

More than vegetables

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Restaurants obviously run in the blood of the Mascarenhas siblings. While Rebecca has overseen Sonny's in Barnes, south-west London, for the past 24 years, Vernon, her younger brother, had his own restaurant in north London for 14 years before becoming managing director of Secretts farm outside Godalming, Surrey.

Having supervised the picking that starts at 5am, Mascarenhas now spends his mornings talking to some of the 300 chefs he supplies with vegetables, fruits and herbs. He also occasionally lets me know what is going on.

After a recent holiday eating and wine tasting around the south island of New Zealand, he phoned with a mixture of good and bad news. Even before the current snows, the very cold snap at the beginning of the year had killed off a lot of parasites that would mean that farmers would need to use fewer pesticides later in the season. And to defend themselves against the cold, certain crops - such as the Yorkshire forced rhubarb, Savoy cabbage and spring greens - had had to produce more sugar, a development that would make them taste even better.

But sales last month were 15% down on last year, he reported, reflecting lower demand from the restaurants. And certain customers were unilaterally extending their payment terms. Mascarenhas remains optimistic, partly, he explained, because he enjoys talking to chefs so much, telling them what to buy and what to avoid, and helping them to plan their menus by letting them know what will soon be in season.

He cited Mark Blatchford at Racine, London SW3, Paul Merrett at The Victoria in SW14 and Sanjay Dwivedi at Zaika in W8 as his three most enthusiastic listeners. 'They're the kind of chefs who will even change the soup on their daily set price menu if I tell them that there's an even more suitable, fresher vegetable available', he added.

This conversation reinforced a long-held belief of mine that while there are many ways by which to judge a restaurant, how its chefs prepare and serve the vegetables is probably the acid test. And as I scrutinised menus everywhere I had come to the conclusion that the prices being charged for side orders of vegetables and potatoes were rising. Vegetables present any kitchen with a challenge in that they are bulky to store; awkward, tedious and time consuming to prepare; and definitely the unsung heroes of any meal.

Vegetables are also synonymous with a certain style of cooking and that is why, early one morning, I was sitting opposite Dwivedi in the bar at Zaika, as he complained how little sleep he now gets as a chef and the father of 18-month-old twin boys.

I had chosen to come here not just because I enjoy Dwivedi's cooking and the Indian approach to cooking vegetables in general but also because he had spent two years cooking under Mark Hix at Le Caprice restaurant, where a strict respect for seasonality had been drummed into him.

In fact, Dwivedi began by being critical of the Indian approach to cooking vegetables in general. 'I think that there is a widespread tendency to overcook vegetables as our cooking incorporates so many spices. Because the spices have to be cooked through, then the entire dish tends to get overcooked. I want my customers to taste the vegetable and then the spice so it's a rule here that there are never more than five spices in any one dish. And when we prepare a dish like the baby aubergine masala, I will cook the aubergines and masala mix separately, then slice the aubergines and lay the mix on top.'

Born in Delhi, Dwivedi grew up in his family's hotel on the southern coast of India before moving to London. But it was the book *Charlie Trotter's Vegetables* written by the American chef which opened his eyes to how vegetables should be treated, prepared and cooked. Pointing to the table where Trotter had eaten only a couple of months ago, he added, 'My ambition is to provide my customers with the best experience of Indian cooking and I know now it's the vegetables that can make the difference', before leading me into the kitchen.

Along one counter were the dozen boxes that made up that day's delivery from three different suppliers. From a major wholesaler at New Covent Garden Market, Dwivedi buys the bulk vegetables that no kitchen can survive without; from an Indian wholesaler he buys what no Indian kitchen could exist without - pungent ginger, packets of curry leaves and bags of green chilis which smelt hot even though they had just come off a cold van; and ten various items picked that morning from Secretts farm.

But before Dwivedi could continue in his highly enthusiastic manner, my eye was caught by something I had never seen before in a kitchen. Two Indian chefs had just walked in and after shouting hello in Hindi to Dwivedi and shaking hands with us both, one of them went over to the main stove and the two tandoori ovens next to it, bent down, blessed them and then lit them. He did this, I was told, every time he started and finished a shift in the kitchen as a way of showing his respect for the element that allows him to make a living.

One of the other chefs had now pulled out a large tray of whole, peeled onions and at the sight of these Dwivedi explained how even at the most basic level a greater respect for vegetables can make a significant difference.

'Indian cooking requires an awful lot of onions and I'm buying Chilean ones at the moment because although they are about three times more expensive, the others have so much water in them that you end up using three times as many.'

'And these are the unwashed English potatoes we use and I think make the best mashed potatoes because you have to start by boiling them in their skins, then peeling and preparing them. This method takes longer, and I had some difficulty in convincing the rest of my brigade, but they get it now.'

Over at the stoves, a breakfast of a thin, spring onion omelette eaten between slices of toast, and small cups of sweet masala tea, was being enjoyed and offered to the men delivering that day's fish and meat. Dwivedi returned to the boxes delivered by Secretts and sniffed the plump, purple cabbage he serves with halibut and the cauliflower to be cooked in salted turmeric water and then seasoned with sesame and ginger for a lunchtime thali.

But then he had found the rhubarb, golden beetroot and what are called white carrots, although they are in fact closer to pale yellow. 'I've ordered these so that I can start to put together our menus for Valentine's Day. The rhubarb will make a deep red chutney. The white carrots I will probably make into a soup with a quenelle of red carrots and yoghurt on the top. And the golden beetroot I am going to cook with cinnamon and ginger and then use as a base for a salad with slices of goats cheese that have been coated with breadcrumbs and then gently fried. I hope these will make my customers very happy on the night', he added with a smile.

www.sonnys.co.uk

www.secretts.co.uk

www.zaika-restaurant.co.uk