Lush, Earthy, Strictly Seasonal: Cavolo Nero is a Green Worth Waiting For

Indrani Sen
Sweet Leaf
Lush, earthy, strictly seasonal: cavolo nero is a green worth waiting for

BY INDRANI SEN PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDRÉ BARANOWSKI
**METHODS**

**Cavolo Nero Salad with Pecorino Rossellino**

This dish (previous page, bottom) is based on a meal made by chef Joshua McFadden at Franny's, an Italian restaurant in Brooklyn, New York. Heat oven to 400° F. Toss 1 cup coarse fresh bread crumbs with 2 tbsp. melted butter and kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste; bake in a baking sheet until golden, 5–7 minutes. Let cool. Sprinkle a little kosher salt over 1 chopped clove garlic; mash with the side of a knife to make a paste; transfer to a bowl. Whisk in 3 tbsp. extra-virgin olive oil, preferably Frantoi (see page 100), 2 tbsp. lemon juice, 1/4 tsp. red pepper flakes, and salt and pepper to taste. Stir in 1/4 cup grated pecorino cheese, preferably pecorino rossellino (a sweet-tasting, tomato-coated variety; see page 100), to make a dressing. Add 1 lb. trimmed and thinly sliced cavolo nero; toss. Serve sprinkled generously with the bread crumbs, more grated pecorino, and a drizzle of extra-virgin olive oil. Serves 4.

**Ribollita**

(Cavolo Nero and Borlotti Bean Soup)

This recipe for the classic Tuscan soup (previous page, top) is based on one in The River Cafe Cook Book by Rose Gray and Ruth Rogers (Ebury Press, 1995). Heat 1/4 cup olive oil in a pot over medium-high heat. Add 1/2 cup chopped flat-leaf parsley leaves, 6 chopped ribs celery, 4 chopped cloves garlic, 3 chopped carrots, 1 chopped red onion, and kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste. Cook, stirring, until light brown, 15–20 minutes. Crush contents of one 28-oz. can whole peeled tomatoes; add to pot. Reduce heat to medium-low; cook until thickened, 25–30 minutes. Add 2 lbs. trimmed and roughly chopped cavolo nero, 2 drained 14-oz. cans borlotti beans, and 1 gallon water. Cover; bring to a boil. Reduce heat to medium-low; simmer, uncovered, until cavolo nero is tender, about 30 minutes. Meanwhile, puree 1 drained 14-oz. can borlotti beans and 1/2 cup water in a food processor; stir into pot. Tear 1 stale, crustless loaf ciabatta bread (about 3/4 lb. whole) into 1” pieces; add to pot with 3 tbsp. extra-virgin olive oil and salt and pepper to taste. Cook, stirring, until thick, about 30 minutes. Serve drizzled with extra-virgin olive oil. Makes 8–10 servings.

I wish I could say that I discovered cavolo nero on a ramble through Tuscany. In fact, my introduction to this rugged-looking, dark green kale was rather less romantic. I found it in the pages of a book.

I was at university in England, and my stepmother had given me a copy of The River Cafe Cookbook, the landmark London restaurant’s now famous 1995 volume on rustic Italian cooking, for my student digs. The recipes seemed to possess a kind of magic: even with my battered pans and tiny stove, every one that I tried came out tasting bright and delicious. But there were a few dishes I didn’t attempt, because they called for the mysterious Tuscan “black cabbage,” cavolo nero. In the book’s photographs, the kale’s inky-green leaves curled around pale spines. It looked jagged and prehistoric, totally unlike the perfectly round heads of cabbage at my supermarket. Over time, cavolo nero acquired an almost mythical allure—mythical in that, try as I might, I couldn’t get my hands on it. I remember scouring the market stands, only to be greeted with bewildered shrugs and offers of savvy cabbage.

As it turned out, I wasn’t the only one struggling to find this elusive green. Years later, when I had the opportunity to corner the book’s authors, Rose Gray and Ruth Rogers, they admitted they had struggled to get seeds of cavolo nero from Tuscany in the late 1980s for the farmer who supplied their restaurant. They were probably the only people in Britain with access to cavolo nero at that time. Still, in their book, they declared it “essential for an authentic ribollita,” the Tuscan soup of beans, bread, and tomatoes, in which the kale takes center stage with its silky texture and musky flavor. “Cavolo nero became a vegetable that people went into the greengrocers and asked for,” Rose Gray told me. “Ruthie and I used to go around when we gave talks and say, ‘Be demanding consumers! Say to the greengrocer, I want cavolo nero!’”

