seems too sharp, whisk in a little icing sugar. Chill the sauce.

Serve the cake in thick wedges, with the sauce poured generously over the top.



# Blewits

John Wright

**LATIN NAME**  
Wood blewit: *Lepista nuda*.  
Field blewit: *Lepista saeva*

**ALSO KNOWN AS**  
Field blewit: blue legs

**SEASONALITY**  
Late autumn–early winter  
(wood and field blewits)

**HABITAT**  
Wood blewit: common  
in woodland, hedges,  
mature grassland.  
Field blewit: uncommon  
but locally abundant in  
areas of mature grassland

**MORE RECIPES**  
Hedgehog mushroom and  
bacon omelette (page 306);  
Woodcock with wild  
mushrooms (page 678)

In late October, just when the ceps and chanterelles are fading from the woods, my favourite of all the mushrooms, wood and field blewits, begin to appear.

The fragrant wood blewit (pictured right) is bluish all over, flushing brown on the cap, and has an unusual, slightly damp feel and soft rubbery texture. There is little to confuse it with but, if you are unsure, check that it produces a pinkish spore print, not one that is rust coloured. Cut off a cap and lay it, gills down, on a sheet of white paper then leave for a few hours to allow the spores to accumulate to visibility.

Unsurprisingly, this mushroom grows in the leaf litter of woods, but I very often find them in enormous, productive rings in old pasture. Sometimes I pick several kilos at a time and, since they neither dry nor keep well, it's time for a mushroom feast.

The field blewit is cream coloured all over except for the substantial, short stem which is a remarkable, brilliant lilac. It grows in permanent pasture, though parks and lawns sometimes sport them. It is less common than its cousin, at least in the Southwest. In the Midlands they were, and sometimes still are, sold in markets as blue legs, making them one of the few wild fungi that have made a mark in British cuisine.

Both types of blewit must be cooked, not eaten raw. They are particularly delicious served with garlic and cream. Slice them straight across the cap and gently sauté for a few minutes until the abundant juices have started to flow. Take the mushrooms out of the pan and keep them to hand. Strain any maggots out of the juice, swearing never to tell your guests what you have done, and return the juice to the pan with a little salt. Simmer until the water has mostly evaporated, then add some crushed garlic and the partially cooked mushrooms. Sauté until lightly browned, then stir in some cream and simmer for another minute. Serve on toast, of course.

## BLEWIT, PIGEON AND ENDIVE SALAD

*Blewits, with their lovely firm texture, are perfect with pigeon in this earthy sauté. You could use other mushrooms here, especially field mushrooms or, in spring, St George's mushrooms. Serves 4 as a light meal*

Set a large frying pan over a medium-high heat and add a dash of oil. Season the pigeon breasts with salt and pepper and add to the hot pan. Cook them for 1 minute each side, if you like them quite rare, or 2 minutes each side for a medium finish. Remove all the breasts and leave to rest on a warm plate.

Using the same pan, fry the chopped bacon until starting to colour and crisp a little. Add the mushrooms, thyme and butter and sauté for 6–7 minutes, or until the liquid released by the mushrooms has evaporated and they are starting to caramelize. Throw in the garlic about a minute before the end of cooking and season well with salt and pepper.

For the dressing, put the ingredients into a small jar (or bowl). Add a twist each of salt and pepper and any juices released by the pigeon breasts while resting. Shake (or whisk) to emulsify, then pour over the endive and toss carefully.

Divide the dressed leaves between 4 plates. Slice the pigeon breasts thinly. Scatter the pigeon, mushrooms and bacon over the leaves and serve right away.

