APRIL

An American Euphemism

The theory that baseball causes global warming may be controversial, but it is based on close and careful observation. Each year, the natural experiment called spring training is replayed, coinciding with a time when New Englanders are losing their will over whether winter will ever end and whether we will need to readjust expectations for outerwear and inner peace. The results thus far are always the same: warm weather breaks out in Florida, and as baseball swings northward into the frozen lands, the warmth spreads with it until sometime in April, when Red Sox fans are able to divest themselves of just enough layers of coats and mittens to enter Fenway unfettered. Spring arrives. Baseball-induced warming may be no argument against league expansion, but it is a reminder that springtime is more than just a change of weather. It is a change of mindset and mood. In times past, before electricity and refrigeration changed the world of food preservation and eating, the arrival of fresh foods after a winter of pickled, canned and dried produce was something to cheer, a beacon for better times.

Spring in New England had its own, distinctive harbingers. Sugaring in March was a promise of life stirring, like marauding bears, ruby-throated hummingbirds or rivers of mud, but when it comes to pie, the surest sign of the season was the arrival of rhubarb. Pushing through to the sun as the last snows depart, like snow drops or crocus, rhubarb symbolized our reanimation. As the weather gathered nerve to warm itself, fitfully, hearty meat pies quickly ceded their privileged shelf in the oven to the bright

hope of fresh fruit pies like rhubarb. Other fruits would have to follow. In the garden as in the kitchen, rhubarb was a visual relief. With enough oxalic acid to be toxic, the plant's deep green leaves defied the dulled earth and seasonal slush, framing a tart contrast with the artful ox-bloods and spring onion greens of its long, celery-like stalks. The ornamental virtues as much as the culinary ones made rhubarb a garden gem.

In April up north, with the Red Sox as backdrop and patches of snow still cowering in the north shade of the barn, my friend Rachel turned out a rhubarb pie to chase away the day. She is an experienced cook, excellent, but this was no delicate operation—ridding the stalks of toxic leaves and choking fibers, dicing them rough and tossing them into a crust with enough sugar to feed a continent of reawakened ants. It is hardly the stuff of haute cuisine. But Rachel is a crust master, and she knows that the details make the difference. Even where the filling corroded seams and boiled to the surface—a fearsome vision in mauve—her crust remained flaky and light. Somehow, when the pie emerged, its sweetness was restrained. There was texture, too. Entering raw into the fray, the rhubarb inside survived the long bake with integrity intact, resisting fork and molar long enough to demand acknowledgment. What made Rachel's pie stand out, though, was the insinuation of orange that came from an entire rind of zest and juice, a citrus complement to the rhubarb bite. Her friend Ben insisted that lemon made the pie even better, but there was no winning the argument. Rachel's rhubarb, a New England delicacy, was a product of two centuries of culinary history and perfect in the looming time of spring.

It may be no surprise, but like so many favorites of New England cuisine, rhubarb was an immigrant. Early Americans thought of the plant as an import from exotic Tartary, a region sprawling from China (its point of origin) to the Ukraine, and according to British horticulturist Henry Phillips, it made its way into western Europe as early as 1535. From ancient times, the plant was revered for the medicinal value of its roots, which were prepared as a purgative and laxative and as a powerful aid to maintaining the balance of bodily fluids. The difficulty of transport from central Asia made it among the costliest drugs in the European pharmacopoeia, particularly after a Russian czar asserted a monopoly on the trade, but its potency made it highly desired. In England, Phillips insisted that "all medical men acknowledge" its excellence in "evacuating bilious humours" and fortifying "the fibres of the stomach in the intestines." American physicians were equally sanguine. Daniel Whitney used rhubarb to evacuate "any acrid matter that may be

Slicing rhubarb. *Photo by I. Eliot Wentworth, 2015.*

Rhubarb stalks. *Photo by I. Eliot Wentworth, 2015.*

offending the bowels," and throughout the States, his colleagues prescribed its concoctions for any disease that called for depleting the system, including ague, diarrhea and dysentery.

A good purgative, though, did little to encourage thoughts of pie, and it took centuries for rhubarb to move from the medicine chest to the kitchen table. Only near the time of the American Revolution would a broader view of the vegetable emerge in the British world, spurred in part by horticultural societies seeking to advance agriculture. The Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce, for example, issued gold medals in 1770 "For Introduction of the True Rhubarb Seed" and, in 1798, for innovation in cultivation.

When Americans finally took up the cause, they did so with gusto. America's best-known medical botanist, Benjamin Smith Barton, and one of its greatest horticulturists, Bernard M'Mahon, were partisans in a campaign to build an American national botany that could rival, or surpass, Europe's. For both men, the diversity of our climate, population and flora were a decided advantage, and in their minds, a great future would arrive when we learned to exploit the best of the New World to go with the best of the Old. Theirs was a species of reverse colonialism in which American farmers would exploit this continent's unique productions while adding to this bounty by importing the best plants of the Old World. We would remake our nation as a composite of people and crops, old and new.

