

EDIBLE TRADITIONS

THE PIE PLANT: RHUBARB

BY ELIZABETH GAWTHROP RIELY

Rhubarb occupies an ambiguous but welcome place in the culinary landscape. Botanically a vegetable, its tall, pink stalks are usually cooked, sweetened and served as fruit desserts and preserves. In recent years, chefs in stylish restaurants have dressed rhubarb as a high-fashion accessory to rich, savory meats and seafood. These two sides of rhubarb's personality make it intriguing, as you can explore either according to your mood and situation. Like many early spring plants, rhubarb has been valued as a medicinal purgative since ancient times, although the crinkly leaves and underground rhizomes are toxic.

A native of northern Asia, rhubarb made its way from Tibet, Mongolia and Siberia through the Middle East to Europe and from there to New England. Few English or American cookbooks mention it before the 18th century, but Martha Washington's *Booke of Cookery* (a manuscript collection compiled between 1749 and 1799) includes a recipe for syrup of damask roses with rhubarb. Thriving in a cold climate, rhubarb grows easily and reliably, and the shoots are easy to force early in the season under pots or in hotheouses, where the stalks turn a brilliant red. Its popularity increased in New England after the Civil War with the availability of sugar to temper its tartness.

In whatever ways rhubarb was used in savory meat braises along its path westward, in the last 200 years it became vernacular American. So popular were rhubarb pies in the 19th century that its nickname became "pie plant." Most houses had a rhubarb patch on the outer edge of the garden, where the large green leaves grew thick and tall. Those two words, "rhubarb patch," became slang for the boondocks. As far back as medieval England, a rhubarb could mean a quarrel, but in the idiom of American baseball it became a bench-clearing brawl. Turn on the radio next Saturday evening to hear the song refrain, "Be-bop-a-ree-bop, rhubarb pie!" on "A Prairie Home Companion."

For me, rhubarb is endearingly domestic, a comfort food from childhood that assured me spring was truly coming. Since then I've baked it into pies, crumbles, and crisps; frozen it into ices creams and sherbets; served it with custard and cookies; or simply stewed it, heavy cream passed alongside for a do-it-yourself fool. Some kind of cream seems to tame its bracing edge.

Hothouse rhubarb, with tender red stalks, appears in New England markets from January into April. Unforced field rhubarb becomes available into June. Though it's paler in color and less sweet, some people think its firmer stalks have more flavor. Rhubarb's color, ranging from red to pink to green to sometimes almost mauve, is part of its appeal.

Rhubarb gives off a lot of liquid in cooking. This can be used to advantage, as in compotes, sorbets, and puddings, or melted into sauces for complex Middle Eastern meat stews. For firmer texture, bake rhubarb without stirring and with no additional liquid. Strawberries make a seasonal partner in springtime, giving color and body along with sweetness. Orange and a full range of spices—ginger, clove, coriander, allspice, cardamom, cinnamon, and nutmeg—make natural companions.

Because of rhubarb's chemical makeup, the leaves and rhizomes should never be eaten uncooked. It is unwise to eat the stalks raw. Cook rhubarb only in non-reactive, non-aluminum pans. ❖

Middle Eastern Lamb and Rhubarb Stew

This dish appears in variations all over the Middle East—in Persia, Afghanistan, Iran, etc., sometimes seasoned with a little saffron, cumin, allspice, or tomato. After the lamb has slowly braised to tenderness and the juices are reduced, a handful of chopped fresh mint and parsley, perhaps cilantro, give a heady aroma. In the last minutes, rhubarb is placed on top of the lamb chunks to steam and served intact. The plant's bright color and flavor contrasts the dark, rich stew.

Makes 4 or more servings.

About 3 tablespoons vegetable oil, or a combination of butter and oil

2 large onions, chopped

2 pounds lamb leg cut in 1-inch cubes

1 teaspoon ground coriander seed

About 3 cups vegetable stock or water

¼ cup fresh mint, chopped

¼ cup fresh parsley, chopped

Salt and pepper to taste

2 or 3 rhubarb stalks, trimmed and cut in 1½-inch segments

♦ Heat the oil in a wide pot and cook the onions, stirring, until translucent.

♦ Push the cooked onions to the side of the pot and add some of the

lamb cubes in one layer, browning and turning them as they color. Depending on the size of your pot, push them to the side or remove them to a bowl to make room for the rest of the lamb.

♦ When all the meat is well browned, add the coriander seed (or whatever spices you choose) and stock or water.

♦ Cover the pot loosely and simmer for about an hour, until the lamb is tender. Keep an eye on it to see that the stew doesn't become dry, adding more liquid as needed.

♦ When the lamb is tender, season generously with salt and pepper, then stir in the fresh mint and parsley.

♦ Set the rhubarb pieces on top of the lamb, cover closely, and cook over low heat for a few minutes, just until the rhubarb is tender (hothouse rhubarb cooks faster than field).

♦ Serve the stew with the rhubarb pieces whole and intact on top of the meat.

♦ Rice makes a perfect accompaniment.