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## Tara Leonard, County Bounty: Radish revelation

Sentinel Staff Report

Radishes have a bad rap. This unassuming veggie is commonly found raw in salads, languishing amidst a platter of crudités, or perched on the periphery of your plate perhaps carved into a delicate flower. More for show than sustenance, the humble radish tends to play a supporting role in American cuisine.

Local farmer Stephen Haas, a.k.a. The Radish Man, is out to change all that. With the help of local chefs, Haas is spreading the gospel of the remarkable radish, rescuing it from the sidelines and proving that this underappreciated food can take the heat of the culinary spotlight.

A root vegetable that resembles small beets or turnips, radishes were first cultivated in China, then spread to Egypt and Greece. Ancient Romans used radishes for their medicinal value, believing they could stimulate the appetite, aid indigestion and treat melancholy.

The radish gets its name from *radix*, the Latin word for "root." The technical name of the genus, *Raphanus*, is a Latinized form of an old Greek expression *raphanos*, or "easily reared," which is apt, according to Haas. The owner of Agricultural Contaminant-Free Enterprises, or A.C.E. Organics, Haas grows a wide range of produce at three locations in Santa Cruz County. One of the reasons he enjoys cultivating radishes is they have a fast growing cycle with many varieties reaching maturity within 30 days.

The most popular variety in the U.S. is the common Red Globe, a small, oval-shaped variety with a pink-red exterior and crisp white flesh. But Haas grows radishes of all shapes, colors and sizes with a level of peppery spice for every taste. His Easter Egg radishes come in a rainbow of muted lavender, pink, rose and cream. Mild French Breakfast radishes which Haas says his grandmother eats like an apple are long and narrow with scarlet skin and white tips. The less common Black Radish, a large variety with an ebony exterior, packs some heat with reach-for-your-water-glass kick. The Asian Daikon is a carrot-shaped species that can grow up to 18 inches long, hotter than red radishes but milder than black. Also increasing in popularity is the Watermelon Radish, an heirloom variety from China with pale skin and a vibrant pink interior.

To familiarize buyers with these different varieties, Haas offers them in mixed bunches at the Summit Grocery Store and Sunnyside Produce in Soquel. On a recent visit to his Happy Valley field, I admired one of these radish bouquets, the rich damp soil still clinging to its roots. Lovely as it was, I admitted to an utter lack of imagination when it comes to radishes. Aside from dipping these beauties into sea salt and crunching them raw, what are the options?

"A lot of people don't think to cook with radishes," says Mark Gallagher, owner of Your Affordable Chef catering company. According to Gallagher, radishes hold up well under heat, retaining a crisp crunch while their flavors mellow. "You can braise, boil or bake them. They're an unexpected addition, bringing subtle texture and flavor to familiar dishes. Diners go home happy and wonder, 'Now what was that ingredient?' It's just what every chef wants"

To prove his point, Gallagher served me a lovely melange of roasted radishes, carrots and beets in a sweet honey glaze. [See recipes.] The radishes were a pleasant complement to the more familiar root vegetables, smooth and snappy without the peppery bite they have raw.

Then he offered a steaming bowl of black mussels sautéed with radishes in a rich ginger-butter sauce. Again, the radishes were a revelation, a crunchy counterbalance to the elastic mussels. I soaked up every morsel.

Gallagher is not the only chef motivated by Haas' far-from-ordinary radishes. Beverlie Terra, executive chef at Chaminade, purchases A.C.E. radishes because they're local and organic. "I wanted to tie someone local into our menu," she says. "I like the combination bunches for the different colors. I'll toss them in a really hot pan with extra virgin olive oil, a little sea salt and black pepper. They stay crunchy and keep their color. It's a great accompaniment to fish"

"A lot of people think of radishes only as a garnish," confirms chef Chris Avila, who has purchased A.C.E. produce for Soif in downtown Santa Cruz and La Posta in Seabright. "People tend to chop off the radish tops and throw them out. But I like to cook with them like turnip greens. They have a really earthy, slightly bitter flavor that's great in soups. You can also saute them with a little butter or olive oil and onions"

There are plenty of ways for everyday cooks to make the most of local spring radishes. Mince them and blend with cream cheese and garlic for a dip to serve with crackers or crudités. Grate into slaws or salads for a colorful presentation. Grill in a foil packet with garlic and butter alongside fish. Julienne and toss into stir fry. Pickle in plum vinegar. Or simply serve whole with Kosher salt, sweet butter and bread for a classic English treat.

