

The surprise of a winter radish



(Deb Lindsey/ FOR THE WASHINGTON POST) - The wide variety of winter radishes offers great cooking possibilities. China Rose radishes, far left, red, are crisp and just faintly hot; pickled, they bleed a rosy pink.

By Emily Horton, Published: January 10

A cook's highest compliment to a fruit or vegetable is simplicity of preparation. Think of a mid-August tomato, the disinclination to interrupt its sun-ripened flavor with anything more than a bit of salt. May's first spears of asparagus, the ones so sweet and tender that cooking them seems almost uncivil.

Or consider radishes, one of winter's most convincing arguments for eating seasonally.

In 1974, writing in "On Food," James Beard talked of being smitten with radishes; a novice gardener, he favored them pulled and eaten straight from the ground (though he also declared them something of an epiphany when served with bread and butter or wrapped in a single anchovy fillet). There, his adoration was of spring radishes, the petite cherry-red and pink-tipped icicle varieties sold at markets in tidy bunches when the chill finally starts to slink away, as demure in flavor as their looks suggest.

But in the same essay, Beard also mentioned "huge, black radishes," which he recommended grating and combining with chicken fat or goose fat as a spread for bread. Though he didn't specify, Beard's black radishes probably were a Spanish heirloom variety harvested in the cooler months of fall and winter, part of a family of robust winter radishes that cooks and growers are just beginning to rediscover.

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Delicately crisp and lightly hot, spring radishes are a tease of what a radish can be. They are charming in their way, relevant to other equally understated flavors and textures of their season. But radishes are at their most pronounced, and their most versatile, in fall and winter. The return chill of autumn brings variety: pastel-painted German and Chinese heirlooms and juicy, miniature daikons in fade-out lime green. They differ so greatly in character from spring radishes as to seem another vegetable entirely. They eschew subtlety with dense, crisp flesh, a faintly nutty sweetness and an untamed heat that, depending on the variety and growing conditions, can vary from mildly spicy to wildly pungent.

Yet despite their assertiveness (or perhaps thanks to it), winter radishes, too, revel in minimalism. A plate of the Misato Rose radish, sliced thin, drizzled with a buttery olive oil and scattered with flaky sea salt, doesn't want for more. Its interior color, vivid in kaleidoscopic fuchsia, precludes any need to fuss over presentation. And there are few livelier (and simpler) midwinter additions to a tangle of vinaigrette-dressed chicories or a lentil salad than wedges of whatever winter radish you happen to have on hand.

At the same time, winter radishes can stand up to bold treatments, such as braising, roasting, sautéing and fermenting, that spring radishes are less obliged to tolerate. Of the latter, British food journalist Nigel Slater, writing in "Tender" (Ten Speed Press, 2011), admonishes readers to "ignore any suggestions of cooking them. The writer is clearly deluded." Exposed to heat, a winter radish mellows; its firm interior yields to tender and meaty. It's the sort of vegetable you want in winter, whose usual committee of root crops, earthy and modest, speak in mild-mannered tones. They comfort the palate but don't always inspire, although undoubtedly there are celery root and Jerusalem artichoke enthusiasts who would disagree. Winter radishes are flashy by comparison, a protest against cold-weather culinary monotony; if you strive to keep your kitchen seasonal, they are indispensable.

Winter radishes might be looked upon quizzically these days and are not so easy to come by, but that wasn't always so. In the early 19th century, radishes were a staple in the winter garden, a crop that provided nourishment and variety when little else could be coaxed from the soil. Home gardeners were encouraged to plant them for their ease of maintenance and longevity. In a root cellar or cold storage, they keep for four to six months, with nearly indiscernible compromise in flavor or texture.

But widespread winter gardening carried on only until industrialization and its associated conveniences rendered it unnecessary. "When food became available and cheap, that was one of the things that fell by the wayside," says Ira Wallace, a staff member at Southern Exposure Seed Exchange in Mineral, Va., and an organizer of the Heritage Harvest Festival at Monticello.



Winter radishes went the way of the rutabaga, and today, certain varieties are less likely to be recognized for what they are than mistaken for turnips or puzzled over entirely.

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Credit small-scale farmers with bringing them back to our tables. In the Washington area, local growers/farmers market vendors such as Tree & Leaf Farm, the Farm at Sunnyside, New Morning Produce and Next Step Produce are increasingly relying on radishes as a cool-season crop, in part because a single harvest can produce months of sales.

“Radishes are really low-maintenance,” says Nicholas Kohl, a farmer at the Farm at Sunnyside, which produces Black Spanish and watermelon radishes, the pink-fleshed radishes also known as Misato Rose. “They’re something you really don’t have to worry about.”

At Tree & Leaf Farm in Unionville, Va., Zach Lester grows eight varieties of winter radishes, including the lavender Hilds Blauer, a German heirloom; two types of Black Spanish radishes; the petal-pink China Rose variety; and the daikon-related Green Luobo and Misato Rose. When he plants more than he needs — which is easy to do with radishes, he notes — he leaves some in the fields to decompose and enrich the soil with, among other nutrients, deposits of plant-loving nitrogen and phosphorus.

Radishes weren’t always a focus of Lester’s growing cycle. About seven years ago, he was growing only cherry-red spring radishes and remembers that a dissatisfied CSA (community-supported agriculture) customer ticked off three reasons on a comment card why he probably wouldn’t resubscribe. The third reason, punctuated liberally for emphasis, was that radishes didn’t count as a vegetable.

“Like, they’re only half a vegetable” was the gist of it, Lester says. “Actually, I think that’s when I realized I wanted to be a radish farmer.”

At Washington area farmers markets, winter radishes begin showing up as early as October, bunched together with their sweet, peppery greens still attached. (Don’t think of throwing these away; they’re nearly perfect braised lightly with olive oil and lemon, and you’ll feel thrifty and smug for keeping them out of the trash.) But unless you, like Mr. Beard, are especially enamored of radishes, it’s easy to overlook them in autumn, among this region’s usually resplendent fall harvest. It’s later, in those cold, unflinching months leading to spring, in a season defined more by what it lacks than by what it gives, that cooks and growers can most appreciate the radish for its generosity in the kitchen and in the field.

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