

Sweetness from the Dark: Yorkshire Forced Rhubarb

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I never really *got* rhubarb. There was no great moment of revelation when I realized how good this ancient ingredient is. Despite having grown up in the cold Midwestern United States, where rhubarb thrives, I didn't like it as a child and remember being warned by my mother never to put the large, toxic leaves in my mouth. My wife knew even less about it, having grown up in Italy where rhubarb is more or less nonexistent. Rhubarb arrived in our London kitchen for the first time one day last year when she brought a large bag of it home from work and placed it on the table. "What's this?" I asked. "Yorkshire forced rhubarb," she responded, with a smile that said, "You're welcome," and also, "Don't ask me what to do with it." It looked elegant and mysterious — delicious, crisp, and refreshing. This was the beginning of my revelation.

Rhubarb, which appears to have been used, at least medicinally, since 2700 BC in China, has produced mixed emotions since its arrival in English gardens, kitchens, and cookbooks in the Victorian era. It is a vegetable that we regard as a fruit. The long stalks are red or pink, but they remain fully green in the oldest varieties, which are less flavorful and more acidic. Where the leaves of the outdoor plant sometimes cover it entirely, bending the stalks, the leaves of forced indoor rhubarb are small, triangular or arrow-shaped, and orange or rust-colored rather than green.

Rhubarb is grown in many countries, but forced rhubarb seems to have originated in the United Kingdom. The story goes that some rhubarb patches in the Chelsea Physic Garden in London became covered by builder's rubble. In the springtime of 1817, gardeners discovered the pale pink stalks and found that they were sweet and delicious. By 1877, forced rhubarb had gained a lasting home in Yorkshire. The exact person or persons who brought it to Yorkshire are unknown, but forced rhubarb succeeded there for two main reasons. First, the coal needed to heat the specially built sheds was cheap and plentiful in that part of the country. Second, the woolen mills produced a great supply of fertilizer in the form of shoddy, the dirt and grease that came off the fleece in washing.

Forced rhubarb is concentrated in the "Rhubarb Triangle," between the towns of Leeds, Bradford, and Wakefield, the only place in the world that grows forced rhubarb commercially. Forced rhubarb reached a peak of popularity during the Second World War, when rationing made fruit scarce, and the government controlled the price of rhubarb to keep it within reach. Some people attribute the postwar decline of rhubarb to bad memories of eating it during the war with little or no sugar, as sugar was also rationed. That combined with farmers gradually selling off their land for development contributed to forced rhubarb's decline. Where there were around 200 commercial growers in the Triangle before the First World War, now there are only about 12.

They were given a boost in 2010 when "Yorkshire Forced Rhubarb" was awarded the Protected Designation of Origin by the European Union. PDOs have been designed to

promote and protect products throughout the European Union from imitations by regulating the area and methods of production; other examples in the United Kingdom include West Country Farmhouse Cheddar, East Kent Goldings hops, and Jersey Royal potatoes.

Forced rhubarb is an early crop, available from mid-January to April, filling a gap in the fruit seasons. But with present high fuel and labor costs, forced rhubarb yields a low profit compared with other crops, and it competes with imported outdoor rhubarb as well as with the many fresh fruits now available year-round.

British food writers differ in their opinions of rhubarb. Nigel Slater asserts, “How could anyone not love something known as the pie plant – or indeed, anything whose stems offer such vibrant colour at a time of the year when so much of our fruit is sleeping? Yet rhubarb has never found the broad audience enjoyed by the raspberry or the apple. Instead, it has a loyal, almost cultish following, happy to indulge in its piercing crimson sharpness. Firmly amongst that number, I hold a crown of rhubarb an essential part of any garden I turn a spade to.” In contrast, the late English writer Jane Grigson, in her *Fruit Book*, doesn’t speak fondly of rhubarb (she does mention that it is ideal for a purge), except outdoor rhubarb in a glimpse of her childhood. “I do have one good memory, of sitting with my sister on a doorstep, each with a stick of rhubarb, and a saucer of sugar between us. We dipped and chewed, dipped and chewed in the warm sun, with clucking hens stepping round us.”

