

THE ENGLISH KITCHEN

RHUBARBARIA

For Joan Thirsk and Ann Prior

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RHUBARBARIA

RECIPES FOR RHUBARB

MARY PRIOR



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Mary Prior
Oxford, 2009

PREFACE

Rhubarb is a word which rolls on the tongue with relish. It sounds both rude and absurd, and the imagination has found all sorts of uses for it, many listed in Partridge's *Dictionary of Slang*. It is uttered by actors in crowd scenes, and the action is called rhubarbing. It means a rumpus or a nonsense – as in 'that's a load of rhubarb'. In low-life it means the genitals. In Scots, to 'gie somebody rhubarb' is to beat them up. Whether these associations gathered around the word first, and slowly brought obloquy to the poor innocent plant or vice versa is a byway in the history of fashion which is unexplored. I hope this little book will rehabilitate the plant. Not much can be done about its literary associates.

None of these associations of the word was known in our family – a rather sheltered environment – though rhubarb itself played an important part in the family economy. I grew up in New Zealand in the 1930s, a 'daughter of the Manse', with all its connotations of Scottish Presbyterianism. It was a busy, hospitable household, with much coming and going: members of the congregation, ministers and elders from country parishes up for Presbytery, students, members of committees, Bible Class girls, missionaries, uncles, cousins and aunts. My mother had an almost superstitious belief in the importance of 'breaking bread together' in bonding people and solving their problems. In her eyes Judas Iscariot and the Campbells were about equal in betraying the bonds that breaking bread created. None escaped without a cup of tea and a scone, many stayed for dinner. When there were more guests than my mother's optimistic view of the contents of the safe could satisfy, I would be sent down the garden to pick rhubarb – a trip made memorable by the fear that my sister's vicious bantam rooster might have escaped, and be lurking in the rhubarb patch.

I don't think we ever did anything with it but stew it and serve it with custard or curds and cream, but on very special occasions the ginger jar would appear and preserved ginger and syrup made it a feast. It would be too much to say of it that it was 'an ever-present aid in time of trouble', but it was certainly an 'ever-present aid'.

Years later in Oxford, in the early days of widowhood, I rediscovered rhubarb. I became an allotment-holder, and found it growing freely around many disused plots. I was not a successful gardener. Twitch and convolvulus played their part, but I certainly ate more of this rhubarb than of my own produce. However, when I gave up the allotment I planted a couple of Timperley Earlys in my garden and began trying out rhubarb recipes. Superior recipe books barely mentioned it, but my 1947 edition of *Farmhouse Fare*, drawing on the recipes of country housewives collected by the *Farmers' Weekly*, had more than a dozen recipes for puddings alone; almost as many as for apples, more than for gooseberries or plums, whose seasons are shorter. It arrived as the country housewife's last apples were beginning to rot and lasted into the season of small fruits, seeing her through the long gap when no other seasonal fruits were available.

Some years later again, on holiday in Shetland, I saw it growing in every garden, and around old abandoned crofts. It grew with an uninhibited luxuriance, indeed, far better than anything else in those windswept islands, and it formed an important item in the Shetland diet. Where did it come from, how did it reach these isolated islands? Or was it a native? Was this where all the world's rhubarb came from?

It was not, and is not. Its history is much more extraordinary. It was known first in the Western world as a dried root, a valuable drug which came from the East, but how far east, no-one knew. I shall very briefly trace its history from its use as a drug to its rise as a culinary plant, once fashionable, later a Cinderella of the dinner table, despised by generations of

schoolchildren. It is, however, a chameleon of the food world, combining and contrasting with a wide range of exotic and homely ingredients to yield many happy surprises.

The larger part of this book consists, though, of an anthology of recipes. They are drawn from a wide variety of sources, from the writings of professional cooks to collections of recipes put together for good causes, manuscript recipe books and letters, and a few of my own, and those of my friends.

Rhubarb was fashionable in the early nineteenth century, when it was still a novelty, and recently, with increasing interest in seasonal food, it has become fashionable again. In the early spring the glossies provide wonderful party dishes by our best traditional cooks with the minutest directions which, if followed exactly, guarantee success. Not all of us have, however, the right sized baking pans and pie dishes, ovens whose temperature is reliable, or families of the stipulated size. We live in an imperfect world, and we have to alter recipes to suit the world we live in. But remember if you use good ingredients, even if you fail to produce the dish of your dreams, unless you have burnt it to a cinder, it will almost certainly taste wonderful, and may even open your eyes to new possibilities. I remember the cake in which the rhubarb never really cooked, from which I learnt the pleasure of rhubarb *al dente*. The cake was made in the wrong sized tin and more or less fell out on to the cake plate in a blowzy sort of way. It was a big cake and there were only two of us, but it never stood a chance.

Rhubarb provides enormous possibilities to the adventurous cook: to those who find exhilaration in cooking well with what comes to hand, I hope this book will provide the wherewithal for further explorations of their own.

RHUBARB IN BRITAIN

As familiar as rhubarb may be to generations of Britons, it is a johnny-come-lately to the garden and table. We have been eating it for no more than two centuries, but for much, much longer we have been taking it as medicine. Its history, therefore, can sometimes be muddling and as a first step to sorting it out, I have laid out the essence of the article on the plant printed in volume 23 of the 1911 edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

RHUBARB.

The name is applied both to a drug and a vegetable.

The drug has been used in medicine from very early times, being described in the Chinese herbal *Pen-king*, which is believed to date from 2700 BC. The name seems to be a corruption of *Rheum barbarum* or *Reu barbarum*, a designation applied to the drug as early as the middle of the 6th century, and apparently identical with the ρηοv or ρα of Dioscorides, described by him as a root brought from beyond the Bosphorus. In the 14th century rhubarb appears to have found its way to Europe by way of the Indus and Persian Gulf to the Red Sea and Alexandria, and was therefore described as “East Indian” rhubarb. Some also came by way of Persia and the Caspian to Syria and Asia Minor, and reached Europe from the ports of Aleppo and Smyrna, and became known as “Turkey” rhubarb. Subsequently to the year 1653, when China first permitted Russia to trade on her frontiers, Chinese rhubarb reached Europe chiefly by way of Moscow; and in 1704 the rhubarb trade became a monopoly of the Russian government, in consequence of which the term “Russian” or “crown” rhubarb came to be applied to it. Urga was the great depot for the rhubarb trade in 1719,

but in 1728 the depot was transferred to Kiachta. All rhubarb brought to the depot passed through the hands of the government inspector; hence Russian rhubarb was invariably good and obtained a remarkably high price. This severe supervision naturally led, as soon as the northern Chinese ports were thrown open to European trade, to a new outlet being sought; and the increased demand for the drug at these ports resulted in less care being exercised by the Chinese in the collection and curing of the root, so that the rhubarb of good quality offered at Kiachta rapidly dwindled in quantity, and after 1860 Russian rhubarb ceased to appear in European commerce. Owing to the expense of carrying the drug across the whole breadth of Asia, and the difficulty of preserving it from the attacks of insects, rhubarb was formerly one of the most costly of drugs. In 1542 it was sold in France for ten times the price of cinnamon and four times that of saffron, and in an English price list bearing the date of 1657 it is quoted at 16s. per lb, opium being at that time only 6s. and scammony 12s. per lb.

...The botanical source of Chinese rhubarb cannot be said to have been as yet definitely cleared up by the actual identification of plants to be used for the purpose. *Rheum palmatum*, *R. officinale*, *R. palmatum*, var. *tanguticum*, *R. colinianum* and *R. Franzenbachii* have been variously stated to be the source of it, but the roots produced by these species under cultivation in Europe do not present the characteristic network of white veins exhibited by the best specimens of the Chinese drug.

...The most important constituent of this drug, giving it its purgative properties and its yellow colour, is chrysarobin.... The rhubarb of commerce also contains chrysophanic acid, a dioxymethyl anthraquinone ... of which chrysarobin is a reduction product.

...Rhubarb is produced in the four northern provinces

of China proper (Chih-li, Shan-se, Shen-se and Honan), in the north-west provinces of Kan-suh, formerly included in Shen-se, but now extending across the desert of Gobi to the frontier of Tibet, in the Mongolian province of Tsing-hai, including the salt lake Koko-nor, and the districts of Tangut, Sifan and Turfan, and in the mountains of the western provinces of Sze-chuen. Two of the most important centres of the trade are Sining-fu in the province of Kan-suh, and Kwanhien in Sze-chuen. From Shen-se, Kan-suh and Sze-chuen the rhubarb is forwarded to Hankow, and thence carried to Shanghai, whence it is shipped to Europe. Lesser quantities are shipped from Tien-tsin, and occasionally the drug is exported from Canton, Amoy, Fuh-chow and Ning-po.

Very little is known concerning the mode of preparing the drug for the market. According to Mr Bell, who on a journey from St Petersburg to Peking had the opportunity of observing the plant in a growing state, the root is not considered to be mature until it is six years old. It is then dug up, usually in the autumn, and deprived of its cortical portion and the smaller branches, and the larger pieces are divided in half longitudinally; these pieces are bored with holes and strung up on cords to dry, in some cases being previously subjected to a preliminary drying on stone slabs heated by fire underneath. In Bhutan the root is said to be hung up in a kind of drying room, in which a moderate heat is regularly maintained. The effect produced by the two drying processes is very different: when dried by artificial heat, the exterior of the pieces becomes hardened before the interior has entirely lost its moisture, and consequently the pieces decay in the centre, although the surface may show no change. These two varieties are technically known as kiln-dried and sun-dried; and it was on account of this difference in

quality that the Russian officer at Kiachta had every piece examined by boring a hole to its centre.

