



# Ramp it up

by Rosemary Mantini

**SPRING CAN BE SO CRUEL.** It brings with it such hope of warmth and colour only to wallop us — usually on the Victoria Day long weekend — with frigid temperatures and snow. No worries, though. It's just winter's last gasp, right? Warm temperatures will be settling in soon enough. Anyway, I've already hauled out the barbecue, table and chairs from the dusty, dark recesses of the garage. I'm ready for some patio living. A trip to the market, packed with the colours and flavours of spring, is what I'm craving right about now.

Spring harvest fruits and vegetables are so much sweeter now than they will be through the summer. Some, like asparagus, can be nearly impossible to find later on. The concept of seasonality is tricky now, when everything seems to be shipped in from somewhere. As a simple guide, keep an eye out for cherries, strawberries, rhubarb, beans, beets, broccoli, cabbage, carrots, cauliflower, cucumber, lettuce, mushrooms, onions, parsnips, peas, peppers, radishes, spinach and sweet potatoes. Farmers' market websites offer a goldmine of information on what's available. After a winter of squash, squash and more squash, beholding the bounty of spring can be overwhelming. How does one get the best from all of this fresh, local produce? Enter Victor Bongo and Therese DeGrace, two great chefs with the expertise to make everything mouth-wateringly good.

Victor Bongo is a multi-award-winning chef, originally hailing from Africa, who now calls Vancouver home. He explains, "every time I walk in the market, I always have a big smile on my face as I stare at all the fresh colourful fruits and vegetables and the aroma coming from it is heaven to me. I can always depend on the farmers' market to introduce me to new varieties of fruits and vegetables. Beets are my favourites and are available

for much of the year. But the first spring beets, with their fresh greens still attached by deep rosy stems, are more tender than their larger brethren that are harvested later in the year. Spring beets are a revelation because they have a different sweetness than fall beets. They are grown from the same varieties, but their sweetness is fresher and cleaner. It's hard to put specifically into words. The golden beets taste sweeter when raw than the red beets, but they have a slight background bitterness that the red beets lack. Cooking eliminates that bitterness. Every time I see spring beets it inspires me to get extra creative because there's so much you can do with them. The young baby spring beets can simply be thinly sliced and drizzled with extra virgin olive oil, salt and freshly ground pepper and will taste amazing."

Meyer lemons, blood oranges, grapefruit and limes refresh the palate after a winter's worth of heavier dishes. Meyer lemons, now widely available, "have a sweeter and more floral taste than other lemons and can even have a slightly orange tint adding an unexpected flavour and visual boost to nearly any dish," Bongo adds. "This recipe has a mix of everything from my favourite fruit, blood orange and Meyer lemons that add that nice touch to any recipe."

## ORANGE INFUSED BEETS AND GOAT CHEESE SALAD WITH PISTACHIO NUTS AND HONEY MEYER LEMON VINAIGRETTE

### HONEY MEYER LEMON VINAIGRETTE

- 2 tbsp shallots, chopped
- 1 tbsp parsley, chopped
- 3 tbsp freshly squeezed Meyer lemon juice
- 1 tsp Dijon mustard

- 1/4 cup honey
- 1 cup olive oil
- Salt and pepper, to taste

Blend all ingredients in a food blender except the olive oil. Slowly add the olive oil to create an emulsion. Season with salt and pepper to taste.

#### FOR THE BEET SALAD

- 4 medium red beets
- 4 medium golden beets
- 2 l water
- 1 l blood orange juice
- 2 tbsp salt
- 1 blood orange zest
- 180 g goat cheese, crumbled
- 1/4 cup mixed peppers – red, yellow, green, diced
- 1/4 cup pistachio nuts, chopped
- 1 cup honey lemon vinaigrette
- 90 g micro greens

1. Place the 4 red and golden beets, water, orange juice and two tablespoons salt in a heavy large pot, and bring to a boil. Simmer on low heat for about an hour or till the beets are tender.
  2. Drain beets and cool them down in ice water to stop from over-cooking. After beets have cooled, peel off the skin with hands or knife. Slice beets 1/4-inch rounds. Place them in a large bowl; add orange zest and 1/3 cup of the honey lemon vinaigrette.
- PLATING:** Using 6 plates, arrange the sliced beets overlapping each other, mixing the two different colours. Top it of with micro greens, goat cheese, pistachio nuts and diced mixed peppers. Using a spoon, drizzle the honey lemon vinaigrette on it.
- MATCH:** Serve immediately with a glass of Moscato d'Asti.

#### THERESE DEGRACE IS THE EXECUTIVE CHEF AT THE GOOD EARTH FOOD AND WINE COMPANY IN NIAGARA.

Her love of food has taken her to many delicious locales, cooking and learning under the tutelage of world-renowned chefs throughout Canada and Europe. The food she creates to pair with The Good Earth's wine showcases her commitment to all things local. Here in Ontario, however, we don't always have a wide variety of fruits and vegetables available in springtime. So, DeGrace has developed a unique cooking style that marries the delicate flavours of the season with international products. "Springtime here is a luminous time of year," she says. "We utilize many of the edible flowers and herbs available in our gardens year 'round and the kitchen brigade gets super excited about seeing the first asparagus or herbs emerge from the ground." DeGrace gives us her favourite seasonal recipe featuring her springtime picks: asparagus and fresh peas.

#### NIAGARA SPRING FALAFEL SALAD

**SERVES 6**

*This dish is vegan and contains no gluten.*

#### FOR THE HUMMUS

- 2 cups chickpeas, cooked
- 1/2 tsp each sumac, cumin, ground coriander and paprika

- 1/3 cup parsley, minced
- 1/3 cup ramps, sautéed and puréed
- Zest and juice of one lemon
- 1/3 cup olive oil
- 1/4 cup water

Purée to desired consistency.

#### FOR THE CHUNKY TABBOULEH SALAD

- 3 vine-ripened tomatoes, chopped
- 1 English cucumber, chopped
- 1/3 cup parsley, torn
- 1 cup pickled vegetables and mini beets
- 1 cup fresh peas
- Handful torn mint
- Zest and juice of one lemon
- 1/3 cup olive oil
- Salt and pepper, to taste

Toss well.

#### FOR THE TAHINI DRESSING

- 1/2 cup water
- 1/2 cup apple cider vinegar
- 1 tsp cumin
- 1/3 cup tahini
- 1/3 cup vegetable oil
- Juice of 2 lemons
- 1/2 cup parsley

Combine all ingredients and blend until smooth.

#### FOR THE FALAFEL

- 4 cups chickpeas, cooked
- 2 garlic cloves, crushed
- 1/2 cup quinoa, cooked
- 1/2 cup chickpea flour (plus extra if needed)
- 1/2 tsp sumac
- Zest of 1 lemon
- Salt and pepper, to taste

1. Combine all ingredients; if mixture seems too sticky adjust with chickpea flour. Mixture should be the same consistency of chocolate chip cookies.
2. Form mixture into 1.5-inch disks, about 1-inch thick.
3. Using a heavy bottomed pot or deep fryer, bring oil to temperature. (Use a thermometer if you are using a heavy bottom pot and make sure you are using at least 6 inches of oil.)
4. Fry falafel until dark brown (about 2 minutes on either side). Serve warm.

#### ASSEMBLING FALAFEL SALAD:

1. Arrange hummus and make a small indentation. Fill crevice with olive oil or paprika oil.
2. Arrange salad next to hummus, arrange warm falafel on top of salad.
3. Drizzle with tahini dressing.

**MATCH:** Serve with a chilled glass of Sauvignon Blanc. ✕