Cavolo nero, like all kales, traces its lineage to the ancient wild cabbages of Asia Minor and the eastern Mediterranean, which came to Europe with Celtic wanderers around 600 B.C. Cultivated in Tuscany starting in the 18th century (and perhaps even earlier), cavolo nero is prized for its bountiful growth through the lean winter months. In the United States, it’s commonly known as dinosaur kale, Tuscan kale, or lacinato—where it’s known at all. It’s a late arrival here, introduced by chefs who have championed it in recent years.

With hardy leaves that grow as long as 15 inches, cavolo nero is a brassica in the same family as broccoli and collards; it thrives in the Northeast because it tolerates cold so well, according to Guy Jones, whose organic farm in upstate New York provides produce for Manhattan’s Babbo, Picholine, and Telepan, among other restaurants. When I called him to find out how he first came across the kale, the story he told had the ring of familiarity: for Jones, as for Rogers and Gray in London, there was a fateful bag of contraband seeds. One of the chefs he supplies had brought them from Tuscany a little over a decade ago. Since then, Jones said, he’s grown more cavolo nero than any other kale. Still, like many farmers, he does most of his cavolo nero business with restaurants, not home cooks. “Kale isn’t an easy sell,” Jones said. “Arugula’s not that big a leap, but kale, that’s a leap.”

He has a point. It’s easy to dismiss cavolo nero, in all its virtuous greenness, as the sort of rabbit food dutifully chewed by health nuts. And healthful it certainly is: it’s a rich source of nutrients as well as carotenoids, pigments that have been shown to have anticarcinogenic properties. Then there’s the fact that cavolo nero can make a bad impression if eaten in the wrong season; harvested before the first frost, it can taste muddy and bitter. But don’t hold those traits against it. With the onset of cold weather and the breakdown of the enzyme responsible for the bitter compounds that mask the plant’s sugars, the leaves reveal their delectable sweetness. Once that...
happens, it doesn’t take much—a slug of oil, the careful application of heat—to bring out their complex flavor.

Cavolo nero has a strong presence, and I often serve it braised simply—with fennel, garlic, and finely chopped anchovies—alongside rich and deeply savory ingredients, like roast pork with French green lentils. Other times, I serve the cooked leaves on toasted crusty bread topped with prosciutto, to make a full-flavored bruschetta. But my favorite way to eat it is with pasta in a pesto made with garlic and olive oil. It’s a lustrous purée that coats the noodles and leaves an emerald slick of oil on the plate. To me, its taste is the very essence of green—but a deeper, more mature green than that of the tender shoots of the spring and summer.

It’s a color we see precious little of at this time of year in New York City, where I now live. The trees in Central Park are rusty red and brown; the farmers’ market in Union Square is a muddled tableau of orange pumpkins, purple turnips, and earth-covered potatoes. But in the late autumn and early winter, when its wrinkled leaves are at their darkest, cavolo nero comes into its glory. When I find it in those chilly months, I treasure the vegetable, appreciating it all the more because it always seems to arrive when I need it the most. And in this age of year-round convenience—when produce from far-off lands is trucked to our doorsteps and we eat homegrown tomatoes in midwinter—there’s something wonderful about this stubbornly seasonal kale, which yields its sweetness only to those who wait for it.

The Pantry, page 100: Sources for cavolo nero, Frantoia olive oil, and pecorino rosellino.
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Cool Britannia, Via Italy

The Italian kale known as cavolo nero (see page 78) is just one of the many fresh, seasonal ingredients that star in the recipes in Rose Gray and Ruth Rogers's seminal River Cafe cookbook series. Like many of my fellow Brits, I learned Italian cooking from the original River Cafe Cook Book, which was published in 1995 by Ebury Press and translated for home cooks the rustic Italian dishes served at the famous London restaurant of the same name. The book, with its distinctive blue cover, invited culinary exploration and offered a welcome change from the fussy fare that many upscale British restaurants favored at the time. Eight additional titles followed the first publication, and I've cooked dishes from all of them: the showstopper of a cake called "chocolate nemesis" from the blue book; the zucchini carpaccio, broad bean—and pecorino, artichoke heart—and—lemon salads from the yellow book (Ebury Press, 1997); and the bruschetta and grouse in red wine from the silver-covered Italian Easy Recipes from the London River Cafe (Clis- son Potter, 2004). In every recipe, the emphasis was on beautiful, fresh foods. Some of them weren't always easy to find, but the patience of Britain's curious home cooks paid off, and soon ingredients highlighted in the books—cavolo nero, bresaola, arborio rice—were showing up on the shelves of Britain's supermarkets, herding Britain's gastronomic rebirth. - Indrani Sen