CELERY ROOT

By Bianca Brown

CELERY ROOT, also known as celeriac or celery knob, is a member of the celery family. It is grown for its root rather than its top and has an intensified celery flavor. Although very popular in Europe, the vegetable is relatively unknown in this country. It is available most abundantly in the fall and winter months. The root is irregular in shape with a light brown skin. In the market one should look for medium-sized roots with fresh green tops, if possible, and no soft spots, which are indications of decay.

Peel the vegetable, and, if necessary, remove and discard any soft center (larger roots sometimes have a hollow or pithy center). Because the flesh will darken quickly when exposed to air, the root should be plunged into acidulated water as soon as it is peeled. Celery root can be eaten raw in salads and cooked in a great variety of ways, a sampling of which follows.

Cream of Celery Root Soup

In a saucepan sauté 2 cups peeled and cubed celery root (about ¾ pound) and ¼ cup chopped scallion in 2 tablespoons butter over moderately high heat for 5 minutes. Add 5 cups chicken stock (January, 1979) or tinned chicken broth, 1½ cups peeled and cubed potato, and salt and white pepper to taste, bring the liquid to a boil, and cook the mixture, covered, over moderate heat for 25 minutes, or until the vegetables are soft. In a blender or in a food processor fitted with the steel blade purée the mixture in batches until it is smooth. Pour the purée into a saucepan and bring it to a simmer. In a small bowl beat ⅓ cup heavy cream with 2 egg yolks, add ½ cup of the purée in a stream, stirring, and stir the mixture into the remaining purée. Heat the soup, stirring, until it is heated through but do not let it boil. Add salt and white pepper to taste, ladle the soup into heated bowls, and sprinkle each serving with minced parsley. Or chill the soup and serve it cold. Serves 6.

Celery Root Sticks

In a bowl combine 1 cup flour, ½ cup each of peeled and grated celery root and grated Gruyère cheese, ½ teaspoon salt, and a pinch of cayenne. Add 1 stick (½ cup) butter, cut into bits, blend the mixture until it is well combined, and form the dough into a ball. Knead the dough lightly with the palm of the hand for a few seconds to distribute the butter evenly and re-form it into a ball. Dust the dough with flour and chill it, wrapped in wax paper, for 1 hour.

Roll out half the dough ⅛ inch thick on a floured surface and with a floured pastry wheel cut out 3- by ¾-inch strips. Arrange the strips on a baking sheet, brush them with an egg wash, made by beating 1 egg with 1 teaspoon water, and sprinkle them with celery seeds or grated Gruyère cheese. Bake the strips in a preheated hot oven (400° F.) for 10 to 12 minutes, or until they are golden. Transfer the celery root sticks with a spatula to a rack to cool. Makes about 48 hors d'oeuvres.

Celery Root Salad

Peel 1½ pounds small celery roots and slice them crosswise into ⅛-inch rounds, dropping the slices into a bowl of acidulated water as they are cut. In a deep stainless

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steel or enameled skillet combine 2 cups water, ¼ cup white vinegar, a cheesecloth bag containing 6 peppercorns, 3 whole allspice, and 1 bay leaf, 2 teaspoons salt, and 1 teaspoon sugar and bring the liquid to a boil. Add the celery root, drained, and cook it, covered, over moderate heat for 8 to 10 minutes, or until it is just tender. Let the celery root cool in the liquid. Remove and discard the cheesecloth bag, transfer the mixture to a bowl, and chill it, covered, overnight. (The liquid will have the consistency of melted aspic.) Add lemon juice, salt, and pepper to taste and transfer the salad to a chilled bowl. Serves 4 to 6.

Celery Root and Walnut Salad

In a bowl toss 3 cups peeled and coarsely grated celery root (about 1 pound) with 2 tablespoons lemon juice. Add 1 tart apple, peeled, cored, and coarsely grated, 1 carrot, coarsely grated, ¾ cup mayonnaise (April, 1979), and salt and white pepper to taste. Stir in ¼ cup coarsely chopped walnuts and chill the salad, covered, for at least 1 hour. Just before serving, season the salad with lemon juice, salt, and white pepper to taste. Arrange the salad in a chilled bowl and garnish it with chopped walnuts and thin wedges of apple brushed with lemon juice. Serves 4.

Celery Root Pancakes

In a bowl combine 1 cup peeled and grated celery root with ¼ cup flour sifted with 1 teaspoon salt, ¼ teaspoon pepper, ⅛ teaspoon double-acting baking powder, and a pinch of cayenne. Add 2 eggs, lightly beaten, and 1 small garlic clove, minced. Heat a griddle or skillet over moderately high heat until it is hot and brush it well with clarified butter (January, 1979). Drop the batter by tablespoons onto the griddle, spreading it into 2-inch rounds, and cook the rounds for 2 to 3 minutes, or until the underside is lightly browned. Turn the pancakes and cook them for 2 minutes more, or until the other side is browned. Serve the pancakes with meats. Makes about 14 pancakes.