...As early as 1608 Prosper Alpinus of Padua cultivated as the true rhubarb a plant that is now known as *Rheum rhabonticum*, a native of southern Siberia and the basin of the Volga. This plant was introduced into England through Sir Matthew Lister, physician to Charles I, who gave the seed obtained by him in Italy to the botanist Parkinson. The culture of this rhubarb for the sake of the root was commenced in 1777 at Banbury, in Oxfordshire, by an apothecary named Hayward, the plants being raised from seed sent from Russia in 1762, and with such success that the Society of Arts awarded him a silver medal in 1789 and a gold one in 1794. The cultivation subsequently extended to Somersetshire, Yorkshire and Middlesex, but it is now chiefly carried on at Banbury. English rhubarb root is sold at a cheaper rate than the Chinese rhubarb, and forms a considerable article of export to America, and is said to be used in Britain in the form of powder which is of a finer yellow colour than that of Chinese rhubarb. The Banbury rhubarb appears to be a hybrid between *R. rhabonticum* and *R. undulatum* – the root, according to E. Colin, not presenting the typical microscopic structure of the former. More recently, good rhubarb has been grown at Banbury from *Rheum officinale*, but these two varieties are not equal in medicinal strength to the Chinese article.... In France, the cultivation of rhubarb was commenced in the latter half of the 18th century – *R. compactum*, *R. palmatum*, *R. rhabonticum* and *R. undulatum* being the species grown. The cultivation has, however, now nearly ceased, small quantities only being prepared at Avignon and a few other localities.

The cultivation of *Rheum compactum* was begun in Moravia in the beginning of the present century by Prikyl,

an apothecary in Austerlitz, and until about fifty years ago the root was largely exported to Lyons and Milan, where it was used for dyeing silk. As a medicine 5 parts are stated to be equal to 4 of Chinese rhubarb. Rhubarb root is also grown at Auspitz in Moravia and at Ilmitz, Kremnitz and Frauenkirchen in Hungary; *R. emodi* is said to be cultivated for the same purpose in Silesia.

Rhubarb is also prepared for use in medicine from wild species in the Himalayas and Java.

The rhubarb used as a vegetable consists of the leaf stalks of *R. rhabonticum* and its varieties, and *R. undulatum*. It is known in America as pie-plant. Plants are readily raised from seed, but strong plants can be obtained in a much shorter time by dividing the roots. Divisions or seedlings are planted about 3 ft. apart in ground which has been deeply trenched and manured, the crowns being kept slightly above the surface. Rhubarb grows freely under fruit-trees, but succeeds best in an open situation in rich, rather light soil. The stalks should not be pulled during the first season. If a top-dressing of manure be given each winter a plantation will last good for several years. Forced rhubarb is much esteemed in winter and early spring, and forms a remunerative crop. Forcing under glass or in a mushroom house is most satisfactory, but open-ground forcing may be effected by placing pots or boxes over the roots and burying in a good depth of stable litter and leaves. Several other species, such as *R. palmatum*, *R. officinale*, *R. nobile* and others, are cultivated for their fine foliage and handsome inflorescence, especially in wild gardens, margins of shrubberies and similar places. They succeed in most soils, but prefer a rich soil of good depth. They are propagated by seeds or by division.

All the chief facts of the plant's history are touched on here. Known to the ancients in both China and the Mediterranean, it

was valued as a remedy for a costive digestion, a purgative. And the useful part of the plant was not its stalk but its root. Most likely, the Greek physician Dioscorides (who flourished in Cilicia in the first century AD) obtained his supplies from regions to the east of the Black Sea rather than far-away China. The name rhubarb itself combines two elements: *rheon* or *rha* denoting the Volga basin, and *barbarum* referring to the barbarians who lived thereabouts. Species of rhubarb grew throughout central Asia, as far north as Siberia, but the Chinese root would be the most important, if only because the most efficacious. As a general rule, this Chinese medicinal rhubarb was *Rheum palmatum* and its cousins, while the early rhubarb grown closer to our European home was *R. rhabonticum* or *R. rhabarbarum*. This latter was smaller than the Chinese varieties, more stalky, less rooty. It is also important to stress, in the light of later botanical explorations and hypotheses, that rhubarb does not breed true from seed. The traffic in seeds, therefore, will often throw up false trails and anomalies.

That medical aspect of the plant need not detain us overlong. Its ramifications are detailed with affectionate brio by Professor Clifford M. Foust in his *Rhubarb: The Wondrous Drug*, published in 1992. But it is worth emphasizing that it was held in almost universal esteem in early-modern Europe and that it survives even today as the active ingredient of many Italian digestive bitters. An early reference to how it hit the spot is found in the Italian exile Giacomo Castelvetro's account of the greenstuffs of his homeland, dedicated in 1614 to Lucy, Countess of Bedford. By his lights, the cure he recounts was effected by raisins, but we know better: it was the powdered rhubarb.

I was once living in the neighbourhood of San Grigioni, in the small but pleasant village of Piuri, a mile and a half from the rather larger town of Chiavenna, when I was taken ill with a serious and dangerous affliction, an unbelievably unpleasant attack of constipation. It was

so bad that I went for ten or eleven days without relief, which when it came caused such intense pain that I do not believe a woman in childbirth could have suffered more than I. In this sorry state, hoping that God in His mercy might cure me, I took myself off on some errand or other to Chiavenna. When I got there I went straight to the pharmacy of Francesco Bottighisio of Bergamo. (This distinguished man was obliged to live in exile there because of his religious views.)

He greeted me affectionately and asked me kindly how I came to be so yellow and bloated, and when he heard about my affliction, smiled and said: 'There's no question but that with God's help I shall soon be able to clear this up for you; come back tomorrow for something I shall have got ready for you.' So I thanked him and went back to Piuri, and returned the next day to find that he had prepared a medicine for me in the following way: Take one ounce of raisins and soak them in dry, not sweet, malmsey. Drain them in a sieve, and when they have dried a little, mix them with a dram of powdered rhubarb.

I was to take some of these raisins when I got up in the morning and walk up and down the room chewing them, before swallowing them. This I did straight away, and after only one or two doses, I was completely cured of my unpleasant affliction. Ever since then, and that was over forty years ago, I have never been constipated for more than two or three days without relief.

That is all I have to say about this remedy, except that the dose is a spoonful, and that if I don't have any malmsey, I use a good white wine instead. I have, to my credit, used this medicine to help many a sufferer.

(Translated from the Italian by Gillian Riley.)

Doubtless the sweet raisins helped the rhubarbaric medicine go down. The pre-eminence of this sovereign remedy can be

gauged from the diaries of the Reverend James Woodforde, living in Norfolk in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. Whatever the ailment, the root was pressed into service. 'Briton [his servant] very poorly today, a violent purging which he is subject to some times. I gave him some Rhubarb, going to bed', he wrote in 1797. 'My Servant Man poorly this Afternoon. My Servant Maid very bad in a cold, coughed very Much to day, obliged to go to bed early to night. I gave them both at going to bed, a small dose of Rhubarb', was an entry in 1802. Parson Woodforde also supplies us with an early reference to eating rhubarb tarts. In 1793, after a busy day visiting friends and colleagues, he had for dinner, 'hashed Calfs Head and a fore Quarter of Lamb roasted & a Rhubarb Tart.'

The cultivation of rhubarb in the British Isles and the near Continent was at first bound up with this medicinal use. As noted above, the Chinese root was exceedingly dear. When the fashion for the remedy increased (and purgatives and cathartics were among the most important weapons in any apothecary's armoury, second only, perhaps, to quinine or Peruvian bark) so did the potential for a financial bonanza to whomever succeeded in first discovering, then growing the genuine plant closer to home. Eventually, people were convinced they had the original Chinese rhubarb and many efforts were made to develop a domestic industry, particularly by the Hayward family near Banbury and by the Superintendent of the Royal Botanic Garden in Edinburgh, Professor John Hope. People may have pursued its cultivation as an 'alternative' agricultural product; the Duke of Atholl, for example, had a large plantation at Blair Castle in Perthshire which he sold to an Edinburgh druggist (C. Anne Wilson, 1973). But the effective strength of any European root never matched that from China. Production continued, as did export of the medicine to the New World, but great wealth was not the consequence.

As they attempted to discover the true Chinese rhubarb, explorers and travellers, doctors and botanists combined in a

delightful virtual republic that stretched across the European worlds, exchanging seeds, reporting discoveries and suggesting alternatives. Some early seeds of *R. rhaponticum* (which was never the genuine Chinese article) came to England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The first importation was possibly by the physician, former Carthusian monk, traveller and ambassador at large Andrew Boorde who wrote in 1535 to Henry VIII's secretary of state Thomas Cromwell that he had 'sentt to your mastershepp the seedes of reuberbe, the which come owtt off barbaray.' What happened to these, no-one knows, and we had to wait until the contact of Sir Matthew Lister with the botanic garden in Padua during the next century before serious experiments could begin, mostly by the pioneering gardener and apothecary John Parkinson in his garden in Long Acre.

