

Monica Askay

Food historian



An acquired taste

The medlar, *Mespilus germanica*, is a member of the rose family. It is a strange-looking fruit, resembling both a very small russeted apple, and a very large brown rosehip.

It has a crown-like calyx around an opening revealing five seed chambers, each containing a large brown seed.

The fruit's appearance led to its old, rather vulgar, name of "open aers" referred to in Aelfric's glossary around 1000 CE, a name also used by others including both Chaucer and Shakespeare.

Gerard refers to it rather more politely as "medlar".

Native to Persia, the medlar was grown by the Ancient Greeks and by the Romans. Pliny mentions three varieties.

It is hardy and has naturalised in colder climates, including in Scandinavia.

It is to be found here growing wild in hedgerows, as well as cultivated in orchards and gardens.

Medlars, according to Gerard, fruit best when grafted on to hawthorn rootstocks, although they can also be grafted on to pear or quince rootstocks.

In our climate the fruit is hard and astringent, with whiteish flesh.

It should be picked around now. Traditionally, medlars were stored in bran or sawdust to soften, and for the flesh to turn into a thick brown paste – a process known as "bletting".

Parkinson, writing in 1629, describes three sorts of medlars, including the Neopolitan, or Medlar of Naples (not a medlar at all but an azerole, a relative of hawthorn).

He describes dishes of ripe medlars being brought to table in season.

John Evelyn, in "Directions for the Gardiner" 1687, lists medlar with his orchard fruit, describing a seedless variety (now lost).

The flavour and texture of the medlar are definitely an acquired taste.



Bletted medlars were once eaten raw.

The flesh was scraped out and mixed with sugar and cream.

They can also be baked and eaten as described.

Theodore Garrett in "The Encyclopaedia of Practical Cookery" 1880s, describes a pyramid of bletted medlars being presented on a dish lined with moss and leaves.

Medlars are, however, most usually turned into Medlar Jelly or Medlar Cheese.

Medlar Jelly is a good accompaniment to poultry and game.

If you want to try the jelly you can find it ready-made.

Garden Preserves based in Dereham (sold in Norfolk as Norfolk Garden Preserves, and in Suffolk as Garden of Suffolk Preserves) make it, as do Wilkin and Sons of Tiptree.

Medlar Cheese is a fruit paste. As I have written previously, fruit pastes or cheeses were popular sweetmeats dating back to medieval times. Theodore Garrett gives a recipe.

Ivan Day, on his website www.historicfood.com, gives Garrett's recipe with photographs and historical notes. (Do not be tempted to leave out the initial cooking phase).

Ivan Day also gives Robert May's 1660 recipe for Medlar Tart.

Jane Grigson in "Good Things" 1971 gives a recipe for Medlar Liqueur made with sugar syrup and brandy.

The review

Charlotte Smith-Jarvis spends a perfect evening at The Packhorse in Moulton

After a week without a working kitchen (which has culminated in us washing up in the bath and eating sandwiches for dinner), our planned Friday night getaway to The Packhorse in Moulton couldn't have come at a better time.

Bedraggled, exhausted and, quite frankly, hankering for a proper cooked supper, we arrived with huge expectations. Not only was the pub recently named Favourite Newcomer by Sawday's, but head chef Chris Lee has already amassed three AA Rosettes, placing his cooking amidst the best in the country.

The location of The Packhorse is idyllic. Not far from the A14, Bury St Edmunds and Newmarket, the quaint village of Moulton is surrounded by undulating countryside and has a relaxing stillness that makes for the perfect retreat.

Our room, Primrose, was on par with any of the five-star hotels we've stayed in across the country. A huge plump bed. Understated, tactile, luxurious furnishings. And even an enormous freestanding bath at the foot of the room – big enough for two.

Once freshened up (and having secretly eaten the homemade biscuits from the comps tray in the room as a mini starter) we wandered down to the eatery.

The dining space at the pub is of a good size but separated into five areas, including a bar, to create a sense of intimacy and warmth. We both loved the modern country décor, which felt really in keeping with the building.

Once sat down, we perused the menu, which was full of dishes with Chris' little twists and touches of genius.

While waiting for our drinks (including a non-alcoholic version of passionfruit mojito for me), we ordered nibbles of smoked almonds and cheese and onion croquettes. Both delicious, but had we known there was a posh bread board coming we would have restrained ourselves.

The pre-starter at The Packhorse included dense, soft foccacia, packed with flavour and studded with olives. Alongside this was a miniature pail of popcorn scented with a waft of heady truffle, and a couple of decadent and perfectly formed blue cheese macarons, which set our tastebuds alight and made us hungry for more.

And we certainly weren't disappointed when our starters arrived. I opted for the salt cod fishfinger. Lightly crumbed and golden, the house salted cod was plump and flaky and fell apart, with just a hint of saltiness that was cut away by the additional accompaniments of a verdant parsley emulsion and slivers of pickled onion. A truly well-balanced plate of food.

My husband also chose fish, ordering smoked salmon, bacon and sweetcorn chowder, which was a quite unexpected surprise arriving, as it did, under a cloche and swathed in a fug of smoke.

The salmon had a melting texture that was complemented by meatier chunks of bacon and the 'chowder' element was a foam that melted into a silky, flavour-laden sauce. Another triumph. My hubby said the taste and scent of the dish to him emulated eating fish fresh from the fire by the seaside.

To accompany our starters, we sampled the wine of the month – Aux Quatre Vents Blanc, a blend of four grape varieties including viognier (one of my favourites) and chardonnay. The wine was excellent with both fish dishes with a hint of vanilla on the nose and a creamy, soft peach flavour with a little butterscotch and citrus, leaving a clean, dry finish.