Celery Root Croquettes

In a skillet cook 2 tablespoons minced scallion in 3 tablespoons butter over moderate heat for 2 minutes. Add 2 cups peeled and grated celery root, ½ cup chicken stock (January, 1979) or tinned chicken broth, and salt and pepper to taste and simmer the mixture, covered, stirring occasionally, for 10 minutes.

Cook the mixture, uncovered, over moderately high heat, stirring, for 5 minutes, or until the moisture is evaporated. Transfer the mixture to a bowl and let it cool. Stir in 1 cup cold cooked rice, 1 egg, lightly beaten, ⅛ teaspoon nutmeg, and salt and pepper to taste, spread the mixture ½ inch thick on a well buttered plate, and chill it, covered, for at least 3 hours. Form heaping tablespoons of the mixture into 2-inch cork shapes and coat the croquettes with stale bread crumbs. Put the croquettes on a plate and chill them, covered, for 2 hours. In a deep fryer fry the croquettes in batches in hot deep fat (375° F.) for 5 minutes, or until they are golden, and transfer them with a slotted spoon to paper towels to drain. Makes about 14 croquettes.

Celery Root Timbales

In a saucepan boil 1½ pounds celery root, peeled and cut into 1-inch cubes, in salted water to cover for 15 minutes, or until it is tender. In another saucepan boil ¾ pound potatoes, peeled and cut into 1-inch cubes, in salted water to cover for 15 minutes, or until they are tender. Drain the celery root and potato thoroughly. In a skillet cook ⅓ cup chopped scallion in ½ stick (¼ cup) butter over moderate heat until it is softened. Add the celery root and potato and sweat the mixture, covered with a buttered round of wax paper and the lid, for 10 minutes, or until the vegetables are very soft. Purée the mixture through the fine disk of a food mill into a bowl and add ⅓ cup heavy cream, 2 eggs, lightly beaten, 2 tablespoons minced parsley, ⅛ teaspoon nutmeg, and salt and pepper to taste.

Butter well four ¾-cup timbale or charlotte molds, line the bottom of each mold with a round of wax paper, and butter the paper. Divide the purée among the molds and cover the molds with buttered rounds of wax paper. Put the molds in a baking pan, pour enough boiling water into the pan to reach two thirds of the way up the sides of the molds, and bake the molds in a preheated moderately hot oven (375° F.) for 30 minutes, or until a knife inserted in the centers comes out clean. Remove the molds from the water and let them stand for 5 minutes. Remove the wax paper, run a thin knife around the inside edge of the molds, and turn the timbales out onto a serving dish. Remove the remaining wax paper and garnish each timbale with a sprig of parsley. Serves 4.

Celery Root au Gratin

In a saucepan boil 2 pounds celery root, peeled, in half milk and half water to cover with 1 teaspoon salt for 25 minutes, or until it is barely tender. Transfer the celery root with a slotted spoon to a dish, reserving the liquid, and let it cool enough to be handled. Slice the celery root crosswise into ¼-inch rounds and arrange the rounds, overlapping slightly, in a buttered gratin dish. Sprinkle the celery root with ⅓ cup freshly grated Parmesan cheese or grated Gruyère cheese, dot it with butter, and bake it in a preheated moderate oven (350° F.) for 10 minutes.

Have ready ¾ stick (6 tablespoons) butter at room temperature. In a saucepan beat 4 egg yolks with ¾ cup heavy cream and ½ cup of the reserved liquid until the mixture is well combined and heat the custard over low heat, stirring, until it coats the spoon. Remove the pan from the heat, whisk in 1 tablespoon of the butter, and as the butter melts whisk in 1 more tablespoon of the butter. Set the pan over very low heat and whisk in the remaining butter, 1 tablespoon at a time, lifting the pan occasionally to allow the mixture to cool and adding the next tablespoon of butter before the previous one is completely melted. Remove the pan from the heat and add 3 to 4 teaspoons lemon juice, or to taste, and salt, white pepper, and cayenne to taste. Nap the celery root with the sauce, sprinkle the dish with 1 tablespoon each of freshly grated Parmesan cheese and grated Gruyère cheese, and put it under a preheated broiler for 3 minutes, or until the top is lightly browned. Serves 6.

