CABBAGE PATCH *kin*

THE CRUCIFEROUS VEGGIE HAS MORE THAN **400 VARIETIES,** RANGING FROM THE HEFTY CANNONBALL TO THE DIMINUTIVE BRUSSELS SPROUT

By Carol Goodman Kaufman

Peter Rabbit got into some memorable trouble when he raided Farmer McGregor's cabbage patch. The hungry rabbit just wanted to eat his fill of veggies. Unfortunately, as the story goes, he overindulged and got sick.

Just as he was about to pick some healing parsley, Farmer McGregor caught him red-handed (red-pawed?), so the rambunctious bunny and his aching tummy hightailed it home, leaving his jacket and shoes behind. After berating him for losing his clothes yet again, Peter's mother put him to bed with a sip of chamomile tea that, at least according to Beatrix Potter, fixed him right up.

But Peter was onto something. Despite the intestinal distress he experienced, and the cruciferous veggie is known for its gaseous properties, cabbage's benefits far outweigh the drawbacks. Aside from being crunchy and delicious, a mere half cup of cooked cabbage has about a third of the vitamin C you need for the day. It also gives you doses of fiber, folate, potassium, magnesium, vitamins A and K, and more.

But what variety of cabbage was Peter eating? There are over 400 different varieties of the veggie, ranging from Pointed to Romanesco, although only about a dozen are readily available in our local supermarkets. These include the Cannonball and the Brussels sprout.

It is precisely due to the many varieties of the brassica genus that tracing its history is problematic. Some experts say that China was the source of the original wild cabbage. Still others claim that it was originally found on rocky crags in Britain and continental Europe. And recent genetic research pinpoints the Mediterranean basin as the source of domestication efforts.

Regardless of its beginnings in the wild and later cultivation, cabbage has enjoyed both approval and disdain. Some ancient Romans, for example, considered it fit for a senatorial feast, while others thought it beneath the upper classes. By the Middle Ages, however, cabbage was so popular that images of the vegetable appeared in everything from paintings to manuscript illuminations. By that point, everybody ate and enjoyed cabbage. And because cabbage is both hardy and easy to grow, it was a staple of the peasant diet.

By the 19th century, the Brothers Grimm had written a fairy tale, "The Donkey Cabbages," that featured magical cabbages that turned people into donkeys.

Documents show that in the mid-16th century, Jacques Cartier brought cabbage to America, where by the 18th century it was a garden staple for both colonists and Native Americans.

And it is still a popular vegetable in today's gardens.

The Cannonball, more commonly known as green cabbage, is arguably the most popular head in the produce section.

Before traveling, I like to read at least one book about the place we're going, so before heading north, I read James Michener's epic, 868-page tome, "Alaska." In one episode of the novel, Michener writes about cabbages weighing 60 pounds apiece. I, of course, assumed that the image was simply an example of the writer's use of poetic license, but when we got to Alaska, we saw mammoth heads of green cabbage growing throughout the state. So, while on a visit to the test gardens at the University of Alaska at Fairbanks, we asked an agronomist about the phenomenon. She explained that, despite the proximity of the state to the cold North Pole, Alaska experiences very long hours of sunlight in summer (the sun didn't set until after 11 p.m.!). That exposure, with its accompanying photosynthesis, allows everything to grow larger. Sunflowers kiss the eaves. Cantaloupes require two arms to carry. And the cabbages were enormous. In fact, NPR reported on one recent prize-winner weighing in at 138 pounds. Some cannonball.

Brussels sprouts provide a significant amount of vitamin K-1, calcium, the antioxidant ALA, and vitamin C.
CHRISTINE PETERSON/TELEGRAM & GAZETTE

On the opposite end of the cabbage size spectrum is the Brussels sprout. Of all the endearments lovers have uttered over the millennia, I think my favorite has to be one whispered by the French: Mon petit chou, my little cabbage. After all, what could be more adorable than a tiny and delicious Brussels sprout?

(There is another explanation of the expression "mon petit chou" that has nothing to do with vegetables. The French word chou is short for a choux à la crème, or profiteroles. So, perhaps when you call your sweetie pie mon petit chou, you're saying that your loved one is sweet and delicious. However, since the English language renders a person called a cream puff weak and ineffectual, I think I'll stick with the little cabbage theory.)

Brussels sprouts are descendants of the wild cabbage plant and a cousin to cabbage, cauliflower, kale, broccoli, and kohlrabi, among others. And like its bigger relative, the green cabbage, its leaves are tightly packed. But sprouts grow on a stalk that can reach up to three feet in height, and each stalk can produce 12-20 sprouts.

Brussels sprouts as we know them today originated in Belgium, where it is believed they were grown as early as the 13th century, but the first written description of them doesn't appear until 1587. Due to the city's rapid growth, living space was at a premium. Consequently, farmers in the area had to find a way to maximize the productivity of their crops with less acreage. Just as today's city planners build high-rise apartment buildings to accommodate large population growth, the Belgian farmers' solution was to breed a variety of cabbage that grew upward.

Today, Brussels sprouts are grown throughout Europe and the United States, where New York and California are the main growers.

Like the big cabbage, Brussels sprouts are good for you, providing a significant amount of vitamin K-1, calcium, and the antioxidant ALA. They also pack 75 mg. of vitamin C — 150% more than an orange. And unlike many other vegetables, Brussels sprouts contain protein.

While Belgium takes credit for "inventing" Brussels sprouts, the British consider them their national vegetable. In fact, Britons eat more Brussels sprouts than anyone else in Europe. They also deem it an absolutely necessary item on their Christmas dinner menus, with supermarkets selling over 750 million sprouts at Christmas alone, a full 25% of the year's sales.

Given humans' need to compete, we just had to know that somebody would try to get their Brussels sprouts into the Guinness Book of World Records, right? In fact, back in 1992, Welshman Bernard Lavery grew a sprout that weighed in at over 18 pounds. Why couldn't he have tried to cultivate the smallest sprout?

When buying Brussels sprouts, look for tender young pieces, as they're usually the sweetest. And, because they're 90% water, they're quite fragile, so it's best to eat them quickly, before they spoil.

The only other negative aspect of preparing either of the two cabbage cousins is the rather funky — okay, let's be honest, stinky — odor that cooking these veggies produces. The odor is due to the high levels of the sulfur-containing compounds called glucosinolates. To combat the reek, try putting a pot of water with orange peels and cinnamon sticks on the stove for a while.

Or just live with it.

BEST EVER, SUPER SIMPLE SALMON AND BRUSSELS SPROUTS


CHRISTINE PETERSON/TELEGRAM & GAZETTE

Serves 4

This dish is super easy to make on a weeknight, and special enough for company. It was the recipe that got my kids to eat Brussels sprouts.

Ingredients:

1 lb. Brussels sprouts

¼ cup extra virgin olive oil

5 cloves garlic, minced

Sea or kosher salt and pepper to taste

1 tablespoon balsamic vinegar

1½ lb. salmon filet, skinned

Directions:

Heat oven to 400 degrees.

Trim bottom of Brussels sprouts, and slice each in half top to bottom.

Toss with oil, garlic, salt and pepper.

Place sprouts cut side down around the edges of a rimmed baking pan.

Roast for 15 minutes.

While sprouts are roasting, prepare salmon filet by sprinkling with salt, pepper, and oil.

After the 15 minutes are up, add the salmon to the same pan in which you are roasting the sprouts, pouring balsamic vinegar over the sprouts.

Bake for 25 minutes. ■