

## **March at the Farmers' market**

Hurray for longer lighter days! As March progresses the daylight increases by a wonderful two hours so that, by the end of the month, we will once again be enjoying days that are longer than nights. Once the clocks go forward on 29<sup>th</sup> March, it really feels like spring is properly underway and we can hope for a summer of sunshine to make up a bit for the wet of the winter now past.

For market visitors this month, what's on offer can seem rather restricted as we wait for kinder weather conditions for animals and crops, which will respond to the increasing light and warmth with bounty to come. That's why March is traditionally known as the hunger gap or famine month. But it's really a great opportunity to make most of the last of the winter and enjoy all those wonderful comfort foods and warming treats before they disappear again till the last quarter of the year.

### **Fruit and veg**

As days lengthen **Cabbages, cauliflower, purple sprouting broccoli, leeks** and **kale** are all good. They need little cooking and are really at their best simply shredded and steamed. Or try quickly stir-fried with garlic, ginger and chilli for an accompaniment to good local sausages. Cauliflower goes really well with curry spices so try it in vegetable curries, soups and fritters or in a puree as a base for scallops grilled with cubes of black pudding. And make the most of leeks, carrots, swede and Jerusalem artichokes before they disappear.

Beautiful pink forced **rhubarb** is really the only locally grown fruit around now but the season for the fine 'champagne' season is short so make the most of it. Use in fools, ice creams and sauces – it goes particularly well with a large pinch or two of ginger. Or make up batches of rhubarb compote and freeze in pots for later in the year. And don't forget it makes wonderful cakes – crumble topped, or upside down, with almonds or ginger. Serve as a pud with ice cream or keep for the tea tray. Don't forget that local apples are still good as the storing varieties go on delivering flavour and texture until April.

### **And don't forget....**

to stock up on the jams, jellies and chutneys made using this winter's produce to keep you going over the next few months – you will find old favourite flavours such as rhubarb and ginger and quince, with many hedgerow jams and jellies and many more unusual offerings to tempt you into buying. Why not try a locally baked cake or sweet tart this month when the range of seasonal fruit is limited? Cold weather, the arriving spring, the first daffodil – they all make a great excuse to celebrate with local produce, if you really need one!

### **Meat and game**

For meat eaters, **pork** is an excellent choice this month and it's still ideal weather to enjoy a hearty roast on Sunday with all the family, after a (probably muddy) walk enjoying the spring flowers and increasing bird song as mating and nest building gets under way. Try a shoulder joint for the best combination of flavour and texture. The cheaper cuts are worth trying in slow cooked stews – pig's cheeks and pork belly, breast of **lamb**, shin of beef – all great value and superb eating when the weather is still holding onto winter. Or what about that eternal family favourite – a roast **chicken**? A slow grown bird has more flavour and better texture and goes really well with roast wedges of sweet potato tossed in cold pressed rapeseed oil and a sprinkling of ground ginger before cooking. Serve with purple sprouting broccoli. Or try a chicken cooked in the pot with saffron shown below. Simple cooking works best with a really good bird as the flavour is enhanced rather than masked. And don't waste the carcass once you eaten the meat off the bones. It will make great stock for using in soups, sauces and risottos. Put the carcass in a large pan with an onion, carrot, celery stick, bay leaf and bunch of herbs. Cover with cold water, bring to the boil and simmer very gently for an hour. Strain, pour into freezer bags sat in a bowl or jug then freeze. Remove from the bowl, tie up and return to the freezer.

Rough shooting takes over as the end of the season has arrived for many game birds so **rabbit** and **wood pigeon** are both good eating now. And if you haven't had **venison** this winter, try some now maybe in burgers or sausages, served with steamed kale and mashed root veg, or make the most of the game mixes that many dealers sell to use up the season's bits and pieces for pie, braises and stews. Look out for locally made excellent game pies and pasties (and other meat or veggie fillings) on sale at

many markets – made with local produce, they take the hard work out of enjoying a really good pie. Put a few in the freezer to enjoy later in the year at picnics.

### **Fish and seafood**

For fish lovers, **sea bass** is a good choice this month or try a wonderful warming fish stew as a superb way of enjoying superb local fish and seafood. Use a combination of cod, mussels and clams in a risotto or soup. Or spoil yourself a little with wonderful local **lobsters** and native **oysters, clams, cockles and mussels**. Storms permitting, Kent and Sussex **scallops** are at their finest now so enjoy one of the great pleasures of the season. **Sardines** are also good now with the cold waters around the coast producing sparkling fresh fish with bright eyes and firm flesh. **Salmon** is also an excellent choice in March and many markets offer good local smoked and cures that make a lovely light lunch dish or starter for a special meal.

### **Braised chicken with saffron and garlic mayo**

This chicken cooks in its own juices in a sealed pot so remains moist and full of flavour. The rich sauce is thickened at the end of cooking with the addition of garlicky mayonnaise. Serve with plenty of mashed potato to soak up the lovely sauce.

Serves 4/Prep 20 minutes/Cook 2 hours

1.3kg free-range chicken

300ml white wine

1 medium onion, peeled and halved

3 large leeks, thickly sliced

4 medium carrots, cut into chunks

a bouquet garni of bay leaf, sprigs of fresh thyme, celery leaves,

¼ tsp saffron strands

salt and freshly ground black pepper

To finish

4 tbsp fresh egg mayonnaise, bought or home made

2 – 3 cloves garlic, crushed

3 -4 tbsp chopped flat leaf parsley

1 Preheat the oven to 180C gas mark 4. Place the chicken in a casserole with the wine, onion, one carrot, one leek, bouquet garni, saffron, seasoning and add 300ml cold water. Bring to the boil on the hob then cover tightly and cook in the oven for 1¼ hours.

2 Add the rest of the vegetables to the pan and return to the oven for a further 25 minutes until the vegetables are tender. While the chicken is cooking mix the mayonnaise, garlic and parsley together. Remove the casserole from the oven and lift the chicken out. Carve the chicken meat into thick slices and place on a warm platter with the vegetables.

3 Add a couple of tablespoons of the cooking liquor to the mayonnaise to thin then stir into the vegetables and broth and heat very gently. Don't allow to boil. Spoon some over the chicken and vegetables to moisten. Serve the rest of the cooking juices in a jug. Serve with lots of creamy mashed potato to sop up the juices.