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The root known as salsify satisfies on every level, except looks.

By: *Pete Petersen*

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If director Tim Burton ever designed a vegetable, it would probably look like salsify. But inside its alien exterior this root has a delicious, delicate flavor.

IN SEASON: The misnamed "oyster plant" produces crisp, cream-colored flesh.

I first tried salsify many years ago at Higgins restaurant in Portland. It was puréed, and its delicate, earthy flavor was deliciously paired with sautéed chard.

Salsify is a wonderful root vegetable that's best known to professional chefs and experienced kitchen gardeners rather than home cooks. That, coupled with short supply, relegates it to a status nearer exotic than quotidian.

It has medium-dense, crisp, cream-colored flesh that softens but holds its shape when cooked. Some cooks may avoid it because they've heard of it by its nickname, "oyster plant." Someone, somewhere, decided it had an oyster taste. I have no idea where that came from, but I strongly disagree. As a Northwest boy I grew up loving oysters, but ocean bivalves can be an acquired taste for some and the comparison could put off folks who lack positive oyster experiences.

Salsify's flesh is amenable to many preparations and compatible as a side dish to almost any entree. It compares favorably to cabbage for nutritional value. It has unique carbohydrate properties that yield fructose rather than glucose when digested, which is a boon to folks who need to watch their glucose intake.

Look for: Two root plants commonly called salsify are distant botanical relatives. They look different, though they have similar culinary uses. One has the tapered shape and buff color of parsnips, albeit much smaller. When available, they're typically bunched for sale with leaves intact.

More commonly available and sold by the pound is the black, cylindrical-shaped variety -- 3/4 inch to 1 inch in diameter and 10 inches or so in length. Black to



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brown velvety skin covers the creamy white flesh. There may be a few nubs of stems or wispy roots visible, but harvest usually displaces the leaves.

The root should be firm, but with a little flex to it. Limp salsify is usable, but may have lost moisture and could be bitter or fibrous. The biggest threat to flavor is desiccation. Decay isn't as much of a problem because it tends to be localized and can be cut away. Examine the skin for rot in the form of dark lesions and soft spots. These are fine as long as they are easily removed. If they are dominant or have rotted completely through the root, take a pass.

When and where: Salsify grows from late October through March. It grows well in the Pacific Northwest. Farmers from Your Kitchen Garden sell it to the restaurant trade and to a few lucky produce stands. I've seen it recently at Raw Raw Raw Produce inside City Market. You should have a good chance of finding it at co-ops like People's and Food Front.

To store: If you can, wrap each root with wax paper. The wrap keeps any decay on one root from spreading to those next to it. Whether wrapped or not, hold salsify in a plastic bag in the coldest part of the fridge.

Basic preparation: First, rinse loose debris and dirt from the root. With the slicing edge of a paring knife or a stiff bristled brush, lightly scrape the skin off in long, even strokes. If you use a peeler, you will remove flesh -- bad idea. Salsify oxidizes quickly once peeled, so dab the flesh with lemon juice or place it in a bowl of cool acidulated water (two to three tablespoons lemon juice per quart of water). Slice or cut the root as you would a carrot, then sauté, braise or roast.

Pete Petersen is a Portland produce expert.