

The Stories We Eat

by Doug Gillis, President
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Josh Viertel, President of Slow Food USA, says that “every time we eat something, we eat the story behind that food.” The slow food movement counters the culture of fast food and promotes enjoying traditional foods in the company of others. Slow Food USA promotes protecting biodiversity and recognized the work of The American Chestnut Foundation® in 2002 with its Biodiversity Protection Award. When you eat any food using Asian or European type chestnuts, think of what it will mean when American chestnuts are abundantly plentiful again and available for eating.

I recently used European chestnuts to make two recipes which are displayed in the picture accompanying this article. On the plate is a slice of Chocolate Chestnut Torte with a dollop of whipped cream. The cup contains Chestnut Fennel Soup. I collected the recipes from a newspaper article, “Cracking the Case of the Mysterious Chestnut,” which appeared in the November 27, 2001 issue of the *Oregonian* newspaper. Marsha, my wife, and I were visiting my daughter and her husband in Portland when Marsha pointed out the article. The recipes can be found at the end of this article.

Finding recipes in an Oregon newspaper is only part of the story behind the food. The pottery I used to display the two chestnut foods was made by Dan Finch of Bailey, NC. He is Marsha’s first cousin, and an excellent potter. The



American chestnut leaves he pressed into the unfired clay came from a tree growing near Barnardsville, NC. When I first met Paul Sisco in 2003 at his office in Asheville, I asked about a pin on a map on his office wall. It marked the location of an American chestnut tree growing near the Big Ivy Community of Buncombe/ Madison County, NC. It was near where my father was born in 1913 and where he grew up. Paul said the tree was on “Jack” Webb’s property. When I needed fresh leaves to send to Dan Finch to use in making the pottery, I called David Harris, my cousin in Barnardsville, to ask if he could collect some leaves from the tree. I started giving David directions when he said he knew exactly where the tree was located—Albert (“Jack”) Webb was David’s brother-in-law.

There is even more story behind my preparing the two chestnut recipes. As I made the soup, baked the torte and later shared them with Marsha, many thoughts and memories ran through my mind. I thought of my father who as a young boy knew the American chestnut as a dominant tree in the forest and as a young adult saw it being devastated by the blight. He instilled in me my interest in the tree, which has led to my involvement with the restoration of the American chestnut. I remembered growing up in Chestnut Hills in Raleigh, NC, having a Chinese chestnut tree in our front yard and learning how to roast chestnuts in our fireplace. I thought of the wormy American chestnut wood paneling in the den of the house, milled from wood my father salvaged in 1960 from the Harris Farm in Barnardsville. I remembered telling my daughters about the American chestnut tree. I thought about the two massive, American chestnut trees planted by Pioneers some 125 years ago that grow near Portland in Sherwood, Oregon. I remembered sharing the shade of those trees one warm spring day with my family and, especially, with my granddaughter. She will learn from me about the American chestnut as will her younger brother and sister. Some day in the future, I will roast some chestnuts to share with my grandchildren and tell them about the mighty American chestnut.

Chestnut Fennel Soup

Makes 8 servings

Ingredients

2 cups boiled, shelled, skinned chestnuts (1 pound in shell or 14 oz. bottled whole, divided)
1 shallot chopped
2 leeks (white and pale green only), chopped
¾ stick unsalted butter (6 tablespoons; divided)
2 tablespoons dry white wine
½ fennel bulb (sometimes called anise), stalks and core discarded and bulb coarsely chopped
1 cup chicken broth
2 ½ cups water
¼ cup half-and-half
salt and pepper

Directions

Coarsely chop chestnuts, reserving 1/3 cup for garnish.
In a 5-quart heavy pot over moderate heat, cook shallot and leeks in 2 tablespoons butter until softened. Add wine and simmer until almost all liquid is evaporated, about 1 minute.
Stir in fennel, broth, 2/3 cups chestnuts (save 1/3 cups for garnish) and water, then simmer, covered, 20 minutes.
Stir in half-and-half and cool mixture slightly.
Puree mixture in batches in a blender until smooth (use caution when blending hot liquids), transferring to a bowl.
Return soup to pot and bring to a simmer, thinning with water, if desired. Season with salt and pepper.
While soup is reheating, heat remaining 4 tablespoons butter in a heavy skillet over medium high heat until foam subsides, then sauté reserved chestnuts with salt and pepper to taste, stirring constantly, until crisp and butter is browned, about 4 minutes.
Serve soup with chestnuts and browned butter drizzled on the surface.

From Gourmet magazine, November 2000

Per Serving:
Calories: 192 (5% from protein, 46% from carbohydrate, 48% from fat)
Protein: 2.4 grams
Total fat: 10.5 grams
Saturated fat: 6.3 grams
Cholesterol: 27 mg
Sodium: 21mg
Carbohydrate: 22.3 grams Dietary fiber: 0.9 gram

See note at end of next column on how to boil chestnuts.

Chocolate-Chestnut Torte

Makes 8 servings

Ingredients

4 ounces bittersweet chocolate, melted
7 ounces cooked, peeled chestnuts (see note)
6 tablespoons cognac (divided)
4 eggs, separated
1 cup granulated sugar (divided)
1/8 teaspoon cream of tartar
pinch of salt
powdered sugar
whipped cream or ice cream

Directions

Preheat oven to 350 °F.
Melt chocolate in double boiler, set aside.
Puree the chestnuts with 4 tablespoons cognac in a food processor until smooth.
Whip the egg yolks with ¾ cup of the sugar and the remaining 2 tablespoons of the cognac until pale lemon yellow and the mixture forms a ribbon.
Whip the egg whites with the remaining ¼ cup of sugar, cream of tartar and salt until stiff, but not dry.
Fold the yolk mixture into the chocolate, then fold chestnut puree into the yolk-chocolate mixture, then fold in the egg whites.
Pour into an 8-inch spring-form pan that has been buttered and floured.
Bake about 25 minutes or until a toothpick comes out clean.
Sprinkle with powdered sugar and serve with whipped cream or caramel ice cream.

From Monique Siu and Kevin Gibson, Castagna Restaurant Portland, OR.

Per Serving:
Calories: 262 (7% from protein, 67% from carbohydrate, 25% from fat)
Protein: 5.1 grams
Total fat: 7.7 grams
Saturated fat: 3:8 grams
Cholesterol: 106mg
Sodium: 34 mg
Carbohydrate: 46 grams
Dietary fiber: 1.1 grams

Note: To boil chestnuts, cut an "X" in each chestnut Place the nuts in boiling water for 15 to 25 minutes or until tender. Chestnuts are done when the shell starts to peel back and the thin brown seed coat between the shell and the meat rubs off easily. If the seed coat sticks, cook the nuts a little longer and try again.