

The Wall Street Journal – December 3, 2010

Marron Made in Heaven



Green spines cover the burr, the American chestnut's protection against hungry bears, squirrels and deer.

Richard Pierce

The art of getting chestnuts out of trees has remained pretty much unchanged throughout American history. It involves a club, a good throwing arm and buckets. Native Americans and frontiersmen would hurl clubs at the nutladen branches that hung 100 feet over the forest floor. Chestnuts were ground into flour, fire-roasted or eaten raw, providing a staple for the long winters. But when the blight came in 1904, caused by the fungus *Cryphonectria parasitica*, it wiped out some four billion trees—99 percent of the American chestnut population—leaving only a few hidden stands for foragers to haunt and nearly erasing the nut from our culinary consciousness.

For **Patrick O'Connell, owner of the Inn at Little Washington**, near Virginia's Shenandoah Mountains, this makes his work as much about educating as cooking. "For Americans, chestnuts seem

like something our grandparents ate. We don't know its importance in enriching coldmonth cooking," he says. "And no other nut can perform with the versatility."

In the past decade, the chestnut industry has re-emerged, as orchards are planted across the country and enterprising foragers discover hidden groves of surviving Americans in Virginia, Michigan and Ohio. Chefs like O'Connell, with his award-winning invention of a simultaneously opulent and rustic cuisine, are showing diners how these woodland jewels can liven every course of a meal.

Loaded with super-nutritional complex carbohydrates, chestnuts are considered a "brain food" and a tremendous source of energy, which is why they made up a sizable portion of the winter diet for Appalachian settlers. More similar in composition to a legume than other nuts, they contain very little fat. They're heavy on starches and natural sugars (over three times as much sugar per serving as apples), providing a gradual stream of energy during digestion.

Those starches and sugars complement heartier fare. "They taste like Dickens," O'Connell says. "Each bite brings out memories of Christmases and Thanksgiving." Except for the turkey, no other food is so woven into the edible history of Western winter holidays. "I'll garnish a cut of venison with pickled cranberries and a chestnut puree. The color of the garnish jumps off the plate," he says.

O'Connell works with fresh ones from a hidden stand of survivors on the sprawling Inn property. When that crop is exhausted, a supplier hand-selects marronis, a type of European chestnut, to his specifications. The benchmark all growers and foragers seek is a nut with the most pronounced sweetness, because where a chestnut really shines is in desserts, perhaps at its most indulgent in the marrons glacés that Rodger Bowser confects at Zingerman's, a respected deli in Ann Arbor, Mich. Traditionally made with European nuts, especially from trees found in northern Italy, the dish becomes all the more indulgent with the higher sugar content of the pedigreed Americans. (For what to drink with chestnuts, please go to the last page here.)

Here's Bowser's recipe: First, he soaks them in a bath of local maple syrup, which they absorb. "I like to keep it local using the products of two trees from the same forest," Bowser says. He then boils them gently for 10 minutes, covers the pot and lets it stand overnight. He repeats the process four times. Next, he warms the syrup up, but not to boiling, removes the nuts from the syrup and places them on a rack to cool and drain for a few minutes (with a cooking tray underneath to catch the drippings). Finally, he bakes them in a 300-degree oven for 8 to 10 minutes to candy the maple-syrup shell.



Richard Pierce

The nut's second layer of defense is a deep mahogany shell that tapers to a point like a Hershey's Kiss.

One more tip: Before roasting, the shell must be cut with an “X” on one end to release steam—chestnuts explode if not vented. “It’s a sound similar to a lobster screaming,” according to Bowser.

In the orchards at Michigan’s Chestnut Growers Co-operative, members gather chestnuts during the early-autumn harvest. Growers have planted Asian and European varieties as well as a few hybrids, which tend to produce larger nuts, but not with the depth of flavor of the Americans. For the American nuts, prices can be staggering. A pound of Chinese chestnuts fetches \$10, while Americans easily top \$30 and are rarely sold on the open market. “I buy a special stash of Americans for my sausage stuffing at Thanksgiving,” Bowser says.

The chestnut maniac develops a palate to identify nuances among the varieties. Chinese nuts, the most common and resilient to the blight, are starch-heavy—good for soups and gravies and with a nutty potato flavor. European strains are sweeter than the Chinese ones and have a mealy texture—still decent for dessert. “The American nut is noticeably richer than the others,” Bowser says.

But science is coming to the rescue. Starting in 1983, the American Chestnut Foundation began backcrossing the genes of the dwarfish, blight-resistant Chinese tree with the morphology of the tall American for the purpose of replanting the tree’s native range. It’s taken a generation, but this fall the ACF harvested 13,000 B(3)F(3) seeds, expected to achieve full blight resistance. “The science tells us they’ll be the same tree and nut from a century ago,” says Cathy Mayes, president of the ACF’s Virginia chapter.

While the foundation’s motives are ecological, with that reforestation along the length of the Appalachian Mountains should come bumper crops of chestnuts as early as 2015. But with as many as 5,000 nuts dropping per tree, autumn foragers will want to heed the Michigan Chestnut Co-op’s Bill Nash and consider a hardhat before venturing into the woods: “Falling burrs will draw blood,” he says.

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**Alice Feiring's Picks for Toasting and Roasting:
What to Drink with Chestnuts**

Rare Wine Company Charleston Sercial

Special Reserve, \$50

Madeira was held in great esteem in the early years of the U.S. This one is like a salted caramel without its sugar—coupled with its lemon acidity, it has what it takes to confront a bowl of chestnut soup.

Camillo Donati Lambrusco

Secco Frizzante 2008, \$25

Proof that sparkling red Lambruscos aren't just fizzy slop. The scent hits with seductive nut and honey and the finish is pure prosciutto and cured olive. Miraculous for toasting a game bird with chestnut stuffing.

West County Cider

Redfield, \$13

From the Maloneys in the Berkshires, its Redfield apples turn into a berry-colored cider, tannic with a hint of raspberry. Pop its cork for hot chestnuts after a late afternoon, woodsy walk.

Cappellano

Barolo Chinato, \$90

Messing with Barolo is sacrilege, but this digestif is a cure-all for holiday overindulgence and makes the marron glacé go down easy. Steeped with wormwood, quinine, clove, fennel and God knows what else, the drink is a Bergman film in a glass.

Alice Feiring is a wine writer who has written for Food & Wine, among other publications. She is also the author of "The Battle for Wine and Love." Visit her Web site at alicefeiring.com.

Sources: The American Chestnut Foundation Acf.org; Theinnatlittlewashington.com; Zingermans.com. To buy chestnuts, visit Michigan Growers, Chestnutgrowersinc.com; Wines: Charleston Sercial's Special Reserve, Rarewineco.com; Camillo Donati Lambrusco's Secco Frizzante, Appellationnyc.com; West County Cider's Redfield, Westcountycider.com; Cappellano's Barolo Chinato, Polanerselections.com