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Take comfort with escarole

by Mary Ann Castronovo Fusco/For The Star-Ledger

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JUST IN

Financial markets are in crisis, and on many fronts an uncertain autumn lies ahead. What to do?

When the going gets tough, my mother taught me, the tough get cooking. Stirring a pot might not solve the problems at hand, but it's a constructive exercise, a positive something to do when everything else seems to be spinning out of control.

And so, on a recent day when nothing seemed to be going right, I searched for solace in the comfort food of my youth, a simple escarole soup.

A dollar bought a ruffled head of green leaves that I cut into bite-size pieces, rinsed, and cooked in a pot of salted water just until halfway done. Next, I poured in half a box of pasta -- throat-soothing little semi di melone (melon seeds).

When the pasta was cooked, so was the soup. All that was needed was a generous drizzle of olive oil, some pepper, and a sprinkling of grated pecorino. The outside world could turn as hard and cold as ice; inside there was light and warmth.

Escarole has that effect on people.

Ralph Formisano of Formisano Farms in Buena, where eight acres of escarole are harvested each spring and fall, knows. "My mother always made soup with escarole and white beans," he recalled. He particularly relishes the memory of a savory pie she composed of layers of garlic-scented sauteed escarole, dough, and a combination of nine nuts, raisins, and anchovies.



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Although these are hardly salad days for the world at large, lettuce is precisely what customers prefer these days. And earthy escarole is taking a hit. "It's less popular than it was 25 years ago," said Formisano. "It's certainly not one of the more popular greens," agreed Kurt Alstede of Alstede Farms in Chester, who grows about a quarter of an acre of escarole for sale at tailgate markets. "People would rather have a leafy lettuce than escarole. It doesn't have a real broad appeal."

According to Wes Kline, a vegetable specialist with the Rutgers Cooperative Extension of Cumberland County, "escarole is another one of those Italian crops that there was a bigger demand for years ago. Those ethnic things are becoming less and less important -- unless a chef rediscovers a crop, and then it becomes important again."

And yet, New Jersey remains a significant producer, behind only California and Florida. In the northern part of the Garden State, the fall escarole season typically runs through at least September, which is when harvesting begins in the southern part of the state. Once the Jersey escarole seasons ends, about mid-November, the Florida crop kicks in until May, when the local spring crop is ready to be harvested. Some area growers, such as Leonard Pollara of Upper Meadow Farm in Montague, plan to plant their escarole in late fall and hold it under winter cover so that it will be ready to sell in early spring. California supplies escarole practically year-round.

Closely related to chicory and the same genus as curly endive (*Cichorium endivia*), escarole is sometimes marketed as chicory or endive. Escarole, which is broad-leafed endive (as opposed to curly endive, which is narrow-leafed) also often goes by the name of Batavian, one of its cultivars.

Growers don't mind including escarole among their plantings because it grows as easily as leaf lettuces and can survive a frost, explained Alstede. "With the spring crop you can have some problems with tip burn if it gets too hot. In the fall, we just don't see that," said Kline.

"Especially in the fall, it gets more bleached in the center than it does in the spring. It's a little more tender," said Formisano. "When the center is tender, we like it in salad, all by itself."

Hmm..Maybe salad days are on their way after all.

Nutrition Notes: Escarole isn't as nutritious as spinach or kale, but it's high in vitamin A, has only 10 calories per three-ounce serving, and contains calcium and potassium.

Cooks' Tips: The beauty of escarole is that it retains its texture even when cooked. Its yellow inner leaves can be substituted for costlier Belgian endive and its outer leaves for romaine lettuce. Those wavy leaves can trap grit, however, so always rinse well before using.

Pairing Suggestions: To temper bitter leaves, sprinkle with a bit of sugar, or combine with sweet ingredients, such as onions, raisins, and citrus fruit. Escarole also pairs well with assertive ingredients like garlic, bacon, olives, capers and anchovies.

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