

A springtime seaside treat that's worth tracking down for its good looks, adaptability and delicate sweet flavour

Sea kale is the forgotten vegetable - found in most large gardens in the 19th century, it is now produced at scale by just one UK grower and is unknown to most consumers. But the simplicity of its preparation and the delicate flavour of its ivory-coloured stalks mean that sea kale is a terrific seasonal ingredient for those who can get their hands on it.

"Like asparagus, it's one of those seasonal items that just gives you a buzz when you eat and serve it," says James Freeman, head chef at The Dining Room at 28 Queen Street, Edinburgh. "It's a very special ingredient that always impresses."

Sometimes known as winter asparagus, it can be boiled or steamed in the same way as asparagus spears and it pairs well with similar accompaniments, such as white fish or poached eggs. While it can be cooked in the same way as asparagus, its flavour is original - sweet, succulent and slightly nutty with no bitterness. Freeman says it is good enough to be enjoyed on its own with a lemon hollandaise sauce or olive oil emulsion.

Overharvesting in the 19th century

Indigenous to the North Sea and the Black Sea, wild sea kale grows around the coasts of Europe, but digging it up from British beaches is prohibited because of

Out of bounds: wild sea kale is protected by law



Pale and interesting: forced (etiolated) sea kale sprouts are a rare seasonal highlight

Words
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overharvesting in the 1800s. The plant is part of the Brassicaceae family and has large, fleshy leaves and white flowers.

At Eassie Farm just outside Glamis, Scotland, Sandy Pattullo is the last-remaining UK producer. He grows the plant outside during the summer months before bringing the whole crop indoors in winter. Like the cultivation of rhubarb, it is then forced in the dark until the first week of January, when Pattullo starts cutting the ghostly white 20cm to 25cm shoots to supply to a handful of restaurants and the odd farm shop. He sells it for £27 to £30 a kilogram - expensive, he says, because it is so costly to produce.

"It's low volume, very labour intensive and we need to use insulated forcing sheds to be forcing at that time of year," Pattullo explains. "The energy requirement to keep it to a temperature of 15 degrees is quite expensive, too."

Pattullo has been growing sea kale for 30 years, alongside asparagus and rhubarb.

He says English farmer Michael Paske produced it until a number of years ago, but dropped out for economic reasons - the relatively low yield, rising production costs and pressure on prices from supermarkets meant it was no longer commercially viable. Growers are also put off because the plant is easily bruised.

Handle this winter favourite with care

Despite its cost and requirement for delicate handling, sea kale remains a firm favourite on winter menus for the UK's culinary elite. At The Dining Room, Freeman serves it as a main with crispy skate wing, razor clams, clams, mussels and vegetables in a vadouvan (a blend of Indian spices with shallots and garlic) curry veloute, while Tom Kitchin dishes it up both raw and steamed with candied hazelnuts and Shropshire blue cheese at his nearby eponymous restaurant. In London, The Ledbury's two Michelin-star chef Brett Graham serves it as a starter with roast langoustines, blood orange and caramelised sourdough.

The vegetable is a favourite with chefs like Freeman because it's simple to prepare - just wash it, cut the bottoms off and then boil or steam it. There's no need for blanching and it should only be cooked for three to four minutes, until it is tender. Freeman cooks it straight down in a butter emulsion, leaving a little of the emulsion on for serving.

"You leave a little bit of crunch in it but you don't want it too al dente," he says. "The mistake you can make is to either undercook it or burn it, and it's very expensive - about 50p a stalk."

Freeman says the unusual vegetable goes exceptionally well with white fish because of the contrast of its crunchiness with the soft flesh of skate or hake or the tenderness of mussels and scallops. "It adds a light sort of crispness to foods," he says, describing the taste as a cross between fennel and celery. 

Sea kale essentials

► **Buying advice:** Sandy Pattullo sells sea kale from early January to the end of March at Eassie Farm near Glamis, Strathmore. Buy it directly from Pattullo or from farmers' markets such as Borough Market or Covent Garden in London

► **Prep:** Boil for 3-4 minutes or steam until crunchy and tender, being careful not to burn it. Serve with hollandaise, béchamel or a herb butter sauce

► **Flavour matches:** White fish, like hake, skate; shellfish; poached eggs, or on its own with hollandaise, béchamel sauce or a herb butter sauce

► **Bet you didn't know:** Sea kale reached the height of its popularity in the early 19th century when it was featured in Thomas Jefferson's Garden Book - the former US president regularly grew the perennial cabbage-like vegetable