Matters got more exciting in the eighteenth century when travellers to Russia and beyond began to bring back news and specimens of more exotic varieties of the plant (much more likely to be the real thing), especially *R. undulatum* and *R. palmatum*. One of the earliest of these was John Bell of Antermony, a Scots physician who, like many of his countrymen, sought his fortune in Russia during the reign of Peter the Great. Bell was appointed physician to a Russian Embassy to China. On his journey he made an interesting observation:

I should not have mentioned an animal as well known as the marmot had it not been on account of the rhubarb. Where you see ten or twenty plants growing, you are sure of finding several burrows under the shades of their broad spreading leaves. Perhaps they may sometimes eat the leaves and roots of this plant. However, it is probable the manure they leave about the roots, contributes not a little to its increase ... it grows in tufts, at uncertain distances, as if the seeds had been dropped by design... and should it fall among the loose earth thrown up by the marmots, it immediately takes root, and produces a new plant.

Professor Foust thought Bell did not collect any seed. However, he was mistaken. Bell's account of his travels came out in 1763, and when in 1765 Professor John Hope, of the Royal Physic Garden in Edinburgh, wrote to congratulate him on his description of the true rhubarb, Bell wrote in reply,

In my return from China I brought some seeds home and sowed them in a pot ... [which were] afterwards transplanted into a border and prospered wonderfully. Last spring having occasion to make some alterations to my Garden, I removed the whole plant & was surprised to find such large roots, I dare say they weighed 7. or 8. lb. Weight ... I made no draft of the plant, nor have I seen any, neither have I seen any plant in Europe, save those at St. Petersburg, & 2. or 3. which I have spared to my friends. Mr. Miller of Chelsea told me he had sowed the seed more than once, but they never came up.

Bell returned from China about 1722 or 1723. His rhubarb had plenty of time to develop large roots by the time he dug it up – whenever that was. The Miller mentioned in his letter was Philip Miller, chief gardener at the Chelsea Physic Garden from 1722 and author of the most important eighteenth-century gardening book, *The Gardener's Dictionary* (1731). The mention given to rhubarb in this work would seem to confirm his failure to cultivate the new *R. undulatum* sent him by John Bell and shows the botanical muddle that surrounded the species. *Lapathum*, his name for the dock family with which he groups rhubarb, is nowadays more usually *Rumex*.

LAPATHUM, [takes its Name of the Greek word λαπαζω to *evacuate*, because the Root of this Plant purges the Belly: One Species of it is call'd *Hippolapathum*, of ιππος an *Horse*; and λαπαθον, as much as to say *Great Lapathum*: and another is call'd *Patience*, of its

gentle Virtue; and *Rhabarbarum Monachorum*, i.e. *Monks Rhubarb*.] The Dock.

The *Characters* are;

The Cup of the Flower consists of six Leaves, three of which are large, and of a red Colour; the other three are lesser, and green: In the middle of the Cup are placed six Stamina: The three outer small Leaves of the Cup fall away when ripe; but the three inner large Leaves join together, and form a triangular Covering, in the middle of which are contain'd shining three-corner'd Seeds.

There are great Varieties of these Plants, which are preserv'd in some Gardens, to increase their Number: but as many of them are very common in *England*, and, if transplanted into a good Garden, and permitted to scatter their Seeds, do become very troublesome Weeds; so I shall only name two or three of the most valuable Sorts in this Place.

1. LAPATHUM; *praestantissimum, Rhubarbarum officinarum dictum*. *Mor. Hist.* The Pontick Rhubarb.
2. LAPATHUM; *Alpinum, folio subrotundo*. *Mor. Hist.* Round-leav'd Alpine Dock, *by some call'd Monks Rhubarb*.
3. LAPATHUM; *hortense, folio oblongo, sive secundum Dioscoridis*. *C.B.P.* Long-leav'd Garden Dock, *or Patience*.

The first of the Plants is by some suppos'd to be the true *Rhubarb*. But that does not appear, from the Figure and Consistence of the Roots, which in this plant, however cultivated with us, is not of the same Colour; nor has it such a Resin as is found in the true; and the Shape of the Roots appear very different, as is also the Strength in Medicine: so that until the true *Rhubarb* is better known, there can little be said with Certainty on this Head.

The second Sort is sometimes cultivated in Gardens, for Medicinal Use; tho' there is a Dispute whether this be the true *Monks Rhubarb* or not: but there is no great

difference between the Roots of this Plant, and the other disputed Sort; so that either may be indifferently used.

The third Sort was formerly cultivated in Gardens as a Pot-herb; but of late Years it has been wholly disus'd for that Purpose, and now only preserv'd in Gardens for Medicinal Use.

These Plants are all easily propagated by sowing their Seeds in *Autumn*, soon after they are ripe, or early the succeeding *Spring*, in a rich, light, moist Soil, where they will grow to be very large, and, if singled out to the Distance of three Feet, will produce large strong Roots, which will be fit for Use the second Year after sowing; when they should be taken up soon after the Leaves are decay'd, and dry'd in a shady Place where the Air may freely pass between them.

Note that each of the three plants he describes, rhubarb, monk's rhubarb and patience, were grown for their roots. Just as the Chinese version, they would be dried and powdered, then deployed as a mild laxative or purge.

It was a few years after he wrote this that Miller began to have more success with new supplies of *R. undulatum*, drawn mostly from contacts at the botanic gardens of St Petersburg. Another Englishman who benefited from Russian supplies of seed was Peter Collinson. He was in touch with John Bartram, at the time America's most enterprising student of these matters and he thought to send him some seeds to try in the New World. The letter announcing this is a marvellous example of the freemasonry of enthusiasts that kept the ferment of discovery and botanic innovation alive in the eighteenth century. It is worth quoting in full but its length might test the reader's patience. The text is found in Darlington 1849, pp. 133–135, and the nub of the matter is in this paragraph:

London, September 2, 1739.

Dear Friend John [Peter Collinson was a Quaker]:

I have this day received a letter from Petersburg; and am assured, per Doctor Ammann, Professor of Botany there, that the Siberian Rhubarb is the true sort. I wish a quantity was produced with you, to try the experiment. Both this and the Rhapontic make excellent tarts, before most other fruits fit for that purpose are ripe. All you have to do, is to take the stalks from the root, and from the leaves; peel off the rind, and cut them in two or three pieces, and put them in crust with sugar and a little cinnamon; then bake the pie, or tart: eats best cold. It is much admired here, and has none of the effects that the roots have. It eats most like gooseberry pie.

This is the first mention we have of rhubarb tart in England. A printed recipe was not to appear for more than twenty years.

Before we leave these years of Georgian exploration – the necessary prelude to the arrival of rhubarb on our tables – we should mention another Scot, another doctor, who worked in Russia and returned from thence with a parcel of seed. He was James Mounsey (1709–1773), from Dumfriesshire. He served for many years in Russia, at first with the army under General Keith and later as personal physician to the Empress Elizabeth. Under her successor, Paul III, he was chief physician, privy councillor and medical director of the armed forces. When Paul was assassinated in 1762, Mounsey was dismissed by the Empress Catherine. Legend has it that the Scot was in such fear of the garrotte – after his protector’s own precipitate dispatch – that he escaped the country by faking his own death. Returning to his native heath, he built a handsome residence near Lockerbie (it still survives). Each room in the house had two doors (the extra one, they say, for a hasty escape should he be set upon by assassins). He also made extensive plantations of his new rhubarb (which was *R. palmatum*) while distributing seeds to

his learned acquaintance north and south of the border. Many would say that the most significant efforts to reduce the pre-eminence of China stem from this new importation. James Mounsey lives on. His ghost ('Old Jacobus') haunts the library of Rammerscales Mansion. When a teacher training college was evacuated there during the Second World War, students refused to occupy the house and slept for preference in the stables.

Perhaps they should have taken a dose of rhubarb to quiet their fluttering stomachs. These two new varieties of rhubarb, the *undulatum* and *palmatum*, were not really edible themselves, but when hybridized with the older breed *rhaponticum* (which had been growing in English gardens since those early seventeenth-century exchanges) they did offer a larger and more toothsome stalk to the cook's delight. This process of cross-breeding must have gone on through the middle of the eighteenth century, allowing the plant to be wholly domesticated by its closing years. Erasmus Darwin, father of Charles, put it succinctly (Darwin 1800, pp. 525–526):

The *rheum hybridum*, mule rhubarb, described in Murray's *Systema Vegetabilium*, edition the fourteenth, I believe to be produced between the palmated rhubarb, and the common rhubarb of our gardens, or *rheum rhaponticum*; as it appeared both in my garden and my neighbours amongst a mixture of those two kinds of rhubarb, without being previously placed or sown there. The leaf is very large and pointed, without being palmated, and is a week or two forwarder in the spring than either of the other rhubarbs, and the peeled stalks are asserted by connoisseurs in eating to make the best possible of all tarts, much superior to those of the palmated or raphontic rhubarb; and, are so much more valuable as a luxury, as they precede by a month the gooseberry and early apple; and may be well propagated by dividing the roots, as they do not produce seed in all summers.

