

Chestnuts For All Seasons

Although the chestnut season ends in late April, you can still pretend you're a squirrel and do lots of things with them through winter as long as you've gathered and stored enough. Paul Cosgrave visited two friends to sample their fully sustainable chestnut cake and get a fix of Slow Food-ism.

As colder weather arrives, there's nothing like salted roast chestnuts with a glass or two at the cocktail hour. You can roast them on a fire or in the oven and google has many pages of recipes and "how to peel". Just remember to cut an X in the shell so they don't explode.

Our cake recipe comes from two sustainability champions. Jenny Ingall is co-proprietor of Katoomba's Hominy Bakery, renowned for its sourdough bread; and Anne Elliott (who signs her letters "slowest regards") is Convivium Leader of Slow Food Blue Mountains. For our morning tea they created a chestnut cake from heaven, which I can confirm meets and exceeds the Wonderland taste test.

We've welcomed the Slow Foodies before to this column and the nice thing about them is they're happy to dip into a bit of good old ideology. Anne told me about a book she's found by Rachel Botsman and Roo Rogers called "What's Yours Is Mine" (link below, to the Collaborative Consumption hub). It's right in line with the slow food philosophy of respectful cultivation, cooking and consumption of locally sourced food. "It promotes the use of technology networks to share skills and knowledge, and it forecasts that these ideas will become absolutely mainstream thinking, and very quickly", enthuses Anne.

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We talked about what the late David Foster Wallace called "addictions intentionally introduced into our lives" – the corporate effort to confuse, separate and "atomize" people because, as he put it, "... that way, they consume more". The 'more for me' generation of TV commercials tends to confirm his view and it's refreshing to spend time with a couple of people who think differently and live their reality. And make great cake.

Chestnuts have a fascinating heritage. They process into delightfully light flour, long used in Italy, and it's known that the Romans prized them. More recently, chestnut flour formed a staple diet for America's old west pioneers, as 'Deadwood' devotees will notice. Although you can buy them out of season it's best to gather them, eat a few, then prepare flour or dough for freezing. "They're beautiful with savoury dishes like quail. But they substitute so well for wheat, and have such exquisite texture, that I prefer to use them for cakes", said Jenny, cutting more slices for us. Fresh or frozen is the key because they lose their moisture and mould quickly. "Collect them fresh, refrigerate them immediately in a firmly secured plastic bag and process them for freezing by boiling, peeling and mashing them into a dough".

Anne's & Jenny's Chestnut Cake (*food miles – nil*)

With climate change, Anne says, the season is arriving earlier. "We've taken this recipe from the Ruefleur Chestnut Farm (chestnutfarmvic.com) and what we love about it is that

all ingredients can be locally-sourced, right down to the hazelnuts which also grow well in the Mountains. If readers have chickens, buy local honey and use local olive oil, food miles are negligible". **You need:** ½ cup olive or grapeseed oil, 1 cup chestnut flour, ¼ cup hazelnuts (or almond meal), ½ t baking powder, ½ t baking soda, ¼ t salt, 3 large eggs (separated), ½ cup mild honey, ¼ cup sugar.

"Place an oven rack in the middle position and preheat to 180 C. Spray a 9" spring-form pan with nonstick spray and dust with flour. Roast hazelnuts in the oven for 20-25 minutes. Rub the nuts in a kitchen towel to remove loose skins. Chop until medium fine in a food processor. Mix together the chestnut flour, baking powder, baking soda and salt. Stir in the hazelnuts. In another bowl, beat together the egg yolks, oil, honey and 2 T of sugar until thick and pale - about 5 minutes. Add the flour mixture and mix at low speed until well blended, beat the egg whites and a pinch of salt in another bowl with clean beaters until they form soft peaks. Add the remaining 2 T sugar a little at a time until the whites hold a soft peak. Fold into the cake mix 1/3 at a time until well mixed. Pour into the cake pan and bake for 30 minutes, then loosely cover with foil and bake another 10-15 minutes. Cool on a rack, remove from the tin, dust with icing sugar and serve with whipped cream and chopped hazelnuts".

Thanks, Anne and Jenny – and watch out for SFBM's inaugural Chook Fest in spring, following up their highly successful Chooks Tour.

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