

Seasonal delights

By Hannah Freeman

Monmouthshire is at its most beautiful when the trees burst into bud and the first lambs gamble about the fields.

Welsh lamb is still the best in the world, in my opinion, but mutton is also proving very popular. This meat is darker, more flavoursome, almost as duck is to chicken or wild boar to pork, it works extremely well in a shepherd's pie or slow cooked cawl (Welsh stew).

Hoggett, although rarely seen, is also making a come back. This meat sits between lamb and mutton. It had some of the richness but is a little more tender than mutton. Hoggett is a minimum of one years old and mutton two.

The extra time allows for the flavour to deepen, for the terrior (as the French say) to impact upon the flavour as the herbs and grasses which form the dominant diet infuse the meat, providing an underpinning of flavour which is strangely familiar.

There are, of course, traditional Easter foods, other than lamb.

Simmel cake with its burnished marzipan topping and rich fruit studded cake was always served, alongside toasted hot cross buns and little sandwiches, on Easter Sunday in our household; and Welsh cakes of course; a real 'spread'.

March and April see the hedgerows are full of delicious, forgotten edible gems and foraging courses are proving extremely popular. Make sure you do know exactly what you're picking, find an expert, buy a book and if in doubt, don't pick. However, for a plentiful and easy to spot first foray into foraging why not seek out young nettles. These have been used in many ways over the centuries; even nettle beer was once very popular; as were boiled nettles served as a vegetable with a good pat of butter, nettle soup with a swirl of double cream and a light chicken stock base; nettles have even been used to protect cheeses while maturing – although don't forget the gloves as nettle stings are extremely painful!

In season: Jersey Royals, spinach, spring onions, wild nettles, lamb, wood pigeon, crab, salmon, cockles, sorrell, samphire and watercress

Why not visit: The Angel Bakery, Abergavenny. Specialising in delicious sourdough and elegant patisserie the bakery adds another string to Abergavenny's foodie bow - just make sure you arrive early not to be disappointed! Angel Hotel: 01873 857121 www.angelabergavenny.com

Why not dine at: The Hardwick, Abergavenny is acknowledged as one of the finest gastro-pub restaurants. Produce is proudly locally-sourced and the seasonal menu is a delight to study. Booking essential. www.thehardwick.co.uk

Why not try: The Parson's Nose, Dingestow. All made on the farm from Large Black Pigs, the sausages come in at least a dozen varieties, gluten free also available. These sausages are 95 per cent meat with delicious, locally sourced additions. www.theparsonsnose.com 01600 740664



Chris Harrod, chef/patron at the Michelin starred The Whitebrook, near Monmouth, has

shared three of his dishes in Relish Wales, the third edition of which is out priced £20.



WYE VALLEY ASPARAGUS HOGWEED, MARITIME PINE, HEDGEROW PICKINGS, TINTERN MEAD

SERVES 4

INGREDIENTS

Pine oil
20g flat-leaf parsley (washed, picked)
75g Maritime pine needles
75ml rapeseed oil

Asparagus
20 local asparagus spears (woody ends removed)
Maritime pine needles
100ml rapeseed oil
salt (pinch of)

Asparagus purée
75g unsalted butter
250g asparagus (chopped)
4g salt

Hogweed
250g hogweed shoots
100g unsalted butter (diced)

Mead sauce
125g mead (Parva Vineyard, Tintern)
7g honey
85g unsalted butter (diced)
salt (pinch of)
lemon juice (spritz of)
2g lecithin

METHOD

For the pine oil (prepare ahead)
Cook the parsley for 6 minutes in boiling water, then strain and refresh in ice water. Squeeze dry. Place the pine needles, parsley and oil in a blender and blitz for 8 minutes. Strain into muslin cloth and hang above a bowl overnight.

For the asparagus
Trim the asparagus to the same length and set aside. Reserve the trimmings for the purée.

For the asparagus purée
Melt the butter in a large saucepan. Add the asparagus, asparagus trimmings and season, cover and cook quickly until tender. Blend until smooth.

For the hogweed
Pick the leaves and peel the shoots if stringy. Blanch the shoots for 2 minutes in boiling, salted water, then refresh in ice water. Fry the shoots and leaves in butter, adding more butter if they start to burn. The leaves will crisp as they caramelise. Season and strain on kitchen cloth.

For the mead sauce

Warm the mead, honey and butter, and whisk until emulsified. Add a little salt and lift with lemon juice. Add the lecithin and blitz until frothy.

To serve

Preheat the oven to 180°C. Place a bed of pine needles in a pan and lay the asparagus in a single layer on top. Coat with the rapeseed oil and season. Cover with foil and cook in the oven for 6 minutes until tender. Warm the asparagus purée, stirring in a few drops of pine oil before placing it on the plate. Place the asparagus and warmed hogweed shoots on the purée. Spoon the warm, frothed mead sauce over the asparagus. Sprinkle over the crisp hogweed leaves to finish.

Chef's Tip

Asparagus is around for a short time, from the end of April to the beginning of June. Take advantage and visit the nearest pick-your-own farms for the sweetest, freshest crop. At the restaurant we also forage pennywort and fiddle ferns to serve on the dish.