

TURN OVER A NEW LEAF

Now that we’ve got a taste for peppery rocket and delicate baby spinach, British diners are sampling ever more exotic leaves. **CLARE HARGREAVES** welcomes some delicious newcomers to the salad bowl



Rocket scientist: salad farmer Steve Rothwell

When I was a child, “salad” meant a limp leaf or two of Webb’s Wonder lettuce, whose chief selling point was the salad cream we drowned it in. Salad was a garnish tolerated as a half-hearted nod to healthiness, a penance to offset the hero of the plate, the meat. My dad would certainly have agreed with the historian-clergyman William Harrison, who in 1577 described his predecessors’ view of raw vegetables as “more meet for hogs and savage beasts to feed upon than mankind”. The idea of salad leaves being a gutsy, gourmet delight in their own right never entered our heads.

There was worse to come: America’s iceberg lettuce, a tightly packed ball of tastelessness which got its name from the blocks of ice used to preserve it as it travelled from California to the east coast. It had its uses – it lasted forever, and provided crunch in a BLT, for instance – but again, its main asset was the dressing that you smothered over its anaemic leaves.

Then came the rocket revolution. Salad rocket, originally called roquette, was introduced to the British market by a Hampshire-based farmer called Steve Rothwell, whose friends soon nicknamed him the Rocket Scientist. Actually, his true love was, and still is, watercress – he even boasts of being the first person in the UK to have a PhD in the subject. We’d eaten watercress for generations, but feisty rocket was one step further, so Rothwell trod carefully. “M&S, whom we launched with in 1988, sold it in 10z punnets as it was worried the leaves would be too much for their customers in larger quantities,” recalls Rothwell, whose name was later adopted for Vitacress’s Steve’s Leaves brand. “Then Delia Smith discovered it and featured it on a TV show, and stocks were cleaned out.”

Our palates were emboldened, packet sizes increased and we’re now chomping on a far fiercer leaf, wild rocket (oddly unrelated), blow-your-mouth-off wasabi rocket, and a host of other perkily peppery leaves. “People want to challenge their taste buds,” Rothwell says. “As with chillies, the hotter, the better.”

There are gentler newcomers to the salad bowl, too, such as spinach. “Before the late Eighties, spinach was a vegetable with long stalks that you boiled,” Rothwell says. “Although people – including my boss – thought I was mad at the time, we introduced raw spinach as a salad leaf. We cut the leaves when they were still baby-sized to make them more palatable.”

Baby is the operative word. Just as we adore the flavour-packed tenderness of baby vegetables, we want our salad leaves baby-sized, too – not only for taste, tenderness and convenience but also appearance. A whole leaf of wine-red-veined chard or a delicate fennel-top frond is a miniature work of art.

“People used to be happy with torn iceberg lettuce leaves, but now they’re far more

demanding,” says Ed Scott, the assistant harvest manager at Riverford Organic Farms, which includes salad leaves in its weekly veg boxes. “Customers want flavour, colour, texture and shape.”

According to the British Leafy Salad Association, we’re consuming more leafy salads than ever. Last year, a record 786 million bags, bowls and heads of lettuce were sold, an increase of more than 23.5 million on the year before. Steve’s Leaves says that sales are rocketing (excuse the pun) by a phenomenal 60 per cent year-on-year.

Often taking their cue from chefs, growers are exciting our taste buds with ever-more interesting leaves. The leafy list now ranges from frilly-edged red mustards to aniseedy fennel tops, fiery rockets and subtle pea-shoots. Guy Watson, of Riverford, is crazy about red-rib dandelion, whose bitter leaves are great with creamy, salty foods such as blue cheeses. Bitterness, he believes, is a definite new trend.

Another new kid on the block is Persian cress, which looks like a frilly flat-leaf parsley but tastes sweet, aromatic and mildly peppery. It has just gone on sale in Waitrose, and chefs are loving it.

The two-Michelin-starred Daniel Clifford, from Cambridge’s Midsummer House, for instance, uses it in his fresh crab and tomato salad starter. “Persian cress is the perfect partner with seafood – it brings a mild pepperiness without overpowering it. It looks fabulous, too,” he says. Clifford also likes Persian cress with roasted vegetables, such as peppers, aubergines and courgettes (see recipe).

With feisty, show-stopping salad leaves the heroes of our plates rather than an afterthought, we’ve come a long way from the flabby Seventies and Eighties.

As Guy Watson says, “Now we’ve tasted truly fresh salads with myriad colours, flavours and textures, there’s no going back.” Maybe even my dad would take a nibble. ●



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EAT SHOOTS AND LEAVES: 10 UNUSUAL TYPES

