

WHAT'S IN SEASON?

Fennel

BY BARBARA KOBSAR

WINTER CROPS

Artichokes
Apples
Avocados
Bok Choy
Buddha's Hand
Broccoli
Broccoli Rabe
Brussel Sprouts
Cabbage
Carrots
Cauliflower
Celery Root
Chinese Broccoli (Gai Lan, or Chinese Kale)
Collard Greens
Dried Fruits
Fennel
Grapefruit
Kale
Kiwifruit
Leeks
Lemon Grass
Lemons
Lettuce
Lime
Mandarins
Mushrooms
Mustard Greens
Nuts
Onions
Parsley
Parsnips
Pears (Comice, Bosc, Seckel, Anjou)
Potatoes
Radish
Raisins
Rutabagas
Salad Greens
Spinach
Sweet Potatoes
Swiss Chard
Tangerines
Turnips

You can't miss it. Fennel grows wild all over the East Bay, showing off its feathery plumes along roads and trails. The wild, or common green fennel, which perfumes the air with its sweet licorice-like scent, is a perennial herb of the carrot family. Like its cousins, parsley, dill, chervil and anise, fennel easily reseeds itself, which is why you see it growing all over our wild landscape.

Wild fennel is closely related to the bulbous Florence fennel now in season and available in our markets. One of the true delights of the Mediterranean table, Florence fennel has gained notice in the United States only in the last decade. It is still marketed as a specialty vegetable, often mislabeled "anise" because of its licorice or anise taste and aroma. Indeed, Florence fennel is related to the plant which produces the culinary anise seeds used to flavor baked goods, and like anise seeds, fennel seeds impart a strong, licorice-like flavor.

Florence fennel is produced specifically for its enlarged bulb or thickened leaf base. The broad ribbed leafstalks overlap each other to form a 3- to 4-inch wide, firm, whitish bulb that grows just above ground. Extending above are the pale green celery-like stalks. These are quite similar to the stalks of the wild fennel, which can be seen reaching five feet high in the summer season before they die back, leaving behind shrubby skeletons from which new shoots of fresh greenery emerge late in the rainy season. Those new shoots of wild fennel can be used as an herb, as can the oval, greenish brown fennel seeds left on the large umbels after the yellow flowers wither. But the stalks, which overlap one another at the base of the wild fennel plant, form only a skimpish bulb, which is tough and not suitable for eating.

While it might be fun to forage for fresh shoots of wild fennel, farmers' markets are often the best places to find fresh fennel bulbs with some feathery leaves still attached. The ferny foliage is excellent in flavored butters, soups, sauces and fish dishes, added to salads or sandwiches, or chopped and used as a garnish.

The bulb is delicious served raw or cooked. To prepare the bulb, rinse well and trim the stalks down to within 1 inch of the bulb. Trim off the base, leaving about 1/8 inch near the root to hold the bulb together during cooking. Peel off any coarse, outer layers and cut the bulb in half lengthwise or crosswise.

Raw Florence fennel makes a delicious and simple addition to an hors d'oeuvre platter. Cut prepared bulbs lengthwise into slender chunks (like celery) letting the core hold a few pieces together. Drizzle with extra virgin olive oil and a sprinkle of kosher salt. Add some goat cheese to the plate and you might even find sliced, raw fennel appealing as a healthful dessert.

Braised fennel is wonderful as a side dish. To braise, heat a few tablespoons of olive oil in a large skillet over medium high heat and add two trimmed and quartered heads of fennel. Sauté and turn frequently for about 5 minutes. Add 2 cups chicken broth and 1 tablespoon chopped fresh thyme, cover and simmer gently over low heat for about 30 minutes. (The liquid should be syrupy). Place the fennel in a shallow baking dish and pour the sauce over it. Season with salt and pepper to taste, and sprinkle with 1/3 to 1/2 cup Parmesan cheese. Bake at 375 degrees for about 15 minutes or until the cheese has melted and turns golden brown.

Since barbecuing is a year round activity at my house, I like to place the fennel



Photograph: Janet Flemer

stalks and leaves on the coals so the wonderful fennel scent can permeate whatever I'm grilling. If the stalks are long enough, they can be used as a natural rack in a roasting pan for poultry and meats.

I like to use my vegetables as soon as possible after purchase, but fennel keeps unwashed in the refrigerator in a plastic bag for 4 or 5 days if necessary. Fennel bulbs will keep longer if any excess stalks or leaves are removed before storing.

Besides fennel's unique flavor, it's low in calories and high in vitamins A and E, calcium and potassium. It's delicious and healthy. What a way to start the New Year!

Enjoy and see you at the farmers' markets.

Barbara Kobsar writes a regular column on seasonal produce for the Contra Costa Times, and contributes to many other publications. She has authored two cookbooks that focus on traditional home cooking. When not roaming the farmers' market aisles, she is behind her market stand selling her Cottage Kitchen jams and jellies, which she makes from fresh farmers' market produce.

COOKING WITH FENNEL AT BAY WOLF

This season, our featured recipes come to us from Bay Wolf Restaurant in Oakland, where monthly menus highlight the season's prime ingredients, often following traditional uses from the regional cuisines of the Mediterranean. Michael Wild, founding owner and executive chef, confirms our accolades for fennel and dedicates a whole month to this versatile vegetable. Here are a few of the creative dishes prepared and created by Wild and Chef de Cuisine Louis Le Gassic.

