



The Edible Garden with Alison Alexander

Chatting with Garden Club friends a couple of weeks ago the topic of fennel came up and how it is used in the kitchen so that is the theme for today. Fennel is a member of the carrot family and although originally from the Mediterranean region it has become naturalized in many parts of the world. The long stems with feathery light green leaves and broad round heads of yellow flowers are unmistakable in late summer and it grows wild in many areas including the Granite Belt. It has a propensity to grow along railway lines to the extent it is considered a weed in some parts of Australia.



There are three main types of fennel grown in kitchen gardens in our area – green and bronze fennel as herbs and Florence fennel with a swollen bulb which is used as a vegetable. Fennel seeds are widely used and are essential to good Italian pork sausages and the pollen from the flowers has been a favourite in recent times by some of the more adventurous chefs around the world. Fennel has a mild aniseed flavour and is a great companion for any and all seafood but not limited to this. I prefer to use the bulb when it is no more than about 12cm across – exceptionally large bulbs tend to be tough and fibrous.



One of my favourite soups is a twist on Vichyssoise – leek, potato and fennel cooked in chicken stock and finished with some flaked hot smoked salmon or fried crumbled bacon or chorizo. I also like using fennel with lamb and pork – trim the root base of the bulb but don't remove it entirely then cut the bulb into wedges and place in the pan with a roasting piece (leg or shoulder) and other preferred vegetables when roasting. I also like to use chopped fennel bulb in a lamb pie. Finely sliced fennel is a good addition to coleslaw.

The following recipe has been contributed by club member **Elizabeth Burns**.

Sausage and Apple Tray Bake

1 tablespoon olive oil
1kg pork sausages
1 large leek, thinly sliced
1 large fennel bulb, thinly sliced
300g potatoes, cut into wedges
2 red apples, sliced into thick rounds
1 ½ tablespoons plain flour
330ml apple cider
½ cup chicken stock (more if cider is not used)
1 tablespoon butter
¼ cup fresh sage leaves
100g sourdough bread, torn into pieces

1. Pre-heat oven to 180°C.
2. Brown the sausages then leeks and fennel in the olive oil and place in a baking dish. Place the potatoes and apples in the dish with the sausages.
3. Add flour to the pan and combine with remaining oil then stir in stock and cider and bring to the boil. Pour this liquid over the sausage mixture, cover with a lid or foil and bake for 30 minutes.
4. While the sausages are cooking, add half the butter to the pan and when melted and hot fry the sage leaves until they are crisp. Remove the leaves and set aside on absorbent paper. Add the remaining butter to the pan and fry the bread pieces until light golden. You may need to add a little extra butter.
5. When tray bake is ready remove from the oven and sprinkle over the sage leaves and bread pieces before serving.

Seafood Chowder

500g green prawns

400g white fish, no bones or skin

3 bacon rashers

2 tablespoons butter

2 leeks, thinly sliced

1 fennel bulb, cut into 1cm dice

3 medium potatoes, peeled and cut into 1cm dice

3 cobs of corn, kernels removed

pinch cayenne pepper

½ teaspoon sea salt

freshly ground black pepper

1.5litres fish stock

250mls dry white wine

300ml cream

¼ cup finely chopped fennel or parsley leaves

1. Peel the prawns and place in a small bowl. Cut the fish into 2.5cm pieces and keep the fish and prawns in the refrigerator until required.
2. Remove rind from the bacon and cut into 1cm dice. Cook the bacon in a large pot over medium heat until it is golden. Remove and set aside.
3. Melt butter in the pot and sauté the leeks until they are soft. Add the remaining vegetables, cayenne, seasoning and cook for 5 minutes, stirring frequently. Add the stock and wine and bring mixture to the boil. Reduce heat to a simmer and continue to cook, covered, until the vegetables are almost tender but not soft and mushy.
4. Transfer half the vegetable mixture to a jug and purée with a hand blender or purée in a food processor. Return this mixture to the pot.
5. Stir in the prawns and fish and cook for about 5 minutes or until the prawns are pink. Stir gently to avoid breaking up the fish. Add the cream and stir to heat through before serving in bowls sprinkled with chopped fennel or parsley.