

From frozen ground..

Purple broccoli sprouts

We had big plans. With Chinese New Year and Valentine's Day both falling on Sunday, we hoped we'd be able to fill your boxes with crinkly-leaf Chinese cabbage and nutty brown mushrooms. We still have the bean sprouts but we didn't put them in the boxes because we thought they'd look a little lonely on their own. We had a whole Chinese romantic feast thing in mind - or so my female colleagues thought, but we're really struggling.

Even though it's warming up, the January snow has really set a lot of our farmers back. The root crops can take the cold, but the real Herculean effort by our farmers is to get the stuff out of the ground in a reasonable state - and they have been magnificent. The Hearne family has struggled with their mushrooms, as mushrooms don't grow below freezing, but they again have been performing miracles. Sadly, we couldn't get enough of them to fill the boxes, though.

The real stars of the show, as we keep banging on about, have been the purple-tinted green cabbages and the citrus. The demand for clementines and mandarins is as great as ever and we have got through four times the amount of blood oranges this year vs last. What amazes me is the amount of lemons you guys get through; you must put them in your tea!



Alex, who sources all of our citrus and other things on the continent, usually boasts about the sunny weather in her corner of France: Cavaillon. But this year, they've even be slugging through the snow. She says even Andalucia got hit - first time in 30 years, she says. Alex has worked tirelessly to find good things to brighten up the boxes.

Luckily, there's a purple light thawing the end of the frozen tunnel. That's right. The first beacon of spring: purple sprouting broccoli. John Guerin down in Somerset is hoping to send us his first bouquets this week. So, the boxes will get more colourful. But enjoy the soup veg while you can. Before you know it, you'll be getting bored of asparagus.

Bring on Spring...

Jamie

Organic Chinese feast...



Sweet & Sour Chicken

Just like a take-away, but made with organic ingredients. Serves 4

500ml sunflower oil
2 boneless chicken thighs
1 tbsp sake or a dry white wine
1 tbsp soy sauce
3 tbsp plain white flour, sifted
1 medium egg, lightly beaten
1 large carrot
1 large onion
1 leek
2 red peppers, quartered and deseeded
1 small or ½ large pineapple
1 tbsp cornflour

Sweet and Sour Sauce

2 tsp cornflour
100ml water
4 tbsp soft brown sugar
2 tbsp soy sauce
6 tbsp rice or white wine vinegar
2 tbsp tomato ketchup
Long grain white rice (to serve)

Fill a deep pot with oil and place it over low heat. Cut the chicken into 2.5cm cubes and place in a bowl. Mix sake or wine with soy sauce; set aside. To make batter for the chicken, sift plain white flour into a medium-sized bowl, drop egg into centre and beat until the mixture is smooth. Set aside.

Peel the carrot, cut into long, 1cm thick, horizontal panels. Slice at a diagonal into 2.5cm pieces. Slice leek into 2cm pieces. Cut the onion, pepper and pineapple into 2.5cm pieces.

Prepare sauce by placing 2 tsp cornflour in a small saucepan. Mix in the water, sugar, soy sauce, vinegar and ketchup and set over a low heat. Simmer gently until it has thickened, stirring, which should take about 3 minutes.

Meanwhile, remove chicken from marinade. Place on a plate, dust with 1 tbsp cornflour then coat in batter. Fry the batter-coated chicken, a few pieces at a time, until golden, about 3 minutes. Cut one piece open to check that it's cooked through.

Return all the cooked chicken to the oil for a further 2 minutes, while you heat 2 tbsp sunflower oil in a non-stick frying pan or a wok for the veg. Once sizzling hot, add onion and carrot, stir-fry briskly for a few minutes, then add pineapple, leek and red peppers, followed by the sauce. Bring the sauce up to a boil and as soon as it is bubbling, mix in the chicken. As soon as it's coated in the sauce, serve with rice.