

Winter's greens

The brussels sprout got its name because it was thought to have been cultivated originally near Brussels, in Belgium, in the 13th century. From there, the vegetable spread through the temperate zones of the world and today it is one of the most popular and traditional of winter vegetables – even with people who dislike most “greens”. As each sprout is shaped like a small, tightly-packed cabbage it is easy to see that this is where it began – though when growing the plant looks unusual. It reaches about 2ft (61cm), the sprouts grow up the stem and at the top is a mass of leaves which are also eatable (see page 310). Though newer varieties don't need a frost to tighten up the heads, all sprouts seem to taste better in frosty weather. Wet weather makes the

heads loose and they don't keep well. Sprouts can vary in colour from medium to dark green, and some have a red tinge. In France, the very finest, smallest sprouts are called *choux de Bruxelles*. They are high quality and expensive but as there are no outer leaves to pull off, there is no wastage. To store sprouts off the stem, remove any outer discoloured leaves then wrap in polythene at the bottom of the fridge. They'll keep for 3–4 days. If growing your own sprouts, pick the whole stem – they'll keep longer. To cook sprouts, trim the stalk ends and any damaged leaves. Make a cross cut in the stalk end of each to help them cook quickly – 10 minutes in a little boiling salted water is sufficient, and do cover the pan. But sprouts don't have to be cooked – try shredding them finely in salads – they keep their high vitamin C content, which is reduced by boiling. To freeze: trim, then blanch for 3 minutes. Open freeze then pack into bags. Freezer life is up to a year.

Brussels sprouts soup

A thick, creamy, satisfying soup made from simple ingredients

STARTER

Serves 4

Overall timing 1½ hours

Equipment 2 saucepans, sieve and bowl

Freezing Omit the egg/cream mixture. Cool then pack into rigid container, leaving 1 inch (2.5cm) headspace. Freezer life: 3 months. To use: thaw gently in a pan and bring to boil. Off the heat add egg/cream mixture

INGREDIENTS

| | | |
|----------|------------------|---------|
| 1lb | Brussels sprouts | 450g |
| 3oz | Butter | 75g |
| 1¾ pints | Hot beef stock | 1 litre |
| | Salt | |
| 1oz | Plain flour | 25g |
| | Grated nutmeg | |
| 6 tbsp | Single cream | 6×15ml |
| 1 | Egg yolk | 1 |

METHOD

- 1 Trim sprouts. Cut a cross in base of each. Heat 2oz (50g) butter in a pan, add sprouts and cook for 3 minutes, stirring continuously. Add stock and salt. Cover and cook for 40 minutes, then sieve into a bowl, or liquidize.
- 2 Heat remaining butter in a pan. Add flour and cook, stirring, for 3 minutes. Remove pan from heat and gradually add sprout purée. Return to heat and cook for 10 minutes over low heat. Season with salt and pinch of nutmeg.
- 3 Mix cream with egg yolk. Off heat, stir in cream mixture to thicken.

