The humble fennel is often overlooked in most kitchens and supermarket shelves. Put off by its gnarled exterior, most culinary enthusiasts chase after more glamorous produce, leaving poor fennel feeling a bit like an awkward, dateless teenager at the high-school prom.

Looks, as they say, can be deceptive and never has this been truer than in the case of fennel. So, let me fill you in on some gossip about the mighty fennel.

**HISTORY**

In Italy, the gentle folk of the town of Florence affectionately refer to fennel as finocchio. Perhaps its fronds and fingers resemble Pinocchio’s nose? Hmm ... food for thought.

In ancient Greece, fennel used to be called “Marathon”, named after the place where it was first found to grow. As a coincidence, this also happens to be where the battle of Marathon took place (back in 490BC) and where the Olympic running event gets its name. However, it is not clear if fennel had anything to do with the battle itself, or whether it endows any special powers on long-distance runners.

The Greeks, it would seem, reserve a special place in their hearts for fennel. There is a little story about how Prometheus used the stalk of a fennel to steal fire from the gods and bring it to man. Perhaps this is where the fennel gets its fiery aniseed flavour?

**MEDICINAL USES**

In mediaeval times, fennel was combined with St John’s Wort to ward off witches and evil spirits. Although the usefulness of such a concoction may be limited today, fennel juice can expel the evils of a hangover and campers still use it as an effective insect repellent.

The more observant among you may have noticed that fennel is a common ingredient in cough syrups and similar remedies. This is because it is an effective treatment for respiratory congestion. After a long night out, or too many hours in front of the computer, an infusion of fennel makes a soothing eye bath.

During the early days of the Renaissance in Europe, fennel created the earliest of fad-diet crazes. Yet another of the many powers of fennel is that it is an appetite suppressant! Back then it was all the rage as a cure for obesity during those crazy Renaissance times. Apparently, church-goers chewed on fennel seeds during long, dreary church services in order to beat pangs of hunger. How’s that for something to chew on!

**NUTRITIONAL VALUE**

Believe it or not, fennel is in fact a member of the parsley family. Although it looks nothing like its slicker, sexier cousin, fennel is a great source of dietary fibre and minerals and is a rich source of vitamins. Fennel an abundant source of folate (one of the B-vitamins).

Not very exciting you say? Consider this – folate is essential for your body to produce and maintain new cells, including skin and hair. Popping some fennel into your daily morning juice may just have you looking and feeling a whole lot younger!

**CULINARY USES**

As we’ve discovered, fennel is truly an extraordinary vegetable and in the right hands has endless applications. Fennel is mostly known for its aniseed flavor and its aroma which is unlike that of any other vegetable.

Fennel is one of those vegetables where every last bit has its uses. In India, the seeds are an essential ingredient of the Bengali spice mix, panch phoran, and candy-coated fennel seeds are used as a breath freshener! It is also used in Asian cooking as part of the Chinese five-spice powder (incidentally, that’s what panch phoran means, too – “five-spice”). In the US, fennel is often mislabeled as “anise” – now there’s a surprise!

Edible seeds are collected from the wild fennel while the tamed, sweet fennel can be eaten raw in salads or as crudites. Fennel fronds and the herbs attached to them can be used in salads. In fact, the freshness of the herb will indicate the freshness of the bulb. In Australia, fennel is best from February to September.

Thanks to the versatility of fennel, cooking with this amazing ingredient can be a lot of fun. If guests drop in unannounced on a quiet winter afternoon, stuff them with a simple salad that can be quickly thrown together using shaved fennel, orange, rocket and feta cheese. As the hungry masses nibble on the salad, a nice hot tomato-and-fennel soup makes a delightful appetiser. This would go particularly well with a few slices of bread baked with fennel seeds.

In keeping with its mediaeval past, braising is a popular method of cooking fennel, where the vegetable is placed in a covered tray or pan with a little bit of broth and baked in the oven. Served with the fennel-seed bread, a Tuscan braised fennel and cannellini bean stew makes a great hearty main course.

Finally, what meal is complete without dessert? To finish off, floor your guests with my favourite invention – the fennel panna cotta.

The possibilities are truly endless! Fennel has been around for centuries and is loved all around the world. It has brought relief to the hung-over, hope to the fad-dieter, and variety to the kitchen of the chef looking for a challenge. If it wasn’t a vegetable, fennel would probably be some kind of super-hero!

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