

Spring brings excitement to the kitchen with fresh produce. TOM AIKENS shows how to indulge and stay healthy

FOR chefs, this is the most exciting time of year. The arrival of all the delicious young vegetables and salads means we can get down to seriously good eating and great spring food. It's fun for me to see how I can tempt my customers in new ways, but, of course, their tastes can change what I decide to put on the menu. I do try to have a broad selection to cover all the possibilities of vegetarians, strict fish eaters and so on. We won't even refuse a customer who wishes to have his meat 'well done'!

I for one don't like to be told what to eat and how, so to create a new menu can be tricky. But there are a few simple rules I follow, and after that, imagination and creativity take over. For the starters, for example, I'll choose two meat, two fish, two veg and then perhaps a mixed meat and fish combination. Then, I'll look at what's in season and what would go with what in terms



A chef has to cater for all his customers' tastes

of the vegetables, meat or fish. I can then play with the ideas in my head and draw how the dish could look. Finally, I cook it: sometimes it's perfect straight away, and other times I need to tweak it until I'm completely happy. Over the course of the year, I change the menu every three to four months, with the seasons.

Find out what's cooking at Tom's restaurants at www.tomaikens.co.uk

FOOD IN SEASON FOR APRIL

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|---------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Broccoli | Spinach |
| Purple sprouting broccoli | Flowering rosemary |
| Jersey Royal new potatoes | Watercress |
| Rhubarb | Little gem lettuce |
| Rocket | St George's mushroom (April 23) |
| Spring onions | Spring lamb |
| Sorrel | Duck eggs |
| | Wild garlic |
| | Basil |
| | Celery |
| | Cockles |
| | Morel mushrooms (just) |

SPRING SALAD

30g fresh pea shoots
2 bunches watercress
2 little gem lettuce
150g wild rocket
2 small bunches sorrel
1 small bunch chervil
Dozen basil leaves, ripped

METHOD

Take all the leaves and herbs and wash them very carefully in cold water. Drain in a colander and then place into the salad spinner to dry. Empty into a salad bowl and cover with a good-quality extra virgin olive oil, a little lemon juice and some Malvern sea salt and black pepper. Then mix loosely and serve with the lamb and peas.

ROAST LEG OF LAMB WITH GRATIN AND PEAS

ROAST LEG OF LAMB

INGREDIENTS

1 leg of lamb (3kg in weight) with bone in
2 bulbs garlic, peeled
1 small bunch rosemary
2g natural sea salt
200ml olive oil
3 peeled onions
5 peeled carrots
500ml white chicken stock

METHOD

Make about 20 small incisions all over the leg of lamb. Take the bulbs of garlic, cut about 10 of the cloves in half, and insert them into the small holes. Then, take the rosemary and break off little pieces to insert into the remaining holes. Smear it all with a little olive oil and then the sea salt.

Place this on a wire rack in a roasting tray and keep out of the fridge for about an hour before roasting. If you take a large piece of meat straight from the fridge to roast, it won't cook evenly, because the inside will have to warm up before it even starts to cook. The meat will also be more relaxed if it's already at room temperature, and should be much more tender once it's been rested after cooking.

Cut the carrots in half, lengthways, and the onions into thin pieces. Put these into the bottom of the roasting tray with the rest of the olive oil, garlic and a few rosemary leaves. Put the leg of lamb into the oven at 180°C for 10–15 minutes (to brown the meat), then turn the oven down to 160°C. This will also help to keep the meat tender, as you won't be roasting the meat too fiercely. It should take approximately 1½ hours to cook.

The best way to tell if the



ISTOCK, JOHN LAWRENCE/JONES



meat is cooked is by inserting a roasting fork into the centre of the meat, and then lightly touching the fork onto your upper lip. It should be a little hotter than your own body temperature (37°C). So, for medium rare, cook the lamb to 58°C; medium would be about 65°C. If you want to cook the lamb all the way through until it's 'well done', it will need about 2½ hours in the oven.

When it's ready, remove the lamb from the oven, then leave it to rest on a warmed

serving plate for 10–15 minutes.

While it's resting, you can make the gravy. Place the whole roasting tray onto the heat and then re-colour the vegetables. Add the chicken stock, bring this to a simmer, and season with salt and pepper.

Put ½tsp of cornflour in a little container and add 1tbsp of cold water. Whisk this into the gravy. Simmer it for a few minutes, then pass it through a fine sieve into a clean pan. Press the vegetables really well for maximum flavour.

BUTTERED PEAS WITH SOFT LETTUCE

- 2 large banana shallots peeled and finely diced
- 1 soft English lettuce, cut thinly
- 500g shelled peas
- 150ml white chicken stock
- 50g butter
- 200ml double cream
- 5 spring onions, sliced thinly
- 1tbsp chopped parsley
- 1tbsp chopped chervil

METHOD

Cook the peas in boiling salted water, refresh them in iced water, drain and then dry. Sweat the shallots in a pan with 25g butter and cook until almost soft on a low heat with no colour. Add the sliced spring onions, and cook for a couple of minutes, before adding the chicken stock and cream. Bring to the boil and cook for two minutes, then, finally, add the peas. Stir in the butter, add the herbs and lettuce and serve.

POTATO GRATIN

- 600ml double cream
- 6 cloves garlic bashed then chopped roughly
- 6g fresh thyme
- 6 large white potatoes (King Edward/Maris Piper)
- 35g grated Gruyère cheese

METHOD

For the *gratin*, place the cream, garlic and thyme in a pan. Bring to a simmer, and then remove from the heat and leave to infuse for 15 minutes, before passing through a sieve, pressing really well down on the sieve to extract maximum flavour.

Peel the potatoes and slice them on a mandolin at 1mm or 2mm thick. Take an earthenware dish or flat tray (about 2.5cm deep), and lay the potatoes in layers, topping each with a little cream, salt and pepper, starting with a layer of cream and every other one some cheese. Once built up, the gratin should be 1½cm deep. Sprinkle cheese on the top layer. Place it in a pre-heated oven at 170°C/340°F/gas mark 3 ½. It should take about 45 minutes. To see if it's done, plunge a knife into the *gratin*—it should go through without resistance.