The earliest recipe for rhubarb tart that I have so far found in an English cookery book is that by Hannah Glasse in her *Compleat Confectioner* of c. 1760. She is clearly aware that she is dealing with something novel. She writes, ‘these tarts may be thought very odd, but they are very fine ones and have a pretty flavour.’ So far as I am aware, they do not reappear in print until John Farley’s *The London Art of Cookery* which first appeared in 1783. The seventh edition of 1792 says:

Rhubarb Tarts.

Take the stalks of the rubarb that grows in the garden, peel it, and cut it into the size of a gooseberry, and make it as gooseberry tart.

This instruction, which gives hardly more detail than Peter Collinson’s in his letter to John Bartram, is repeated virtually word for word in the early editions of William Augustus Henderson’s *The Housekeeper’s Instructor* of the 1790s (save that he spells rhubarb as rheubarb). And it is the standard wording of many other tart recipes found in English cookery books of the turn of that century. It was not, however, until the first years of the following century that the trickle of suggestions grows to a flood, including tarts, pies, jams, wines and other things. Some of these pioneer recipes are reprinted in the chapters which follow.

Talking of pioneers, a cap should be doffed to that great original of Regency cooking, Dr William Kitchiner. His *Cook’s Oracle* (originally *Apicius Redivivus; or, The Cook’s Oracle*), first published in 1817 and repeatedly thereafter is perhaps the most entertaining and, dare I say it, most instructive of manuals of this era. His recipes regarding ‘spring fruit’, i.e. rhubarb, are worth quoting in full, in preference to scattering them through the relevant chapters. The text is that printed for the new edition of 1829.

TO DRESS SPRING FRUIT.

SPRING FRUIT SOUP.

Peel and well wash four dozen sticks of Rhubarb; blanch it in water three or four minutes; drain it on a sieve, and put it into a stew-pan, with two Onions sliced, a Carrot, an ounce of lean Ham, and a good bit of Butter; let it stew gently over a slow fire till tender; then put in two quarts of good *Consommé*, to which add two or three ounces of Bread-crumbs; boil about fifteen minutes; skim off all the fat; season with salt and Cayenne pepper; pass it through a tamis, and serve up with fried bread.

SPRING FRUIT PUDDING.

Clean as above three or four dozen sticks of Rhubarb; put it in a stew-pan, with the peel of a Lemon, a bit of Cinnamon, two Cloves, and as much moist sugar as will sweeten it; set it over a fire, and reduce it to a marmalade; pass it through a hair-sieve; then add the peel of a Lemon, and half a Nutmeg grated, a quarter of a pound of good Butter, and the yolks of four Eggs and one white, and mix all well together; line a pie-dish (that will just contain it) with good puff paste; put the mixture in, and bake it half an hour.

SPRING FRUIT – A MOCK GOOSEBERRY SAUCE FOR MACKEREL, &c.

Make a Marmalade of three dozen sticks of Rhubarb, sweetened with moist Sugar; pass it through a hair-sieve, and serve up in a sauce-boat.

SPRING FRUIT TART.

Prepare Rhubarb as above; cut it into small pieces into a Tart-dish; sweeten with Loaf-Sugar pounded; cover it with a good short crust paste; sift a little Sugar over

the top, and bake half an hour in a rather hot oven: serve up cold.

SPRING FRUIT SHERBET.

Boil six or eight sticks of Rhubarb (quite clean) ten minutes in a quart of water; strain the liquor through a tamis into a jug, with the peel of a lemon cut very thin, and two table-spoonsful of clarified Sugar; let it stand five or six hours, and it is fit to drink.

Most interesting is his suggestion that you should substitute gooseberry with rhubarb for a mackerel sauce. His soup, like Stephana Malcolm's spring soup in the soup chapter, but not like many of those northern European spring fruit soups, is made from savoury ingredients.

The common view is that rhubarb would never have gained culinary traction had it not been for the rapid decline in the price of sugar from the later eighteenth century. This, it's true, must have helped. But the development of more palatable hybrids must have been more significant – as was the entry of rhubarb into urban produce markets. After all, English people had been coping with the sourest of ingredients since time immemorial: barberries, green gooseberries, crab apples, various sorts of wild plum – none of these was sweetly toothsome.

Another important preliminary to the acceptance of the plant as a foodstuff was that the cook should be clear that the stalk might be edible, but the leaf was not. The oxalic acid (present in many other plants such as spinach and sorrel, even tea) contained in the broad leaves of the rhubarb was sufficient, perhaps, to kill, certainly to make unwell (the acid has most effect on the kidneys). Current American medical websites remark, 'Deaths have been reported, but are rare.' The University of Idaho reports that the death of a goat was put down to its voracious demolition of a rhubarb patch when it escaped its paddock, but goats are like that. This distinction

between stalk and leaf was not always appreciated by earlier writers. Professor Foust remarks that some in the sixteenth-century suggested using rhubarb as if it were spinach or beet greens. Gerard's *Herbal* (in the 1636 edition) suggests that the leaves might be eaten like spinach, and John Parkinson wrote in 1629 that the leaves had a highly refined and acid flavour. John Gerard's grand anecdote concerning the medicinal use of the leaves is probably nearer the mark. A Maidstone surgeon had a butcher's boy with a bad case of ague. As a cure, 'he tooke out of his garden three or fower leaves of the plant of rubarbe, which myselfe had among other simples given him, which he stamped and strained with a draught of ale, and gave it the ladde in the morning to drinke: it wrought extremely downwarde and upwarde within one hower after, and never ceased untill night.' (As well it might.) Thomas Jefferson, when noting work done in his vegetable garden at Monticello in Virginia, remarked that in 1809 he sowed one row of *Rheum undulatum*, 'the leaves excellent as Spinach'. This misapprehension died hard. In the first edition of *Larousse Gastronomique* (1938), the editors remark that the leaves eat like spinach. Waverley Root's fine dictionary of food (1980) notes that the French *Dictionnaire de l'Académie des Gastronomes* was still claiming, as late as 1962, that the leaves 'are treated like spinach. The taste does not please everybody; but there is at least agreement on finding it refreshing.' 'Agreement among survivors, one supposes,' Root laconically comments. Professor Foust has located a discussion of rhubarb from the superintendent of exotics at the gardens of Versailles in a letter to the English botanist Anthony Fothergill in 1785. They had made successfully a marmalade of the stalks, which they found acted as a mild laxative: this anticipates the principal use of rhubarb stalks in French cookery, as a compôte or candied sweetmeat, their purpose largely medicinal. 'The superintendent also reported,' Foust goes on, 'the use of leaves in soups "to which they impart an agreeable acidity, like that of sorrel".'

If we have now progressed as far as a decent plant, a recipe or two and a general idea that rhubarb would make a satisfactory spring fruit (even if, pedantically, it was thought a vegetable) we still have to see supplies in the markets. This omission was rectified by an enterprising south-London gardener called Joseph Myatt in 1808 or 1809. His achievement was later recorded by the indefatigable Henry Mayhew (1861, vol. 1, p. 84):

I may instance the introduction of rhubarb, which was comparatively unknown until Mr. Myatt, now of Deptford, cultivated it thirty years ago. He then, for the first time, carried seven bundles of rhubarb into the Borough market. Of these he could only sell three, and he took four back with him. Mr. Myatt could not recollect the price he received for the first rhubarb he ever sold in public, but he told me that the stalks were only about half the substance of those he now produces. People laughed at him for offering “physic pies,” but he persevered.

This little paragraph underlines the significant role played by a single grower; it also stresses how rapid improvements of breeding and selection were undertaken by Myatt and his competitors in the first years of commercial exploitation of the plant. An infinite number of new varieties were developed – so infinite, indeed, that the Royal Horticultural Society had to intervene in 1884 to bring taxonomic order to the nurserymen’s chaos. By mid-century, Mayhew estimated that 7,200 dozen bunches of rhubarb were sold at Covent Garden, 48,000 at Borough market in Southwark, 28,800 at Spitalfields, 2,400 at Farringdon close to the City, and 4,800 dozen at Portman market in the West End. This would seem to confirm Mayhew’s

own assessment that rhubarb was more food for the common man than something to adorn dainty tables in Mayfair. Another Victorian journalist, George Dodd (1856), reported that 2,100 tons of rhubarb were sold in London markets in 1850, of which only 150 tons were purveyed through Covent Garden.

Myatt was renowned both for his rhubarb and his strawberries. The two fruits go well together, as you can see from the recipes. By coincidence, another Victorian family of nurserymen, the Osbaldestons of Baguley in Cheshire, specialized in the same pair. John Osbaldeston was the first to supply rhubarb to Manchester, in 1833. He maintained a virtual monopoly for many years. Fifty years on, the firm was to pioneer the commercial growing of strawberries in the region (Scola 1992).

Mayhew sensed that rhubarb was part of a broader process of change in the diet of the Victorian urban consumer. He made a perceptive comment (1861, vol. 1, p. 159):

A gentleman ... considers that the great change [in street trading in the previous fifty years] is not so much in what has ceased to be sold, but in the introduction of fresh articles into street-traffic – such as pine-apples and Brazil-nuts, rhubarb and cucumbers, ham-sandwiches, ginger-beer, &c.

