



TWO SMALL FARMS

Community Supported Agriculture

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The “It” Vegetable, by Andy Griffin

It took me three years before I learned to successfully cultivate agretti. Now it seems as easy to grow as a weed; in fact, some people say agretti is a weed.

I knew nothing about agretti when Chris Cosentino, the chef at Incanto in San Francisco, presented me with a bag of seed. Chris had gone on an eating safari to Italy, as chefs are wont to do, and he’d enjoyed agretti for the toothsome quality it has even after it’s been cooked, for its unique marine flavor, and for its novelty. Vegetables go in and out of fashion the way hemlines go up and down and that year agretti was the “it” vegetable for the trendiest ristoranti.

I planted Chris’ agretti seed on a mild spring day and waited to see what happened. The soil was well worked, loose, and rich. I watered the crop gently but frequently. “Textbook farming,” I thought proudly, and immediately started thinking about the price per pound I should charge. Agretti seed wasn’t generally available in America at the time; you had to have a friend in the know to bring back some seed from the old country. I figured I was the only farmer on the West Coast with this stuff!

Warm days passed and weeds germinated but no agretti seedlings popped their heads up. “Hmm,” I thought. “Maybe the seed was bad.” So I dug down into the soil with my fingers and looked for the seed. It had all rotted.

Next I contacted Bill McKay from Seeds of Italy. He brought a 25lb bag of fresh seed in from Italy for me and I got into a rhythm of planting a bed of agretti every two weeks throughout the summer.

But week after week the agretti seed rotted. “Jeez,” I thought. “Is all the seed bad, or is it me?”

So I hit the books, which is what I should have done before I even sowed the first seed. I learned that agretti is native to the Mediterranean Basin, and that it’s a halophyte or salt-tolerant plant. Supposedly it can even be irrigated with salt water. Agretti’s scientific name is *Salsola soda*, and it is closely related to the tumbleweed, *Salsola tragus*, which grows as a feral weed across the American West. The picture of agretti on the seed packet had showed a plant with pointed leaves that looked like chives but the pictures I found on the web showed a smallish annual shrub. It turns out that agretti starts out with slender succulent leaves which soon branch. A mature agretti plant forms a sprawling, dry and prickly shrub, much like the tumbleweed.

I meditated on all that I’d read. Maybe by irrigating with clean, sweet water I was treating the agretti poorly. After all, a

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sound and fundamental rule of organic gardening is to learn where a crop plant originally evolved and then attempt to mimic those conditions. I decided to take my cultivating instructions from agretti’s tumbleweed cousins; tumbleweeds germinate with the winter rains and grow when the soil is cold. So I bought more agretti seed and waited. Then one December morning I saw little wild tumbleweed sprouts emerging from the ground alongside the road to New Idria. I called Nato on the cell phone that minute and asked him to begin sowing the last of our agretti seed. The winter sown agretti germinated perfectly. After that, all we had to do was weed the crop once and harvest; the winter rains took care of irrigation. Agretti, it turns out, like it’s tumbleweed cousin, will not germinate when the soil is warm, probably because the plant understands on some cellular level that there are no summer rains to sustain it if it grows during a typical Mediterranean summer.

This idea of mimicking a plant’s evolutionary conditions to assure success with cultivation holds true even for the most

modern, scientifically designed plants. Evolution also helps explain why some people can say with certainty, “You can’t grow x, y, or z organically.” Some crops do defy organic practices. Think about it; if a plant has been developed in a laboratory environment where it has been suckled with high-nitrogen fertilizers since germination and prophylactically dosed with chemical fungicides to eliminate any potential fungal pathogens, then showered with herbicides and pesticides against all invaders before finally being harvested, then a grower, by replicating those industrial conditions and judiciously applying the correct brand of “crop protection products,” should be able to achieve a “successful” harvest. A plant that has been selected to perform well in a chemical environment may hardly function in an alien organic environment.

I respect science. But I also know that all too often scientists only answer the questions that money can ask. As long as we ask “which plants work best in agricultural environment where

This Week

Leeks MF

Agretti MF

Red Orach MF

Romaine Lettuce HG

Red & White Mixed

Turnips HG

Cilantro OR Parsley HG

Mystery MF

Mystery HG

Flowers: Mixed Bouquet TF

chemical ‘crop protection products’ are taken for granted?’ then crop science will continue to give us GMO corns that kill butterfly larvae, Roundup Ready crops that demand herbicide, and so on. Someday, maybe consumers will begin to demand that crop scientists develop crops that thrive under organic environmental conditions. This change has to be consumer driven because many of the companies that develop crop plant genetics and sell seed are now owned by the companies that develop and sell chemicals. Don’t expect their scientists to stop asking that most important question; “Which kind of chemically dependent crop benefits shareholders the most?”

