

Seeing Red

The Bittersweet History of the Radish

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Photography by Ilva Beretta

“Radishes, though often eaten, are miserable things...”

- William Andrus Alcott, *The Young Housekeeper, or Thoughts on Food and Cookery*, 1846

Cherry Belle. French Breakfast. Plum Purple. Gala. Snow Belle. Bunny Tail. Charming appellations for the most humble, the most common of garden root vegetables. Such pleasing names are evocative of sweetness but give no hint of the bitter sharpness or the peppery heat that define them. A crisp bite of French Breakfast, dipped first in fleur de sel, then paired with a mouthful of dense, chewy bread slathered with fresh, creamy butter, is a surprising blend of bitter, salty, earthy and sweet. Or the pungent blood red American Cherry Belle, round and plump, sliced paper thin to be tossed into salads. Yet it is just this peppery, robust sensation that is so intriguing to our modern palate. It wasn't always so.

The radish has had a rather convoluted history, its reputation somewhat tarnished by unimpressed food writers. As Auguste Escoffier declared in his 1934 edition of *“Ma Cuisine”*, the edible root was so common he felt no need to include it in his tome. He eventually succumbed to mentioning the little red radish as

necessary to a plate of hors-d'oeuvres - simply for its attractive colour.

On the other side of the Atlantic, however, the radish was placed assuredly at the centre of the cocktail party buffet worth its salt, according to Irma S. Rombauer's 1936 *“Joy of Cooking”*.

The radish may have originated in ancient China about 3,000 years ago and was a well-known crop in early Rome. It was used, along with garlic and onions, as payment to the Ancient Egyptian labourers who built the Pyramids. According to historians these particular radishes carried little resemblance to today's tiny hybrids, but were large specimens weighing up many pounds and were cooked and served with honey and vinegar. At the end of the 8th century, the Emperor Charlemagne exhorted that his subjects include radishes in their gardens by royal decree upon pain of royal retribution. The radish is even mentioned in the Talmud, the central text of Jewish law written in the 1st century of the Common Era, where eating radishes was

cited as beneficial to helping food dissolve in the stomach and part of a healthy diet.

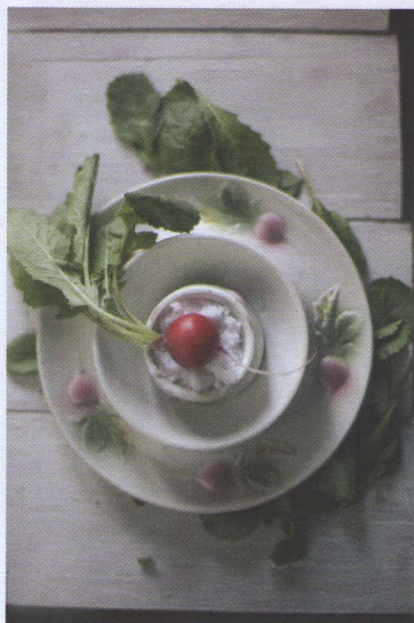
Though kith and kin to the cabbage and turnip, the radish is more of a soul mate to other root vegetables such as the potato, onion and carrot. Radishes in shades of black, brown, watery grey and pale dirty white were the colour of peasants' food, meant to fill stomachs and sustain bodies more than please the palate. Ugly in its sheer gnarliness, the very essence of the dirt still clinging to its skin, it is understandable that this root vegetable would be relegated, more often than not, to the medicinal section of the gastronomic canon. The therapeutic qualities of the radish reach back centuries - when it wasn't being berated for ruining one's health. “... They (radishes) are looked upon as an aliment only fit for lowbred people.” according to Pliny the Elder as written in his *“Natural History”* of AD 77-79. He went on to remark that although radishes were a useful staple during the winter months, they were “injurious” to the teeth as “they were apt to wear them



away.” But he did recommend them for an extraordinary variety of ailments, everything from expelling worms and curing ulcerations of the intestines (when eaten with vinegar or honey) to drawing off “superfluous” blood. Pliny also claimed that Hippocrates suggested rubbing the head of females with radishes if they suffer hair loss.

