

Hereford Times – Talking Point: Andy Link, chef/patron
The Riverside Inn, Aymestrey
December 2018

Working with the Winter Larder

Winter is always a strange time for home cooks and chefs who enjoy cooking with seasonal food. Yet with a little creativity, great things can be done with ingredients such as brassicas, celery, celeriac, squash, pumpkins, and one of Herefordshire best ingredients - apples. It's worth trying a few heritage varieties for an excellent flavour and texture.

The British have always been a nation of preservers, in the past from necessity, and now from the sheer pleasure of doing so. Good old-fashioned preserving is the ideal way to make use of perishable produce, and is far more satisfying than shoving the excess in the freezer. Chutney is a real crowd pleaser as it tastes delicious. People are always impressed when you put some home-made produce on the table, but chutney couldn't be easier to make, and there's no worrying about whether or not it will set, as there is with jam.

Although I am not keen on food fads, the current fashion for fermenting - from kombucha to lacto-fermenting – has produced some interesting flavours in modern British cooking. The best known fermented food item is sauerkraut - fermented cabbage -but you can apply the technique to virtually any fruit or vegetable. Here at the Riverside, we use many such ingredients from pickled fruit and walnuts to Willy's cider vinegar from the Chase Distillery.

Looking back to my childhood my family always made jam, using produce as it arrived in the garden and hedgerow, from strawberries and raspberries, to gooseberries, currants, red and black, to blackberries a little later in the season. Pickled beetroot was another favourite. And my grandad always made his own wine, which was a very different beast to what we regard as a wine today.

Sloe gin is another favourite, and in an age of instant gratification, it's a pleasure to make something and have to wait several months before you can tuck into the fruits of your labour.

Infusing is another great tradition, and infusing alcohol is a lovely thing to do now that the weather is colder, and Christmas is on its way. I like to use spruce needles to give local gin an extra dimension – a floral, citrus taste that's both unusual and delicious.

In the Riverside kitchen we are currently experimenting with roasted sweet chestnuts infused with whisky, so the idea will be perfected by Christmas Day, and will add a warm and luscious twist to this traditional festive ingredient.

As our three new garden bedrooms are now up and running – and looking very at home in the landscape – I now want to turn my thoughts to planning our kitchen garden for next year, and working out what traditional, and forgotten vegetables I can raise and hopefully give a new lease of life to.