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Pink power

Rhubarb has been a smash hit this year. **Zoe Strimpel** finds out what makes it great

THE tangiest of British vegetables, so long relegated to fools and crumbles, stepped into the (pink-tinged) limelight last week. Rhubarb made headlines when Waitrose suddenly found itself entirely sold out of the British variety, thanks to an advert featuring Delia Smith and a rhubarb and ginger brulee recipe.

In just four days, the supermarket sold enough for 61,000 puddings – the quantity it usually sells in 12 weeks. It was reduced to importing German rhubarb.

Importing produce that grows in Britain is always a shame. But rhubarb has a particularly close, tender relationship with British soil. For when it arrived on these shores in

the 16th century (a native of Siberia), it was discovered that the best possible place for growing it was West Yorkshire.

Enter the legendary Rhubarb Triangle, a nine-square-mile triangle between Wakefield, Morley and Rothwell. This is where premium “forced” rhubarb is cultivated – or rhubarb grown in the dark after its roots have been outside absorbing nutrients for two or three years. Until the 1960s it was carted down to London in hundreds-of-tonne loads nightly for sale in Spitalfields and Covent Garden markets, in the still-legendary Rhubarb Express.

The express runs no longer, but rhubarb is having a modern renaissance. “From January onwards I get rather overexcited about rhubarb,” says Candice Webber of The Restaurant at St Paul’s. “It is so versatile, though most people don’t think of it that way. It’s actually the British version of Thai nam jim sauce – our very own version of sweet and sour.” During the season, Webber always has a rhubarb dessert on the menu, but she also likes to use it in savoury dishes. “Rhubarb sauce is great:

mix the rhubarb with white wine, vegetable stock, shallots and sugar, and it perfectly balances mackerel and white meats such as pork. Think of it as a replacement for apple sauce – it’s great in chutneys and pickles too.” One of her star dishes is chicken liver parfait drizzled in rhubarb sauce.

Forced rhubarb is grown in greenhouses lit by candlelight, and – as the picture shows – it looks eerie but beautiful. The idea is to avoid all sunlight to prevent photosynthesis from taking place and therefore to grow a plant without fibrous green leaves. Also, without sunlight the rhubarb grows straight up, trying to find light. “It’s quite medieval-feeling in the planting sheds,” says Webber. “They come up in a phallic pod, which suddenly bursts open, and out of it grows the rhubarb.”

The forced season is waning, and with it the chance to use a more intense, streamlined variety of rhubarb. But the outdoor rhubarb season is upon us and full of its own tangy opportunity. Here are some exciting recipes from top chefs – it’s time to think outside the triangle.



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