Olive or rapeseed oil, for frying

8 pigeon breasts

6 rashers of streaky bacon  
(smoked or unsmoked),  
roughly chopped

About 400g blewits, brushed,  
trimmed and thickly sliced

A sprig of thyme

25g butter

1 garlic clove, crushed

1 curly endive (or other crisp  
lettuce), leaves separated

Sea salt and black pepper

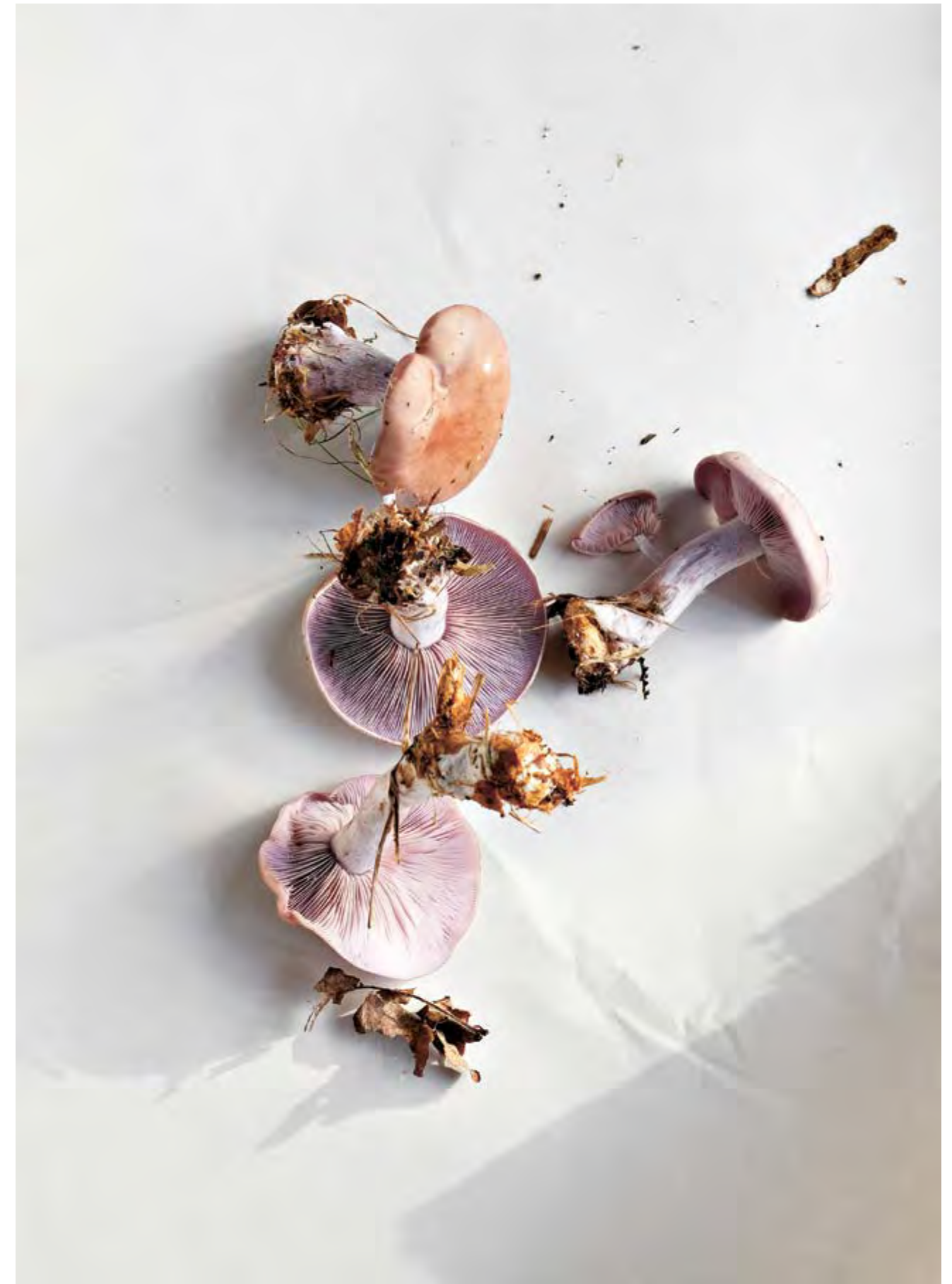
**FOR THE DRESSING**

1 tsp Dijon mustard

3 tbsps extra virgin olive  
or rapeseed oil

1 tbsp red wine vinegar

A pinch of sugar



# Blueberries

Mark Diacono

B

## LATIN NAME

*Vaccinium* species

## SEASONALITY

British crop July–September; imported all year round

## MORE RECIPES

Strawberry salad with raspberry basil sauce (page 616); Pear and bilberry crumble tart (page 69)

## SOURCING

dorsetblueberry.co.uk; blueberrypicking.co.uk

Next time you have a punnet of blueberries in your hand, check out the base of one of the fruit. You'll see a rather beautiful, round-lobed, five-pointed star. This was taken by Native Americans as a sign that the Great Spirit had bestowed 'starberries' on his subjects to ease famine and disease. They were on to something: high in vitamins A and C, as well as anti-inflammatories and antioxidants, blueberries are one of those foods where the nutritional value is just as great as the pleasure of their eating.

