

Chestnuts on the menu

As enthusiasts bring back the American chestnut, the flavor shows up in chef's creations from soup to dessert

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"Chestnuts roasting on an open fire."

Those six simple words from "The Christmas Song," written in 1944, create a vision of holiday cheer that has stood the test of time - a crackling fire to ward off the cold and dark of a winter evening, friends and family gathered nearby and the simple, delicious pleasure of eating sweet, meaty chestnuts.

One hundred years ago, those chestnuts undoubtedly would have come from American chestnut trees, once a dominant species in East Coast forests. But by the time Nat King Cole crooned those famous words, the trees were nearly gone, felled by a blight.

Chestnuts these days fall from European and Asian chestnut trees. Not many people alive today have tasted American chestnuts, which are reputed to be sweeter than their counterparts.

A group called the American Chestnut Foundation is working to restore these trees to the American landscape through an ambitious crossbreeding program.

Meanwhile, European and Asian chestnuts are readily available, and delicious in dishes ranging from soups to desserts. And they're also good roasted.

Like many foods these days, chestnuts, sold in forms ranging from fresh to frozen to a sweetened paste, are available year-round. But the nuts are forever connected with winter and the holiday season, partly because of the song, but most likely because chestnuts are traditionally harvested in late fall.

The sweet meat of the nut was once a staple of American and Native American diets, a valuable source of protein during the long winter months.

In the fall, farmers would let their hogs roam the woods to fatten up on fallen chestnuts, according to literature from the American Chestnut Foundation.

"Chestnuts historically were a very important food," said Kathy Marmet, president of the Maryland chapter of the American Chestnut Foundation, one of 15 such chapters nationwide.

Now chestnuts are a chic treat, not hog fodder. As the days turn cold and dark, chestnuts pop up on winter menus at several local restaurants, including the Elkridge Furnace Inn in Elkridge and Timothy Dean Bistro in Baltimore.

Dan Wecker, chef and owner at the Elkridge Furnace Inn, said the nuts pair well with poultry and add texture and interest to sides like sauteed greens. His December menu includes a side dish of braised collard greens and chestnuts that nestles alongside two corn-bread-stuffed quail.

To create the dish, Wecker uses chestnuts that already have been peeled and blanched, and are sold frozen. He starts by crisping diced bacon and onion in a heavy saucepan, then adds the greens, a ham hock and maple syrup. They are put into the oven and, a half-hour later, he adds the chestnuts; the dish continues to cook.

When the pan emerges from the oven, the greens have cooked down and the chestnuts have become soft and taken on the smoked flavor of the bacon and ham and the sweet taste of the maple syrup.

Wecker's daughter, Genelle Wecker, the inn's pastry chef, uses a sweetened chestnut paste in a silky puddinglike dish called Chocolate-Chestnut Pot de Creme. "It's a very wintery flavor," she said.

Chestnuts pair particularly well with chocolate and vanilla, she said, but they don't marry well with fruit-based desserts. Timothy Dean, chef and owner of his eponymous bistro, uses the nuts to create a rich chestnut soup, and sometimes adds them to risotto or brussels sprouts, he said.

Chestnuts, he said, have a "very nutty, woody flavor" that is reminiscent of late autumn. To create his soup, he begins by roasting the nuts in the oven. He scores the hard outer shells, then cooks the nuts until the casings crack open.

The meat then can be extracted. He combines the flesh with prosciutto, shallots, garlic, foie gras and cream.

Recently, chefs from throughout the region were challenged to create dishes featuring chestnuts as part of a Chestnut Restoration Feast held by the Maryland chapter of the American Chestnut Foundation. They responded with recipes ranging from seared scallops dusted with chestnut flour to short ribs with chestnut mole to chestnut-flavored ice cream.

The goal of the event was to raise money for the chapter, which is working to introduce American chestnuts through an ambitious cross-breeding program.

Before the early 1900s, American chestnut trees dominated the landscape from Maine through Alabama. The trees, which grew to as high as 100 feet, were prized for their strong wood and delicious nuts.

But people began planting orchards of Asian chestnuts, which have meatier nuts. These trees carried a blight that didn't hurt the Asian trees, but destroyed their American counterparts.