One reason for nurserymen to experiment with new varieties was to improve sweetness and delicacy of flavour: to distance rhubarb from ‘physic pie’. The single most important discovery, quite early in the century, was finding that rhubarb could be forced, accelerating its arrival in the shops, and reducing its astringency. As with so much about this plant, it was by way of an accident. A bed of rhubarb in the Chelsea Physic Garden was buried beneath spoil thrown up by workmen digging a trench in 1815. When they came to remove the debris, it was found the stalks were blanched, sweeter and more tender. It took little time for more organized trials to be undertaken and there were

many contributions to the trade literature of the time on the best method of forcing. In the main, the preferred systems involved large boxes or frames piled with compost and manure to promote heat, or large pots put in the vine house or some such shelter, or boxes placed in the mushroom cellar. These were all more or less elaborate schemes that differ only from open-ground forcing under inverted pots or dustbins which we are familiar with in our own back gardens in that a certain amount of heat was involved. If you want to get proper early crops, you have to have the roots at 55 to 65 degrees Fahrenheit.

The big innovation in forcing occurred in West Yorkshire, in an area now called 'The Rhubarb Triangle' (more exactly a square) between the towns of Leeds, Wakefield, Bradford and Rothwell. Rhubarb was marketed outside London. I have already mentioned the Osbaldeston family in Manchester; there were large supplies available in Edinburgh; Birmingham had growers sending into the markets from at least the 1820s; and the earliest grower in Leeds was one Appleby of Hunslet in 1819. In the late 1870s, however, Joseph Whitwell of Kirkstall (a Leeds suburb) took the forcing business one step further by constructing sheds devoted only to growing rhubarb. Yorkshire was an ideal situation. The soil was good; there were plentiful and cheap supplies of coal to heat the forcing sheds; there was lots of manure and composting material available from the horse-drawn traffic of the town, the sewage works and slaughterhouses, and particularly the woollen mills for shoddy and other by-products all of which contributed nitrogen. And the climate was perfect for rhubarb. A touch of frost in the autumn would get the roots into top condition for bringing on in the sheds.

This happy combination of agricultural circumstance gave rise to much activity. The Yorkshire season was early: sticks could be in the market before Christmas. The district was soon the preferred London supplier and many farmers in the Triangle built sheds and turned their land over to it. Every week-night

during the three-month season, a train left Ardsley station laden with up to 200 tons of produce. The last Rhubarb Express left in 1966. There used once to be up to 200 growers but there are now 'around ten', and there were still more than a thousand acres given over to the crop in 1966 (it is now down to less than 400).

Roots that are to be forced are usually two or three years old. They will not have been previously cropped. They do best if they are exposed to some hard frosts before being brought indoors for forcing. The roots are then only harvested for one year. A well-grown root of the Victoria variety might weigh between 28 and 56 lb. (And a recycled orange box of sticks ready for the market weighed 84 lb until the Leeds and District Market Gardeners Association redesigned the boxes to weigh only 14 lb.) Oldroyd's, one of the champions and stalwarts of the trade in Yorkshire, also remark on their website that they only crop their outdoor roots for three years before replacement.

The rhubarb trade over the last century or more has depended on the improved varieties that were developed from the 1850s, although plant breeding and selection has carried on, most notably at the Stockbridge horticultural research and development station at Cawood, near Selby. Their modern varieties, Stockbridge Cropper, Stockbridge Arrow, Stockbridge Guardsman and Cawood Delight are well regarded. Two of the oldest varieties, Prince Albert and Victoria, are those selected by Joseph Myatt himself, while a gardening neighbour in south London is credited with Hawkes' Champagne. Ben Asquith of Brandy Carr Nurseries, whose website is informative, says that his forebears (who began forcing rhubarb during the First World War) relied on Prince Albert, Victoria, Fenton's Special – a variety named for the Fenton family who grew rhubarb at Tingley in Morley in the 1930s – and Grey Giant. An important modern variety is Timperley Early.

Although rhubarb has come once more into favour, as chefs and cookery writers seek unfamiliar flavours and combinations

to tickle our palates, there was a pronounced decline in its popularity in the middle years of the twentieth century. The reasons advanced are various. Yorkshire growers tell of the decimation of their resources during the Second World War by a Ministry of Food eager to utilize every spare ingredient. In the first instance, fuel and fertilising materials were harder to come by in the war years; in the second, Ministry officials noticed that the growers left young roots to flourish unharvested. This was essential to their successful forcing in their third year of life. However, the Ministry insisted that they be cropped and the sticks pulped for jam. This meant there were no roots in proper condition for forcing. If this were not enough, the tremendous accession of new fruits and sub-tropical produce in British markets in the '50s and '60s meant that rhubarb had serious, and sweet, competition. We lost our taste for it.

Without doubt, the British adopted rhubarb with greater enthusiasm, and earlier, than most other countries. But the recipes I have collected here make plain that its cookery was not confined to Britain alone. First there was the Empire, old and new. Plants and seed went to America and later in the nineteenth century much work was done by plant breeders such as Luther Burbank to develop new varieties. Burbank took advantage of the fact that rhubarb had followed the English settlers to Australia and New Zealand in the southern hemisphere. Their plants were acclimatized to the seasons in reverse and he capitalized on this to breed winter-cropping varieties for America which reached the market much earlier than competitors. California became an important centre for early rhubarb production although today most is grown in the northern states of Washington, Oregon and Michigan.

In Europe, too, rhubarb was embraced as a new ingredient, especially in northern countries. In France, Spain and Italy, its appearance usually had medicinal undertones, although in the 1960s and 1970s it began to be adopted by *nouvelle cuisine* chefs such as Alain Chapel and the Troisgros brothers, each

of whom included recipes for tarts in their ground-breaking books. More recently, the chefs who have led the latest changes in restaurant cooking, such as Ferran Adrià in Spain (and Heston Blumenthal in England), have not been shy of experimenting. In the Low Countries, Germany and Scandinavia – as well as in parts of eastern Europe – rhubarb was widely adopted in the nineteenth century and recipes that have met with success in these countries are included in the anthology which follows.

SABZI RAHWASH, SPINACH WITH RHUBARB AND DILL

In the same way as their Persian neighbours, the Afghans use rhubarb in savoury dishes. This recipe comes from Helen Saberi's description of their cookery in *Noshe Djan, Afghan Food and Cookery*. She notes it can be served with a *pilau* or a *qorma* or meat stew. The leeks in the recipe should in reality be an Afghan vegetable, *gandana*, which is akin to Chinese chives. Some European cooks replace them with spring onions, but Helen advises leeks.

99 g / 2 lb spinach
450 g / 1 lb leeks, cleaned and chopped
75 ml / 5 tbsp vegetable oil
2 tbsp powdered dill weed
salt and pepper
50 g / 2 oz rhubarb

Wash the spinach thoroughly, remove the stems and chop roughly. Wash the leeks well and chop into small pieces.

Heat 50 ml / 2 tbsp of vegetable oil in a pan and fry the leeks over a medium to high heat. When they are soft but not brown, add the spinach and stir continuously until the spinach reduces. Reduce the heat, cover, and continue to cook gently, stirring occasionally, until the oil comes to the surface. Then add the dill, salt and pepper. Add a little water if necessary.

While the spinach is cooking, skin and wash the rhubarb and cut it into 2.5 cm / 1 in. lengths. Fry it briefly in the remaining 25 ml / 2 tbsp of oil over a medium heat, without letting it brown, then add it to the spinach and cook for a further half an hour or until it is sufficiently cooked.

RHUBARB AND POTATOES

This Polish recipe combines rhubarb and new potatoes. It comes from the classic domestic handbook by Maria Ochorowicz-Monatowa, *Universalna ksiazka kucharska*, first published in 1910.

<i>5 stalks of rhubarb</i>	Broth
<i>450 g / 1 lb of new potatoes</i>	<i>2 cups of water</i>
<i>1 tbsp butter</i>	<i>6 dried mushrooms</i>
<i>1 tbsp flour</i>	<i>1 onion, sliced</i>
<i>1 heaped tsp chives, chopped</i>	<i>1 bay leaf</i>
<i>1 clove of garlic, crushed</i>	<i>a few sprigs of dill</i>
<i>salt and pepper</i>	<i>salt and pepper</i>

Let the broth simmer about half an hour to extract the flavour from the mushrooms.

Wash and clean the rhubarb and cut it into 2.5 cm / 1 inch slices and put it in the broth. When it is tender, drain and reserve the liquid. Meanwhile, boil the potatoes separately.

In a third saucepan, make a roux by browning the butter, then adding the flour and cooking it well. Add a cup of the broth and stir until it is smooth. If it is too thick add more broth. Add chives and crushed garlic. Season to taste. Add the rhubarb and potatoes to the sauce and cook gently until thoroughly heated.

