

# roasted chestnut

Seasonal, delicious, low in fat and calories and if you know where to look, free. **Lisa Moore-Wilson** delves deep into this traditional winter nut...

When I was younger, I spent some time living in France where autumn always heralded the return of the chestnut sellers, their braziers making a welcome oasis of warmth in the crisp Parisian air. The vendors, whether old men with weather beaten faces and twinkling brown eyes to match their wares or the young bucks eyeing up the girls scurrying past on their way to meet their friends in nearby cafes, seemed to take a perverse pleasure in handing over the little paper packages of chestnuts almost too hot to hold. In this country, chestnut sellers seem much harder to find but if you happen upon one never pass them by – roasted chestnuts with their potato like texture and smoky taste are strangely addictive. Low in fat and calories they are the ultimate comfort food and healthy snack rolled into one.

Although we've all heard Nat King Cole crooning about chestnuts roasting on an open fire, they are in fact sadly underrated as a seasonal food. However with a growing interest in foraging for local produce, the humble chestnut seems set to make a come back. Collecting chestnuts can add a new dimension to an autumn walk but take care to pick the right thing – a common mistake is to confuse these edible sweet chestnuts with horse chestnuts whose fruits are better suited to a game of conkers. If you're buying fresh chestnuts look for heavy fruits with a shiny, smooth skin and make sure they're used up before the skins turn wrinkly when they will be past their best.

While it's perfectly possible to roast chestnuts over an open fire it's probably easier these days to use the oven or cooker top. If you're roasting chestnuts in the oven, simply put them in a shallow baking dish covered with foil and let them cook for about half an hour at 425 degrees F. Wait until they're cooled and then peel and serve. Some cooks advocate making a small cross on the flat side of the chestnuts to stop them popping in the oven and to make the peeling afterwards a little easier.

If you prefer to cook chestnuts on the cooker top, use a heavy bottomed pan and keep shaking the nuts until the shells look cooked and a pleasant Christmassy aroma drifts through your kitchen. Speaking of the festive mood, chestnuts go well with a glass of wine,

and in Italy they are traditionally served with 'vino novello', a wine which starts its season at the beginning of November. If you're holding a dinner party, hot chestnuts and a glass of wine are sure to be a memorable aperitif – simple to serve but infinitely more glamorous and aromatic than a dish of peanuts.

In winter, the classic pairing is roast chestnuts mixed whole with Brussels sprouts – a few slivers of bacon thrown in wouldn't go amiss either. Chopped into smaller pieces, chestnuts can also be added to stuffing for the Christmas turkey. However, chestnuts also work well with chicken and game and seasonal recipes books can be sources of inspiration. If you can't find fresh chestnuts, many delicatessens and supermarkets now sell tinned chestnuts as well as chestnut puree which is great swirled into creamy yoghurt for a simple dessert or as a filling for pancakes whizzed up with some cream and vanilla essence.

In aperitifs, as side dishes and in baked puddings, once you start raiding your cookery books for ideas you will find that the uses of this versatile nut become obvious. So this year don't just listen to the greats singing their praises on the radio - move them into your kitchen and prepare to be pleasantly surprised. ■