

Gefilte fishing in the garden . . .



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Several years ago, my friend Fritzi Weinstein taught me how to make gefilte fish. I never actually made it on my own, but I don't have to because I eat Fritzi's every year at her family's seder.

As much as the gefilte fish, I love the horseradish, or *chrain*, that goes with it. Fritzi makes red horseradish as well as white — my favorite is the red. She peels it and grinds up the hard root and flavors it with ground beets and a touch of sugar.

To me, Fritzi's gefilte fish with horseradish is as epicurean as coq au vin or asparagus with hollandaise sauce. I have a thing for horseradish. I even like the straight root that serves as a bitter herb during the seder meal. At the seder, Fritzi's son-in-law distributes pieces of root on *shmurah* matzos, which he says are similar to the unleavened bread the Israelites ate on their long journey to the promised land. I have an affection for the cardboard taste of the *shmurah* matzos, but even if I didn't, the horseradish would make up for them.

As you might imagine, all this is exotic stuff for a Hungarian Protestant kid from Bridgeport, Conn. With horseradish available, who needs jalapeños? I never took snuff, but I suspect the sensation is similar. Horseradish is marvelous for the sinuses. As a child, the only person I ever saw eat horseradish was my stepfather, who smeared it all over his kielbasa. "It puts hair on your chest," he said. Since I didn't see this as a desirable goal, I never tried it before I met Fritzi.

Anyway, Passover is just around the corner, and Fritzi is still lovely and caring and full of life as she approaches her 99th birthday. So, this one's for you, Fritzi. I can't wait for the seder meal. Bring on the gefilte fish. Bring on the horseradish.

This is, of course, a garden column and you can't grow gefilte fish. But you surely can plant horseradish.

Botanically speaking, horseradish, or *Armoracia rusticana*, is a member of the *Brassicaceae* family, which includes cabbages, mustard and wasabi. Although wasabi is the Japanese equivalent of horseradish, there are those who contend that some of what is served with sushi is not actually genuine *Wasabia japonica*, which is most often found along moun-



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Horseradish, or *Armoracia rusticana*, a member of the cabbage family, is a perennial known to clear sinuses at Passover seders.

tain streams in Japan, but good old *Armoracia rusticana* dyed green.

Horseradish's roots go deep into history — Cato mentions it in his agricultural studies and Pliny the Elder cited its medicinal properties. It was touted throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance as a cure for everything from coughing and colic to rheumatism and arthritis.

In a book of herbal cures written around the time of America's independence, a Philadelphia apothecary named Johann Christopher Sauer advised readers that horseradish was wonderful for bodily ills. "It purifies the matrix," he wrote, "carries off sand, gravel and stones, eases difficult breathing, absorbs phlegm upon the chest, purifies the blood and promotes digestion."

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Happily, along the way its excellence as a condiment by itself or in sauces was discovered. If the medicinal qualities of horseradish were exaggerated or in question, there is little dispute as to its ability to pep up a meal — just try Fritzi's gefilte fish with a little *chrain*. Well, not just a little.

If grating rubs you the wrong way, there's plenty of prepared horseradish on the market. By itself, the root is fairly innocuous. It has to be cut or grated to produce the oils known as isothiocyanate that make your eyes as well as your taste buds water. And if you don't eat it right away, you need vinegar to stabilize the flavor. About 24 million pounds of roots are processed annually in the United States to make 6 million gallons of prepared horseradish.

Most of it comes from a relatively small area around Collinsville, Ill., which calls itself the "Horseradish Capital of the World" and holds an annual horseradish festival. If you're looking for a hot time, this year's celebration is slated for June 10-11 and will feature a root-sacking competition and a Bloody Mary contest.

Not that you need a festival to celebrate horseradish. It's a people's plant — in England, it was the common folk who discovered its gastronomic kick. And you can plant your own. *Armoracia rusticana* is an upright perennial that can grow as tall as five feet. It has 12- to 20-inch-long oblong, toothed leaves and a thick white tap root. In early summer, it displays tiny white flowers. Most gardeners refer to it as an herb. Occasionally, someone who isn't sure calls it

a vegetable. Other more cautious souls just say "plant."

But be careful. If you don't watch your step when you're tilling or raking or even weeding, you could easily call it an invasive plant — or even a pesky weed. Watch out for severed roots. Even little pieces of root left in the ground may grow into new plants. As is the case with eating it, exercise control. Plant it in a confined garden corner. Or try it as a screen alongside the compost bin. That way, the compost gets screened and the horseradish gets nutrients.

You can grow horseradish in sun or partial shade as long as you provide rich, well-drained soil. Look for ready-to-plant root cuttings at garden centers or get rooted crowns that you split lengthwise into strips. Leave a piece of crown on each strip. Plant the strips or cuttings in 3- to 4-inch-deep furrows spaced about 2 feet apart. Leaves are best picked in spring and roots in autumn, after they're nipped by frost.

That takes care of the *chrain*. If you want to know about the gefilte fish, you'll have to ask my friend Fritzi.

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