A blueberry is intensely fruity, as if a few blackcurrants, a blackberry and a strawberry were rolled into one and condensed. It's a flavour I never tire of, and the sweet/acidic balance is as good as in any fruit. It seems that I'm not the only who thinks so: a couple of years ago, blueberries overtook raspberries as the nation's second favourite fruit, behind strawberries.

Nevertheless, there's no denying that blueberries remain expensive (see below for the reasons why). So it's handy that their flavour is intense and even a few can make a real impact: a small handful added to a bowl of banana and yoghurt, or steaming porridge, lifts an otherwise plain breakfast, and takes even a perfectly fine fruit salad into the extraordinary. Muffins and pancakes are much more appealing with blueberries punctuating that gorgeous creamy batter – just a few in each one is all you need.

As lovely as blueberries are eaten raw – popped one-by-one like biblical grapes – they are excellent in cooked dishes. For a clafoutis, they run cherries a very close race: sift 75g plain flour and a pinch of sea salt into a large bowl and whisk in ½ tsp vanilla extract and 180ml milk. Beat in 2 medium eggs (one by one), 40g caster sugar and an additional 170ml milk until smooth. Scatter 300g blueberries over the base of a greased and floured 25cm baking dish, pour in the batter and dot the surface with cubes of butter. Bake at 230°C/Fan 210°C/Gas 8 (yes, really that hot!) for around 25 minutes until plump and lightly golden. Allow to cool and dust with icing sugar. You have the option to court a little controversy here: man-made blueberry flavouring shares a compound with coriander seed, and a twist or two of ground coriander either in the clafoutis batter or dusted on with the icing sugar at the end gives a little extra blueberry taste. It works beautifully in blueberry muffins too, and the recipe opposite.

Similarly, a blueberry and sliced strawberry salad – equal amounts of each fruit, with 2 tsp each of caster sugar and lemon juice – is marvellous scattered with fresh coriander flowers (you'll not find these in the shops, but you'll be familiar with them if you've tried growing coriander, which bolts so easily (see page 198). Other herbal flavours that enhance blueberries, whether in sweet or savoury dishes, include basil, mint and tiny amounts of thyme.

We've got used to blueberries being ever-present on the shelves, with Chile, France, Poland and Spain supplying most. (The fruits are fragile and need careful handling during transport, which goes some way to explaining their cost.) But there is an increasing home-produced crop, available through the height of summer and into early autumn – you'll find British blueberries on some supermarket shelves, as well as in veg/fruit boxes and specialist suppliers. The Dorset Blueberry Company first brought blueberries across the pond just after the war and the increasing demand in the last 10 years has seen production swell to over 1,200 tonnes annually.

There's a limit as to how much we can produce, however. Blueberries thrive in very acidic soil – the sort that tends to be covered by protected heathland in the British Isles. It means that home-grown fruit is likely to remain a very seasonal, relatively small crop and all the more precious because of it.

When buying blueberries, look for fruit that is firm: softening is no indication of ripeness, just that the berries are reaching the end of their lifespan. Good ones will keep for a week or more in the fridge – much longer than many berries. And frozen ones can be dropped straight into muffin batters, smoothies or compotes. Size is also an important consideration. The skin carries a great deal of a blueberry's flavour, so smaller fruit (where the ratio of skin to flesh is higher) can be considerably more flavoursome, though this varies with variety to a degree. 'Bluecrop', 'Duke' and 'Draper' are about the best varieties in the supermarkets, so keep an eye out for them.

This is a fruit definitely worth growing yourself. The plants are easy to raise as long as you provide their favoured acidic conditions, so grow in containers filled with ericaceous compost – widely available at garden centres and garden suppliers. Give them a place in the sun and out of the worst of the winds and frosts, water them with rainwater if you can, as it's mildly acidic, and you should be in blueberries mid-summer. They fruit more heavily if cross-pollinated, so two or more plants, of different varieties, will give you the heftiest harvest.

