



**Eat my words**  
**Alex Renton**



**What is the point of Peruvian spears?**



n make an omelette into a chic affair treating it as a pastry-less quiche. All that's needed is a well-oiled quiche dish and plenty of double cream and black pepper with your beaten eggs. Spinach with a little grated nutmeg and plenty of grated cheese, works well, as long as you wilt it first and press out the water. Ricotta and cherry tomato is elegant and light: simply break the ricotta into chunks and fold it through the eggs, pressing whole cherry tomatoes into the mixture at pretty intervals.

For a fancy lunch, smoked pollock and saffroned leek is a wow: gently fry chopped leeks in butter with a pinch of saffron till soft. Separately, bring the smoked pollock to the boil in milk, then move from heat and allow to sit for five minutes before draining and chopping into chunks. Mix with your beaten eggs, softened leeks and double cream then bake in a medium-hot oven till golden in patches on top and just to the touch (about 30 mins). Eat with good bread and a salad.

Lastly, boiled eggs. I find large eggs take five minutes to boil perfectly so that the white is cooked but the yolk runny. Add a nut of butter and a squirt of lemon juice with plenty of salt and pepper for a hollandaise effect. Experiment with varieties: blanched tenderstem or purpleouting broccoli works a dream (not getting late-season British asparagus), as do Parmesan wrapped cheese straws, though it's hard to beat studded sourdough with butter and olive oil. Good enough to share with the grandest person you know.

It's a very odd thing indeed: a packet of "Extra Fine Wye Valley Asparagus" with a September sell-by date. You scan the label for "Grown in Peru's Vallejo de Wye" or some blurb about the little Berber oasis of Wye in North Africa. But no: this is Union Jack-carrying English asparagus, picked this week beside the River Wye in Herefordshire by a farming family called Chinn.

Asparagus, as any fool knows, is a spring vegetable — perhaps the greatest of them. The British asparagus season runs from early May to June. So it should be some 220 days until we eat proper asparagus again. Those who cannot wait may subsist on woody, bland asparagus grown on sand in Egypt, Morocco or Peru, chilled and airfreighted here. This practice is one of the sillier achievements of modern civilisation. Better to wait for May.

So how is it that John Chinn — a third-generation asparagus grower — is putting his shoots into Marks & Spencer in September? "We all accept British asparagus is a different vegetable from imported. So I thought that extending the very short season would be special," he says. This labour started six years ago when Chinn visited the Peruvian deserts to see how they grew asparagus there and married the techniques with a Mediterranean variety (the Romans first brought asparagus to Britain). His work finally bore fruit this week with a launch at Marks & Spencer. The asparagus will stay on sale there till the end of October, displacing the imports from 300 of the chain's stores. I'm told it is minimally chilled and on sale within 24 hours of picking.

This is a story that ticks many boxes for a moralising foodie like me. Chinn and M&S are lowering the carbon cost of imported asparagus while also addressing the fact that the Peruvian trade is painfully unsustainable: according to development agencies, impoverished communities in Peru's Ica Valley are suffering drought because of water diverted to the vast farms that churn out 6.5 million kilograms of asparagus a year for Europe. Chinn's new techniques produce a greener asparagus in every sense. Because mould and weeds are less of a problem in the late summer, he says he uses less than 2 per cent of the

herb and fungicides that spring asparagus requires. The crop needs heat: this is generated by sunlight on the polythene tunnels over the beds and rain water is harvested from this plastic to irrigate the plants.

Extended seasons and new fruit and veg are going to become common stories in Britain as — the science overwhelmingly predicts — our part of the planet grows warmer. It's been happening for a while: "When my grandfather grew strawberries," Chinn says, "the season lasted six weeks. Now it's six months." British-grown melons, apricots and mange-tout have all become commercial crops in the past few years. Longer seasons and new varieties will soon mean that we produce the green beans now imported from Africa. Mark Diacono, a farmer on the River Otter in Devon, expects soon to offer olives, Szechuan peppers and almonds.

The most moral foodies among you will have spotted a flaw — how does Peru, a poor country, and East Africa, even poorer, deal with the loss of income when we start growing the veg they need to sell to us? A good question. And here's another — what's the Chinn autumn asparagus actually like?

I tried it on several friends and they were all fairly impressed. It looked lovely and its texture was perfect. The taste was sweet and delicate, but... "Doesn't quite have the complexity of May asparagus," said one, getting all wine-buffy. I think that's fair — the Chinn asparagus doesn't have the essence of spring, that vivid greenness in the taste. But it's a big step forward.

As the Jamie Oliver season kicks off again (that's every autumn in living memory) I have some questions for readers. How great is our greatest chef? What's his best recipe, in your experience? And the worst? Do tell me, and I will report back on what, in your collective wisdom, you decide.  
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