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Celery's Taking Root

By William R. Snyder



Richard Pierce

Growers of heritage celeries, like the Giant Prague Celerlac, let the leaves run wild, which intensifies the stalk's taste.

Dietitians used to encourage the overweight public to gnaw on sticks of celery, claiming the fibrous, watery stalks required more calories to chew than they had in them. It's thinking like this that doomed the vegetable to become a bland canvas for preschool classics like ants on a log. But mass-produced, stringy celery has led diners away from its true potential. Instead of hiding beneath a slather of peanut butter and a few shriveled raisins, celery can thrive as the centerpiece in an Alsatian tart that plays up the plant's juiciness with traces of bitterness. Or its root ball can be sliced into noodles and pickled in a mustard vinaigrette. Chefs can't use diced and packaged varieties from the corner store for these kinds of dishes. Instead they turn to preservationist-minded farmers, who cultivate forgotten, more appetizing strains.

Celery actually has hundreds of varieties— from France’s rare A Coste Piene Rosate and Italy’s Dorato d’Asti to China’s Heung Kunn and the widely dispersed Giant Prague Celeriac. The stalks are not a uniform pale green. They range from blood reds to bright golds to electric whites and deep greens. But every part of the plant can inspire invention: The roots can be pureed, the leaves fried, the stalks turned to foam.

“The strength of flavor with the heirlooms is not even like comparing white bread to wheat bread. It’s more like comparing generic white bread to old-world, artisan-baked loaves,” says Richard Andres, a farmer in Chelsea, Mich. “It’s high-octane.” He grows two varieties of exotic stalk celery, the Conquistador and the Tango, and Giant Prague Celeriac.

The root ball of heritage celeriac has an earthy, nutty taste that is lively on the tongue when paired with vinegars. Roasted, it accomplishes naturally what the potato needs a vat of seasoning to do, with hints of coriander and caraway. The leaves—often trimmed and forgotten—are considered to be a cleaner, deeper cousin of cilantro. And the stalks provide a crisp texture that carries traces of a carrot’s sweetness, parsley’s bitterness, fennel’s licorice and caraway’s anise—all cousins of the plant. “It has so much character. There is no other vegetable with such an intense flavor,” says Daniel Humm, executive chef at New York’s Eleven Madison Park.

Celery’s earliest cultivation dates back at least 3,000 years. It originated around the Mediterranean and was primarily used by ancient civilizations as a medicinal herb. (Egyptians boiled it to drink as a contraceptive tonic.) By the Middle Ages, it had evolved into a staple vegetable across Europe and Asia. Of the varieties still extant, the Chinese Heung Kunn has one of the oldest traceable pedigrees—wild variants of it were used as far back as the fifth century before it became a farm crop. The Giant Prague, on the other hand, is a relative neophyte, first grown in its current form in the mid-19th century.

“A lot of these seeds have been around for hundreds of years, and while we’re alive, we are the active link to preserve them,” says Randall Agrella, a horticulturist for Baker Creek Heirloom Seeds in Mansfield, Mo. Agrella has seen the market increase exponentially in the past five years for rare strains of every vegetable, including celery. His company carries four celeries, among them the Giant Prague and Zwolsche Krul, a Dutch variety that looks like curly parsley.

Specialty celery isn’t something that shows up in the home kitchen often, Andres says. It’s difficult to work with because of the potent flavors and tough texture—but it can sometimes be tracked down at farmer’s markets and specialty stores like The Orchard in Brooklyn, N.Y. For Laurent Gras, the classically French-trained chef and co-owner of L20 restaurant in Chicago, getting the right produce is as important as his search for perfect oysters. Celery’s cachet isn’t in its pricing (this is not the kind of ingredient that gets FedExed overnight) but in being sourced locally and to specific standards.

Andres grew up during the '70s back-to-the-land boom. After working a couple of menial jobs, he started Tantré Farm in the late '80s, one of the first community-supported agriculture programs. Today he dedicates half an acre of his farm to celery, and belongs to an informal collection of farmers near urban centers who have created a niche for “produce with super-concentrated flavors.”

Sixty miles west of Andres's farm in Chelsea is Kalamazoo, the former nucleus of the commercial celery industry in the U.S. A Scottish farmer named George Taylor is credited with bringing the first plants here in 1856, where they thrived in the fertile muck surrounding the city. His initial experiment was quickly taken over by thousands of Dutch immigrants who had settled in western Michigan and who cultivated the crop during the latter part of the 19th century. Multiple varieties still made it to market until World War II, when blight and diminishing water supply pushed the industry to California. There, celery could be grown year-round and variety was sacrificed for steady production.

The vast West Coast operations are limited to the common varieties Pascal and Golden Heart. The stalks are only faintly green, while heirloom celery often has a deep hue that animates chefs. “The darker the color, the more nutritious and the deeper the flavor will be,” Andres says. His stalks glow like neon tubes. Andres lets his celery's leaves run wild, creating a botanical afro. “We give it freedom. We don't want to treat it or train it,” he says. Commercial growers trim back the leaves to encourage stalk growth, essentially reducing the vegetable's flavor potential by a third.

“Celery is the kind of thing you don't want to compromise the flavor of,” says Gras, whose more scientific approach to the vegetable includes compressing the texture of the roots. He does this by filling a sous-vide bag—a type of airtight container—with the root balls and a hefty shovel of sea salt. “I let it sit overnight. The salt enhances the natural flavor, bringing out the sweetness,” Gras says.

He also creates a celery hat trick with his Beef Tobacco dish. “We like to get into the deep flavor of the ingredient with the sweetness and bitterness,” Gras says. He begins by roasting the root in sea salt and then steams, purees and sets the stalk and leaves with a starch to give it some body. (Pureeing also electrifies the color.) The mixture is finished with emulsified butter to enrich the celery. All of this is incorporated with the beef and additional emulsions of cranberry and huckleberry for the final dish.

Once in the kitchen, celery stalks and roots must be cleaned and carved with the same care as for sashimi-grade bluefin tuna. “We use sharp kitchen knives to pare out every fiber,” Humm says. Even missing one string can make it feel like you're eating a ball of dental floss. “Celery goes from great to terrible more easily than any other vegetable.”

What to Drink with Celery



2006 QUINTA DO FEITAL VINHO VERDE — PORTUGAL, \$29

Winemaker Marcial Dorado made this salty little wine with the high-wired grape that is called Albariño in Spain. The wine is breathy yet focused—a swig of this and the celery's earthy flavors are vastly intensified.



2002 ALLEMAND CORNAS — FRANCE, \$78

For robust meat preparations: a cult producer in the Northern Rhone. Collectors shunned the 2002 because of the region's floods, making this a bargain with the grace of a Kentucky Derby winner who has been chomping on black olives and herbs.



2006 KIRALYUDVAR TOKAJI FURMINT SEC — HUNGARY, \$22

This bright yellow wine appears to have been tailor-made for taming more aggressive, nose-to-tail celery preparations. Its flavorsome mix of honey, bitter and chamomile qualities embraces and soothes the vegetable beast.



2007 CASCINA DEGLI ULIVI VIN DE TABLE MONTEMARINO (OLD VINE CORTESE) — ITALY, \$27

One of the first Italian biodynamists grows this full-bodied wild child from Gavi on limestone soils. Push past the almond and linseed oil nose and get down to work in a flowering spring grove. — *Alice Feiring*