FRUIT MOOS

This recipe is inspired by the Mennonite *More-with-Less Cookbook* by Doris Longacre, published in 1976. The author was anxious to show there was more to food than high-protein, meat-based dishes and drew largely on German, Polish and Russian traditions. The *Moos* (a German word) was akin to northern European fruit soups and was usually made with dried fruits, or tart fruits like gooseberries, plums or cherries. It could be served alongside a meat course of ham and fried potatoes or as a sweet dish to finish the meal. It was popular for Sundays as it could be made the day before, avoiding the need to cook on the Sabbath. Mennonites are strict Protestant Anabaptists named for their teacher Menno Simons (*d.* 1561). The Amish are Mennonite at root. The first Mennonites were in Switzerland and Germany but spread eastwards, due to persecution, and later came to America, where they flourish today.

1 quart of rhubarb, prepared and cut into short lengths
700 ml / 1 ½ pints milk or water
100 g / 4 oz honey or castor sugar
4 tbsp cornflour
300 ml / 10 fl oz double cream

Heat in a heavy pan the fruit, water or milk and honey or sugar. Simmer gently until the fruit is tender.

Slake the cornflour with some cold milk in a small bowl. Add the cream and mix to a paste. Pour this into the simmering fruit and cook over a low heat until it thickens. Should it need extra sweetness, you can add more honey or sugar. It can be served hot or cold.

RHUBARB MINT SALAD

I first came across this pleasing combination in Nathalie Hambro's imaginative book *Particular Delights* (1981). It can be made more of a composition by mixing rhubarb with cucumber and adding some leaves of rocket along with the mint. Other people suggest a salad of rhubarb, mint and melon as being refreshing, aromatic and all that a salad should be. Another combination of rhubarb and mint can be seen in the rhubarb jelly recipe at the end of the chapter on jams.

500 g / 1 lb forced rhubarb stems
1 tsp brown sugar
1 tbsp red wine vinegar
5 tbsp extra virgin olive oil
salt and pepper
10 mint leaves

Slice the rhubarb finely and put it in a serving dish. Strew it with brown sugar. Marinate for an hour. Make the dressing and pour it over the sugar and rhubarb. Shred the mint and scatter over the salad immediately before serving.

RHUBARB AND LENTIL DIP

This is a recipe with a delicate flavour and it is best to add the ingredients cautiously to get the right balance.

75 g / 3 oz brown lentils

1 small carrot, cleaned and roughly sliced

1 small onion, peeled and sliced

cottage cheese

lemon juice

1 or 2 sticks of rhubarb, chopped

salt, pepper and granulated sugar

1 tsp mint, chopped

Pour near-boiling water over the lentils and let them soak for at least half an hour. Cook them gently with the carrot and onion until tender.

Strain off the excess water and add an equal quantity of cottage cheese, or slightly less, and a squeeze of lemon juice. Add 1 or 2 sticks of finely chopped rhubarb and liquidize. Season with salt, sugar, and freshly ground black pepper. Top with chopped mint. Serve with crisps or sticks of cucumber or celery.

RHUBARB RUSSE

This recipe was offered by the *Fair Isle Times* on 15 June, 1984.

450 g / 1 lb rhubarb
50 g / 2 oz granulated sugar
2 egg yolks
50 g / 2 oz castor sugar
225 ml / 8 fl oz milk
12 g / ½ oz gelatine
18 sponge fingers
the grated rind and juice of 1 orange
150 ml / 5 fl oz pint double cream, whipped
1 orange, sliced

Wipe and slice the rhubarb. Mix with the granulated sugar in a saucepan over a gentle heat until the sugar dissolves. Simmer until the fruit is tender. Put through a food mill or otherwise purée. Cool and reserve.

Cream the yolks and the castor sugar until light-coloured and creamy. Stir in the milk. Cook in a bowl over pan of boiling water till thickened. Make sure the custard never boils itself.

Whisk the gelatine into the hot custard until it is completely dissolved, then cool.

Dip the sponge fingers in orange juice. Stand them around the sides of a 1.25 litre/2.25 pint buttered soufflé dish. Mix the rest of juice, the grated rind and the rhubarb purée into the custard.

Fold in the double cream; pour into the dish; and chill until set. Now, carefully trim the protruding tops of the sponge fingers.

If you want to serve it straight away, dip the dish into hot water to turn it out. Decorate with overlapping orange slices. You can freeze this charlotte, well wrapped of course, and for best results use within 2 months.

RUBY FRUIT SALAD

A friend living in Tokyo, Susan Ugawa, sent me this recipe. She advises using red-stemmed rhubarb. The salad usefully turns small quantities of fruit from your own garden into a stunning looking dish with a fresh flavour. If your children have grown the raspberries and strawberries, and there aren't enough to go round the family, this will make the most of them. It is also easy enough to be made by the children themselves, though the amount of fruit might diminish in the making.

350 g / 12 oz prepared rhubarb cut in 2 cm / $\frac{3}{4}$ inch lengths
100 g / 4 oz granulated sugar
225 g / 8 oz raspberries
225 g / 8 oz strawberries
3 tbsp water

Put the rhubarb in a saucepan with the sugar and water. Bring to the boil and simmer until barely tender, stirring continuously – this will take only a few minutes. Add the raspberries and cook for a further few minutes. Turn into a serving dish and add the strawberries when the cooked fruit becomes cooler. Chill well before serving with whipped cream.

Just before serving, a little whisky or brandy may be stirred in.

RHUBARB CRANACHAN

A fund-raising pamphlet for Sand Church was the source of this recipe. The parish church in the westside of Shetland is the smallest on the island. My daughter, who tested the instructions, put some of the sugar with the oatmeal or sesame and grilled them together. It can also be made with whipping cream and Greek yoghurt. A classic cranachan or cream-crowdie will take its sweetness from heather honey, and spice things up a little with whisky or Drambuie.

450 g / 1 lb rhubarb, wiped and cut into pieces
1–2 tbsps granulated sugar, to taste
50 g / 2 oz medium oatmeal or sesame seeds
300 ml / 10 fl oz double cream
150 ml / 5 fl oz fromage frais
25–50 g castor sugar

Stew the rhubarb, adding sugar to taste. Toast oatmeal or sesame seeds under a preheated grill until lightly browned. Whisk cream until it is holding its shape. Fold in the fromage frais, sugar and all but two tablespoons of the oatmeal or sesame seeds. Layer the rhubarb and cream mixture, then sprinkle over the remaining oatmeal or sesame seeds.

Sandsting Specials

RHUBARB MERINGUE

The idea of rhubarb meringue has been around for some time. May Byron had a recipe in her *Pudding Book* (1917) which entailed blind-baking a crust over an upside-down pie-plate then filling the cooled shell with fruit topped with meringue. It went like this:

Bake the crust on an inverted pie-plate. To prepare the filling, cut the rhubarb into inch lengths, put a layer into a saucepan, and sprinkle with sugar; add other layers of rhubarb and sugar, and cook till tender, using one cup of sugar to each pound of rhubarb. To each scant pint of cooked rhubarb add the juice of half a lemon and the well-beaten yolks of two eggs; pour the mixture into the baked crust, and set in the oven until the eggs have thickened the mixture. Spread a meringue made of the two whites of eggs over the top of the rhubarb, and brown delicately in the oven.

Lydia Strong, in a fund-raising cookery book for St Andrew's Church in Penrith, Cumbria (which has a most amazing eighteenth-century interior, designed by Nicholas Hawksmoor in 1720), made the following proposal for a rhubarb meringue without the pastry case.

*450 g / 1 lb rhubarb
the grated rind and the juice of an orange
2 eggs, separated
100 g / 4 oz sugar
35 g / 1½ oz cornflour*

Cut up the rhubarb and put it in a greased dish with the grated orange rind. Put the juice in a pot with enough water to make 15 fl oz. Mix 50 g / 2 oz sugar and cornflour, slake with the liquid and heat. Stir until thick. Let it cool. Add the beaten yolks. Pour this over the rhubarb. Preheat your oven to 170°C/325°F/gas mark 3 and bake for 20 minutes. Whisk the whites until stiff, then fold in the rest of the sugar. Spread over the rhubarb and continue to cook (for about 20 minutes) until the meringue has browned on its peaks.

St. Andrew's Recipe Book 2004

NANCY'S RHUBARB AND YOGHURT FOOL

This recipe is another from New Zealand. The authors estimate it will serve eight people.

*500 g / 1 lb prepared rhubarb
60 g / 2 oz castor sugar
200 ml / 7 fl oz plain yoghurt
300 ml / ½ pint double cream
dark chocolate or crystallized ginger*

Cut the rhubarb into small pieces and place in an oven-proof dish with 30 g / 1 oz of castor sugar and the butter and cook until tender. Purée in a blender.

Beat the yoghurt and cream with 30 g castor sugar until slightly thicker than the purée. Mix all together gently. Pour into dessert glasses and chill. Decorate with grated chocolate or finely chopped ginger.

‘A refreshing, simple but glamorous dessert.’

Mary Browne, Helen Leach and Nancy Titchbourne 1980

BURNT RHUBARB AND ORANGE CREAM

This recipe can be made with thick Greek yoghurt or with whipped cream. If the latter, less is required. I like to make this a day in advance. It does not separate out.