Thinking that Grigson was on to something with that bowl of sugar, I washed the dirt from a stalk of forced Stockbridge Harbinger, a variety known to growers for its subtle acidity and complex sweet-and-sour notes. Sliced, it was permeated by dark red from the skin to the center. I dipped a piece into sugar and chewed, dipped and chewed. The rhubarb had a definite crunch and none of the astringency you might associate with it. I didn’t really need the sugar. Compared with outdoor varieties, this forced rhubarb was pure candy. The sweetness was accompanied by an herbal note that reminded me of the flavors in certain earthy red wines. That and grassy undertones gave real depth. I was completely surprised and hooked. The experience was a lesson in the value of simplicity.

It was Robert Tomlinson, a fourth-generation rhubarb farmer, who grew the forced rhubarb I tasted in my first encounter (and many times since). He is one of just four farmers to sign up for the PDO. One cool, dry day in late January, my wife and I went to Tomlinson’s house, on the edge of the Rhubarb Triangle, in the village of Pudsey, where the family are the only growers of forced rhubarb left.

Tomlinson is in his late thirties, with a wife and two children. At lunch, which didn’t include rhubarb, we met Tomlinson’s father, David, who raised forced rhubarb on the farm before Robert. In their marked Yorkshire accents, the Tomlinsons spoke about the weather, choosing varieties for flavor, the market for forced rhubarb, and the ideal conditions for growing it. Hearing all this, seeing Robert’s passion and personal investment in the farm, I understood why the family has stayed in the business for so long.

The clay soil, its low pH, and the cold temperatures necessary to send the crowns into dormancy — conditions particular to this part of Yorkshire — all help to produce great stalks. Most forced rhubarb, Tomlinson said, is Timperley Early, a variety that is easily grown but doesn’t have the best flavor. To push the season earlier still, several growers force

it very fast, usually with a loss of quality. Tomlinson has stopped growing Timperley Early in favor of Stockbridge Arrow, Stockbridge Harbinger, and Queen Victoria. Many more varieties are available, but after years of growing, the Tomlinsons have identified these as best for their location. Robert has become known to locals, chefs, and wholesalers for the taste of his rhubarb, because of the care and choice of varieties.

He continues to grow the older variety Queen Victoria partly to keep it from dying out, partly because of its hardiness and different taste, and partly because it is the last to be ready, so he can sell over a longer season. Tomlinson's Queen Victoria roots have been on the farm since before 1900. Its yields are lower than other varieties, and where most have to be grown outdoors for two years before they are fetched into the sheds, Queen Victoria requires three years to build up enough energy in its roots. Compared with Stockbridge Harbinger and Arrow, Queen Victoria is much paler, and it is very, very acidic, so it is often cooked with orange juice. These days it would be hard to find anyone eating it raw.

After lunch, we stepped outside to see the sheds. In the wintry yet green countryside, the wind had picked up, blowing from the Pennine Chain into the valley, where the frost settled in each night. We followed Robert along the road to a nondescript shed, one of five, all built of brick and concrete block. It might have been a normal farm building apart from its lack of windows.

Tomlinson slid open the door and, as soon as we entered, shut it quickly behind us. The warmth hit us immediately, 55 degrees F (13 degrees C), which Tomlinson said is the ideal for forcing. He lit a candle, the only source of light, just as candles are the only light when the rhubarb is harvested. Anything stronger would disturb the growth and affect the color. As our eyes slowly adjusted, we saw hundreds of small pink and red stalks reaching up toward the ceiling with all their might. The plants were eerily beautiful and felt full of life and energy. The scene was uncanny. I smelled earth and dampness, herbs and grass, but also something I couldn't quite place, something that I've encountered only in a shed in the Rhubarb Triangle.

By reproducing his own plants, Tomlinson saves some money over buying new rootstocks each season, and he is certain the roots will be adapted to the conditions of the region. More than that, he is preserving the varieties and strains that the family has been working with for many years.

The young plants grow outdoors. A one-hectare (two-and-a-half-acre) field holds approximately 24,000 of them. When a two-year-old root is ready to be moved indoors in winter, it can weigh up to 50 kilos and requires two men to lift it. The process is delicate and demands skill and patience.

Tomlinson explained how the plants are reproduced: "Crowns are the actual hole in which the stalk grows through. On one root you might get around six to ten crowns. When you split the roots into sets, we try to leave two to three crowns on each one. For example, if we have 10,000 roots, we cut up 2,500 to 3,000 to make another 10,000 sets that are then planted to grow for two years. The remaining roots are then taken into the sheds whole, intact."