By the 16th century, the radish had made its way to England and the European continent and quickly became a common household vegetable and one of the most prevalent of all root crops. In 1577, Thomas Hill penned in “The Gardener’s Labrynth”, “The garden radish with us, is better known, than I with pen can utter.” Yet it still seemed to be more of a medicinal root than culinary; many, by this time, were consuming radishes to aid digestion or to excite the appetite; radishes were recommended for everything from kidney stones and facial blemishes to intestinal worms. When radishes were not being used to cure one ailment or another, they were usually grated or puréed, cooked into condiments, jellies, soups or stews, something to tame their fire and make them palatable, undoubtedly winter nourishment.

The small, more delicate red-skinned radishes finally began to make their appearance early in the 18th Century where they were soon cultivated in abundance, maintaining their reputation for being easy, cheap and fast crops to grow. Radishes in shades of black, red and white, large and small, are written about in gardening guides and encyclopaedias as well as cookery books and dictionaries for both farmers and housewives. Although certain types of radish continued to be used therapeutically as both an antiscorbutic,



as being rich in vitamin C they prevent scurvy, and an appetite enhancer, the smaller types began appearing on hors-d'oeuvres platters. By the time Mérat and de Lens published "Universal Medical and Therapeutic Dictionary" in France in 1837, the division between the black or white turnip-like radish and the more delicate red or pink radish seemed clear: the former were distinctly vaunted for their medicinal qualities, while the latter had now been relegated to the kitchen.

But it was that illustrious epicure Brillat-Savarin who succeeded in blending the two personalities of the radish. In his "Physiologie du Goût" published in 1825, the French gastronome brought together the therapeutic and the culinary qualities of this red root. Brillat-Savarin suggests eating generous amounts of radishes as part of a diet to combat obesity along with great quantities of seltzer water, light and freshly tart white **wines**, preferably those from the Anjou, poivrade artichokes, asparagus, celery and cardoons.

Mrs. Beeton set the British tone for a modern generation of British cooks in her 1861 "Book of Household Management" when she wrote "Radishes...are generally eaten raw... and on that their flavour depends. They do not agree with people, except those who are in good health." Well into the 20th century, British cookbooks, while often instructing how to grow radishes in the kitchen garden, rarely offered recipes for anything beyond serving radishes with horseradish, which they seemed to enjoy immensely, excepting pickled radish "pods". Almost a hundred years after Mrs. Beeton complained of the indigestible quality of eating too many radishes, Elizabeth David seemed no more excited by this root or its relatives

than her predecessor. In her 1954 book "Italian Food", she explains "There are numerous vegetables of the radish family of which the leaves are made into salad; some of them are a very bright red colour and look very fine on the market stalls, but their flavour does not come up to their appearance." She offers a recipe for radish salad dressed simply with oil and lemon. By this time radishes are appearing and gaining popularity in cookbooks as appetisers, tea sandwiches paired with cheese and watercress or butter and salt, or in salads.

Ellis Parker Butler wrote about the radish in a 1926 issue of the American magazine "Better Homes and Gardens": "I'll bet that when man pulled the first radish and saw its delicious colouring he thought he had discovered a new and more dainty apple; then he bit into it and thought he had bit into a wad of double-concentrated essence of Satan's realm..... I am nothing but grateful to the man who amended the untamed radish of the ages into the crisp and juicy earth-fruit it is now." Illustrious food writers such as M.F.K. Fisher and Julia Child may very well have renewed the interest in radishes, teaching a new generation the joys of eating French Breakfast with a sea salt and butter, but the popularity of the radish, from the daikon and salad radishes to horseradish and wasabi is flourishing. We have learned to tame the heat and appreciate the delicate qualities of this old world root.

"Spare feast! A radish and an egg!"

- William Cowper {1731-1800}

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