- 1. PERSIAN CRESS**
This mildly peppery leaf looks like delicate green lace. A distant relation of watercress, it originates from Iran, as its name suggests.
- 2. BABY WATERCRESS**
Peppery, pungent baby watercress is grown in the traditional way, in gravel beds washed by flowing mineral-rich spring water, but is cut earlier so that you don’t get the stalks. It’s bursting with vitamins, too, so what’s not to love?
- 3. BABY FENNEL TOPS**
These tiny, pretty fronds give a subtle aniseed flavour to any dish that you serve them with, especially fish.
- 4. MIZUNA**
Similar in appearance to rocket, this oriental leaf is sometimes nicknamed “Japanese mustard” on account of its hot, mustardy flavour. Good in salads and stir-fries.
- 5. BABY RED CHARD**
With its vibrant red veins and stems, this leaf, a member of the Swiss chard family, has a mild, earthy flavour.
- 6. TATSOI**
An Asian brassica in the same family as pak choy. Its mild-tasting, slightly mustardy oval leaves make a nice contrast to all that peppery stuff.
- 7. ROCKET**
Rocket (also called salad rocket or roquette) has been grown in the UK for centuries but made a comeback as a baby salad leaf in the 1980s. It’s now been largely superseded by wild rocket (part of the mustard family), with its thinner, more serrated leaves and stronger bite. Look out, too, for the red-veined version (pictured), and for fiery wasabi rocket – my hot favourite.
- 8. BABY LEAF SPINACH**
Yes, you can eat spinach raw and it has even more nutrients than the cooked stuff. The baby leaves have a soft texture and “leafy” taste. Good with egg, tomato and lentil dishes, or in warm salads with grilled cheese, meat or bacon.
- 9. RED MUSTARD**
As its name suggests, a hot, mustardy leaf with vibrant burgundy looks. The ruby-streaks variety, with its frilly-edged purple leaves, is a favourite of Alex Stephens, Riverford’s crop-production manager. If that’s too hot, try komatsuna, a cross between mustard and spinach, with a slight crunch.
- 10. PEA-SHOOTS**
It’s funny how, for decades, we ignored the tender shoots, which are just as delicious as the peas. Mild but tasty.

PERSIAN CRESS PESTO AND VEGETABLE SALAD

BY DANIEL CLIFFORD

Ingredients to serve 2

To roast:
Half a red pepper
Half a yellow pepper
Half a small aubergine
Half a red onion
Half a courgette
1 sprig of rosemary
2 cloves of garlic
2 tablespoons of olive oil

For the pesto:
60g of Persian cress and/or mixed leaves
1 clove of garlic
1 tablespoon of toasted pine nuts
15g of Parmesan, grated
75ml of extra-virgin olive oil

For the salad:
125g of quinoa
Half a teaspoon of tomato paste
Zest of half a lemon
60g of Persian cress
20g toasted pine nuts
4 large basil leaves, torn
8 cherry tomatoes, halved (100g)

De-seed the peppers and cut into rough 3cm squares. Cut the aubergine, red onion and courgette to the same size and transfer them all to a roasting tray.

Break up the rosemary, peel and thinly slice the garlic and add to the vegetables. Toss in

the oil and season lightly with sea salt. Bake for 20-25 minutes, stirring halfway through. Leave to cool.

Place all the pesto ingredients into a blender and blend – blend more for a smoother pesto, less for a rustic one.

Rinse the quinoa under cold water, then place in a saucepan with 250ml of water and the tomato purée and bring to the boil. Reduce the heat and simmer for 10 minutes. Remove from the heat, cover and allow to cool slightly. Stir in the lemon zest and season to taste.

Assemble the salad by folding the roasted vegetables through the warm quinoa. Dress the Persian cress with pesto and place on the quinoa. Garnish with toasted pine nuts, basil and cherry tomatoes.



On the Menu

SAMUEL MUSTON



A capital idea for raising money for a new restaurant



It is rare that a financial instrument makes your stomach rumble – collateralised debt obligations tasted *all* wrong, after all – but that seems to be most people’s response when they hear about Chilango’s Burrito Bond. In an attempt to raise £1m to finance the opening of three new restaurants, the London-based Mexican chain turned to Crowdcube to source the money from its customers.

That’s unusual enough in itself, but as well as that, they are also offering some edible sweeteners. Any investment greater than £500 gets you a free burrito (nice enough, you might think) but if you have your eye on the main prize, invest £10,000 and see what happens should the chain prosper. Not only will you get an 8 per cent return on the four-year bond, you will also get a free burrito each week that you remain an investor in the company (equating to roughly £1,352 worth of burritos). Seven days after the bond launched it had already raised £570,000 for the company, which is mainly based around the City of London.

Is this a new paradigm for funding restaurants and cafes then? Ask the customers to stump up for a new place near their house? Certainly, Eric Partaker, a former Skype employee who founded the company with Dan Houghton, thinks so. “We have absolutely sprinted past our target. Restaurants and retailers are in a good place to make use of this sort of funding mechanism because we have frequent, direct contact with our guests so we can connect easily,” he says.

In some senses, it is rather a good idea: you raise finance for your business and strengthen your customer base at the

same time. Win, win. You also have the comfort of knowing that your investors are unlikely to pull the plug, which perhaps explains why BrewDog, the beard-wearing makers of craft beer, have twice turned to their drinkers for money to finance growth, with their scheme called Equity for Punks.

That said, sometimes that “direct connect” can backfire. Witness, for instance, the Minnesota couple who, in late May, offered those investing more than \$1,000 in their new “brew pub” free beer for life. It seems a bit short-sighted, that one. What happens if the person comes in *every* day, for example? And also it seems likely to lead to people getting absolutely skirting boarded, which may rather miff off the other punters who are having to pay for their pints of Old Knuckle Cracker, or whatever the pub’s brew will be, if and when it opens its doors.

Still, the free-booze pub comes a distant second in the mad stakes when compared to John Burton-Race’s 2012 foray into crowdsourcing. In his attempt to set up the world’s first interactive restaurant, he asked 8,000 investors to stump up £60 each for the privilege of helping him decide everything from the joint’s name, to its location and even what staff to employ and what dishes to serve.

Unsurprisingly, it flopped (though, it must be said, Burton Race has since opened a new restaurant in the capital called The New Angel, which has been fairly well-received).

Perhaps there was something missing – perhaps Mr Burton-Race should have left the light fittings to designers and just offered all the investors a burrito.



ON OTHER PAGES

Ellen E Jones on last night’s TV **P.43**