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Just Below the Surface

My clients are good eaters. More often than not the presentation of my menu is met with smiles, nods and rumbling stomachs. However, there are a few foods, that for some reason, never seem to create much excitement when I mention their inclusion in a dish. I don't know what it is. I know that my clients trust my judgment and almost always enjoy the final product, but even the biggest fans of my cuisine get a little worried when I mention certain foods. So I want to take the chance to introduce you to one of my dearest friends. He's not the most physically gifted buddy of mine. He's pale, sort of hairy and a bit out of shape, but I promise even though your first impression may not be ideal, he will soon become a life long companion. In fact you have actually already met him many times, well, part of him at least.

May I present celery root! Celery root, as the name suggests, is the root of the plant that we eat the stems of and call celery. If you have a full bunch of celery at home right now look at the bottom end and you will notice that it was cut clean away from some mysterious pale white substance. We often forget that plants don't come from the grocery store, but rather grow in the ground. Similar to carrots, which are actually distant relatives of celery, the celery plant creates a large swollen root that stores sugars and nutrients (which is why both of these roots are actually somewhat sweet when grown well).

Like many of our closet friends, it's subtle nuances are what make it so wonderful. Unlike the stems and leaves of the plant, the root is not bitter or overly herbaceous, yet still retains a flavor that is undeniably celery. Depending on how it is prepared it can either be crunchy like a fresh apple or soft and slightly starchy like a well cooked carrot or beet. Not to worry about celery root's less than desirable appearance, beneath the outer skin is a wonderful white flesh that when sliced or cut into julienne mingles wonderfully with the appearance of any dish. Like your mom always said, "It's not what's on the outside, but what's on the inside that counts!"

Not only is celery root versatile and delicious, but like every fresh vegetable it offers up an assortment of key nutrients. Celery's flavor is often described as having a mineral quality, and this is 100% correct. The stems as well as the root are jam packed with many essential minerals including notably high amounts of potassium, calcium and magnesium. The fiber in

celery root is water soluble so it helps protect against heart disease and lowers blood pressure. It has also been shown to support the nervous, lymphatic and urinary systems.

Like apples and artichokes, celery root will begin to turn brown when cut into. To stop this reaction with the air, place the prepared root in acidulated water (the juice of one lemon works well). Celery root can be eaten raw, but unless shredded or sliced very thin, it's texture may be less than ideal. For preparations where the raw flavor is desired with a slightly

softer texture, blanch pieces of the root in salted water for 30 seconds or so depending on the size (as in the recipe below). When soft texture is desired baking for 45 minutes to an hour usually does the trick. Celery root pairs especially well with potato, fennel, onion, leek, turnip, apple, walnut and pistachio.

To help get everyone acquainted with celery root I thought that the following recipe (courtesy of Deborah Madison) might be helpful.

Celery Root, Apple and Walnut Salad

- 2 tbsp red wine vinegar or lemon juice
- 2 shallots, finely diced
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- 1 tbsp Dijon mustard
- 2 tbsp creme fraiche or sour cream
- 1/3 cup extra virgin olive oil
- 1 tbsp chopped parsley
- 3 tbsp capers, rinsed
- salt and pepper to taste
- 1 celery root (~ 1lb), peeled, and cut into julienne, soaked in acidulated water
- 1 large granny smith apple, cored and slivered, soaked in acidulated water
- 1/4 cup walnuts, toasted and chopped

Combine the first 9 ingredients in a bowl and whisk vigorously. Set aside. Bring a large pot of salted water to boil. Drop the celery root into the boiling water and blanch for 1 minute. Drain and rinse with cold water, then pat dry. Toss the celery root, apple, and walnuts with 1/3 cup of dressing and serve (extra dressing will keep in the fridge for at least a week).



Awesome Autumn Apples

Summer may be over, and with it many of our favorite local fruits, but fall brings its own sweetness. As the days get shorter, the local apple harvest begins. To get us all up to date on this wonderful fall offering, I once again tuned to the famous Jennifer Walsh of Mesa Produce.

When are apples at their best?

The general rule is, "Apples are best in the fall." But there are variations due to the different varieties grown in different areas. The first apples to hit the shelves are Galas. Desert regions and Arizona Galas kick off the season as soon as late July (weather pending). This year, with the very cold spring, the first pick came the second week of August. Next come the early Fujis and early Golden Delicious. By the end of September we have most all varieties available. Apples are harvested until the first freeze of the winter or until the limbs are empty. I would say that, locally, by end of November, most of the fall harvest is packed into boxes.

