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## Watercress: Best of the bunch

It's been upstaged in the kitchen by fashionable rocket leaves. But now we're rediscovering the peppery pleasures of watercress

By Anthea Gerrie

Wednesday, 5 May 2010

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For centuries it was an arbiter of the British spring; people used to munch bunches of watercress in the street like ice-cream cones. After a winter of eating meat and root vegetables, it was believed to be just the thing to "clear the blood". The Greeks swore by its health-giving properties, and the Romans thought it would help them excel in combat. But no one has embraced watercress like the British – since the Earl of Sandwich paired it with cold roast beef in the nation's first-ever takeaway, we have been eating more of it than anyone else in the world. However, this peppery crop, so rich in iron, vitamins and minerals, should never be taken for granted. If it was not for a few white knights who stepped in to bail out the industry a decade or so ago, watercress would have vanished from the greengrocers' shelves.



JOHN LAWRENCE

Green and pleasant: John Hurd on his Wiltshire farm, which produces organic watercress, grown in the traditional way and then harvested by hand. The produce is then sold in bunches, complete with the flavoursome stalks

ENLARGE

By the 1980s, the ready availability of lettuce, followed by a contamination scare, had all but killed the market, with 90 per cent of Britain's watercress growers deserting their gravel beds. Fast forward a few decades, and thanks to a Page 3 Girl and the saucy tag-line: "Not just a bit on the side", the fortunes of this tasty superfood have been reversed. Watercress has become a booming £60m industry, doubling in size over the past seven years, with supermarket sales 30 per cent up in the past year alone. "It has the heart and soul of the nation," is how Tom Amery, one of a new generation of growers, rather lyrically puts it. "We were overtaken by rocket briefly, but then we turned around and beat it again. The British just love watercress."

At London's Le Bouchon Breton brasserie, head chef Vickram Singh Purewal has devised a dish for his spring menu of watercress risotto served with a soft-poached hen's egg. "I cook a basic risotto, using either chicken or vegetable stock, then, in the final minutes, add a 'chlorophyll' of watercress. I love its vibrant colour, both as a key ingredient and a garnish. It is just so versatile. During winter, I usually combine it with meat and game, but I also use it for a dessert of watercress soufflé served with a salt-caramel sauce."

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It seems that the salad-starved Brits of old instinctively sussed out the health benefits identified by Hippocrates as long ago as 400BC. That's when the founder of modern medicine set up his first hospital on Kos beside a spring, in order to grow bountiful supplies of watercress to feed his patients.

The Greeks called it kardamon, and believed it could brighten their intellect, giving rise to the proverb: "Eat watercress and get wit." Two thousand years before Popeye came on to the scene armed with a can of spinach, General Xenophon was making his soldiers eat their greens – specifically watercress – "for vigour" before going into battle.

Irish monks survived on it for long periods of time, calling it "the pure food of wise men", while the 17th-century herbalist Nicholas Culpeper did most to prompt modern cultivation with his declaration that "watercress pottage is a good remedy to cleanse the blood in spring and consume the gross humours winter hath left behind". To this day, most of us buy our bags and bunches of watercress to sling into a beautiful, bright green soup.

"But we need a new slogan now, urging people to chop up their watercress and crunch it," frets Amery. He wants to get the message across that chomping on watercress like the peasants of old is the best way to release a valuable compound in the mustard oil within the stalks, which mops up free radicals. "A benefit you don't get from blending watercress in soup," he says.

The message may find some resonance with an increasingly health-conscious public in September. That's when the University of Southampton is expected to release research showing that watercress can help prevent breast cancer cells developing. Perhaps this is not so surprising, given the nutrient-rich density of the plant. "Watercress is brimming with more than 15 minerals and vitamins – it contains more vitamin C than oranges, more calcium than milk and more iron than spinach," says Wendy Akers of The Watercress Alliance, which is funding the research.

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The group, founded in 2003, has a vested interest in establishing watercress as a "superfood". The alliance was established by the few growers who had stuck with the economically failing crop as dozens of their fellow farmers abandoned it. The watercress industry had thrived during the World Wars, but declined when more exotic varieties of salad were introduced in the Sixties. It was also hit by a scare when a crop of the plant, raised by an unscrupulous grower in contaminated water, was blamed for 19 people being afflicted with liver fluke.