I look forward to a time when crop scientists focus on developing plants that require very few inputs for successful cultivation. For now, I’d say agretti ought to be the “It” vegetable for “green” eaters. Agretti is nutritious, has an interesting, toothsome quality even after it’s been cooked, it has a unique “marine” flavor, it tolerates saline conditions and is almost effortless to grow, seems to be impervious to pest pressure, and is an easy crop for a grower to save seed from for subsequent plantings. Agretti shouldn’t be such a novelty.
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Recipes and Notes

(see www.mariquita.com/recipes for more recipes)

Put everything into your fridge as soon as you return home. If space is an issue, trim some of the darkest green of the leek leaves off before storing in a plastic bag. Top your turnips and use the greens in the first day or two. If the agretti is new to you, give it a try! Just sauté it in olive oil and garlic as a side dish, or try one of the recipes below or on our agretti recipe page. The Red Orach is an old fashioned spinach: use it raw or cooked in any spinach recipe.

Sautéed Agretti with Smoked Pancetta, adapted from *Lucullian Delights*

½ lb pancetta, diced	1 bunch agretti, cleaned
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Pan fry the pancetta until crisp and golden. Remove the meat, leaving the fat. Sauté the agretti in the pancetta fat until wilted. Fold in the pancetta and serve warm.

Pasta with Agretti

Cut away the agretti roots and clean the agretti thoroughly. Bring water to a boil for pasta. Meanwhile, sauté the agretti in olive oil with some sliced garlic cloves and a little salt. When bright green, I added about 1 TBL of water and let them steam until almost tender. When done, drain, and set aside with the lid off. The first choice for a pasta would be a homemade egg pasta (hah!), but any store bought fresh pasta like fettuccine or even dried fettuccine or pappardelle will do.

In a bowl combine some cream cheese (maybe 3-4 TBL), a little cream, 3-4 TBL of grated Romano cheese, and mix. Grate or shred 1½ to 2 cups mozzarella or even jack cheese. Drain the pasta, combine with the agretti, add the creamed mixture and the shredded cheese and toss gently. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Serve immediately as a side or main dish. Please note that this recipe was adapted. This one suggested making the fresh pasta and cooking it with the agretti. It also called for robiola, a fresh Italian cheese with a tangy aftertaste. This I tried to duplicate with the Romano, cream cheese, and jack.--Julia

Turnip & Parsley Risotto

1 leek, cleaned and chopped (white and light green parts only)	2-3 turnips, diced in small cubes
1 bunch parsley, washed and chopped	3-4 cup broth: chicken or vegetable already hot
1 cup Arborio (risotto) rice	freshly grated Parmesan

Sauté the leeks and turnips for 8-10 minutes in olive oil. Add rice and stir continuously until just starting to brown. Slowly add heated broth, one ladle at a time, until absorbed, until rice cooks (keep stirring the whole time!). When nearly done, add the fresh parsley and season with salt and pepper. Add Parmesan

Orach, Fennel, and Feta Salad, adapted from BonApetit

3 TBL olive oil	2 TBL fresh lemon juice
1 large fennel bulb, trimmed, quartered lengthwise, cored, thinly sliced crosswise	1 bunch orach: leaves removed from stems and washed
1 large shallot, minced	1 bunch radishes, sliced
¾ cup crumbled feta cheese	

Whisk oil, lemon juice and shallot in small bowl to blend. Season dressing to taste with salt and pepper. Combine orach, fennel and radishes in large shallow bowl. Add dressing and toss to coat. Sprinkle feta cheese over salad and serve.

Chickpea and Orach Soup, adapted from a recipe by Shakti

2 TBL olive oil	4 crushed garlic cloves
1 chopped leek or onion	1 tsp. ground cumin
2 tsp. coriander powder	3 big potatoes peeled and chopped
16 oz can chick peas, drained	5 cups vegetable stock
1 bunch orach or spinach, washed and roughly chopped	2/3 cups half and half or whole milk
2 TBL sesame seed paste	1 TBL corn starch
red chile powder	salt and pepper to taste

Heat oil and cook the garlic and leek until soft. Stir the cumin and coriander and cook. Add the stock and the potatoes. Bring to a boil and simmer. Add the chick peas and simmer until both are soft. Blend the sesame seed paste, milk and the corn starch. Add the chile powder and mix into the soup. Add the orach and bring to a boil. Keep stirring. Simmer for 5 minutes, add the salt and pepper and serve.

Roast Turnips and Carrots, from chef Jonathan Miller

1 bunch turnips, peeled if necessary, and quartered	1 bunch carrots, halved and cut into large pieces
thyme leaves from 12 branches	salt and pepper

Toss everything together and toss again with a generous drizzling of olive oil. Roast, uncovered, in a 400 degree oven until soft and sweet, about 35 minutes. Make sure the carrots are completely roasted so they are super sweet. Wilt your turnip greens quickly in some butter and salt and serve the roasted veggies on top of them. Serve warm.

From Mariquita Farm: leeks, agretti, orach, mystery. From High Ground: romaine, turnips, cilantro, parsley, mystery. From Thomas Farm: flowers.