Because apples are available year round people tend to forget that there is an apple season. Apples are stored until the next harvest, and of course there a couple different ways to store them. For short term storage a simple cooler will do for a month or two. Many local farmers have their own cooler to keep their harvest ready for the Farmers' Market or Mesa Produce. If a grower contracts with a packer their apples could be kept in CA, 'controlled atmosphere,' storage. With this type of long term storage apples are kept as fresh as the day they went in. The humidity, temperature, and naturally occurring ethylene are controlled. A controlled atmosphere apple will be juicy and crisp for about two weeks after it comes out of storage, even if they are stored for 10 months.

During the off season you can still get a tasty treat from New Zealand, Chile, or even South Africa. Each new season in each region ships fresh to the USA. We pay well for fresh apples when ours' are all storage. New crop apples from below the equator start arriving as early as March. US grown apples are all from "CA" storage by February. Now this brings us back to the original question. The 'best' apple will be one that is straight off the tree, possibly from your own backyard, however some harder types will stay crispy longer. To ensure a fresh good tasting apple stick with locally grown, in season, and you will have something special. Ojai, Santa Ynez, and Paso Robles have just about every variety you need and crave for that perfect pie or snack.

What apples are grown in the Santa Barbara area?

- Gala - early, red or dark pink fruit, sweet, small, great for the kid's lunch box, or making homemade applesauce, tend to get soft quickly after harvest.
- Fuji - abundant harvest, very popular, crunchy, sweet/tart, juicy, lower altitudes and trees with heavy foliage produce mostly green fruit with a red blush, while high altitudes produce mostly pink or red toned fruit, assorted sizes, these apples store very well, staying crisp throughout the year.
- Pink Lady - later harvest, crunchy, sweet (but not too sweet), medium sized, pink skin, great all around eating apple.
- Granny Smith - mid-season harvest, tart, crisp, green, best for pies or candied, holding together well when cooked.
- Braeburn - mid-season, limited production, multi-colored red and green, another sweet/tart flavor, fairly crisp, good all around apple, for baking or eating.

There are many more backyard apple varieties that pop

up from time to time as well. Ones that I have carried in the past include:

- Gravenstein - Early tart apple, mostly used for cooking.
- Beverly Hills - very attractive pinkish red, but very tart.

Unfortunately, I can only get my hands on these varieties when someone has a tree in their yard and can't eat them all. Commercial growers stay away from these varieties because of their short shelf life and lack of demand from consumers.

How does one pick and store a good apple?

An apple should be firm to the touch, and when thumped, it should have a hollow sound. Also an apple should be heavy for its size to ensure plenty of juice. But every rule has exceptions though. A Pink Lady apple is lighter than a Fuji. Why? Well they are both crisp apples, but the Pink Lady is dense while the Fuji has more juice. Compare yourself and you'll see what I mean.

A fresh picked apple can comfortably sit in the fruit bowl for a week or two. During the off seasons, spring and summer, the fridge is best.

What about wax on apples?

All apples come with their own natural wax. On the trees a hazy wax protects the apples from small insects, sun, and wind. Once an apple is sent to a packing house it is washed to keep up with proper sanitation. Now a new coat of wax must be applied to keep the apple from drying out or getting soft, and of course, for shelf appeal. Organic waxes are bees' wax, mineral oil, or any other natural wax. Conventional waxes can be food grade shellac and many other substances. Shellac is very shiny, bees' wax can be a bit sticky, and mineral oil is slimy. Apples brought straight to market from the orchard do not have artificial waxes. These are cloudy in appearance and can be shined with a cloth. However, remember to wash all produce before eating. People tend to think that if produce is organic that they do not have to wash it. This is not a good idea. Which bird left a cloudy deposit, did the picker wash his hands, who sneezed on that display? If you are picking and inspecting it, then okay. Otherwise, think about the latest spinach and lettuce scares and wash your produce.

Anything else?

Another thing worth mentioning is the decline of older childhood varieties like Red Delicious and Golden Delicious. These Delicious varieties are still grown and sold every year to my amazement. They are soft mildly sweet and do not hold well in storage. I carry the Golden Delicious, because when fresh they are versatile and preferred by people who want a sweet apple that isn't hard. Ever had braces? Ouch! I even had a customer win an apple pie baking contest using Golden Delicious. But still why grow an apple that isn't the best and in high demand? I once proposed this question to a farmer who grew many acres of Red Delicious. His answer; Red Delicious are a vibrant healthy tree. You may get up to a third more apples each harvest without the aid of fertilizers. They are disease resistant and steady producers year after year.

If you have never been to Mesa Produce, you are missing out on a true Santa Barbara treasure. Mesa Produce is located at 2036 Cliff Dr on the corner of Cliff and Camino Calma.