*125 g / 4 oz rhubarb, wiped and chopped small
50 g / 2 oz granulated sugar
the grated rind and the juice of an orange
300 ml / 8 oz Greek yoghurt or 150 ml / 4 oz cream
muscovado sugar*

Put the rhubarb and half the sugar in an oven-proof dish and sprinkle it with a dessertspoon of the orange juice; cover and cook in a lowish oven until tender. Cool and spoon off as much of the liquid that will have come out of the fruit to make up 50–75 ml when added to the remaining orange juice. Place the remaining sugar in a medium-sized saucepan, about 7 inches across, and heat it until it caramelizes. Immediately add about two-thirds of the liquid, stirring vigorously, and reduce it for about two minutes over a lowered heat. Watch for splashes and splatters. Cool this caramel and add the grated rind to it. Fold the rhubarb pulp and then the burnt orange gently into the yoghurt or whipped cream. Aim to distribute the pulp and the orange through the mixture without homogenizing it, so that it is instead streaky. Dish into four small bowls and sprinkle with muscovado sugar.

Something of the same idea, but different of course, can be found in a book by Caroline Waldegrave, Puff Fairclough and Janey Orr called *Leith's Easy Dinners*, a useful compendium from the cookery school of that name. Here the rhubarb is stewed with some orange peel and orange flower water, then shared between ramekins, topped with dark brown sugar and grated orange rind, and finished with Greek yoghurt and cream.

CAIRGEIN WITH RHUBARB

Cairgein is the Gaelic word for the seaweed known elsewhere as Irish moss or carrageen. I found the recipe in a publicity leaflet put out by a North Uist company, Hebridean Health Ltd. Carrageen has the ability to set food, much like agar-agar which comes from a related seaweed. It has often been favoured by vegetarians. The recipe does not give much idea of how to deal with the cairgein. It can be bought ready to cook in packs of about 25 g or 1 oz. First you soak it in cold water until it is soft, then simmer it in the water as in the recipe for about 20 minutes before straining it into the fruit purée.

500 g / 1 lb rhubarb, wiped and sliced

600 ml / 1 pint water

ginger or cloves

sugar and honey to taste

7 g / 2 tsp cairgein

Put the rhubarb in a small amount of the water and add flavourings such as cloves or ginger according to taste. Cook until broken down into a purée.

Simultaneously soak the cairgein in cold water. Then use the rest of the water to simmer it for 20 minutes. Strain it into the rhubarb. Mix thoroughly, and add sugar or honey according to taste. Put it in a mould that has been rinsed in cold water and chill until it is set (about 3 hours).

This use of seaweed to set a mould finds an echo in a vegetarian recipe book emanating from a holiday hotel or guest-house called Penlee in the South Devon village of Stoke Fleming that catered for the *bien pensant*, vegetarian and left-wing élite of Britain in the early years of the twentieth century. It is surprising how often the place crops up in the memoirs of old Labour politicians: sandals and short trousers by the seaside. The noted architect Clough Williams-Ellis (creator of Portmeirion) designed alterations to the house at Penlee.

1 ½ pounds of rhubarb, weighed after trimming
¾ pound of loaf sugar
half a lemon
½ ounce of agar-agar
1 gill of water
a little carmine [cochineal]

METHOD. – Wipe the rhubarb and cut it into pieces about ½ inch long. Put it in a Welbank or casserole with the grated lemon-rind, sugar, and half the water. Stew gently until tender, then rub through a fine wire sieve. Cut up the agar-agar and boil in the rest of the water. Strain it into the rhubarb-pulp, adding a few drops of carmine to colour. Rinse out the mould with cold water, pour in the rhubarb, and leave until it is cold. Serve with boiled custard.

Rhubarb makes a sensational jelly. Its delicately pink hues sparkle and glow in the soft light of the dinner table. It is possible to make the jelly clear by stewing champagne rhubarb and straining off the juice which can then be set with gelatine. Alternatively, a mould filled with the rhubarb pieces themselves can be set and turned out wobbling onto a dish. May Byron suggests you do it this way:

RHUBARB JELLY (PLAIN)

Cut one pound of rhubarb into inch-lengths, place in a baking-dish in alternate layers with sugar (one breakfastcupful will suffice). Add one cupful of cold water, the thinly peeled rind of one lemon, and a little syrup of preserved ginger or a small piece of root-ginger. Bake until the rhubarb is tender but not broken. Remove the rind and root. Soak one ounce of gelatine in half a cupful of cold water and stand this in hot water till it dissolves. Strain it into the rhubarb, add juice of one lemon, and pour into a wetted mould, a little at a time, letting [it] set a little before adding more, otherwise the rhubarb will all sink to the bottom.

RHUBARB JELLY (VERY CLEAR)

The Cookery Book of Lady Clark of Tillypronie, arranged and edited by Catherine Frances Frere and published in 1909, is a treasure-trove of late-Victorian kitchen lore and remarkably comprehensive in its range. Her recipe for a clear rhubarb jelly (not the fruit-filled one given above) is full of sound advice. The recipe was given to Lady Clark, the book records, by one Mrs Brinkler in 1883.

Do not spare the rhubarb as the juice only is used.

Stew the rhubarb in but little water, as it is in itself three parts water. Strain two or three times through a jelly-bag till the juice runs quite clear, and use 1 white of egg to clarify it. Add, for 1 qt. of jelly $\frac{1}{2}$ lb. of sugar, and 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ ozs. of gelatine. If you want colour, add 3 drops of cochineal. If you bury the jelly in ice, use less gelatine. (1 oz. of gelatine *very much iced* is enough for a mould.)

You pour the jelly into a ring mould and put it on the ice, and you fill the hollow centre of the jelly before serving, with Chantilly cream flavoured with pounded vanilla.

(For stewed rhubarb, or for tarts, should the acid be objected to, first boil the rhubarb in water, and *throw that water away*; finish in fresh water, and do not sweeten the rhubarb till you use this second water.)

RHUBARB GINGER CRUNCH

In June 1984, *The Fair Isle Times* was waxing lyrical about rhubarb. I have already given you their lattice fruit tart, but two weeks later, the editor saw fit to print this proposal for rhubarb ginger crunch.

The name raises the vexed question of the precise identity of all these crunches, crumbles, cobblers, bettys and crisps (and if you are American, slumps, pandowdys and grunts for good measure). The crunch we're dealing with here reminds me of those 1950s cheesecake recipes that depended on a crust of crushed biscuits. In some respects, too, it is rather like a crumble pie with its top and bottom layers. Some crunches are not made with biscuit but rather with oatmeal.

For a handy shorthand, crumbles are topped with a crumbly pastry mixture and sometimes with oatmeal; cobblers are a fruit stew with dumplings made of biscuit dough; a crisp is pretty much like a crumble but made with a streusel dough (this the *Oxford Companion to Food* would claim to be the Central European original of the crumble topping, made with more sugar and less flour; crumbles, the *Companion* remarks, are a twentieth-century phenomenon). A betty is made up of layers of baked fruit and breadcrumbs; a crunch is a crumble with two layers of crumb (whether biscuit or oatmeal) sandwiching the fruit filling. Grunt, pandowdy and slump are American 'spoon pies': grunts are steamed; slumps can be steamed or baked. Pandowdys would appear to be a pie with a broken crust made from biscuit dough.

300 g / 10 oz gingernuts, crushed
100 g / 4 oz butter, melted
350 g / 12 oz rhubarb, prepared
100 g / 4 oz castor sugar
1 tbsp water
2 eggs, separated
200 g / 8 oz cream cheese
2 tbsp ginger jam
12 g / ½ oz gelatine dissolved in a tbsp hot water, cooled
150 ml / 5 fl oz double cream
1 piece stem ginger, sliced

Mix the biscuits and the butter. Press half of this mixture firmly into the base of a greased 10 cm / 8 inch loose-bottomed tin. Chill.

Gently heat the rhubarb, sugar and water until boiling. Simmer until syrupy. Purée. Cool. Beat the egg yolks, cream cheese and ginger jam until smooth; then add the rhubarb and the softened gelatine. Whip the double cream to a soft peak and fold into your mixture. Whisk the egg whites until stiff and fold these in. Pour all this on to the crumb base. Chill until set.

Sprinkle with the remaining crumbs, pressing them on lightly so as not to damage the filling. Remove the cake carefully from the tin. Decorate with stem ginger.

Fair Isle Times, 15 June 1984

RHUBARB AND GINGER JAM

This is the commonest form in the north of Scotland. Here is the recipe as it was given me by the Shetland poet, Stella Sutherland of Bressay, in her own words, which have a vigour not usually found in recipes.

Equal parts of rhubarb and sugar. Preserved ginger chopped small (one ounce to 4 pounds) or ground cloves (one rounded teaspoon to 4 pounds).

Grease a pan well – bottom and well up the sides – use a large pan. Put in chopped, washed rhubarb and cover with the sugar. NO WATER. Leave the pan in a warm place, preferably on the outer, cooler end of a solid fuel stove till the sugar is dissolved. When the process is well advanced, stir it with a large wooden spoon, and when thoroughly dissolved, put it on the heat. Bring it to the boil, stirring constantly, and cook it for about an hour on reduced heat till it is a rich dark brown. (This cannot be achieved if the rhubarb is too young.) Keep stirring. Have jars hot and ready. Add flavouring and cook for only a few minutes. Pot and cover. It keeps almost indefinitely (if it gets the chance!)

