

# Seasonality and the chef



Respected chef **Ian Nottage** sheds some light on all things seasonal

Seasonality can be confusing for the chef. With imported produce available all year round, we can have strawberries, asparagus, broccoli, tomatoes and so on, available for 12 months of the year.

It's estimated that the UK only grows 60% of what we eat. Even when products are in season in the UK, it's often cheaper to import from the EU and further afield. This is due to the vast quantity countries, such as Spain and Holland for example, grow compared to the UK, and the relatively cheap cost of transporting across Europe. It will be interesting to see if this is still the case post-Brexit!

Other factors that confuse our traditional view of UK seasonality are advances in technology, seed varieties and growing methods, such as greenhouses and hydroponics. Who knew that the UK strawberry season can start as early as March and continue through to November? In fact, in 2018 the first British strawberries found their way on to the supermarket shelves on 22 February! Many also believe that changing weather patterns linked to global warming have an impact on UK seasonal availability. Just look at the rise in UK wine producers growing grape vines in this country over the last few years.

If you want home-grown ingredients, it's a good idea to ask your greengrocer where your produce is coming from. But be prepared to pay more if you want specifically British on some products, even when they're in season. Asparagus is a good example. South American will almost always be cheaper than UK-produced asparagus, but, in my opinion, never as good or delicious.

Here, I've listed some of the traditional highlights of the UK seasonal calendar. It's a rough guide as nature and British weather will have a big influence, and where you're located in the country, if you're going for local produce, too. Again, a good dialogue with your greengrocer or supplier is invaluable.

## Spring: March to May

Spring is a great time of year for the chef. As we come out of the cold dark winter months, we start to see some great British produce trickling through, a sign that summer is on its way.



### ASPARAGUS

Quite possibly my favourite UK seasonal vegetable. Usually available from April, and sometimes as early as mid-March, fresh asparagus deteriorates quickly so use it as quickly as you can from delivery. If you need to keep it fresh for a longer period, trim the bottom of the stalks and stand in fresh water (like a bunch of flowers) in the fridge, covered with cling film or a damp cloth.

### JERSEY ROYALS

The Jersey is the first British new potato of the year. Nothing beats loose-skinned Jersey Royals, simply brushed and cleaned then steamed or boiled and dressed with butter and fresh mint. Usually available from March until June they're often available as early as February, but be warned, they will be expensive due to the limited availability and high demand to get the first picks.



### WILD GARLIC

Also known as Ramsons, wild garlic is prolific across the UK, found in damp wooded areas and probably the most foraged ingredient. The season runs from March to early June and it's at its tastiest when the leaves are bright green before the small, white star-shaped flowers open (these are equally delicious). Use it in pestos, soups, salads, pastas, omelettes, quiches and a host of other dishes.

## Summer: June to August

The UK growing season is in full swing in the summer months with berries, salad crops and legumes coming into their own. This is the season when the chef really is spoilt for choice with UK produce.



### BRITISH STRAWBERRIES

Nothing says summer like strawberries. Whilst you can get imported strawberries all year round, nothing beats British. The flavour is dependent on the weather and the variety. There are many varieties such as Murano, Cambridge Favourite and El

Santa. Two of my favourites are Sweet Eve and Jubilee. Ask your greengrocer where your berries are coming from and what variety they are.

### FRESH PEAS

Although everyone predominantly uses frozen peas, nothing beats the taste of fresh ones (whatever Birds Eye says!). It might be a little time-consuming podding them, but the end result is worth it. It's a good idea to get your residents involved, it's bound to evoke memories of childhood.



### BETROOT

Many people think of beetroot as being a winter vegetable but UK grown beets are available in the summer. Beetroot is part of the spinach family (chenopodiaceae), which includes spinach, chard and quinoa. There are many varieties available,

including golden, white and candy stripe (chioggia). Delicious roasted or grated into salads, earthy beetroot is also great in a brownie to add depth of flavour and extra fibre.

## Autumn: September to November

Although the days are getting shorter and temperatures start to drop there's still a good variety of UK grown produce around.



### MARROW

Big brother to the courgette and part of the same family (curcubaceae), which also includes melons and pumpkin. Over the years, marrows have been replaced by the easier-to-handle courgette, but I think marrows have a much better flavour.

Delicious stuffed with a mixture of rice and savoury minced pork or beef and braised in the oven, they make a great comforting dish as the nights draw in.

### PUMPKINS & SQUASHES

Another member of the curcubaceae family, there are literally hundreds of pumpkin varieties. Sadly, we only eat about 5% of all the pumpkins we grow in the UK and carve the rest. Go for varieties such as Kabocha, Cinderella, Acorn Squash and my favourite, Crown Prince. These have much thicker flesh and better flavour than those bred for carving. Pumpkins are incredibly versatile. Use in sweets, such as ice cream and pumpkin pie, or in soups, stews, roasted as a vegetable or in a curry. They're rich in vitamins, minerals and fibre, so definitely deserve a place on the menu throughout autumn.



### PARSNIPS

Parsnips appear in October, not just at Christmas! They're part of the carrot family (apiaceae), which includes chervil, coriander, parsley, dill, fennel, celery and celeriac. Great for tasty soups and purées and delicious roasted (go for smaller, sweeter piccolo

varieties for roasting if you can). Parsnips also work well grated into cake batters with spices such as cinnamon and nutmeg, adding a sweet, aromatic and earthy taste as well as valuable fibre and vitamins.

## Winter: December to February

Winter's a difficult time for growing in the UK due to cold temperatures and much shorter days. There are, however, a few winter hardy brassicas such as sprouts, January King cabbage, kale and cauliflowers. It's also a time when we turn to stored root crops, such as beets, swede and carrots.



### FORCED RHUBARB

A rare splash of winter colour, forced rhubarb is delicate pale through to electric pink, tender, and although not sweet, it's a lot sweeter than its thick, fibrous, green-tinged relative grown in 'open field' later in the year. Apart from the obvious rhubarb

crumble, pies and tarts, forced rhubarb makes a great chutney or light pickle. It has lots of nutritional qualities, it's believed to lower cholesterol and is high in antioxidants and vitamin K, which is good for brain health.



### CELERIAC

It's not going to win any beauty prizes but it's a real star in the kitchen. Part of the carrot family, celeriac originated from a type of wild celery.

It's great in soups, purées, added to mashed potato, grated raw in salads or simply roasted with olive oil, garlic and seasoning. Nutritionally, it's high in fibre and a good source of vitamins B6, C and K. Steam, don't boil, to help retain water-soluble vitamins.

Check out the recipe section (pages 84 – 88) for Ian's delicious seasonal recipes.