

# Beets, carrots off beaten path

by Sabine Eiche

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Sprouting from the top of a beetroot are many leaves on red stalks. When I first bought bunches of fresh beets, I'd always stir-fry the stalks and leaves. Then I started growing beets myself. I ended up with armfuls of stalks and leaves. Eventually panic struck – I couldn't face another stir-fry. Guiltily, I'd feed stalks and leaves to the compost bin, until uneasiness joined guilt, propelling me to find a solution to my beet-top problem – read on.

But first, a detour. With beets on my mind I naturally delved into the beet's history. It was known to the ancient Romans – “beta” is the Latin word. The medieval Italian *taccuinum sanitatis* (health handbook) claimed beet juice eliminates dandruff – but do you drink it, or rub it into your scalp? Thomas Hill, in his gardening book of 1577, maintained beets also make hair grow.

And now to my beet-top solution. Beetroots and leaves can be eaten raw – so, I thought, why not also the stalks? I trimmed off the leaves and roughly cut up the stalks. Adding garlic, parsley and a few capers (careful, they're salty), I chopped everything in the food processor. The mix tasted unusual, but delicious! I let the flavours intensify at room temperature for a few hours and then stirred in Greek yogurt. Sour cream or mayonnaise would work as well. For variety, add hard-boiled eggs, apples, cucumbers. The result is an appetizing relish or sauce. You can even eat it all on its own.

The carrot is another vegetable pushing out of the ground right now. Culinary use of the carrot has a very long history, though at first it was the leaves and seeds that were consumed, not the roots. Originally a native of the Near East, the root carrot was brought to Spain by the Moors in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, and

from Spain it spread to the rest of Europe. By the 14<sup>th</sup> century it was cultivated in China, today the world's largest carrot producer (accounting for 45.5% in 2011).

Every carrot-loving country has its special way of preparing a carrot dish. I've tasted many, but only one has left an indelible impression in the gastronomic zone of my mind. I ate it in a former Benedictine abbey, in Le Marche in Italy. Fresh from the garden outside, cooked until they were slightly chewy, the carrots were tossed with olive oil, a few leaves of fresh thyme, salt and finely-chopped hard-boiled eggs.

The other day, when I was given a bag of carrots to which the soil still clung, I decided to recreate the dish I'd eaten years ago in the Oasi di San Benedetto. The thinly-sliced carrots had the desired chewy texture in five minutes. I drained the water, drizzled some olive oil over them, and tossed them with salt, eggs, and a little thyme (2-inch sprig) from my garden. The taste was sublime. I was transported.