

Vital greens

Parsley, with its piquant flavour and feathery green leaves, will be familiar to all, whether used as a decorative garnish, as a herb, or as a green vegetable.

A member of the *umbelliferae* family with several known varieties, it is rich in vitamins and minerals and has been widely used in cookery since ancient times. Pliny wrote that "every sauce and salad should contain apium (parsley)" and his fellow Romans believed the herb to be an anti-intoxicant, an idea which no doubt arose from parsley's ability to overcome strong scents such as garlic and absorb the fumes of wine! Today, whether collected from the garden, bought freeze-dried at supermarkets or fresh from the greengrocer, parsley provides inspiration in every form of cooking. The fresh green sprigs can be finely or roughly chopped as a flavouring, used whole as a garnish or fried in butter to serve as an accompaniment to fried meats and fish. Sprigs are included in *bouquet garni* and the chopped leaves in *fines herbes* mixtures. *Persillade* is the culinary term for chopped parsley mixed with varying quantities of garlic and *cremolata* when also combined with lemon rind and rosemary. Parsley is believed to have originated in the Eastern Mediterranean and is now grown all over the world. The

most familiar variety is the curly leafed which has a more distinct flavour than the flat leafed type. Celery leafed or Neapolitan parsley is rarely seen outside Naples, though a type of Chinese vegetable can be used as a substitute. It is cultivated for its leaf stalks which are blanched and eaten like celery. Hamburg or Dutch parsley was unknown to the Romans, emerging in medieval times as an edible root vegetable rather like a parsnip. Parsley requires only a little sunshine and a rich moist soil and is an ideal windowbox herb for city dwellers. It is notoriously slow to germinate – legend has it that the seed goes nine times to the devil and back before it eventually takes root. Parsley should be sown in spring and regularly trimmed to allow a new crop of foliage to grow and good flavour and colour to develop. High in calcium, magnesium, sodium, iron and vitamins A, B and C, parsley is associated with good health and is reputed to be instrumental in curing ailments of the kidneys and digestive system. Fresh parsley should be washed to remove any grit, gently squeezed dry, the stalks removed, and stored in an airtight container in the fridge for up to 5 days. It freezes well (see page 1003) or can be dried in a cool oven, and then stored in airtight containers.

Below: the leaves of flat leafed or common parsley resemble those of coriander



Below: curly leafed parsley grows in tight bunches and has a very distinct flavour



PARSLEY BUTTER

Parsley or Maître d'hôtel butter is a simple combination of butter, chopped parsley, lemon juice and occasionally tarragon (see recipe page 318). Its joint role as garnish and dressing makes it a useful addition to many hot dishes. Keep a roll of the butter in the fridge (6 weeks) or freezer (3 months), ready to slice. Place a slice on top of grilled steaks, chops or grilled fish or chicken – as it melts, it acts as a succulent dressing. Save last minute parsley chopping by adding parsley butter to cooked vegetables such as new or jacket-baked potatoes, carrots, beans or cauliflower. Or use to mash potatoes, parsnips, swedes or turnips for a pretty finish and improved flavour. Stir it through cooked rice or pasta for a glossy finish, add a knob to cocottes when baking eggs, or stir into scrambled eggs before serving. Parsley butter can also be spread on bread for sandwiches, and is especially good with smoked salmon.

PARSLEY SAUCE

If parsley sauce conjures up visions of poorly disguised overcooked fish or vegetables, it is time to sample the delights of a well made sauce which complements rather than smothers the other flavours. A smooth, well flavoured Béchamel (recipe page 822) is transformed by the addition of 4 tbsp (4×15ml) chopped parsley. Adding up to ¼ pint (150ml) single cream raises the sauce to gourmet status to serve with gammon steaks or bacon joints, or with delicately flavoured poached fish. Parsley also plays an important part in sauces that are served cold – for example, mayonnaise verte or tartare sauce (recipes page 1423). A piquant sauce, popular in Italy, is made from 2oz (50g) fresh breadcrumbs soaked in ¼ pint (150ml) white wine vinegar and then squeezed out. Two pounded anchovy fillets are added with 4 tbsp (4×15ml) chopped parsley, 2 peeled and crushed garlic cloves and 1 tbsp (15ml) each of chopped gherkins and capers. Then 6 tbsp (6×15ml) of olive oil are added one drop at a time, beating well between each addition, till sauce is smooth.