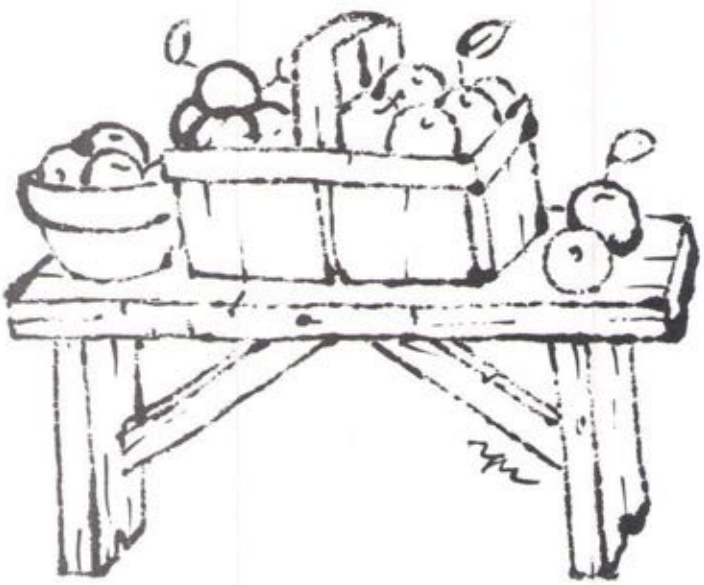
Breaded Celery Root and Ham Rounds

In a saucepan boil two 1-pound celery roots, peeled, in acidulated water to cover for 25 to 30 minutes, or until they are almost tender. Transfer the celery root with a slotted spoon to a dish, let it cool completely, and slice it crosswise into ½-inch rounds. For each celery root round cut out 2 rounds of thinly sliced boiled ham the same size, using about 6 ounces of ham in all. Spread the ham with Dijon-style mustard, press 1 slice of ham mustard side down onto each side of the celery root slices, and dust the "sandwiches" with flour. In a shallow bowl beat 2 eggs with 2 teaspoons water and a pinch of salt, dip the sandwiched rounds into the egg mixture, and coat them well with stale bread crumbs (about 2 cups), pressing the crumbs so that they adhere. Put the rounds in one layer on a plate and chill them, covered, for 30 minutes. In a large deep skillet or deep fryer fry the rounds in batches in hot deep fat (370° F.) for 2 to 3 minutes on each side, or until they are well browned. Transfer the rounds with a slotted

spatula as they are done to paper towels to drain and keep them warm. Serve the rounds with tartar sauce (April, 1979). Serves 4 to 6.

Lamb and Celery Root Casserole

In a saucepan cook 1 cup chopped onion in 1 tablespoon each of butter and oil over moderate heat until it is lightly colored. Add 1 garlic clove, minced, and 1 pound ground lean lamb and sauté the mixture over moderately high heat for 10 minutes, or until the lamb is browned. Stir in ⅓ cup dry red wine, 1 tablespoon tomato paste, ¼ teaspoon thyme, and salt and pepper to taste and simmer the mixture, stirring occasionally, for 15 minutes, or until most of the liquid is evaporated.

In a skillet cook ¼ cup minced onion in 1 tablespoon each of butter and oil over moderate heat until the onion is softened. Stir in 2 teaspoons flour and cook the mixture for 2 minutes. Add 2 cups peeled, seeded, and chopped tomato, 2 tablespoons dry red wine, ¼ teaspoon thyme, a pinch of sugar, and salt and pepper to taste and simmer the mixture, stirring frequently, for 5 minutes, or until it is thickened and most of the juices are evaporated. In another skillet sauté 2½ pounds celery root, peeled and sliced crosswise into ¼-inch rounds, in batches in 2 tablespoons each of butter and oil over moderately high heat, adding more fat as needed, for 3 minutes on each side, or until the slices are lightly browned, and transfer the slices with a slotted spoon to a dish as they are browned. Arrange half the celery root rounds, overlapping slightly, in a well buttered baking dish, 11 by 7 by 1½ inches. Spoon the lamb mixture over the celery root and arrange the remaining celery root on it. Top the dish with the tomato mixture and bake it, covered with foil, in a preheated moderately hot oven (375° F.) for 30 minutes.

In a saucepan melt 1 tablespoon butter, stir in 2 tablespoons flour, and cook the *roux* over low heat, stirring, for 3 minutes. Remove the pan from the heat, add 1½ cups scalded milk in a stream, whisking, and cook the sauce, stirring, for 5 minutes, or until it is smooth and thickened. Stir in ¼ cup freshly grated Parmesan cheese and salt, white pepper, and cayenne to taste and simmer the mixture until the cheese is melted. In a bowl beat 2 eggs until they are frothy, stir a little of the sauce into the eggs, and stir the mixture into the remaining sauce. Remove the foil from the baking dish and nap the dish with the sauce. Sprinkle the dish with 2 tablespoons freshly grated Parmesan cheese and bake it for 15 minutes, or until the top is lightly browned. Serves 4 to 6. ❖