Blueberries have wild relatives, including native bilberries (see page 69) which thrive on heathlands such as Exmoor, and the *myrtilles sauvages* of the Ardèche and Vosges mountains in France. These fruits are pippy and don't keep well, but they are intensely flavoured and perfumed.

## CHICKEN AND BLUEBERRY SALAD WITH CORIANDER DRESSING

About 200g cold, cooked chicken, shredded

75g blueberries

2 handfuls of lamb's lettuce (or another mild green leaf)

### FOR THE DRESSING

1 tsp coriander seeds

Juice of ½ lemon

½ medium red chilli, deseeded for less heat if preferred, finely chopped

3 tbsp extra virgin olive or rapeseed oil

Sea salt and black pepper

*This is a lovely illustration of the happy marriage that can be made between blueberries and spice – and this recipe is also great made with wild bilberries. Cold, leftover pork or duck work well here as alternatives to chicken. Serves 2*

For the dressing, in a small, dry pan over a medium heat, toast the coriander seeds gently until they begin to release their aroma. Tip on to a plate to cool, then grind using a pestle and mortar or spice grinder, as finely as you can.

Tip the ground coriander into a large bowl, mix in the lemon juice and chilli, then whisk in the oil. The dressing should taste a touch sour at this point; the sweetness of the berries in the salad will balance it out. Season with salt and pepper.

Add the shredded chicken and blueberries to the bowl and toss to coat in the dressing. Toss in the lamb's lettuce, then transfer to plates and serve immediately.



# Borage

Mark Diacono

B

**LATIN NAME**  
*Borago officinalis*

**SEASONALITY**  
April–October

There comes a point early each spring when the weather can't seem to make up its mind if it should be winter or something more civilised. At such times, you need a little encouragement to be outside and borage gives you – and the early pollinators – just that. Springing lively and bright, in blue or white, before much else has even thought of growing, and producing right through the summer, borage flowers are spectacular. Miniature, but spectacular nevertheless. Strewn on to leafy salads, sprinkled over strawberries or Eton mess, floated on cocktails or frozen in ice cubes and popped into summer drinks, their light, cool, cucumber flavour lends a fresh contrast.

The lightly furry leaves also carry that fabulous cucumber flavour, but they have to be harvested when young and tender, before they become tough rabbit's ears. At their tiniest, they bring cool punctuation to a salad (leafy or fruity), make a fine accompaniment to smoked fish when sliced and stirred into crème fraîche, and bring freshness and visual loveliness to warm runner beans dressed with olive oil. Not to mention Pimms, where borage leaves and flowers are pretty special.

I've never seen borage flowers or leaves for sale – the flowers are very delicate – but they are easy to grow and you'll only need to buy the seeds once. Sow the seed in spring or summer, cover with the thinnest smattering of compost and they will appear in a few short weeks. In an ideal world, it would be a well-drained sunny spot, but I've seen borage grow in such unwelcoming places that I suspect it would germinate in your shoe. Unless you are meticulous in removing all the flowers before they go to seed, borage will reappear next year. Just pull up any plants you don't want.

## COURGETTE SALAD WITH HAM, BORAGE AND EWE'S CHEESE

*This delicate dish is simple and quick to throw together. If your borage plant has any very young, tender leaves, use some of these – otherwise, just use the flowers. If you can't find soft ewe's cheese, any mild, slightly salty, fresh white cheese will work for this salad. Serves 2*

Using a vegetable peeler, cut the courgette into ribbons, working from top to bottom. Go as far in as the seeds on one side, then turn the courgette and pare ribbons from the other side.

Put the courgette ribbons into a bowl and add the oil, the juice of ½ lemon and a sprinkle of salt and pepper. Turn to coat the ribbons with the dressing, then allow to stand for 5–10 minutes.

To serve, divide the marinated courgette between serving plates, spooning over all the lovely juices too. Scatter over the cheese, ham and any shredded borage leaves you may have, and finish with the flowers. Add a touch more black pepper, a squeeze more lemon and a trickle more oil, and serve.

1 courgette (200–250g)

1 tbsp extra virgin olive or rapeseed oil, plus extra to finish

1 lemon

50g soft, mild ewe's cheese, crumbled or cubed

4 slices of air-dried or cooked ham, roughly torn into shreds

A handful of very young, tender borage leaves, shredded (optional)

A handful of borage flowers

Sea salt and black pepper

