



Monday 31st July 2017

Dear Customer,

Weather mild but almost perpetually grey and with the extremely late arrival of April showers which are on-off-on-off day and night. The sun bursts our briefly, occasionally, but is quickly blotted out by the next mass. But it could be worse. I have just heard from Farmarounds Martin and Angela, freshly returned from a baking Crete where temperatures climbed to 42C.

We have super celery in the bags this week – as delicious braised and added to stews and soups as it is raw. You can use any leaves too, add them finely chopped into salads, omelettes and coleslaws. Or here are a couple of tasty recipes you could try:

Braised Celery with Hazelnut and Celery Pesto

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| 1 head celery | 1 tsp butter or margarine |
| 1 small onion, peeled and sliced | 1 clove garlic, peeled and sliced |
| 300ml vegetable stock | juice of 1 lemon |
| Pesto: | |
| leaves of celery | 1 tbsp flat parsley leaves |
| 1 garlic clove, peeled and crushed to a paste | 1 pinch salt |
| cayenne pepper | juice of ½ lemon |
| 3 tbsp roasted hazelnuts | 3 tbsp rapeseed oil |

Wash and trim the celery then cut in half lengthways through the root. Place in a large, heavy-based pan cut-side down with the butter or margarine and a pinch of salt. Gently sweat over a medium heat for 3-4 minutes, or until the celery is slightly softened. Add the onion and garlic and cook for another 3-4 minutes. Pour in the stock and a good squeeze of the lemon juice and bring to a simmer. Cook for 15-20 minutes over a low heat or until the celery is soft and tender. Keep it warm while you make the pesto. Place any celery leaves and the parsley in a food processor. Add the garlic, salt, cayenne, lemon juice and hazelnuts in too and blitz, dribbling in rapeseed oil until a pesto consistency is achieved. Check the seasoning and add more salt, cayenne and lemon to taste. To serve, carefully lift the celery from the pan and put on serving platter cut-side up. Spoon over the pesto.

Celery Gratin

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| 1 head celery, leaves can be included | 1 litre vegetable stock or water |
| 1 small onion, peeled | 6 peppercorns |
| 100ml crème fraîche | 3 tbsp chopped parsley |
| handful fresh breadcrumbs | 30g grated Gruyere or other cheese |
| bouquet garni made with a bay leaf, 3 parsley stalks and 2 sprigs thyme | |

Heat the oven to 180C/ 350F/ Gas 4. Cut any leafy ends from the celery and reserve. Cut the sticks into 10cm lengths removing any stringy bits. Put the stock or water, onion, bouquet garni and peppercorns in a pan. Bring to the boil and add some salt and the celery. Lower to a simmer, partially cover and poach until celery is just tender, about 15 minutes. Remove the celery from the poaching liquid and arrange in a buttered gratin dish. Pour the strained liquid into a clean pan and discard the onion, peppercorns and bouquet garni. Simmer until reduce to about 100ml of liquid then remove from the heat and whisk in the crème fraîche and chopped celery leaves if you have them and the parsley. Adjust the seasoning and pour over the celery. In a small bowl stir together the breadcrumbs and cheese and sprinkle over the gratin. Bake until golden and bubbling, about 20 minutes.

Some time soon after my mother died and quite a few years ago I took my father to a rented villa in St Tropez. I wasn't particularly familiar with the area back then. We went about exploring into the hills and along the coast. I remember driving up a quiet road next to a narrow, sandy beach with rocks and coves. A few people in trunks and bikinis with towels were walking barefoot on the pavement. It was very chilled out. There were a few villas, hotels, a couple of beach restaurants and a small SPAR but not much there really and the road petered out into a forest of umbrella pines and a coastal footpath. The cicadas were chirruping and it was green and beautiful and intimate. I had no idea where it was, we were aimlessly wandering, but I was charmed.

By chance several years later I came upon it again and so discovered it's whereabouts. It was the seaside hamlet of Gigaro, just below La Croix Valmer, on the 'Presqu'île de St Tropez'. The coastal path took you round the Cap Lardier and Cap Taillat. I thought it was heavenly, and seemingly a very well-kept secret at the time. Crystal clear water, views across to the les Iles d'Or and maritime forest to the waters edge. It was an ecological and wildlife haven. There was a vineyard bordering the beach with an ancient palm tree avenue leading down a sandy track to the sea. Fiercely protected by the 'conservatoire du Littoral' there was barely any development.

So anyway, after finding this place I was never really interested in going anywhere else. This was my paradise and this is where one day I would have a villa. It is certainly where I would spend nearly every holiday thereafter (I guess I am not that adventurous after all). It is here and near here that I spent the month of June this year – my first holiday for nearly three years. Most evenings I insisted on driving the quiet, narrow road from Ramatuelle over the 'Col de Collebasse' to Gigaro, to the boulangerie, or some other pretext. The road wended its way round, up and down the Caps. I'd stop the car to listen to the joyful birdsong, stop again to take in the breathtaking views down the valleys to the sea in the mellow evening light. I was as ever, mesmerised. It is there in that forest that I stopped to let the wild boars cross the road with their 8 babies and watched them congregate and play in the clearing.

I am therefore quite heartbroken that this whole area has been burnt to the ground in the devastating Var fires of last week. Now a dead, grey lunar landscape, nothing remains of this pristine environment. The 100-yr old umbrella and maritime pines which so characterised it, the eco-system, the rare population of Hermann tortoises, the snakes, lizards, toads, all the insects, the habitats - some of France's rarest plant species grew there – all destroyed, along my wild boar family no doubt. It was one of the only places in France where the wild boar could live safely. Practically everywhere else we roamed in June has also been ablaze – from Bormes les Mimosas to le Plan de la Tour, L'Escalet, La Motte, Grimaud. The Mayors of both Ramatuelle and la Croix Valmer both cried over their perished natural 'tresors'. It will come back but it will take decades. It's not yet known what caused the fires but it is very odd that so many started in so many different places within a couple of days of each other despite the excessive heat and Mistral winds. The French authorities have said that anyone responsible for starting a fire will go to prison whether or not they started it deliberately. If there were culprits how could they find them when all it takes is a careless fag end or a tiny flame. Such fragility is terrifying, and with global warming it's all set to become more fragile still.

On that cheery note, I send you my kindest wishes,

Isobel