

BERKSHIRE JEWISH VOICES

Traveling with Jewish Taste

Rhubarb!

By Carol Goodman Kaufman



Rhubarb season is here, and with it comes a flood of childhood memories. A big patch in back of a neighbor's garage was a treasure we looked forward to every year. We kids would snap off stalks to chomp on, the intense sourness seemingly not a problem for us as we sat in a circle telling ghost stories in the dark on balmy summer evenings. It may even have enhanced the spooky atmosphere.

Perhaps due to these fond memories, or perhaps because it is a super-easy plant to maintain, I still love rhubarb and have two different varieties growing in my garden. In fact, one of the plants came from my father's backyard, and

I have recently given a piece of that plant to my eldest son, Seth, as a sort of horticultural *mi'dor l'dor* action. Given my total lack of success with bonsai, I figured this would be my way of perpetuating the family love of gardening while providing a memento of his grandfather. Growing the family tree, as it were.

As a little girl, I believed that rhubarb was a Jewish vegetable, named in fact for my Uncle Reub. (I also believed that brisket was Jewish. After all, on the eighth day...) Anyway, when he wasn't practicing optometry, Uncle Reub was a big-time gardener and grafter of tree fruit, and his wife, Aunt Bea, was a phenomenal cook and baker who incorporated rhubarb from said garden into all manner of delectable dishes.

I also believe that rhubarb has the power to save a romance. The first time my then-boyfriend came to visit, my stepmother had cooked mackerel for dinner. The house reeked of the oily fish, so I rushed out to the garden, picked some stalks, grabbed a pint of strawberries from the fridge, and baked a pie. By the time the boy arrived, flowers in hand, the house smelled divine. He is now my husband.

Today, many Jewish cooking websites feature recipes for everything from strawberry-rhubarb blintzes to Shabbat rhubarb chicken. So, I figured that the veggie must have figured large in the cuisine of our ancestors.

In fact, rhubarb had its roots in China, where its dried root was used for its laxative properties. In fact, it was so coveted for that purpose that at one point it cost more than cinnamon and saffron. Islamic traders brought it west over the Silk Road beginning in the 8th century, and Venetian Marco Polo mentioned the vegetable in journals of his travels to China in the late 13th century, but his fellow Italians didn't get around to planting it until much later. In the 14th Century, rhubarb arrived in Syria, and from there it traveled to the rest of Europe, where cooks began incorporating it as a fruit into pies and tarts (hence, its other name, "pie plant").

Documentation of Ashkenazim cultivating it in their gardens I could not find, but Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews are absolutely known to use the sour rhubarb as

a vegetable (it is actually classified as one botanically), adding it to fish and lamb dishes, such as the stew Khoresht-E-Reevas.

There is some dispute over rhubarb's arrival in America in late 18th century. Some records indicate that a Maine gardener planted it and then introduced it to Massachusetts. Others say that it was first grown by Philadelphian John Bartram, from a case of the root sent to him by Benjamin Franklin. At any rate, by the 1820s, rhubarb became available for purchase in markets.

But, why buy it when it is so incredibly easy to grow? Because rhubarb likes the cold – and in fact it can survive deep freezes in those places – the northeastern United States is an ideal place to grow it. I'll bet that many of the readers of this column have a patch or two in their yards. The vegetable can grow in hot climates, but it must be done as an annual and with lots of shade. The plants will live for decades, the only maintenance being a necessary splitting every five or six years.

Khoresht-E-Reevas: Persian Rhubarb Stew



Adapted from *My Persian Kitchen*
Serves 4

Ingredients:

1 lb. stew beef or lamb, cubed
2 medium yellow onions
1 teaspoon turmeric
3 cups parsley
1½ cups mint
2 lb. rhubarb, peeled and cut into 1/2 inch pieces
salt & pepper
oil

Instructions:

Sauté onion until just past translucent.
While onion is sautéing, separate herb leaves from stems, wash and chop.
Add turmeric, stir, and continue cooking for two more minutes.
Add beef. Season with salt and pepper. Brown meat on all sides.
Add 2 cups of water. Cook, covered, on medium low for one hour.
Add enough oil to thinly cover the bottom of a sauté pan.
Add herbs and fry them for about 5 to 10 minutes, stirring frequently.
Add herbs to the stew.
Continue to cook, covered, for a half hour longer until meat is tender.
Adjust seasoning if needed.
Add rhubarb to the stew.
Give one gentle stir and cook untouched for 10 to 15 minutes longer.

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Carol Goodman Kaufman is a psychologist and author with a passion for travel and food. She is currently at work on a food history/cookbook, tracing the paths that some of our favorite foods have taken from their origins to appear on dinner plates and in cultural rites and artifacts around the world. She invites readers to read her blog at carolgoodmankaufman.com and to follow her on Twitter @goodmankaufman.