

# Eat Wisely

## Root Vegetables: A Curious Combination of Powers

Every so often it happens when I am checking out at the supermarket, the clerk will hold up a bag of parsnips and ask “what are these?” I fully understand her incomprehension- it was only a few years ago that I became acquainted with parsnips. My usual explanation is that they are somewhat like carrots is always rewarded with a dubious look on her part, and any temptation I might have in explaining that carrots were not always the orange color we are familiar with rapidly fades away.

It's not always clear which vegetable the writers of antiquity were referring to, the terms carrot and parsnip were often interchangeable. But the parsnip is far older in use, the earliest (wild) varieties being scraped for a seasoning, the root itself being too bitter to eat on its own. But it must have proved sweet enough to make cultivation useful, and with cultivation comes the manipulation of a plant's characteristics that make it more palatable (although, alas, now the point seems to be to only make it more profitable.)

The sweetness of the parsnip was of great importance in a diet that was generally short on expensive honey and sugar, besides which, it was a fine source of starch. It grows well in cold climates, and happily, frost will actually improve it.

Simeon Seth, the Greek physician says that parsnip's humoral effect is very hot. He considers it to be a diuretic, and it boasts that wondrous and strange combination of being both an aphrodisiac and producing flatulence. He finds them difficult to digest. He does suggest mixing honey with parsnips, which he thinks makes them far easier on the digestion and is useful for chill of the liver, as well as “accelerating the emission of semen”, if that's the type of thing one is looking for.

Hildegard von Bingen, on the other hand, writing from her nunnery dismisses the parsnip as cold, but not lending any help to health, and its function is merely to fill the stomach.

Platina says the parsnip is hard to digest and on that account needs to be boiled twice, the water of the first cooking thrown away, and then cooked with lettuce. If one then seasons it with salt, vinegar, coriander and pepper, he believes it to be a good dish, capable of fixing up a cough, pleurisy, and firing up one's passion.

The water parsnip, sometimes known by the more fun sounding name of skirret, was often consumed in period, and it had the advantage of needing little attention to cultivate it. Like its cousin, it was known for its sweet taste. Pliny thought them good for stimulating appetite, they are (what else?) an aphrodisiac, however, it is thought wise that no one should eat too many of them, as they harm the stomach.

Carrot seed has been found in archeological sites of La Tene Celtic settlements in Switzerland, and they were grown by the ancient Bablylonians, but like the early parsnips, was presumably more valued as a type of aromatic herb. It wasn't until the period of Arabic conquests that the carrot root we are familiar with eating became

something people wouldn't immediately push from the table in search of something else that might be edible. Ibn al-Awam, an Arabic writer of a treatise on agriculture in Moorish Spain, mentions two types of carrot, one being “red., juicy, and very tasty” (the coloration actually varies from red to purplish, it is difficult to find this strain of carrot now), while the other was yellow or green, an inferior type that one finds often in the hotter climates of the Middle East. This red carrot is possibly referred to by Simeon Seth when he discusses parsnips, where he mentions a “red” variety of parsnip, which he thought better than the white parsnip, as it was more moderate in its effects and of less “heat.” However, Arabic dieticians thought carrots were difficult to digest and contributed to bloating. It is useful as a sexual stimulant for men, the recommended approach being to pickle them in vinegar. If one eats them this way, then they promote the appetite, and help dispel gases, as well as helping one get to Funkytown.

Platina describes the red carrots he knew of to be almost black in color. He doesn't think much of their nutritional abilities, but says they should be cooked under ash and coals, then scraped, and sprinkled with oil, vinegar and sweet spices. While it is a very good dish, he is careful to mention that it isn't good for the liver, stomach or the spleen, but it will repress bile and is diuretic. Of the two vegetables then, parsnips produce the windy effect, along with its consequent (accidental or not) aphrodisiac powers, whereas the carrot is much more modest in its workings.

By the mid 1300s, carrots were grown in French , Dutch, and German gardens, and while known to Polish gardeners, seem to have been reserved for special occasions. But it was the Dutch who really found themselves at the forefront of carrot R&D, after introducing the English to the root in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century, Dutch farmers began working extensively on improving the carrot. The purplish red variety would gradually fade from interest, more promising varieties came in yellow or white shades (every now and again white carrots still appear in “normal” colored crops.) The orange carrot we know was being developed at the end of our period.

The turnip by far is the earliest cultivated root vegetable, dating from roughly 2000 BCE. There is more than a little confusion about how to classify turnips, as if life weren't difficult already, but Columella, the Roman agricultural writer made the most significant contribution to the discussion by calling the more slender, pointed variety, “napus”, reserving the term “rapa” for the rounder, larger ones. These terms, more or less, came to stick, in the sense that the Scots refer to turnips as “neeps”, although what they are calling a neep is actually a swede, or the unhappily named rutabaga. The even more unfortunate name of rape has been transferred to referring to a small cadet family of a type of cabbage.

The Greeks roasted their turnips, or else served them pickled with vinegar and mustard and served them as an appetizer.

The Romans loved them and they used them as a great staple food, complete with a touching story of how a Roman general spurned an attempt at bribery by excusing himself from the conversation and pointing out that he had turnips to roast. One doesn't

come by that kind of integrity easily, and almost never in conjunction with cooking root vegetables. Apicius suggests it should be eaten with cumin, rue, and vinegar.

Galen however, believed that unless well boiled, turnips were practically indigestible, flatulent, and liable to cause stomach pain, although he concedes it has diuretic and the now familiar aphrodisiac properties. On this particular point, Pliny cites opinions that say turnip should be seasoned with rocket to get this effect. He also mentions those who assert that turnip taken in wine and oil is an antidote for snake bite.