When it came to the main course, there really was no competition. As soon as we saw the duck to share on the menu, it was a done deal.



The Packhorse, Moulton



Have you eaten at The Packhorse recently, or are you going there in the next week? Send us your Instagram photos of your meal and your own reviews to @eadt24 #bigfoodreviews



To accompany the duck we each chose a different red. I like something quite fruity and gentle so sipped on the Anakena 2012 Pinot Noir which had a herbal blackcurrant scent, yielding cherry and berry flavours. A lovely, easy drinker.

Alan prefers a dryer, deeper red and so picked the 2012 Monastrell from Valencia. The wine was certainly typical of a Spanish bottle, having initial plum and raisin sweetness, tapering off with notes of bitter chocolate and oak – like a

decadent Christmas pudding in a glass.

To finish, we couldn't resist dessert. I usually dive straight in for anything that says chocolate, but managed to restrain my addiction, slightly, choosing the pistachio and cherry frangipane. It was, as the rest of the meal, a very good portion, arriving hot and magnificently green, to the table in a petite cast iron dish.

Beneath a nutty, aromatic sponge, lay a compote of toothsome sweetly sour cherries that were mouth-puckeringly delightful.

Alan was delivered a plate of chocolate goodness. Warm, oozing fondant, pineapple sorbet, pineapple and chilli salsa and chunks of homemade 'Bounty'. I can definitely vouch for this pud (I obviously had to taste it). The fondant was a marvel and perfection itself, with a hint of salt to take the edge off the sweetness. And if I could be locked in a room with a pile of those 'Bounty' bars and a good book, that would make

for the perfect evening.

Talking of perfect evenings, everything about our meal at The Packhorse was polished and delivered with finesse. Staff couldn't have been more friendly, helpful or charming. The food was extraordinarily good. And attention to detail and finishing touches (from the décor, to the pre-starter and beautiful water decanters on the tables) made all the difference.

Fit to burst we enjoyed a good night's slumber and woke ourselves up with a bracing autumn run in nearby fields before breakfast. The countryside around the pub is incredibly scenic, and a real tonic if you've been stuck in an office all week.

Afterwards we felt we deserved buttery croissants, thick toast with Tiptree jam, and Suffolk cooked breakfast of sausage, crisp bacon, buttery mushrooms, silky sweet tomatoes and eggs.

It was with a sigh that we returned to the car, ready to head home and carry on with our kitchen renovation.

Perhaps, when it's all finished, we can revisit The Packhorse to celebrate properly!

Contact

The Packhorse Inn, Bridge Street, Moulton, Newmarket
www.thepackhorseinn.com
01638 751818

Eggs from happy hens and milk from cheerful cows!

You can add an extra touch of joy to your baking by mixing in eggs from happy hens and milk from cheerful cows, courtesy of Havensfield

Eggs in Hoxne and Marybelle Dairy in Halesworth.

Both of these suppliers pride themselves on the connection between happy, healthy animals and the finest local produce.

Havensfield Eggs has grown and expanded from 900 birds ten years ago to 80,000 today. With this many free-range hens laying in flocks across Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex, owners Alaistair and Fiona Brice reveal the tricks of the trade for happy hens.

"We make it easy for our hens follow their natural instincts and to jump, run and fly around to their hearts' content," said Fiona. "They have access to feed and water at all times with pop holes through to fields in which they range by day.

"While some commercial free-range farms have flocks of up to 32,000 hens, most of our flocks are around 5,000. We find it much easier to care for them and there's evidence that hens prefer to be in smaller groups as they like the sense of community.

"We also let them listen to the radio! We keep it on all the time so there is always some background noise. This minimises any stress when we clean them out, feed them, or if there are any loud noises."

The Marybelle dairy in Halesworth was founded over ten years ago by David and Collete Strachan, along with daughter Katherine and son James. It uses milk from farms in Rendham, Sotherton and Wisbech, and prides itself on an ethos of



happy, healthy free range cows in small herd numbers.

Just as with the hens at Hoxne, it seems the secret to cheerful cows is a sense of community. Katherine said: "Our girls graze in spacious pastures during the spring, summer and autumn, and then we tuck them up so they are warm and cosy in airy barns for the winter.

"But cows are really social creatures, there's even evidence that they have best friends, so whether they are inside or out we always ensure there is plenty of room for them to mingle and chew the cud.

"One of our main jobs is to keep them well fed and watered, especially as our dairy cows can eat up to 50 kg of feed a day and drink up to 75 litres of water a day."

Both Havensfield eggs and Marybelle milk are available in East of England Co-op stores as part of the Sourced Locally range. Try using them in this delicious recipe for Crème Caramel from the East of England Co-op's 2014 diary.

recipe

Crème caramel

- 125g caster sugar
- 4 eggs
- 600ml milk
- ½ tsp vanilla extract

METHOD

Preheat the oven to 170C and grease a 900ml ovenproof dish. Put 110g of the sugar and 150ml cold water into a saucepan. Heat gently, stirring until the sugar dissolves.

Bring the liquor to the boil, and then boil briskly, without stirring, until the syrup turns a deep gold. Remove from the heat and add 2 tbsp of boiling water (be careful as it will spit), tilt to mix and pour the syrup into the prepared dish, tilting the dish to cover the base.

Lightly whisk the eggs in a bowl. Warm the milk and gradually pour on to the eggs, whisking constantly. Whisk in the vanilla and remaining sugar. Strain into the dish and stand it in a roasting tin containing enough hot water to come halfway up the sides of the dish.

Bake for 1 hour or until set. Remove from the oven, then leave to cool.

To serve, stand in the dish in a bowl of boiling water for 1 minute, then loosen with a knife. Invert the dish on to a serving plate.