



## The Cabbage Family: Pungent and Plentiful

The members of the large and diverse cabbage family—the brassicas—range in size from massive winter cabbages to tiny Brussels sprouts and in appearance from the nubby whiteness of the cauliflower to the smooth, sometimes purple-tinged, cream-coloured, bulb-like stem of the kohlrabi. Yet all these disparate plants share a common descent from the wild cabbage that still grows in some coastal areas of Britain and France.

The closest cultivated link to the cabbage family's wild progenitor is kale, a hardy vegetable whose strong-flavoured, curly leaves are often sold as "winter-greens," since they can be picked after the heavy frosts that kill other plants. Kale is supplanted later in the year by "spring greens"—a leafy, thick-ribbed variety of cabbage without a compact head. Neither of these brassicas lends itself to cooking methods more complex than simple boiling—although they may both be enhanced with butter or cream before serving.

Firm-headed cabbages—red, white or

green—are more versatile. They are most widely available in winter and are at their best when tightly formed and with firm, unblemished outer leaves. If cored (*box, opposite page*) and shredded, green and white cabbages are good boiled briskly and served still crisp; their cores, a delicacy in their own right, should be saved and eaten raw, dipped in salt. The shredded leaves may also be braised or pan fried, or the whole cabbage can be stuffed and simmered slowly—methods that serve to attenuate their often powerful flavours. As indicated by these various options, cooking times are either very short or very long; anything in between may result in cabbage that smells and tastes sulphurous. Red cabbage, too, is cored and shredded. Boiled in plain water, red cabbage will turn an unappetizing blue; it is usually braised with red wine or vinegar, whose acidity balances its flavour and helps preserve its colour.

Chinese cabbage owes its recent popularity in the West to the crisp, delicate

flavour of its pale, crinkly leaves. Shredded, it may be cooked in the same way as other cabbages. It is also very good when rapidly sautéed, or may be stir-fried in the Oriental fashion, using a *wok*, on its own or in combination with other vegetables.

Brussels sprouts are miniature cabbages that grow clustered on stalks; as their name suggests, they were first cultivated in Belgium. They are best when bright green, small and tight-leaved; soft, loose heads and wilted or yellow leaves are signs that betray age. Trim the bases and remove the outer layer of leaves; the pale green spheres that remain can be boiled in a very few minutes.

The cauliflower has been steadily improved by selective cultivation over the past 200 years; earlier cultivated strains had heads that were no bigger than golf balls. The plant's florets (or curds) must be firm and white with no spots, speckles or other discolorations. Cauliflower can be boiled or steamed whole; however, if it is first separated into individual florets,