

## Italian winter vegetables

The wonderful and distinctive flavours of Italian regional cuisine are found in the different ways vegetables are prepared. Winter is the season of some of the most interesting, yet little known varieties. Due to their seasonality, they are available for 5-6 months, but only at their best for three. From north to south, the combination of differing geographical position, climate and heritage has created varied styles of cooking them, with each region having a preference for certain ingredients and style of preparation which are uniquely its own.

*Cardi* – cardoons, part of the asteracea family is closely related to the artichoke and thistle, and is often called artichoke thistle. First mentioned in the 4<sup>th</sup> c BC by Greek writer, Theophrastus, it was eaten by Greeks, Romans and throughout the middle ages. It has lost popularity in recent times due to its lengthy preparation, but is still traditional in Piedmont and the central Italian regions of Umbria, Tuscany and Marche. The stems of the leaves of this plant (reaching up to 1m in height) are used, and after peeling and discarding the stringy bits, they are boiled until tender, which can take a number of hours. After boiling, they can be braised, deep fried or baked with parmesan and béchamel (parmigiana) and a number of other ways according to the region. Rich in anti oxidants and fibre, it has purifying properties.

*Cavolo nero*, an interesting brassica from Tuscany, similar to curly kale, has dark green leaves which intensify in colour when cooked, hence its name black cabbage. It is extremely versatile – can be boiled and sautéed with garlic, or braised, and is the other main ingredient in *ribollita*, a traditional Tuscan bean soup. It makes a wonderful garnish for pork, liver, game or richly flavoured fish. Rich in vitamins A, B and C and iron, its taste is quite intense with a combination of cabbage and spinach flavours

*Finocchio* – fennel, part of the Umbelliferae family, is found throughout Europe, both wild and cultivated; the cultivated varieties grow a bulb, which is at its best when white, round and smooth. Its seeds are used in many recipes for flavouring. Versatile as a vegetable, it can be eaten raw in salad, thinly sliced, eg in Sicily *insalata di arancie e finocchio*, blood orange, fennel and red onion salad. Braised with olive oil and garlic, or baked with butter and heaps of parmesan, it is a great side order for main courses, especially sea bass and pork. It is popular in Marche, where the term *in porchetta* after a dish is used to indicate its presence

*Cime di rape*, part of the brassica family, is a sub species of the turnip, without the tuber, related to mustard, *bok choy* and *mizuna*, and is harvested when broccoli-like florets start to appear. Although found in many central and southern Italian regions, it is in Puglia where it is most valued. The tender leaves and florets can be boiled or steamed. When boiled, it is delicate and sweet with a mild mustard aftertaste; when steamed in its own water, its flavours are much more intense and pungent. A classic Puglian dish with this vegetable is *orecchiette con cime di rape*, where its combination with garlic, anchovy and cherry tomato produces a dish of surprisingly rich flavours and deliciously satisfying taste

*Cicoria catalogna*, or *puntarelle*, asparagus chicory is part of a large group including *radicchio*, Belgian chicory and the various endives. It is found throughout central and southern Italy, with the best sub species, *cicoria di Galatina* coming from Puglia. Its sprouting asparagus-like tips are crunchy and when cooked it is sweet with a slight bitter aftertaste. Versatile, it can be used raw in salad, boiled and dressed with olive oil or sautéed with garlic and olive oil. In Puglia, it is combined with egg and parmesan in a dish that could be described as a steamed omelette, and in Abruzzo, used in the traditional soup, *Cicoria cacio e ova* with cheese and egg. It is rich in vitamins and minerals, good as a digestive and diuretic.

*Radicchio Trevisano* - radicchio is a chicory similar to the Belgian endive, *scarola* and *catalogna*. It was the Egyptians who first cultivated this plant from the wild. Pliny the Elder describes it in his *Historia Naturalis* as being good for digestion, purifying the blood but especially curing insomnia, as it contains *Intybin*, a bitter substance which has a sedative and analgesic effect. The Greek physician Galen thought it to be beneficial for the liver.

*Radicchio Trevisano* as we know it today was developed in 1860 by a Belgian agronomist, Van den Borre, who introduced the technique of *inbianchimento* or curing the radicchio in dark, cold rooms. Although found from Sept – April, it is at its best in winter, as the cold weather makes it crunchy and less bitter. Many parts of the world have tried to grow this vegetable, but it is from Veneto that the best *radicchio* comes.

Available varieties:

*Radicchio di Chioggia* – round cabbage-like ball, least expensive and most commonly available, good for salad

*Radicchio di Treviso precoce* – early variety, long, compact, bright purple-red overlapping leaves with white stems, highly prized for crisp, crunchy leaves; suitable for salad and cooking.

*Radicchio di Treviso tardivo* – a late variety, long narrow leaves, tender and crunchy, ideal grilled or for salad. The most highly prized variety.

In Veneto, *radicchio* is used in a variety of ways: in salads with dressing of fried pancetta or lard; served as a side dish for *pasta e fagioli* ; plainly grilled to accompany meat; baked in the oven topped with cheese

*Radicchio* and borlotti beans used together are a traditionally wholesome regional combination with the sweet, creamy taste of the beans off-setting bitterness of the radicchio, creating a balanced dish.

## Super pulses

### Castelluccio lentil

This tiny brownish-green lentil is the finest you can find. Light in weight and due to its thin skin, it does not need soaking, takes 30 minutes to cook and holds its shape. But best of all is its taste and flavour which is so special. Rich, intense and wholesomely satisfying. Key to this is its area of production - Castelluccio plain in Umbria, at an altitude of 1000m at the foot of the Sibilline mountains. Here the light well drained soil and the microclimate are the perfect habitat for this lentil. Like Chianti and Brunello di Montalcino its origin is protected by European legislation.

### Pratomagno Zolfino bean

The zolfino is a small yellowish bean (zolfo is Italian for sulphur , which is a reference to its yellow colour). It does not need soaking and when cooked has a creamy texture, with a delicate and intense flavour. Best of all, it does not give wind when eaten. It produces small plants with roots close to the surface, so is sensitive to waterlogging, cold weather as well as extreme heat. For this reason it has found its perfect habitat in the poor, well-drained soil of the countryside around Pratomagno, a town in Tuscany. Growing this bean is labour intensive; pollination is often carried out manually, it requires constant watering, and is harvested by hand. This bean is also called ‘fagiolo del Cento’ (the hundred bean), because it is sown on the hundredth day of the year, hence in April. Its origin is protected by European law and production is very limited (30,000 kilos per annum) and therefore costly (£30-40 per kilo).