However you choose to them enjoy them, radishes won't end up on your waist. At about 20 calories a cup, they're rich in ascorbic acid, folic acid and potassium. Relative to their serving size, they're are also a good source of vitamin B6, riboflavin, magnesium and calcium.

So break out of the radish rut and join Chef Gallagher, who is throwing radishes into everything these days. "They're different," he concludes. "They're unexpected. They just work"

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The following recipes come from Mark Gallagher of Your Affordable Chef. For more information and additional recipes, visit his Web site at [www.affordablechef.info](http://www.affordablechef.info).

### Warm Scented Green Bean and Radish Salad

This delicious salad has unexpected layers of flavor, texture and temperature. A great way to start off a garden lunch!

3 Tbsps. oil

1/4 cup thinly sliced prosciutto

Pinch of mint

1/4 cup radishes, peeled and slivered

20 fresh, whole green beans

3 handfuls mixed salad greens

1/4 cup feta cheese, crumbled

2 heirloom tomatoes, wedged

Dash of rice wine vinegar

In a small saucepan, heat oil and add prosciutto, mint, radishes and green beans. Sauté until beans are tender but snappy. Divide mixture into two servings and place over mixed salad greens. Garnish with feta and tomatoes. Sprinkle with vinegar. Makes 2 servings.

### Roasted, Candied Radishes, Beets and Carrots

Radishes become tender and sweet when roasted, a delightful complement to more familiar roasted vegetables.

10 radishes, cleaned and halved

10 beets, peeled and halved

8 small carrots, peeled and chunked

1 Tbsp. honey

1 Tbsp. butter

Dash cinnamon

Steam or boil the vegetables for 5 minutes. Drain and arrange in a shallow baking dish. Combine honey, butter and cinnamon in a small sauce pan and melt to combine. Pour glaze over the vegetables and bake uncovered at 350 for about 20 minutes or until tender. Makes 2 servings.

### Braised Scallops with Garden Radishes

Mark made me a variation of this simple, satisfying recipe using black mussels. Feel free to experiment with your favorite type of seafood.

3 Tbsps. oil

15 radishes, trimmed and sliced

10 bay scallops

1 cup dry sherry

1 Tbsp. butter

1/2 tsp. salt

1 Tbsp. cornstarch

1 Tbsp. water

Heat oil and add radishes and scallops. Sauté briefly. Add sherry, butter and salt. Cook, covered, about 11 minutes. Combine cornstarch and water. Add to pan and stir to thicken. Serve alone or over pasta. Makes 2 servings.

### La Noche de Rabanos (Radish Night)

The Spanish first brought radishes to Mexico in the 16th century. Not long after, local farmers began carving their radishes into imaginative shapes to entice people to visit the market and buy their produce. La Noche de Rabanos is an annual celebration in Oaxaca, Mexico, where growers and artisans display ornate radish sculptures. The grand prize in the carved radish competition is 12,000 pesos, or about \$1,000 U.S.

### Buying and storing

The freshest radishes are those sold in bunches with tops attached. Look for a firm, brightly colored root and healthy leaves. Packaged radishes have a longer shelf life and are usually less expensive. Avoid those that feel spongy or look wilted. To store bunched radishes, remove the leaves, wrap in plastic and refrigerate. The bagged variety must be refrigerated, too, and should be eaten within a week. To revive those that seem less than firm, immerse in ice water for an hour or two before serving.

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