

BEET SURRENDER

Angela Clutton on how, after growing up despising the pickled beetroots of her youth, she came to fall in love with this most sweet and earthy of autumnal vegetables

Image: Regula Ysewijn

Millennials and Generation Zed-ers, how I envy you the beetroot roasts, carpaccio salads and blended dips you have grown up with. Because like many a child of the seventies and eighties, the beetroot of my formative years came crinkle-cut and pickled. And I loathed everything about it: the inevitable staining of fingers and favourite dresses, the smell and, most of all, the taste.

It would be many years before I realised that beetroot came in anything other than a jar, and saw for the first time a true beetroot, one with actual roots and leaves attached, its rough skin just waiting to reveal the glistening sweet flesh underneath. Ideally, it'll have a little soil still on there too—soil that is somehow redolent of the deep earthiness of flavour that beetroots carry and that came as a taste revelation to me. These days, I can't imagine not having beetroots in my cooking life, and whenever I use them I try to bear in mind that they're at their best when prepared in ways that protect and embrace that earthy flavour.

Sure, beetroots can be boiled or steamed. Know, though, that even when a few centimetres of the roots and tops are left on as a precaution, it is inevitable that some of the colour—and flavour—will bleed out into the water. Roasting is the way to go for achieving the deepest intensity of flavour. All the better with some sprigs of woody herbs, garlic cloves and a few tablespoons of red wine vinegar in the roasting tin to help the flavours along. Cooked and cooled, their skins slide off with the barest rub of your thumb, leaving them ready to partner with the glorious autumnal produce that clever old Mother Nature, with her unerring knack of knowing exactly what goes with what, has arranged to have in

season at just the same time.

Think about beetroot as a perfect fit for game meats, maybe roasted with shallots and a slug of port wine for venison steaks. Or as a foil for autumn's blackberries, plums or figs, the acidity of the fruits balancing the beetroot's sweetness. It's the same, too, when winter's oranges start to appear. One of my go-to, midweek-favourite, cold-weather dishes is roasting beetroot with chunky sausages and a hefty squeeze of halved orange, the spent fruit thrown into the roasting tin too. Served alongside will be the beetroot tops' leaves, stir-fried in the way I might do some Swiss chard, beetroot's botanical cousin.

The sharpness of the fruits against the sweetness of beetroot is a clue to how successful beetroot is with soured herring or mackerel. And given sousing is just pickling with a slightly snazzier name, I can't for too much longer avoid admitting that, now I'm a self-declared vinegar obsessive, I see that pickled beetroot can be a very fine thing indeed. Inspiration comes from chefs such as Yotam Ottolenghi, who offers a ferment of beetroot with turnips in his Jerusalem cookbook, or Olia Hercules, who has so many gorgeous recipes for fermented or pickled beets.

Those writers and many others tell us of beetroot's connection with the culinary heritage that runs through the Middle East, the Caucasus and into eastern Europe—a spread of nations whose mention in the context of beetroot means I'm swiftly headed to one thing: borscht. Borscht seems to have sometimes become a bit of a catch-all word for any beetroot soup, yet there is an authenticity to the many variations that come with different nations, all of which make it with the produce they have in abundance, in a way that suits their lifestyle.



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Borscht is almost always made with dill, and often with horseradish—two more flavour partners we would all do well to remember. It might be chilled, or not. Light, or rib-sticking. Vegetarian, or made with meat stocks or chunks of pork. Blended smooth, or with the elements left whole and distinctive.

Blending beetroot makes me think too of glorious beetroot dips: baked, then blitzed with yoghurt and some of the many flavours it has a natural affinity for. That could be dill and horseradish, yes; or perhaps cumin, walnuts, mustard, garlic or capers. I have become a huge fan of heaping beetroot dip on rye for lunch, or in a bowl for flatbread with a drizzling of the very best extra virgin olive oil I can lay my hands on.

My Great Beetroot Epiphany has

so far centred on cooked beetroot, but what about using it raw? That can be just as fabulous. Try grating some into latkes to give more colour and sweetness than the traditional potato. Grate into a carrot salad, finely chop for a remoulade with celeriac, or use in a winter leaf salad for gravadlax. 'Carpaccio' beetroot salads can be made by simply slicing raw beetroots as thinly as your fingers or a mandoline will provide and styling the circles on a platter—a dressing of sherry vinegar, olive oil and pounded walnuts works exceptionally well here.

That's a beauty of a dish that becomes extra Instagram-able if you use a mixture of beetroot varieties. Modern cooks may not have quite so many different shapes and sizes and colours of beetroot as were around in the 19th century, when beetroot first properly burst onto the culinary scene, but we do okay. Keep an eye out for gorgeous golden beetroots, or the choggia 'candy-stripe' variety that give the classic ruby-red globes a run for their money. Note that the choggias are best used raw, as their stripes can sadly disappear on cooking.

The 'candy' name of the choggias is a nod to their colour but also to the inherent sweetness I have been banging on about here, and which makes them such a joy in savoury dishes. It does not, however—for my money, anyway—make them anything like so useful or joyous in sweet cooking. I just cannot get my head or tastebuds around using beetroot in the chocolate cakes, brownies, mousses and more that I know lots of people enjoy. I don't know if I can ever fully escape the feeling and flavour of the earth. Even beetroot ice cream is a thing. Just not my thing.

I shouldn't say that, though, when I haven't actually tried it. Maybe you have, and maybe it is fabulous. And isn't this just the kind of beetroot prejudice that first got me into my anti-beetroot bind all those years ago? Perhaps we should all be more open-minded about cooking with beetroots and beet leaves, and enjoy the diversity of ways they make autumn's meals zing with colour and flavour.

