

Monday 9th September 2013

Dear Customer,

Brrrrrrrrrr. I have just put the heating on for the first time since June. We are on the turn, but on the upside we have attractive Purple Haze carrots in lots of the bags and Jonnie Watson's beetroot. I put the beetroot straight from the bag into the saucepan to cook, so it's ready to use. A terrible admission I know, but if it gets into the fridge first, it may never come out again. There is nothing quite like freshly cooked beetroot – one can almost taste the earth's minerals in it. When one buys it pre-cooked, I don't know how they manage it, but they seem to pre-extract the taste and one presumes, the goodness, before vacuum-packing. We have the first leeks of the season from John at Newfields and his rainbow chard. Here are a few delicious recipes you could try this week:

Beetroot Tart (with Goat's Cheese optional)

75g golden caster sugar
splash of sherry vinegar
6 sprigs thyme, leaves picked
250g puff pastry
4-8 discs goat's cheese, optional

40g butter or margarine
1 tbsp honey, plus extra to serve
4 cooked beetroots
flour for dusting

Heat oven to 180C/350F/Gas 4. In a smallish ovenproof frying pan, over a medium heat, heat the sugar until it dissolves, then add a big pinch salt, the butter/margarine and a splash of sherry vinegar and keep stirring. It will go foamy. Keep stirring on the heat until it has gone a mahogany brown. Take off the heat and stir in the honey and thyme. Cut the beetroots into nice fat slices and arrange the slices fanned out over the caramel, working in a spiral towards the centre. Use up all the beetroot and season with a pinch of salt and a twist of pepper. On a lightly floured work surface, roll out the puff pastry large enough to cover the beetroot, tucking the edges down into the pan. Put the whole lot in the oven and bake for about 30 minutes until the pastry is golden. Remove from the oven and let the pan cool down a little. Get a plate that's bigger than the pan and invert it over the pan. Holding the two together and using oven gloves, turn the whole lot over. Leave it for 30 seconds for all the caramel to fall from the pan on to the top of the tart, then whip the pan off. Serve by the wedge while still warm with goat's cheese on top if using, and a drizzle of honey and a few extra thyme leaves.

Potato and Beetroot Gratin

1k potatoes
425ml double cream
85ml milk
3 tsp creamed horseradish (optional)

450g beetroot, cooked
140ml sour cream
salt and pepper

Preheat the oven to 180C. Peel the potatoes and slice very finely. Cut the beetroot into fine slices too. In a large saucepan mix together the creams and milk and bring the liquid to just under the boil. Add the sliced potatoes and cook gently for 5 minutes. Season really well and spoon half the potatoes into a buttered gratin dish. Layer all the beetroot on top, seasoning as you go, then top with the rest of the potatoes and their cream. Put in the oven for an hour or until the vegetables are completely tender. You may need to cover the top with foil after 45 minutes to stop the top becoming too dark in colour.

Leek and Oat Savoury Pancakes

1 tbsp olive oil
4 sun-dried tomatoes, chopped
250ml milk
50g plain flour
pinch salt

1 leek, thinly sliced
100g rolled oats
3 eggs, well-beaten
2 tsp baking powder
1 tbsp sunflower oil

Put the oats in a large bowl with the milk and soak for at least 30 minutes, even overnight. Mix in the eggs, flour, baking powder, salt and sunflower oil, using a hand-whisk to get a fluffy mixture. Heat the olive oil in a frying pan and add the leeks and cook until soft, approximately 5 minutes, stir in the sundried tomatoes and cook for a further minute. Stir into the pancake mixture. Heat a griddle pan to medium-high, oil it and drop a ladle of the pancake batter onto the griddle. Cook on each side to golden brown.

I don't know what to make of fracking. Earthquakes and noxious, toxic tap water aside, I think we extract the gases in the core of the earth at our peril. Who knows, they might be what make the earth spin in balance and give stability for the essential attraction / detraction which holds us in our place in the universe. One frack too many might see the rotations slow down and us all fall off the planet head first into space.....with our belongings. A fitting end.

I'd been thinking of going up to the Highlands for a few days with a friend, a last minute flit before autumn closes in. The weather looks rough there but there's something to be said for, instead of waiting for autumn, just drive straight into it. That was until I noticed the place we were going to stay is in Midge Lane. Maybe Dorset would be a better bet, hang out around Thomas Hardy's cottage.

As you can see, I have no great news to bring you this week. I have been slightly depressed, Ernest has been helping me catch sheep and squirt antibiotic into their eyes as there is an outbreak of 'pink eye', a contagious kerato-conjunctivitis. Coco is recovering badly from his operation and is miserable and I wish I hadn't put him through it. Eating a sandwich, half of my tooth crunched off. It was the tooth which had that gruesome 90 minute treatment a few weeks ago. I've been wondering whether to pack my bags and just go. Pack Coco, Kiki and Myfa and go and live in France for the next 6 months – in Troyes or Reims or Lille.

The idea of another lead-up to Christmas kicking off and the highlight of the week being Strictly and X Factor. Surely to God there has to be more to life.

I hope all is well with you ☺

Kind wishes,

Isobel