Exploring the English Pea

Chef Judd Lohof puts a new spin on the classic cheerleader for spring, cherished companion to lettuce and turnips, and sustainer of babies.

Spring is upon us, and all of nature seems to strain to hold itself back. As we look forward to new growth, new wardrobes and new American Idol finalists, the late winter labor of local farmers and gardeners suddenly...springs forth.

As a chef, I get excited by the prospect of a new season of products and dishes. Spring says many things: lamb, fava beans, asparagus, strawberries, radishes, etc., but most of all, spring means peas.

When I had time to garden, peas were a winner for me in WNC. Easy to grow on a simple trellis, they have high yields for the space, and much of the plant...
is edible. I grew snow peas and sugar snaps first. My trouble was always making it out of the garden without eating them all out of both hands. Thus, I settled on English peas, which require shucking. If you have kids, this is a great task for them.

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These peas can be used in all kinds of ways, from light vegetable ragouts and soups to accompaniments for scallops with strawberries and rhubarb. Even the shoots and tendrils can be used for salads and garnishes. Peas, like most vegetables, have a bad reputation thanks to the twin tortures of canning and overcooking. When properly handled, these sweet little morsels are a vibrant, tasty, and nutritious reprieve from a winterlong of turnips and kale. The easiest way to enjoy peas, aside from devouring them straight from the pod, is to steam them and toss with some butter, salt and pepper. But, if you’re feeling adventurous, here are a few recipes to try. All are nutritious, not terribly difficult to prepare and an appropriate holistic food for the weather in spring. They utilize healthy wholesome ingredients available locally and incorporate enough good fat to nourish in the coolness of the season.
Curried Pea Soup
a vegetarian change of pace from ham hocks

Ingredients:
- 1 onion, diced
- ½ a fennel bulb, diced
- 2 tbs garlic, minced
- 2 tbs ginger, grated
- 2 tbs vegetable oil
- 1 russet potato, peeled and chopped
- 2 tbs water or veggie stock
- 2 tbs curry powder, prepared or make your own
- 1 can coconut milk
- Salt to taste
- 1 carrot, peeled, diced and steamed

Instructions:
Sweat the first four ingredients gently in the vegetable oil. When the contents are soft, add the potato, water or stock, and spice mixture and bring to a boil. Reduce heat to a simmer and cook until potato and peas are soft. Puree the mixture in a food processor, incorporating coconut milk. Return soup to your pot and bring back up to serving temperature. Add the carrots for a nice contrasting garnish.
ENGLISH PEA FLAN
almost dessert

Ingredients:
- 3 cups cooked, pureed peas
- 3 cups milk or half and half
- 6 eggs
- 6 egg whites
- 1 tbs fresh dill
- Salt and white pepper to taste

Instructions:
Beat eggs and whites. Add remaining ingredients. Sprinkle custard or coffee cups with pan release and fill three quarters of the way full with custard mixture. Place cups of custard in a casserole dish and add enough hot water to the dish to come half way up the cups. This enables the custards to cook evenly. Cook in a 350-degree oven for roughly one hour, or until the center of the custard is only a little jiggly. These savory custards are lovely with a salad of lightly dressed pea tendrils and shaved radishes.

While on the subject of pea tendrils, a few years of thinning the garden plot gave me ample opportunity to explore their culinary uses. Easiest of course is to add them to your salad greens. They are crunchy and sweet. They are also widely used in Chinese cooking, where they are known as dau miu. So, give them a try in your next stir-fry. Other good combinations can be found in the spring garden: garlic scapes, leeks and baby vegetables are all very compatible.

Author Judd Lohof and his wife Mackensy own Café Azalea, a casual-elegant neighborhood restaurant in East Asheville that serves market-fresh cuisine Tuesday through Sunday for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Café Azalea is located at 1011 Tunnel Road in Asheville, 828-299-3753.

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