



FOOD ROOTS A MEDITATION ON SPRING GREEN(S)

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY
BY LIZ DRIVER

All good citizens are striving to be “green” in the twenty-first century. Since the colour became the emblem of the environmental movement and its meaning has taken on a certain earnestness, it’s easy to forget the first definition that appears in my dictionary: *Green: The colour of most growing plants, grass, and leaves.*

Green can be a joyous colour, especially the shade in nature that we call “spring green.” In Ontario, this vibrant, yellowish-green hue follows a frozen period dominated by white snow and sometimes-blue skies. As winter ends, the cook welcomes “spring greens” – fresh new edible leaves and other plants, such as lettuce, spinach, herbs, and green onions (in England, aptly called “spring onions”). In wild areas, delectable green fiddleheads (ferns) push up through the forest floor, their uncurling fronds an early sign of warmer weather. Ramps (wild leeks), especially coveted by city chefs, seek the sun. In cultivated kitchen gardens, asparagus spears shoot up.

For every cook attuned to the local growing cycle, each week brings the prospect of another annual miracle of new leaves and fresh green vegetables to throw into the pot or to toss in the salad bowl. The cook’s spring stretches from the earliest onion shoots through a parade of colourful lettuce leaves to the first fresh peas of June, including the varieties eaten whole, like sugar-snaps (also known as *mange-touts*) and snow peas, or the ordinary green garden peas that must first be shelled.

Imagine how appreciated these spring greens would have been at a time before the influx of imported produce from California and Mexico. Here follows a nineteenth-century soup recipe from Hamilton, Ontario, that combines two types of lettuce, herbs, peas and cucumber, cooked in butter and stock made of veal and lean bacon or ham. As the old cookbook advises, the recipe can also be prepared with water – a good vegetarian alternative – but be sure to add extra seasoning (flavour was important to cooks of the past, just as today). The soup ingredients can be grown in backyards or purchased at farmers’ markets or your favourite greengrocer. The increasing number of Ontarians who continue to return to seasonal eating will especially enjoy this beautiful spring-green soup. □

Liz Driver is the author of *Culinary Landmarks: A Bibliography of Canadian Cookbooks, 1825-1949*. As the Curator of Campbell House Museum in Toronto, she invites volunteers to join the cooking program in its nineteenth-century kitchen with open hearth and bake oven. She also teaches Applied Food History at George Brown College, and serves as past president of the Culinary Historians of Ontario.

NEW SPRING AND AUTUMN SOUP

A most refreshing soup, when the markets are full of everything, and few use them, can be made as a *bonne-bouche* [a tidbit or small, tasty serving]. Wash, dry, and cut up four cabbage lettuces [varieties with crisp leaves forming a compact, round shape], and one coss ditto [cut-up romaine lettuce], a handful of sorrel, a little tarragon and chervil, and two or three small cucumbers peeled and sliced; put into a saucepan a quarter of a pound of butter, then set in the vegetables; put on a slow fire [simmer over low heat], and stir often, until there is no liquid remaining; add two table-spoonfuls of flour, mix well, and moisten with two quarts of broth (No. 1 [veal-and-bacon stock] or water, and set it to boil; when boiling, add a pint of green peas, two tea-spoonfuls of powdered sugar [loaf sugar pounded in a mortar and pestle; the modern equivalent is granulated sugar], a little pepper and salt; when the peas are tender, serve. If you use water, increase the quantity of seasoning.

From *The Canadian Housewife’s Manual of Cookery* (Hamilton, Ontario, 1861)