

Turnips and rutabagas; or, underground wonders; with a recipe for rutabaga soufflé

The turnip and its wild cousin, the rutabaga, are endlessly adaptable root crops. Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English cooks adopted turnips quickly after the root was introduced in the late sixteenth century. Turnips remain a part of the rural English diet. In a trip through southern England in 2009, I had a pasty of the sort described below (“ffyed Pasties”) in a splendid Sussex pub. Perhaps lesser known is the turnip’s medicinal qualities. I give one example below (“A medicine for one that cannot make water.”) And I provide a 17th-century recipe for turnip bread.

Rutabagas are the wild cousins of the turnip and the cabbage. The root is a spontaneous hybrid of the two vegetables. In the mid-17th century, near the present-day border of Belarus and Ukraine, a Swedish botanist discovered the rutabaga in the pot of a peasant stew. Anders Swensen, the botanist, had the remarkable research method of hiring local teamsters to drive him around in big wagons, into which he would pile root crops for analysis. “Analysis,” for Swensen, meant tasting any cooked root crop that he could find in the peasant villages through which he passed. And his scientific instrument was a silver tasting spoon that hung by a caribou-hide thong around his neck. At any rate, Swensen took a wagon load of rutabagas back to Sweden, where they flourished, spread into Finland and Norway, into England in the 1680s, and, in the 1860s and 1870s, conquered the American Midwest. So complete was the rutabaga’s victory that it was crowned Root Vegetable of the Year at the International Root Vegetable Congress in Joliet, IL, in 1884.

#### A. Pottage

Put bones, peices of bloody necks and any odd bitts of meat with some Anchoves to water and a glass or 2 of white wine or sider and a little beaten spice, then cover the pot, and paste it down, and let it stew severall hours, then strain it and put to it cabbage and turnip cut in little bits, and a little whole spice, and some gravy let it stew an hour or two, then put in Marigold leaves, Beet leaves strawberry leaves & parsley, all chopt a little, some bits of sweet breads and little balls, let it stew an hour Longer, so serve it up.

Source: [MS] Receipt book of Jane Staveley [1693-1694] (Folger Shakespeare Library)

#### B. French Soup 19

A Sheep's Head and Pluck to a Gallon of Water- boil it till reduced to half the quantity. a small tea cup full of Pearl Barley 6 large Onions = one Turnip one Carrot a bunch of sweet herbs and a few Cloves. Strain it off and let it stand till the next day Season it to your taste add Mushroom Ketchup and thicken it with Flour and Butter. Cut the Head into thin slices the same as for Calf's Head Hash. forcemeat and Egg Balls with

white Wine will make it little inferior  
to Mock Turtle

Source: [MS] Receipt book of Jane Staveley [1693-1694] (Folger Shakespeare Library)

#### C. ffyed Pasties

Take a rosted kidney of veal sread it small and season it with grated bread, turnip minced small, Nuttmeg, courance, sugar, som Almons beaten small, and an egg or 2 beaten with a little cream, and some salt, mix it well and put it into pasties of puff paste, and fry them in butter, if you be in hast and cannot make paste, make them as thin with cream that you may drop them into your pan like fritters and fry them.

Source: [MS] Receipt book of Jane Staveley [1693-1694] (Folger Shakespeare Library)

#### D. Turnip bread

to make turnip bread. the manner of preparing it is thus; Take turnips, peel and boyl them until they become soft. and tender, then press strongly out the juice, chop them small, and mix them with an equal quantity of wheaten meal, add salt and barm, with a sufficient quantity of water, and knead it up as other dough or paste, let it stand a little time to ferment or rise, then order and bake it as common bread. This turnip bread was not to be distinguished from common bread, either to the eye, taste, or smell, except to very nice palates, who perceived as small flavour of the turnips. These roots may be now dug out and preserved in sand or dry earth, for several months

Source: [MS] Receipt book of Jane Staveley [1693-1694] (Folger Shakespeare Library).  
Reprinted [with errors in transcription] in *Ipswich Journal*, December 4, 1756

#### E. A medicine for one that canot make water ,

Take a Turnip and rost it soft; and break the pap, and spread it plaster wise prettie thick vpon a cloath, and lay it vpon the nauell as hot as the party can suffer it, if it doe not helpe at the first Layeing on, lay it on the second time, and it will assuredly helpe, this medicine did help the Earle of Montgomeries [...] when he was in verie great extremitie.

Source: [Anonymous MS] A book of receipts which was given me by several men for several causes, griefs and diseases . . .[ca. 1625-1700] (Folger Shakespeare Library)

#### F. Rutabaga soufflé

( a recipe for 6; reduce ingredients by half for 2 or 3)

I adapted this recipe from a Finnish rutabaga dish called Lanttulaatikko, often made at Christmas festivals in the Keweenaw Peninsula of Michigan, a mining area to which Finns immigrated in large numbers. The Finnish version adds much cream, much butter, and nutmeg, making for

festive flavors. My version is a shameless appropriation to my love of French cooking. At least “soufflé” is easier to pronounce than “Lanttulaatikko.”

**Ingredients:**

2 lbs rutabaga, peeled and cubed

2 Tbs butter

2 cups finely chopped onion

2 Tbs minced parsley

1/2 tp salt

Freshly ground black pepper to taste

1/2 cup grated cheese (sharp Cheddar for palates preferring milder cheeses; or Manchego for other tastes)

3 eggs separated

1/2 cup breadcrumbs

**Method:**

1) Boil rutabagas in salted water until tender, about 25 to 30 minutes. Drain and mash until pureed.

2) Melt butter in a small skillet. Sauté onion until soft, about 5 minutes. Stir in the parsley and set aside.

3) Preheat oven to 350 F. Grease a 1 1/2-quart soufflé dish.

4) Transfer the rutabaga puree to a bowl. Stir in the onion mixture, salt, pepper, and cheese. Beat in the egg yolks one at a time.

5) Whip the egg whites until they form soft peaks, then fold them carefully into the rutabaga puree. Turn the mixture into the prepared dish and sprinkle the breadcrumbs on top.

6) Bake for 50 to 60 minutes, until puffed and brown.

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