

Seagreens



Arctic Fresh

Illustration by Angela F Rawson, July 1999
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Cooks warm to little weed



Health and Diet Centre manager Liz Chandler displays some of the seaweed products she sells in Newbury

For many people, seaweed conjures up images of beach holidays, but with widening cultural influences in this country it has become a fashionable culinary ingredient. NIKKI ROWAN-KEDGE writes about the many types of seaweed now available in our shops.

SEAWEED, reared by the sea and ploughed by the waves, is one of the world's oldest crops, and much valued for its medicinal properties. It even featured in Babylonian and Egyptian pictures and symbols known as hieroglyphs. Roman centurions ate it and fed it to their horses and the Celts turned it into bread and patties. It was even made into soluble paper for secret documents during the war.

Seaweed comes in many varieties. One of the most familiar is Carrageen or Irish Moss. It is tedious to prepare because you have to wash it several times or leave it out in the rain until it is bleached white. Then it has to be trimmed and dried and stored in paper bags until needed.

Fortunately, we can also buy seaweed products ready prepared. From Japanese waters comes the black and nutty-flavoured Arame. Its mild flavour makes it an ideal introduction to this now fashionable food and it can be added to rice, stir-frys, salads and casseroles.

Kombu comes from the cold waters off the northern Japanese island of Hokkaido and can be used to flavour soups and salads. From the shallower waters off the same island comes Wakame, which is popular for its versatility and sweet flavour. It can be roasted and crumbled so can be used instead of salt.

Nori seaweed is grown in tidal waters on nets anchored onto bamboo poles in shallow inlets. It can be served toasted until it changes colour then crumbled over vegetables or rice or cut into strips for sushi. These seaweeds form part of the Sanchi range, available from Waitrose and Wild Thymes Organic Health Food Shop in Marlborough, where a 60g bag of Arame costs £2.36.

Another seaweed processing company is Seagreen, whose managing director, Simon Ranger's family came from Theale. His company concentrates on wild seaweed harvested from remote Norwegian islands in the outer Archipelago. The nearest island of Froya, the name of the Norwegian Goddess of fertility, is more than 100kms from the mainland, and this is where the seaweed is harvested, dried and processed the same day. Seaweed is harvested without damaging the marine environment, and Simon, aged 49, says his company is the only organically-certified producer in Europe.

Seaweed is suitable for both vegans and vegetarians. Aga Aga, the thickening agent used by vegetarians in place of animal gelatine in many dishes such as mousses, is made from a blend of seaweed.

Seagreen also produces freshly-milled seaweed which can be used as a condiment instead of salt, and its granulated Whistle Wrack, a variety of seaweed, can be used in cooking. It contains minerals, vitamins and amino acids which aid digestion. Baked or fried, its subtle flavour adds a nutty taste to bread, pizzas, soufflés, shellfish, vegetables, rice and pasta.

Seagreen makes Wild Seaweed Food Capsules. Their rich iodine content acts as an internal cleanser, regulating digestion and helping to stimulate the metabolism and hormone system.

Animals too love seaweed, especially cats, probably thinking it is fish. Sprinkle a little over their normal food and they will come back purring for more. Seaweed has even saved lives, as Wiktor Zvenniaks knows. When he was lost at sea in 1954, he survived 46 days by eating floating seaweed.

Fish and seaweed are natural partners and cooking them together could not be more simple. Crumble lightly-fried seaweed over smoked or fresh fillets of salmon for a real taste of the sea. For a more unusual combination, try steamed or fried seaweed with pork or crispy bacon.

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Seaweed risotto

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Seaweed cakes

Seaweed risotto

Ingredients

(to serve four people)

1 onion, peeled and chopped

2 tablespoons olive oil

125g cooked prawns

6 button mushrooms, cleaned and sliced

8 tablespoons cooked rice

3 tablespoons dry Arame seaweed

1 level teaspoon Seagreen wild wrack granules

2 shakes of Cayenne pepper

1 teaspoon chopped tarragon

1 teaspoon chopped parsley

1 small handful of fresh peas.

These are optional.

Method

Soak the seaweed in cold water for 15 minutes.

Sauté the chopped onion in the oil in a large saucepan until soft. Add the mushrooms and cook until brown. Lower the temperature, squeeze any excess water from the seaweed and add it to the saucepan, stirring well to mix it in.

Sprinkle in the wild wrack granules and Cayenne pepper. Heat through, stirring from time to time. Put in the prawns, rice, chopped herbs and peas and blend all the ingredients well. Serve hot with a green salad or as an accompaniment to other fish dishes.

This dish can be adapted to be suitable for vegetarians. Simply substitute the prawns with cooked cauliflower or courgettes.

Seaweed cakes

Ingredients (to serve four people)

500g cooked potato

3 tablespoons dry seaweed

6 spring onions, chopped

90g butter

2 tablespoons chopped parsley

1/2 teaspoon ground mace

1 level teaspoon Seagreens wild wrack granules

Seagreen seaweed seasoning – instead of salt

1 large free-range egg, beaten

125g fresh breadcrumbs and flour for coating

Method

Soak the seaweed in cold water for 15 minutes. Squeeze out the excess water. Fry the spring onion and seaweed for one minute. Mix the onion, mashed potato and seaweed. Mix the parsley, mace, wrack granules and seaweed seasoning. Form into eight potato cakes and chill for 30 minutes. Dust each cake with flour, dip into the egg and coat with breadcrumbs. Fry.