WHY WE'RE A NATION OF CORRIE FANS

Coriander is now Britain's best-selling herb, yet our grandparents would never have heard of it. So, how did it beat parsley to become the nation's go-to garnish?
By **CLARE HARGREAVES**

The Romans brought coriander to Britain, but they found it fiendishly difficult to grow in our chilly climes, so it fell out of favour.

In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Ophelia talks of rosemary and rue, but there's not a squeak of coriander. The playwright's contemporaries only mention the seed which, in the words of natural historian John Maplet "provoketh a man to much venerie" – in other words, it was an effective aphrodisiac. Peruse Mrs Beeton, or even my mother's cookbooks, and you'll barely find a mention.

How coriander's fortunes have changed. Over the past three decades, as our horizons and holidays have extended across the globe, the herb's citrusy leaves have started infusing our soups, stews and salads.

Now, according to herb-industry sales figures just released, coriander is our favourite herb, beating basil, mint and our traditional favourite, parsley. Undisputed king of the kitchen, coriander accounts for more than a quarter of supermarket herb sales.

A key reason is the soaring popularity of Asian and Mexican cuisines, on the high street and in supermarket ready meals.

"I can't really imagine eating a burrito or a tortilla without coriander. It makes the dish," says Laura Marner, assistant growing manager for herbs at Vitacress, the UK's largest herb producer.

TV cookery programmes and recipe books have also contributed. A survey of 21 recently published cookery books, cited by the herb industry report, discovered that coriander was the most used herb, with no fewer than 285 mentions.

The coriander craze started with Delia in the early Eighties.

"Before Delia, it was just a family near Reading who supplied Asian shops with coriander – leaves, stems, roots and all," recalls Jekka McVicar, the Bristol herb farmer and "queen of herbs" (according to Jamie Oliver), who was just starting to supply herbs to garden centres at the time (as supermarkets didn't sell herbs).

"Delia used coriander in just one dish in a telly programme and the result was mayhem. We couldn't grow enough of it. I was hand-potting more than a thousand pots a week."

Jekka admits that the experience put her off the strident smell of coriander leaves, and it's taken her 30 years to enjoy eating it again. She knows that she's not alone in finding coriander difficult to stomach. "It's definitely a Marmite herb, you like or hate it. There's no middle of the road," she says. Chef Angela Hartnett's dislike of "this senseless garnish" is well known. "I find it too pungent and overpowering," she told *The Independent* last year – although she admits to popping coriander into dishes with scallops or bream at her Murano restaurant in London.

One reason for this antipathy may be that the smell of coriander leaves apparently resembles that of bed bugs – although I have to confess to not being unfortunate enough to have put this to the test. Some believe that coriander takes its name from the ancient Greek *koris*, meaning bed bug. The connection is not fortuitous: both bed bugs and coriander contain compounds called aldehydes. These are also produced in the making of soap, which explains coriander's "soapy" taste. The way we react to aldehydes appears to be dictated by our genes.

Perhaps partly for these reasons, early coriander cooks such as Delia trod gingerly, measuring it out in teaspoons. Then came Jamie, who advocated whacking in handfuls. By 1989, we were able to buy the herb in generous pots as well as stingy packets, so finally we had coriander aplenty. Today, as Britain soaks up a growing number of foreign cuisines, chefs are using this amazingly versatile herb in a range of ways in Indian and Asian curries, stir fries, salads, even puddings.

"Do use the stalks, too, as they're as flavoursome as the leaves," says chef-restaurateur Mark Sargeant, who rates coriander as his favourite herb. He keeps his stalks – and roots if there are any – to make Thai green chilli paste.

Coriander pesto is a winner, too, as in Yotam Ottolenghi's recipe above. Sargeant recommends using walnuts instead of the usual pine nuts. He also believes that it's hard to beat carrot, orange and coriander soup. "Coriander and carrot are from the same family, so make perfect bedfellows," he says. "In autumn, I love the soup as an amuse bouche."

Coriander also works surprisingly well in desserts. Sargeant regularly uses it in crème brulee and panna cotta. In the Nineties at Stephen Terry's London restaurant, Coast, he was famous for his "Thai ice cream" containing ginger, galangal, lemongrass, chilli and coriander. Last week at the The Pass restaurant at South Lodge, Sussex, Michelin-starred Matt Gillan served me a starter of coriander ice cream with oven-roasted plum vine tomatoes and cheese beignets. "People expect basil with tomatoes, but I thought it would be good to try coriander. You don't expect ice cream in a starter, so it comes as a surprise. Now I can't believe that I haven't made it before – it really works."