RHUBARB JAM

Another Scottish recipe, this time from the kitchen notes of Lady Clark of Tillypronie, in which she acknowledges her source as Mrs Davidson from the Manse at Coldstone (just up the road).

This jam, which is marked “the older the better,” is for roll puddings.

Cut the stalks of rhubarb in bits from 2 to 3 inches long; weigh them and put them in a jar with an equal weight of sugar; cover it with the sugar and let it lie some hours – use no water, as the rhubarb is so full of juice.

Put the jar in a pan of hot water to boil from $\frac{1}{2}$ hour to $1\frac{1}{2}$ hours according to whether the rhubarb is old or not; stir all the time; take it off to stand till cold. This is all.

But you can, if you like, add from the beginning a little ginger, broken roughly with a hammer and tied in a muslin to lie and cook with it, but remove the ginger later.

Something of the same simplicity is expressed by the vegetarian writer 'Domestica' (a Miss Baker) who wrote her *Vegetist's Dietary and Manual of Vegetable Cookery* in the 1870s.

The rhubarb must be young, and pulled in dry weather. Cut it in pieces about an inch long, (a silver knife is best). To 10 lbs rhubarb, add 1 oz powdered ginger, or the rind of 4 lemons shred or chopped fine; boil half an hour; then add 8 lb loaf sugar; boil three quarters of an hour.

Now for some jams using a wide variety of fresh ingredients. The next comes from the southernmost island of New Zealand. Stewart Island is separated from the South Island by a wind-swept and treacherous strait and, even in these days of air travel, contact with the wider world depends on wind and weather. Here you are very much in the Roaring Forties. From the air, the island appears to be entirely covered with bush, but there is a small settlement, Oban, with a little church out on a point. Here I found a small book of recipes sold for the church funds. Rhubarb grows well locally, but the amount of other fresh fruit available is fairly limited. It seems a strange paradox that in a place of such natural beauty factory-food should play a large part in the diet. Improvisation in such a situation is essential.

RHUBARB AND STRAWBERRY JAM (1)

I wouldn't make this jam if I had a wide choice of ingredients; it palls rather fast, but is very easy to make. It comes from that book I mentioned, on sale in the Oban Presbyterian Church, Stewart Island, in 1989. I have found similar recipes in books emanating from two other island communities, the Falklands and Shetland: in Tim Simpson's *Cooking the Falkland Island Way*, and in *The Church of Scotland Women's Guild Recipe Book: Shetland*.

5 heaped cups of finely cut rhubarb
5 cups of sugar
11 oz tin of crushed pineapple
2 packets of raspberry or strawberry jelly crystals

Place the rhubarb, sugar and pineapple in a large saucepan or boiler. Bring to the boil and boil for 10 minutes. Remove from the heat and let it cool slightly.

Add jelly crystals, stir to dissolve, and just bring to the boil again. Remove from the heat, cool a little, and pot.

RHUBARB AND STRAWBERRY JAM (2)

My source for this was *The New Home Cookery Book*, published by the Women's Institute at Levin, a town some miles north of Wellington in New Zealand. There are many versions of this recipe which deploy various setting agents, either gelatine or pectin. I do not find them necessary, but did add the juice of a lemon as some insurance.

1 kg / 2 lb rhubarb
1 kg / 2 lb strawberries
1.3 kg / 3 lb sugar
1 lemon

Slice the rhubarb quite small, roughly mash the strawberries; combine in a bowl; cover with half the sugar; macerate overnight. Place the fruit and the rest of the sugar in a saucepan and stir over a gentle heat until the sugar is dissolved. Add the juice of the lemon. Boil for 30 minutes. It set bang on the half-hour, just as the ladies said it would. Once tested for set, cool slightly, then pot up in sterilized jars.

RHUBARB, APPLE AND PASSION FRUIT JAM

I found the original of this in the French writer Christine Ferber's *Mes Confitures*, published in 2002. The passion fruit gives the jam a wild and exotic perfume.

450 g / 1 lb rhubarb

450 g / 1 lb apples

*350 g / 12 oz granulated cane sugar for each 450 g / 1 lb of fruit
juice of a lemon*

the pips, flesh and juice of 5 passion fruit

Rinse the rhubarb in cold water, cut the stalks in 5 cm / 2 inch lengths, then dice them. Peel the apples, quarter and core them, then slice finely. In one bowl place the rhubarb, 350 g / 12 oz of sugar and the juice of the lemon. In a second, place the apple, the juice and pips of the passion fruit and another 350 g / 12 oz of sugar. Cover each bowl and leave for an hour.

At this point, you can combine the contents of the two bowls, stir well and leave covered overnight. The next day, cook the mixtures in a heavy-based pan, stirring so the jam does not catch, and cooking until it reaches the correct temperature. Pot up and store.

A most excellent and similarly exotic recipe came my way when reading the New Zealand food-writer Gilian Painter's

book *A Fruit Cookbook* (1984). She proposes a persimmon and rhubarb jam, given further perfume by adding either sweet cicely, angelica or lemon balm. This is the only modern author I have noticed using these old flavourings, most going for spices of some sort.

APRICOT AND RHUBARB JAM

I first tasted this at the Ben End, a tiny café overlooking Scalloway Harbour in Shetland, now sadly closed. It was run by sisters, relatives of Clement Williamson, the local photographer and author. It was not just the atmosphere of the Ben End which made their scones and jam memorable. It was the jam.

The recipe was given me by Anna Smith of the Ben End, but another version comes from Mrs Annie Thomson of Shirva, Fair Isle, who adds a few cloves in a muslin bag. This smells rich and spicy.

250 g / ½ lb dried apricots

150 ml / 5 fl oz water

675 g / 1 ½ lb rhubarb cut into 2 cm / ¾ inch lengths
sugar

Cut up the apricots finely, or mince, or process. Soak them overnight in the water. The next day, simmer them for 20 minutes. Then add the rhubarb and simmer gently a few minutes longer. Measure the mixture in a jug or with a cup before returning it to the pan. Measure out an equal volume of sugar and warm it in the oven. Add this to the fruit, and stir until dissolved. If the rhubarb is very mature, more water may be added to the fruit. Now cook the jam to setting point, pot up, cover and store.

The jam can be made with white or brown sugar. The brown makes it very different and characterful.

BLACKCURRANT AND RHUBARB JAM

The authors of the New Zealand recipe book *The Cook's Garden* are three sisters. They claim that this jam is preferred by their families to plain blackcurrant. For myself, I prefer the plain if there is double cream about for contrast; otherwise, I wouldn't quarrel.

675 g / 1 ½ lb rhubarb, finely sliced
675 g / 1 ½ lb blackcurrants, stalks removed
600 ml / 1 pint water
1.8 kg / 4 lb sugar

Cook the rhubarb to a pulp with half the water. Add the blackcurrants and the rest of the water. Boil for 20 minutes. Warm the sugar in a cool oven, then add it to the fruit and stir until dissolved. Boil rapidly about 15 minutes until the setting point is reached (see my notes at the outset of the chapter). Pour into warm sterilized jars and seal.

NANA'S RHUBARB AND BANANA JAM

This recipe came from the same three sisters and is found in their second instalment, *More from the Cook's Garden*, published a few years down the line.

1.3 kg / 3 lb rhubarb
1.3 kg / 3 lb sugar
75 ml / 3 fl oz lemon juice
4 large ripe bananas
1 tsp butter

Slice the rhubarb and combine it with the sugar and juice in a bowl. Leave 3 hours. Then put it in a jam pan and boil slowly for 30 minutes. Peel and slice the bananas and add to the boiling jam. Cook for 5 minutes more. Add the butter and skim. Pot.

CARROT AND RHUBARB JAM

1 kg / 2 ¼ lb sugar
450 g / 1 lb carrots
450 g / 1 lb rhubarb
the grated rind of 1 lemon and 1 orange
1 apple
1 tsp root ginger, finely chopped

Warm the sugar in a slow oven while busying yourself with the rest of ingredients. Wash and dry the carrots and rhubarb. Slice the rhubarb into 2.5 cm / 1 inch pieces, and grate the carrots. Combine in a large jam pan. Add the orange and lemon zest. Grate the apple and add it with the finely chopped ginger. Heat the pan gently, adding the sugar and stirring until the sugar is dissolved. Boil it until it reaches the correct temperature (104°C/220°F) and/or it sets when tested. Pot in sterilized jars.

GRAPEFRUIT AND RHUBARB JAM

My first encounter with this was through Pamela Westland's *A Taste of the Country* in 1976. Subsequently, many cooks have embraced it, not least in northern California where it seems to accord with the latest culinary fashion.

1.3 kg / 3 lb rhubarb, prepared weight
2 grapefruit & 1 lemon
1.3 kg / 3 lb cane sugar

Wash the rhubarb, trim it and slice it. Grate the rind off the grapefruit and lemon. Halve the surviving fruit and press through a sieve. Put the rhubarb, fruit pulp and peels in a basin and sprinkle with the sugar. Cover and let stand overnight. Transfer the fruit to a jam pan and bring slowly to the boil. Stir it often until it boils. When all the sugar is dissolved, boil it fast for about 15 minutes, and test for a set. Pot and cover.

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