Each variety requires a certain minimum of cold weather before the roots are ready to be moved inside. Starting around mid-October, the farmer tracks soil temperatures, marking each day and degree below 10 degrees C as one cold unit. For example, if the day's soil temperature is 5 degrees C, that's 5 units. Harbinger requires 120 units, and when that is reached, all the roots of the variety are moved inside. Arrow requires 270 units, and Queen Victoria requires the most — 350. As the climate warms and winters become shorter, Tomlinson said, the time needed has grown longer and longer. Sometimes Queen Victoria barely reaches the necessary total. Some producers put their roots into an artificially cooled storehouse, but then the stalks are thinner and less sweet.

The fuel to heat the sheds used to be coal, but paraffin (kerosene in the US) is less expensive and more common today. The coal fires had to be stoked three times a day, seven days a week. Now Tomlinson only has to make sure the paraffin heaters are on and working.

Once inside, the roots are arranged on the bare ground, dirt is packed around and over them, and they are left to grow. Only sometimes do they need a little water. The warmth triggers growth, while the darkness prevents photosynthesis. If the temperature is slightly cooler than 55 degrees F, the rhubarb is redder; if it's slightly warmer, it's paler. And, especially with the old varieties, if the stalks grow too fast, they can go pale.

After five to six weeks, the first stalk is ready to pick. The farmer typically goes over the crop twice per week, leaving the short stalks to grow. Instead of cutting a stalk, you hold it at the base and twist. The crisp, cracking sound made my mouth water. The stalks are still packed in 14-pound boxes, the standard old weight. Depending on the variety, a rhubarb shed produces for around six weeks. When the harvest is over, the roots are so completely empty of nutrients and energy that they are only good for compost.

Forced rhubarb is “in” at the moment, prized by many of the most talked-about chefs in Britain. The awarding of PDO status gave it more recognition in the marketplace, and at the moment, production and demand are about even. Rhubarb recipes have been proliferating on the internet and in other media — for rhubarb fool, rhubarb jam, British rhubarb crumble, American rhubarb crisp. Forced rhubarb goes especially well with oranges, available at the same time of year. Late in the season, the first strawberries are a favorite, if not clichéd, companion, though outdoor rhubarb overlaps more with strawberry season. It's popular to pickle rhubarb, forced or outdoor, and serve it with the richness of mackerel or pork. You can make rhubarb chutney. Other non-dessert uses range from rhubarb baked beans to the more unusual and perhaps challenging rhubarb scrambled eggs.

We left the Tomlinsons' farm with an entire box of freshly picked forced rhubarb, and when we got on the train back to London, we received looks of awe from fellow travelers — they must have been from Yorkshire. They knew what a precious item we carried.

Rhubarb's renaissance is a testament to those who seek out seasonal products at their peak, when they are full of flavor. Forced rhubarb, with its intricate combination of grassy, earthy, and sweet notes, tastes of a particular place. It is mysterious and elegant — it captures the imagination.

Buying Forced Rhubarb

Forced rhubarb can be found at specialist fruit and vegetable merchants in Britain for about £10 a kilo. Some farmers sell direct in Yorkshire as well as at local markets, in season. You may find it at farmers' markets in Otley, Wetherby, Harrogate, and Knaresborough as well as Leeds. Booth's Stores in the north of England stock forced rhubarb from the Jonathan Westwood farm, whose family has been growing it since the 1800s.

The PDO label doesn't guarantee great taste, but it does mean the plants have been grown in the area in the historical way. Varieties to look for are Stockbridge Harbinger, Stockbridge Arrow, Timperley Early, and Queen Victoria. If they have been grown by a PDO farmer, a label on the box will indicate that and the name of the variety. At a farmers' market you will likely have to ask the name of the variety.

The stalks are harvested, packed, and shipped the same day. After you buy forced rhubarb, it keeps just a couple of days in the fridge before going a bit limp. Use it as quickly as possible to keep the crunch.

Besides buying it, you can force your own rhubarb, which can be done indoors, such as in a dark cellar, but is more easily done outdoors in late winter or early spring. I haven't done it myself, but various online merchants sell rhubarb for planting in your home garden as well as lovely but expensive terra-cotta pots made for forcing. A more economical alternative is to use a regular large, upturned, ceramic garden pot or a large bucket (and it has been done using black plastic bags). If the pot has holes in the bottom, simply cover them with opaque tape. Fill the pot with straw to help create a warm, damp microclimate inside. If you force a crown one year, give it a rest the following one; at least two plants would be ideal.