I agree. I've caught the coriander bug. ●

JONATHAN LOVEKIN

Coriander and carrot are from the same family, so they make perfect bedfellows

SQUASH WITH CHILLI YOGHURT AND CORIANDER SAUCE

BY YOTAM OTTOLENGHI

Serves 4

1 small coquina or 1 large butternut squash (1.4kg in total)
1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
90ml olive oil
50g coriander, leaves and stalks, plus extra leaves to garnish
1 small garlic clove, crushed
20g pumpkin seeds
200g Greek yoghurt
One and a half teaspoons Sriracha (or another savoury chilli sauce)
Salt and black pepper

Preheat the oven to 220C/200C fan/gas mark 7.
Cut the squash in half lengthways, remove and discard the seeds, and then cut into 2cm-thick wedges, about 7cm long, leaving the skin on. Place in a large bowl with the cinnamon, 2 tablespoons of the olive oil, three quarters of a teaspoon of salt and a good grind of pepper.
Mix well so that the squash is evenly coated. Place the squash on two baking trays, skin side down, and roast for 35–40 minutes, until soft and starting to colour on top. Remove from the oven and set aside to cool.
To make the herb paste, place the coriander, garlic, the remaining 4 tablespoons of oil and a generous pinch of salt in a small food processor. Blitz to form a fine paste and set aside.
Reduce the oven temperature to 180C/160C fan/gas mark 4. Lay the pumpkin seeds out on a baking tray and roast in the oven for 6–8 minutes. The outer skin will pop open and they will become light and crispy. Remove from the oven and allow to cool.
When you are ready to serve, swirl together the yoghurt and Sriracha sauce. Lay the squash wedges on a platter, drizzle over the spicy yoghurt sauce and then the herb paste (you can also swirl the yoghurt sauce and herb paste together, if you like). Scatter the pumpkin seeds on top, followed by the extra coriander leaves and serve.

Taken from 'Plenty More' by Yotam Ottolenghi (Ebury Press, Hardcover, £27)

NEW HERBS ON THE BLOCK

ISABELLA BASIL
New variety of basil with a more pronounced anise flavour, developed exclusively for Tesco. Use in both sweet and savoury dishes.

CINNAMON BASIL
Olive, oval, pointed, slightly serrated leaves with a spicy, cinnamon flavour. Lovely in stir fries. Available only in Waitrose during October.

SUMMER SAVORY
Often known as the "bean herb", as it combines well with all kinds of bean, from broad beans to dried pulses. The leaves have a sweet aroma and pungent flavour and can be used as a substitute for black pepper. Summer savory, with its pungent small leaves, is the most popular savory and was sold in Waitrose in August.

KAFFIR LIME LEAVES
A must-have ingredient in Thai and Indonesian cooking, these fragrant green leaves have been grown commercially in Britain since 2011. The citrus leaves lend a zesty edge to curries, soups and cocktails alike.

BUCKLER LEAF SORREL
Like other sorrels this small, tender-leaved variety (also known as French sorrel) has an intense, citrusy flavour and is wonderful in a mixed leaf salad. It also makes a great fish sauce. Likely to appear in supermarkets soon.

On the Menu

GILLIAN ORR

How did boring old vodka become the spirit of the age?

I'm not much of a vodka drinker. My student days of swilling Smirnoff and Red Bull are long gone and I can't remember the last time that I ordered something as pedestrian as a vodka and Coke at the bar. That's surely a drink for someone with no imagination; normcore in a glass. (OK, it didn't take long to realise that I actually drink a fair amount of the stuff; it's just dressed up in things such as Espresso Martinis and Bloody Marys.)

But apparently the whole country is guzzling vodka like a bunch of Russian farmers in mid-winter. It has recently been announced that vodka is to overtake whisky as Britain's favourite spirit for the first time. I'm horrified. How did something that tastes so dull get so popular? It's the celery of the drinks cabinet. And it's so… uncool.

Its appeal, of course, lies in its blandness. A study by Nielsen for *The Grocer* suggests that younger drinkers found vodka more "palatable", which is surely just another way of saying that they can mask the taste of booze if they pair a triple Kirov with some Fanta Orange and they'll be trolleyed within the hour.

They also think that its higher marketing profile has led to more people buying voddie. They're not wrong about its visibility. Just this week it was announced that Richard Branson's Virgin Galactic space mission was partnering with Grey Goose, an unsettling collaboration if ever I heard one. Or maybe it's not that strange. I'd certainly want to be a bit pissed if I were on the maiden commercial voyage into the cosmos.

The other reason behind vodka's ascent is its alleged health benefits, of which there aren't any. It's just seen as less bad than other hooch because the hangover will supposedly be less severe, and, if you pair it with soda and fresh lime, it won't give you a gut.

So I am fairly dismissive of vodka. But maybe I'm in the wrong; am I missing out? A quick ask around proves that there's a lot more to vodka these days than a bottle of Glen's and a carton of Ocean Spray. There has even been a rise in – shiver – craft vodkas.

David Beatty, the UK ambassador for Ketel One, insists that vodka has been given a personality.

"While some vodkas have always been character-driven, there has certainly been a rise in the number of vodkas being produced in this way now," he says. "Where previously consumers only saw neutrality, they can now see a greater depth in character, texture and how they feel in the mouth, making these craft vodkas a more sip-able and enjoyable spirit."

Although I can't see myself swigging neat vodka any time soon, there are some crazy new concoctions that I might try, the most interesting-sounding of which is Black Cow Pure Milk Vodka. Distilled in West Dorset, it is made entirely from the milk of grass-grazed cows, and its creamy end note has secured fans in Heston Blumenthal and Daniel Craig.

But, unlike the rest of Britain, I doubt that whisky will ever be swapped for vodka in my affections. Give me the stubbornness and adventure of a single malt over the easy-to-please vodka any day.

Just the tonic: a martini made with Ketel One vodka