Citrus Braised Fennel

2 fennel bulbs

Chopped zest and juice of 4 oranges

1 tablespoon Champagne vinegar

2 tablespoon honey

2 thyme sprigs

1 cup white wine

black peppercorns

Olive oil

Salt and pepper

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Cut fennel into ¼-inch slices, coat with olive oil and season well. Arrange in a single layer in an ovenproof dish. Roast the fennel for 20 minutes. In the meantime, in a saucepan bring to a boil the orange juice, vinegar, honey, thyme and black peppercorns. Bring to a boil and reduce by half. Strain the orange juice mixture and pour over the fennel cook for another 20 minutes. Remove the liquid left to a saucepan and reduce to a glaze, then pour back over the fennel. Can be served hot or room temperature. Serves 8



Tian of Fennel and Kabocha

- 2 bulbs fennel cut into ¼ inch slices
- ½ kabocha peeled and seeded and sliced into ¼ inch slices
- 1 small red onion sliced
- 3 tablespoons olive oil
- Salt and pepper
- 4 tablespoons water
- 3 tablespoons breadcrumbs
- 4 tablespoon grated Reggiano

Toss the cut fennel, kabocha and red onion in 2 tablespoons of olive oil and season well with salt and pepper. Place into an ovenproof baking dish and drizzle the water throughout the dish. Put into a preheated 350-degree oven and bake for 30 to 40 minutes until the fennel and kabocha are soft. Top with breadcrumbs and Reggiano. Return to oven and bake until golden brown. Serve hot. Serves 8

Shaved Fennel, Artichoke and Mushroom Salad with Reggiano

- 2 fennel bulbs
- Heart of 1 large artichoke
- 4-6 button mushrooms
- 2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- Juice of 1 Meyer lemon
- Salt and pepper
- Reggiano

With a mandoline shave the fennel, artichoke heart, and button mushrooms into a bowl as thinly as possible. Season with salt and pepper. Add the juice of the Meyer lemon and the olive oil. Toss and let stand for a few minutes. Toss in the Italian parsley and arrange onto salad plates. With a vegetable peeler, shave some Reggiano over the top of each plate to finish. Serves 8



*Bay Wolf Chef de Cuisine
Louis Le Gassic*



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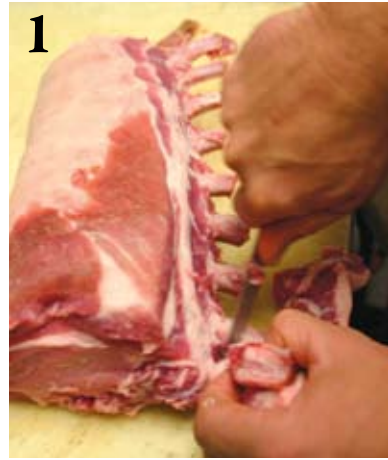


Bay Wolf Fennel Crusted and Stuffed Pork Rib Roast

1 ten-rib end pork roast, frenched and butterflied
10 tablespoons fennel seed, toasted and ground
Salt and pepper
1 bulb fennel, cut 1/8 inch thick
Olive oil
String



Bay Wolf Chef de Cuisine Louis Le Gassic used to work at a local butcher shop where he became an expert in preparing meats, such as this rib end pork roast. He recommends asking your butcher to french and butterfly the roast for you. However, when Edible East Bay asked to watch, Le Gassic had on hand a roast that had not been frenched and butterflied, so we were able to photograph the whole process:

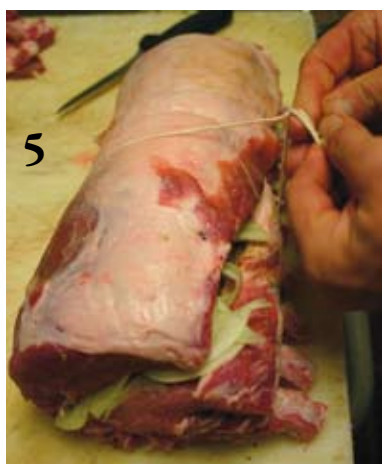


1. Le Gassic “frenches” the roast by carving the meat away from the bone ends.
2. To “butterfly,” he slices part way down the length of the roast to lay it open flat on the cutting board.



3. He grinds the toasted fennel seeds and seasons the inside of the roast with a third of the fennel seed, plus ample salt and pepper.

4. After slicing the fresh fennel, he lays out the pieces on the roast and then rolls it up.



5. He ties the roast securely, starting from the middle and working his way out on each side, in between each bone.

6. He rubs the roast with olive oil and seasons the outside with salt and pepper and the remaining fennel seeds.

7. Then he places the roast on a rack in a preheated 325-degree oven and roasts until the meat has reached an inner temperature of 145 to 150 degrees. He removes it from the oven, covers with a tent of aluminum foil, and allows it to rest for 20 to 30 minutes. To serve, he cuts the roast in between the bones straight down, removing the strings as he goes. Serves 10

