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Here Comes the Sun(choke)

BY TERRA BROCKMAN

We've just passed the Winter Solstice, and although it may still be bitterly cold, each day we see a few more minutes of the sun, and know that warmth is on its way—and with it, the start of a new growing season.

When I talk to people about eating food grown by local farmers, someone always says, "That's nice from May to October, but what about the other six months of the year?" That's when I launch into a description of the rainbow of summer produce in suspended animation in my freezer—red tomatoes, yellow wax beans, green spinach, kale, and chard... plus the winter squash and pumpkins, plus the onions and garlic, dry beans and popcorn...plus the long list of root vegetables that can easily last through the winter if kept cool and dry.

So in this season of resolutions, may I suggest one that will improve your quality of life all year long? Resolve to get to know a farmer (your local farmers market, or localharvest.org are good starting points), and resolve that as each vegetable comes into season, you buy twice what you normally would, and put that second portion up for the winter.

Even if you haven't squirreled away anything from last season, you can still enjoy wonderful root crops and more from local farmers at the year-round farmers markets, or you can buy some winter roots from your local grocer. Either way, you'll find one of the hardiest winter roots, the Jerusalem artichoke or sunchoke, is perfect right now.

Because the Jerusalem artichoke is neither from Jerusalem nor an artichoke, I normally call it a sunchoke—which is close to the Native American name, "sun root." They're crisp, like water chestnuts, with a sweet, nutty, earthy flavor and are low in calories and high in potassium and iron. They also have an unusual carbohydrate called inulin, which has good and bad characteristics. While it's good for your blood sugar, some people find inulin bad for their digestive system.

Sunchokes can be eaten raw—in salads, as crudités, or as a garnish—or

cooked any way you would cook a potato. In fact, sunchokes may be substituted in many of your favorite potato recipes. Baked, boiled, mashed or fried, they add a sweet, nutty accent to any meal.

Raw Sunchokes in Mustard Dressing

- » 1 egg yolk
- » 2 tsp minced onion
- » 1 tsp Dijon mustard
- » 1 Tb cider vinegar
- » pinch of crushed hot Thai pepper (optional)
- » 1/4 tsp salt
- » 5 Tb canola oil
- » 1 pound sunchokes, scrubbed

In a small bowl, combine egg yolk, onion, mustard, vinegar, pepper and salt. Blend with a whisk. Gradually incorporate oil, whisking vigorously. Set aside. Scrub or peel the sunchokes and cut into evenly-sized large pieces. Then slice them thinly (a food processor works well.) In a bowl, combine the sunchokes with the dressing and chill for about an hour. Serve on a bed of salad greens or stir-fried greens.

Roasted Sunchokes (with or without a chuck roast)

If you really like sunchokes (and they like you), use the recipe as written. I often add carrots, potatoes, celery root and other winter root vegetables. And if you want a hearty, warming mid-winter meal, have these roasted vegetables alongside a slow-cooked chuck roast, with a big, deep red wine.

- » 1 pound sunchokes, sliced into 1/2 inch rounds or left whole
- » 2 Tb olive oil or walnut oil
- » rosemary or thyme sprigs
- » salt and fresh pepper

Preheat oven to 375 degrees F. Toss the sunchokes with the oil. Bake in a shallow gratin dish with the herb for 30-45 minutes or until done. (Pierce them with the tip of a knife. They should be mostly tender but offer some resistance. Don't let them get mushy.) Sprinkle with salt and pepper and serve.

Terra Brockman is author of The Seasons on Henry's Farm, available at terra Brockman.com. She is also founder of The Land Connection, a nonprofit dedicated to preserving farmland, training new farmers and connecting consumers with local food. Visit thelandconnection.org to learn more.



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