In pursuit of this dream, Barton carefully studied Native American uses of plants, hoping to glean what he could in the way of new medicines or foods. In 1803, he expressed a wish that one day he might discover a rhubarb equivalent among them. Until then, he wistfully advised his fellow countrymen only that cultivation "ought to be attended to." More emphatically, in 1806, M'Mahon effused over rhubarb's potential. A radical émigré from Ireland, M'Mahon had a grand horticultural vision for the new nation so powerful that he convinced Thomas Jefferson to entrust him with rearing the irreplaceable plants and seeds collected by Lewis and Clark out west. When it came to the potential for rhubarb in America, M'Mahon asked rhetorically, "Shall we despair of bringing it to perfection, where soil and climate is perfectly congenial, and nothing wanted, but the enterprize of a few spirited individuals to make a commencement?" In American hands, he implied, rhubarb would achieve perfection. The campaign for rhubarb would be a small part of a grand project to propel the nation to an exceptional future, and it

was this campaign by "spirited individuals" that formed the backdrop of New England's love for the pie of spring.

Having discovered that rhubarb was delectable when stewed with enough sugar to tame its tart tendencies, British cooks became industrious at smuggling it into puddings, sauces and tarts. Maria Rundell was an early convert. Deeply influential in America, Rundell's cookbook *Domestic Cookery* (1807) included one of the first published recipes for rhubarb pie, and through it, she may be as responsible as anyone for planting the rhubarb seed in American kitchens.

But for rhubarb to strut its stalks would require more than a few recipes; it would require a team of publicists. Although "America is blest with a favorable climate," a farmer named D.F. Ames wrote, and although we were "peopled by natives from all parts of the earth, who variously cultivate our various soils;" conservatism was stultifying. Despite all our national advantages, he insisted, "our markets are not so well supplied with fruit and vegetables as those of less favored lands." Progressive agricultural magazines such as the *New England Farmer* and *Genesee Farmer* took up the challenge, and in the late 1820s and 1830s, they pled with Americans to experiment and to try out new crops, new foods, new techniques and new ideas, rhubarb included, all in fulfillment of the new gospel of scientific agriculture and American values.

For promoters of rhubarb as food, the plant had a natural advantage: timing. The editor of the *Genesee Farmer*, Willis Gaylord, wrote that "at a time when other green articles for pies are difficult to be obtained," rhubarb would be there. Rhubarb was first out of the gate in spring, and for several weeks, it had few competitors in freshness. The prolific horticultural writer Edward Sayers called it "one of the best substitutes we have at an early season for green tarts," and Ames called it "a valuable plant" that had "the important recommendation of presenting itself for the table, when few others for a similar purpose are to be had." At a time of year when the only fruits available for pie were last fall's aging apples, Ames noted that rhubarb added a welcome zing, since an over-wintered apple "generally loses its flavor and becomes flat and insipid." The most avid supporter of the rhubarb may have been the "New-York Gardener," Agricola (publishing under a pseudonym), who gushed. "There is nothing more pleasant" in April than rhubarb, he wrote in 1824, "and physicians tell us there is nothing more healthy, than a frequent use of thrifty green vegetables." It relieved the dull similitude of winter and was a pleasure to the eye, the body and the taste. "[A]nd as variety alone can please," he wrote, "this plant should have a place in every kitchen-garden."

For Agricola, nothing could be better. "The majesty and beauty of the rhubarb," he claimed, "is not surpassed by any tenant of the garden."

Introducing an immigrant vegetable to unfamiliar Americans took patience and skill, beginning with learning how to cultivate it. Who first raised a rhubarb here is not recorded, but when living in London in 1770, Benjamin Franklin sent rhubarb seeds from the Society for Arts (from the gold medal winner, no less) to the great Quaker botanist John Bartram, and he sent more to the equally Quaker botanist Humphry Marshall in 1785. Neither man seems to have had long-term success, and in 1835, the *American Gardeners Magazine* ignored their efforts altogether, tentatively assigning credit for cultivating rhubarb to John Prince of Roxbury, a well-respected member of the Massachusetts Horticultural Society.

But cultivating the plant was only the first step in introducing it to a naïve nation, and further encouragement was needed. Agricola saw rhubarb as a prime example of "the slowness and difficulty with which every new vegetable finds its way to notice." In every country, he wrote, an innate "partiality to articles of customary culture" held many back from trying novel foods, and it was only "with hesitation and reluctance that our cooks attempt to dress new [vegetables], or to bring them to the table." Yet even when staring down the shackles of conservatism and its purgative reputation, Agricola was heartened by the progress rhubarb had already made. It was esteemed in England already, he noted, and in just sixty years, it had "spread from its native Tartarian mountains, or the hills of Thibet, to every part of the globe where horticulture is understood." In London, where tastes were a step ahead, it had gained so much that "thirty wagon loads of this article is sold every day."

Campaigners like Agricola and Gaylord introduced rhubarb to Americans by likening it to the familiar and much-loved apple. This fibrous vegetable with toxic leaves could easily daunt the uninitiated, but Gaylord stressed that it could easily be peeled, washed and used "in the manner of apples," remarking that if cooked properly with spices, the stalks would "make excellent pies, tarts, &c." It was as easy as apple pie. Like many promoters to come, Gaylord added that rhubarb would even charm the frugal-minded: as a perennial, it yielded year after year and was so productive that only a few plants would supply an entire family.

