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Food

Notes from underground

Coated with soil and smelling of the earth, vegetables are at the root of many a delicious dish. Nigel Slater gets to grips with his weekly box

Nigel Slater

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I always pounce on the bag of kale that crowns each weekly vegetable box like pillows of green candyfloss. This week I blanched the leaves for a few seconds in boiling water, then chucked them into a thin black pan already spitting and sizzling with spring onions, ginger and red chillies. Supper was on the plate in less time than it takes to write about it. And then there is the frilly leaved January King cabbage that came this week and will accompany today's gammon, probably with lemon juice and olive oil or a few toasted caraway seeds. The greens are always gone in a few days, even the chard, whose earthy notes and mineral-tasting ribs are not at the top of everyone's list.

Without its bag of squeakily fresh kale and tight little cabbage, the vegetable box resembles a tin of biscuits that has been stripped of its most interesting assets. I am left with the stuff that no one really wants, the dull swede and grouchy old parsnips, the muddy carrots and rock-hard celeriac. All delicious in their own way, but without the eat-me-now vitality present in the winter leaves.

Things start to look up the minute you wash the root vegetables' faces, rubbing off the layers of dusty soil to reveal their bright colours: the cream and maroon skin of the swede, the new green and ivory white of the celeriac, the Belisha-beacon orange of the main-crop carrots. Scrubbed in ice-cold water, they take on a new life and suddenly start to tempt.

I can only take so much mash, even when it comes in the appetising tones of ivory, amber and vermillion. Sometimes something roasted or toasted or baked seems to fit in better - less heavy, more savoury. Celeriac and swede can be baked, in paper-thin slices, moistened with butter and layered with some tough, oily herbs such as thyme or rosemary, and a little garlic crushed or cut into thin slices. You end up with a shallow, buttery, herby cake that sits rather well with a roast or maybe some slices of thin cold beef. Or perhaps you might prefer it as a light main course with some green leaves on the side.

Celeriac goes one better: it makes great oven chips tossed with herbs, butter and - curious one, this - honey. I don't know why this works, I only know that it does. Lightly crisp on the outside and melting within, celeriac cooked in this way is very different from the usual way of eating what is fast becoming a very hip vegetable indeed: that raw vegetable salad that we know as celeriac remoulade. Baked, its mineral qualities soften and take on a warm, nutty quality, and certainly in this house it has become a vegetable that is looked forward to rather than left till last.

I would hate anyone to think that it is just the presence of a bit of soil that puts me off going for the root vegetables first, but it has to be said that it does make them less instantly tempting, apart from making a mess inside the fridge. Yet that soil will keep them fresher; root vegetables hate being exposed to the light. Perhaps that's why they bake so much better than they boil.

Swede and Parmesan cake

Swedes can be blissful cooked with stock or butter till meltingly soft. I wanted a dish with the simplicity of pommes boulangere but the richness of pommes dauphinoise. Perfect with cold roast lamb or beef. Serves 4 as a side dish.

750g-1kg swede

75g butter

2 cloves of garlic

40g finely grated Parmesan cheese

a few sprigs of rosemary

4 or 5 bushy sprigs of thyme

Peel the swedes then slice them thinly by hand or with a mandolin or Magimix slicing attachment. The rounds should be so thin you can almost see through them.

Melt the butter in a small pan. Peel the garlic, then crush it or chop it finely.

Smooth a little of the melted butter over the base of a shallow baking dish or small cast-iron frying pan and cover it with some of the swede slices, overlapped slightly. Pour on a bit more butter then season with salt, garlic, black pepper, some of the herbs and a good dusting of Parmesan. Cover with layers of swede, more seasonings, garlic and Parmesan until all the swede is used. Finish with butter and a light dusting of Parmesan.

Bake in a preheated oven at 200C/gas mark 6, pressing the cake down very firmly once or twice with a large fish slice. After 45-50 minutes, you should have a deep-golden cake sizzling around its edges.

Remove from the oven and leave it to calm down for a few minutes before serving.

Roast celeriac with honey and thyme

Serve with roast beef or sausages - something savoury. Enough for 4 as a vegetable.

a large celeriac, or 2 smaller ones

a thick slice of butter

a little olive oil or beef dripping

2 tbsp honey

8 sprigs thyme

4 tsp honey

Set the oven at 200C/gas mark 6. Put a pan of lightly salted water on to boil. Peel the celeriac and remove the tops. Slice the flesh into thick chips. Drop them into the water and leave for 10 minutes till almost tender.

Drain them, then put them into a roasting tin or baking dish with a thick slice of butter and a spoonful of olive oil or beef dripping. Season with salt and black pepper, the thyme leaves pulled from their stalks, and the honey. Toss gently then roast for 35-40 minutes until the celeriac is crisp and pale gold. The flesh should be soft and sweetly tender.

Baked swede

This is just the job with faggots in gravy or a beef casserole. Serves 4 as a side dish.

a large swede (about 650g peeled weight)

40g butter

2 medium onions, peeled and thinly sliced

a large sprig of rosemary

chicken or vegetable stock to cover

Set the oven at 200C/gas mark 6. Cut the swede into slices about as thick as a pound coin. It is easier and safer to do this by first cutting a slice from one side and using this to steady the swede as you cut.

Generously butter a baking dish or roasting tin. Lay the slices of swede and onion in the dish, seasoning them with salt and black pepper, and strewing over the rosemary leaves as you go. Ladle over the stock so that it just about covers the vegetables - a matter of five or so ladlefuls - then dot on the rest of the butter.

Bake in the preheated oven for an hour or so, turning the swede in the stock from time to time, until the vegetables are tender enough to crush between your fingers. Serve as a side dish, with some of the juices spooned over.

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