"I had to rebuild every one of my beds to comply with a strict new code of practice established then to ensure purity – it took me 28 years," says John Hurd who, with his family, has been cultivating watercress for more than 40 years. He is something of a celebrity among other watercress farmers and packs out "meet the grower" events staged by Waitrose, the supermarket he supplies with his organic bunches.

"I went through all the steps it took to get organic certification in a bid to find a market in the 1990s," he says. "I decided to stick with watercress when nearly everyone else got out, but I had to find a niche. Now I produce about three tons a week, and in the past 14 years I've shifted all I can grow. But inevitably there's a gap between Christmas and the start of spring, because unlike the big growers, I don't plant beds abroad in winter."

Hurd, who now farms eight acres and is seeking planning permission for one more, has increased his business massively since he started farming a quarter-acre in 1953: "We were dairy farmers who grew watercress for our own consumption, and as I had no job, my father suggested I try it on this little patch of land."

Hurd's peppery, flavourful bunches come complete with long, thick stalks, which are absent from the bagged, pre-washed product that makes up most of the supermarket supply, and they take more than twice as long to develop. Hurd plants from seed in a dry open bed lined with "scalpings" of Mendip stone, covered with an inch of riverbed sand and topped with gravel. "After two or three weeks the water trickles in, and more is added as the plants grow bigger. Mass-produced watercress is cut and washed by machine, but ours, which is left to grow longer, has to be harvested by hand," he says.

While Hurd's own sales are up 15 per cent year on year at Waitrose, bags of pre-washed watercress are doing even better, showing an astonishing 35 per cent rise. Victoria Hughes, salad buyer at Sainsbury's, which only sells bags of watercress, but claims to be unique in that the leaves are washed in spring water with no chlorine added, says: "We have done bunches in the past, but customers prefer the bagged watercress; it keeps fresher for longer and is more convenient." Although Sainsbury's has had a 30 per cent rise in sales of bags over the last year, for the foodies who like their watercress with stalks, they will start selling "living" watercress in a pot in the summer.

On 16 May, the Georgian market town of Alresford in Hampshire will host what has become an annual celebration of the watercress boom in its heartland. The Watercress Line, now a nostalgic remnant of the steam era, is a train line which was built to run from the town through Dorset, which is also an area of intensive production of the crop, so that farmers who had moved out from the Home Counties could quickly get the highly perishable crop to the west and north of the country, where it was most popular.

The Watercress Festival, which kicks off National Watercress Week, will feature farm tours, food stalls and, naturally, a world watercress-eating championship. In case you were wondering, products on offer will range from watercress houmous, scones and crêpes to the somewhat less credible watercress Pimm's. It's almost a relief that watercress chocolates, once a festival staple, have now gone out of production.

Facts, recipes and festival information at [www.watercress.co.uk](http://www.watercress.co.uk)

#### WAYS WITH WATERCRESS

- \* Chopping watercress and eating it raw is the best way to release the peppery mustard oil. Try mixing it with chopped tomatoes and a pinch of sea salt or hard-boiled eggs mashed up with mayonnaise.
- \* Watercress soup can be sublime, but it's vital to use enough of the main ingredient – use at least one bag of watercress for every two people – and plenty of potatoes to add body. For a great recipe, visit [Organicwatercress.co.uk](http://Organicwatercress.co.uk), where blending in diced pear is recommended for a chilled version.
- \* Watercress and orange salad makes a great accompaniment to crispy roast duck.
- \* Incorporate into a salad mix; Waitrose's ready-made combination of red watercress, rocket and spinach is particularly flavourful.
- \* Watercress chopped into creme fraiche diluted with a little double cream makes a sublime sauce for fish, particularly salmon.
- \* Give a steak a typically French flavour by garnishing with plenty of watercress – and follow the Gallic habit of serving roasts on a bed of it to mop up the meaty juices.
- \* Try the natural affinity of watercress with oriental flavours of soy, ginger and chilli by chopping it roughly into a stir-fry or garnishing cold sliced beef to be served with a Thai dipping sauce.
- \* Follow the lead of the Maori people and add the thickest stalks from bunches of watercress to enrich stews.
- \* Take a leaf out of John Hurd's book – the grower consumes it raw twice a day, mixed with tomatoes, radishes and red or spring onions.

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