Campaigners realized, however, that merely launching the product would not be enough; it needed rebranding. "The true name of the plant," Agricola carped, did it no favors and had "in some instances prevented its culinary use…in order to prevent a previous nausea and disgust." To most

Americans, rhubarb equaled purgative. Fortunately, some unnamed proto-PR genius came up with the name "pie-plant" to divert attention. "Invented to disguise the somewhat painful associations of the generic name," as the British magazine the *Athenaeum* put it, this "American euphemism for rhubarb" did just enough to spackle over the old associations and convince New England cooks to adopt pie-plant into their pies. When the admirably frugal Lydia Maria Child complained in 1830 about the high cost of rhubarb pies because of the "enormous quantity of sugar" they required, the adoption was complete. If it was so expensive in a region so cheap, it was because it was so desired.

Ever since, pie-plant pie has been a bright presence of the New England spring, beloved enough to spawn dozens of variants. The early fellowship with apples remained strong for years, but cooks have paired it with almost any acidic fruit strong enough to withstand the stalky assertiveness, including gooseberry, pineapple and lemon. Rachel's orange-rhubarb had precursors as far back as Flora Haines Loughead's pie of 1891, and other cooks have tried to tame the rhubarb with custard or, like the Ladies of St. Mary's Guild of Grace Church in Providence, Rhode Island, with dollops of cream and meringue. Even odder mixtures have crept in, including a jam of rhubarb and fig (with raisins to boot) proffered by the African American corporate chef Rufus Estes in 1911.

Today, the most common variant of the pie revolves around a marriage with another sweet-acid fruit of the spring, the strawberry. The origins of this popular pie are obscure, but something was afoot at the turn of the twentieth century. Recipes for strawberry-rhubarb preserves were traded regularly for years, but in the pages of the *Boston Globe*, the pie sneaked in. Four years after a passing reference to strawberry-rhubarb pie in 1910, a recipe appeared under the byline, "B.B.," who declared the pie as "one of my mother's original recipes." Her version called for alternating layers of sliced rhubarb and strawberries—"the two flavors combine very well," she wrote. It was thickened with cornstarch and topped with butter and a dash of salt. Wherever it originated, New Englanders made strawberry-rhubarb their own, claiming the season for sweetness and a vision for a nation.

Recipes

Rhubarb-Pie, New-England Style (Corson, 1885)

Make a good pastry, for which directions have already been given. Peel some garden rhubarb, or pie-plant, and cut it in small pieces; after lining the pie-plates with pastry, fill them with layers of rhubarb and sugar, and if a lemon is available use the grated yellow rind for flavoring; cover the pie, wetting the edges of the pastry to make them adhere; make several cuts in the top crust, and bake the pie in a moderate oven until both top and bottom crust are nicely browned; if the bottom of the pie cooks faster than the top, put a second plate under it when it is quite brown; if the top browns before the bottom is done, cover it with brown paper. Dust the top crust with powdered sugar after the pie is done, and use it either hot or cold.

Pie-Plant Custard Pie (Ladies of the Congregational Church, Rutland, Vermont, 1891)

1 cup stewed pie-plant
1 cup sugar
1 tablespoonful flour
yolk of three eggs
small piece of butter.

Bake under crust. Beat whites of eggs with three tablespoonfuls sugar; put into over and brown.—Mrs. D.K. Hall

Rhubarb Cream Pie (Ladies of St. Marys Guild, 1905)

One cup stewed rhubarb (cold), 1 cup sugar, yolks of 2 eggs, 1 tablespoonful flour. Mix all together, and when crust is ready for over add 1 cup milk and bake at once. Use the whites for meringue.

Rhubarb Pie (Strawberry-Rhubarb) (Greenbaum, 1919)

Make a very rich crust, and over the bottom layer sprinkle a large tablespoon of sugar and a good teaspoon of flour. Fill half-full of rhubarb that has been cut up, scatter in one-fourth cup of strawberries or raspberries, sprinkle with more sugar and flour, and then proceed as before. Over the top dot bits of butter and another dusting of flour. Use a good cup of sugar to a pie. Pinch the crusts together well after wetting them, to prevent the juice, which should be so thick that it does not soak through the lower crust at all, from cooking out

Rhubarb Pie (Fredrika and Rachel, 2015)

Crust:
2 cups flour
1 teaspoon salt
1 cup Crisco

Break up Crisco into 8–10 pieces; chill in freezer. Mix together with other ingredients and 4–6 tablespoons ice water and chill in refrigerator for 30 minutes or so before rolling out.

Filling:
6 cups rhubarb
1 whole orange zested
2 tablespoon orange juice
1½ cups sugar
⅓ cups flour

Dot with butter and sprinkle bit of water on top. Place pie on lowest rack in oven at 450F. Bake for 15 minutes and reduce oven temperature to 350F, and continue baking for 40 to 45 minutes. Serve warm or cold.