The view of the Arabic physicians very neatly echoes that of Galen. A curious use of turnip among the Persians is that the juice of it is used either as a souring agent for meat dishes. They also drank turnip juice as a kind of unfermented beer, and thought this good for the digestion.

Hildegard von Bingen does find that turnips are easy enough to digest, although she cautions that the exterior rind should be removed, if one wishes to eat them raw, but that in any case, they are better for one if cooked. She believes them to be good for ulcers, but those suffering from pulmonary congestion would do best to avoid them.

Turnips were very popular throughout northern Europe as a staple food, the French gardeners lavished much attention on them. They were a frequent method of payment on feudal leases in Poland, one of the few welcome aspects of German settlements in Polish territories after the 12<sup>th</sup> c. (for the Poles at least) was an improvement in methods of turnip cultivation.

Like Hildegard, Platina finds that the turnip has warming humoral powers, but he goes on to suggest that they soothe the throat and chest, and of course promotes the passions. He says to eat too many of them would generate phlegm.

Radishes too, go back far in human diet, perhaps not so far as turnips, but at least as far as the Egyptians, who fed the labor force that built the Pyramids on a large number of them, along with onions and garlic. The Greeks, too, were familiar with radishes, distinguishing three types among them, by Roman times, we find Pliny mentioning some of an alarming size (big as a baby boy), and perhaps there is something about radishes that lends people to exaggerate, Matthioli in 1544 mentions one that weighs in at about one hundred pounds.

Galen says that once those who lived in the city preferred to eat radish raw, or to pour fish sauce or vinegar on it, while country folk would eat it with bread, just as they would have eaten bread with other herbs that he says act as food relishes, such as thyme, savory, pennyroyal, wild mint, and so on. The stalk, he believes, to be more nutritious than the root when boiled with oil, fish sauce or vinegar, all of which take away its innate bitterness. As for the root itself, he is skeptical it has any food value.

Pliny does not think this to be the case at all, he thinks they loosen phlegm, purge the stomach (not something we normally look for in a food, however, remember that food often serves double duty as medicine.) Radish taken with honey in the morning on an empty stomach he says is good for a cough, this same cure will expel intestinal worms and cure ulcers. The hottest varieties are good for banishing lethargy. Hippocrates, he

says, recommended the rubbing of radish on the scalps of women suffering from hair loss. He does not say that this cure would work on men.

Simeon Seth says of them that they are mildly hot in humoral powers, and have all of the usual sexually stimulating, socially embarrassing properties of the other root vegetables. Eating too many will produce “thick humors” and create obstructions in the liver. One can apparently escape some of the windy dilemmas of eating whole radish by crushing the seed and swallowing that.

Al-Warriq takes the curious position that the radish has much heat and that it breaks down phlegm, but it makes food float in the stomach and generates energy. Differing from Galen, he says that the leaves of radish assist in digestion and are good for stimulating appetite. Other Arabic physicians assert that it is, but of course, helpful to those about to enjoy coitus, and is a cure for arthritis and poor eyesight.

Hildegard von Bingen agrees that they are hot in nature, and says once dug up, they should be stored underground in the damp for two or three days, so as to temper its energies. She thinks radishes have a cleansing effect on the brain, and it reduces bad humors in the digestive system. Fatter, healthier people should eat the radish, not the those who are lean. But if you are sick, and insist on eating radish, then one should dry it out, pulverize it to a powder, then mix this with salt and fennel and eat this with bread. This pulverized radish can also be mixed with wine and honey to counter too much phlegm.

Radishes of varying size and color (long and turnip shaped, black and white) were a prominent feature in medieval Polish cuisine, and were cooked like other root vegetables, young long white and black varieties being prized at noble tables. The tops were often cut and cooked separately, as was another green, known as nipplewort, which has a strong radish taste.

None of this should suggest that if a friend invites you over for a dinner of roasted root vegetables you should, by virtue of the meal alone, pack a toothbrush and plan on spending the night. Those who defend the humoral theory be quick to point out that these vegetables are not being boiled to mush and that their aphrodisiac properties would be mired in a body busy trying to digest them. That we digest them just fine without such treatment would strike them as odd, or perhaps proof that we have not a sensitive and noble character. The curious combination that the perception of heat and the ability to bring on flatulence in a body seems an odd basis for an aphrodisiac. Yet it is this very combination which made ancient medicine believe it would work, the heat stirred the blood, but it was the “wind” within the body that drives the blood to the, uh, appropriate places.

Nor does it imply that everyone who sat down to a meal that included root vegetables (or indeed any other food deemed aphrodisiac) were seized with the randy itch. If they had, such foods would have been forbidden by ecclesiastical authorities, or else a lot of history wouldn't have happened. At least it might not have happened the the way it was written down.

Maitre Gilles de Beauchamps

Sources:

Hildegard von Bingen (trans Priscilla Throop) *Physica* 1998 Rochester, Vermont

Alan Davidson *The Penguin Companion to Food* 2002 New York

Maria Dembinska *Food and Drink in Medieval Poland* 1999 University of

Pennsylvania

Galen (trans Owen Powell) *On the Properties of Foodstuffs* 2003 Cambridge UK

Henry Marks *Byzantine Cuisine* 2002 Henry Marks

Nawal Nasrallah *Annals of the Caliph's Kitchen: Ibn Sayyar al-Warriq's Tenth Century Baghdadi Cookbook* 2010 Leiden and Boston

Platina *On Right Pleasure and Good Health* 1999 University of North Carolina

Pliny *Natural History* 1936 Harvard