By the 1950s, American chestnuts were nearly gone, and the ones that survived rarely grew tall enough to bear fruit.

Events like the Chestnut Restoration Feast help raise money for American chestnut-breeding programs. The event was also a fun way to showcase the many ways that chestnuts can be enjoyed.

This was the second year of the chestnut foundation event, said Marmet. In 2006, it was held at ThorpeWood, in Thurmont, and this year it was at the Comus Inn at Sugarloaf Mountain.

Before the eating began, guests gathered around a fire that had been built behind the inn.

Essie Burnworth, a former chapter president, had brought chestnuts from her own chestnut tree for roasting in the fire. Is her tree American?

No, she said, it's a Chinese chestnut tree. But the efforts of her organization mean that someday, the cold-weather ritual of roasting American chestnuts may return.

Genelle Wecker's Chocolate-Chestnut Pot de Creme

Serves 4-6

1 cup sour cream

12 ounces sweetened chestnut puree

8 egg yolks

2 tablespoons vanilla

1 quart heavy cream

1 pound chopped semisweet chocolate

Blend the sour cream and chestnut puree in a blender or food processor until smooth. Whisk in a mixing bowl with egg yolks and vanilla. In a pot, bring heavy cream to a boil, add chocolate and stir 3 to 5 minutes.

Slowly pour into chestnut mixture, whisking quickly. Strain mixture through a sieve and pour into small cups or bowls. Chill in refrigerator for at least 3 hours. Top with whipped cream to serve.

Courtesy of Genelle Wecker, pastry chef at the Elkridge Furnace Inn

Per serving (based on 6 servings): 1,189 calories, 11 grams protein, 95 grams fat, 57 grams saturated fat, 83 grams carbohydrate, 7 grams fiber, 507 milligrams cholesterol, 100 milligrams sodium

Jean-Louis Palladin's Chestnut Soup

Serves 4 as a main dish, 8 as an appetizer

2 ounces grapeseed oil

2 pounds fresh or frozen chestnuts, roasted if possible and peeled

1 pound fresh foie gras or chicken liver

1 pound cured prosciutto

5 peeled whole shallots

10 fresh garlic cloves

1 ounce fresh thyme

1 ounce fresh rosemary

2 quarts fresh chicken stock or vegetable stock

2 cups heavy cream

salt and freshly ground pepper

Heat grapeseed oil in a large skillet. Add the chestnuts, foie gras and prosciutto. Sweat for 10 minutes and then add the shallots and garlic. Stir until all ingredients are tender.

Add thyme and rosemary. Pour stock into the skillet. Bring to a boil and simmer for 45 minutes to an hour. Remove from heat and blend in a blender or food processor until

smooth. Add cream to the skillet and bring to a boil. Whisk in the chestnut puree. Season with salt and pepper to taste.

Courtesy of Timothy Dean, chef/owner of Timothy Dean Restaurant

Per serving (based on 8 servings): 791 calories, 34 grams protein, 48 grams fat, 20 grams saturated fat, 59 grams carbohydrate, 8 grams fiber, 355 milligrams cholesterol, 2,109 milligrams sodium

Dan Wecker's Braised Collard Greens with Chestnuts

Serves 4 as a side dish

4 strips bacon, chopped

1 small onion, diced

1 ham hock

2 pounds collard greens, washed twice and chopped

2 tablespoons maple syrup

2 tablespoons sherry or red-wine vinegar

1/2 cup white wine

1 1/2 cups chicken stock

a pinch each: crushed red pepper, white pepper and Sazon seasoning

1 cup peeled, whole chestnuts

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Crisp bacon in a heavy pan and add onion. Cook until the onion is clear. Add all the other ingredients except the chestnuts, and cook covered in the oven for 1 hour and 15 minutes. After the first half-hour, add the chestnuts.

Courtesy of Dan Wecker, chef/owner of the Elkridge Furnace Inn

Per serving: 266 calories, 11 grams protein, 5 grams fat, 1 gram saturated fat, 46 grams carbohydrate, 8 grams fiber, 10 milligrams cholesterol, 330 milligrams sodium

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