



A Question of Taste

By Hilary Keating Callaghan

The much-maligned parsnip can be delectable

Despite improved methods of storing and transporting foods, certain foods remain closely associated with particular seasons.

Those foods may be available fresh only periodically, may be affordable only at those times, or may be at their best in season. Beyond these practical considerations, a particular food may capture the mood, the spirit of a season. The plump, sweet strawberry is summer, the crisp apple is spring, the tender green asparagus is autumn, and I have decided, the parsnip is late winter. This is not as desperate as it may sound.

The parsnip has actually been much maligned — when not totally ignored. One woman told me of the ecstasy of her greengrocer when she purchased some parsnips. He was thrilled that someone under the age of 75 would rec-

ognize, much less buy, this neglected vegetable. (For anyone who wouldn't recognize them, they look like bleached carrots.)

Older, canner cooks knew their value in turning out a delectable spring vegetable soup. For a generation raised on Campbell's, however, they have become an anomaly.

THIS IS unfortunate because they are actually a tasty, versatile vegetable. The English, in particular, have always been fond of parsnips. It is said that when the sweet potato was first introduced in England, it met with acceptance because of its resemblance to parsnips.

Perhaps it is the English who are partially to blame for the decline in popularity of the parsnip. The English tend to do unnatural things with vege-

tables — things which do not always enhance their best characteristics. (The best characteristics of the vegetables, that is. The characteristics of the English go back for generations and are, presumably, unaffected by the preparation of parsnips.)

There are methods of preparing parsnips which are best avoided. Included here are steaming, mashing, and glazing with sugar. On the other hand, sautéed in butter until just crisp-tender, sliced raw into salads, or added to soups, parsnips are delicious and distinctive.

Unlike carrots and celery, which belong to the same family, parsnips benefit from extreme cold. They should not be harvested until after the first hard frost since the freezing cold converts their starch into sugar, making them delectably sweet.

The home gardener, in fact, can leave his crop in the ground all winter, pulling up a supply each time the ground thaws sufficiently. Once harvested, parsnips not only tolerate long storage in a root cellar or refrigerator, they actually improve in flavor if kept

for a period of time rather than being served immediately after harvest.

THE FLAVOR of the parsnip is, in fact, so sweet that it benefits from a contrasting tartness such as the lemon juice in Lemon Parsnips. Even with the added lemon, the parsnips in this dish were mistaken for banana slices when I served it recently.

PARSNIP SPINACH SOUP

1 lb. parsnips, trimmed and peeled
1 large Spanish onion (7 oz.), peeled and cut into wedges
1 rib celery with leaves
5 to 6 cups chicken broth
1/2 lb. fresh spinach
1/2 tsp. freshly ground nutmeg
Salt and freshly ground black pepper

Slice the parsnips, onion and celery about 1/4-inch thick. Place in a 4-quart pot with 5 cups of the chicken broth. Cover and bring to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer 25 minutes. Remove vegetables from the pot with a slotted

spoon. Place in a blender or food processor. Add 1/2 cup of the cooking liquid. Blend until smooth. Add the spinach and continue blending another 30 seconds. Return the mixture to the pot. Season to taste and reheat, adding remaining cup of broth if soup is too thick. Makes about 6 cups.
(Adapted from "The Pleasures of Cooking" Vol. 1 No. 12).

LEMON PARSNIPS

1 lb. parsnips
4 tbsp. butter
6 tbsp. vegetable stock
2 tbsp. lemon juice
Salt and pepper

Cut off ends of parsnips and peel with a swivel peeler. Cut into 1/2-inch crosswise slices. In a medium-sized skillet with a lid, melt butter over moderately high heat. Add parsnips and toss to coat with butter. Pour in stock. Cover, bring to a boil and steam about 7 minutes, stirring once or twice, or shaking pan to keep parsnips from sticking.

Just before serving, stir in lemon juice, season with salt and pepper and toss over high heat for a few minutes until piping hot. Serves 4.
(From "The Quick and Easy Vegetarian Cookbook" by Ruth Ann Manners and William.)

MOCK CRABMEAT SALAD

2 cups shredded, raw parsnips
1 cup finely chopped celery
1 tbsp. chopped pimiento
1/2 cup quartered ripe olives
1/2 cup mayonnaise
1 tbsp. lemon juice
2 tsp. thinly sliced green onion
1/4 tsp. salt or kelp powder
Shredded salad greens

Combine parsnips, celery, pimiento and olives. In a separate bowl, blend mayonnaise, lemon juice, onion, and salt. Add to parsnip mixture and toss lightly. Serve over shredded greens. Makes 4 to 5 servings.
(From "The Green Thumb Cookbook" by the editors of Organic Gardening and Farming)

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