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Leeks, for the cooking of the green

by Mary Ann Castronovo Fusco/For The Star-Ledger

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Forget about shamrocks for a moment. There's another leafy green plant ideal for celebrating the upcoming St. Patrick's Day holiday. And it tastes a whole lot better than any three-leaf clover. It is the **leek**.

Among the miracles attributed to Ireland's favorite saint is one in which Patrick transformed rushes into leeks for an ailing pregnant woman in Cullen. She feared that she and her unborn child would die unless she gratified her craving for the herb, which she'd seen in a dream. After eating the miraculously conjured leeks, goes the legend, the woman recovered and gave birth to a son.

According to the late cooking professor **Noel C. Cullen**, author of "Elegant Irish Cooking," "leeks are one of the oldest known vegetables in Ireland." Also adopted as a national symbol by the Welsh, who celebrate the March 1 feast of their own patron, St. David, by wearing leeks in their buttonholes, this relative of the onion and scallion underlies the flavor of many a soup, sauce, and stew throughout Britain and Ireland to this day.

A bulbous herb of the lily family, the leek is characterized by its broad succulent stems and sheaf of flat yellow-green or blue-green leaves, depending on the variety. A good source of vitamins and minerals, and able to withstand cold temperatures, leeks historically sustained the poor when their winter supplies ran low. In Ireland, leeks were traditionally combined with oatmeal in a soup known as brotchan foltchep. The arrival of potatoes from



M. KATHLEEN KELLY/FOR THE STAR-LEDGER

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the New World led to a pairing with the tuber in leek and potato soup, served warm in the north and cold in France, where it's known as vichyssoise.

"I always do a potato and leek soup for St. Patrick's Day," said Kevin Alber, the chef at Thatcher McGhee's Irish Pub & Eatery in Pompton Plains. He also favors leeks instead of onions in his Irish cream of vegetable soup. "It's a much milder, delicate flavor," he said.

"Leeks are one of those indispensable things in the kitchen, for everything from a risotto to a creamy spinach Rockefeller served under crab cakes," said Michael Haimowitz, executive chef at Arthur's Landing in Weehawken.

"Leeks give a different dimension as opposed to onions, shallots, and scallions--something a little sweeter, a little softer on the palate. Texturally, they're very interesting as well. When they're lightly cooked, they have that little crunch to them. When they're cooked low and slow, they melt on the palate."

From the French stew, pot-au-feu, to the Greek leek pie known as prassopita, from the Scottish cock-a-leekie soup to the Lebanese leek side dish, barassia, the mild leek has a powerful international culinary presence. Besides pinch hitting for its more pungent cousins in various savory dishes, leeks stand up nicely to grilling and are ideal served *à la grecque*--that is, poached whole in aromatic broth. Haimowitz fashions a leek "fondue" by softening leeks in butter and then simmering them in white wine and heavy cream, seasoned with fresh thyme, until they "virtually break down," he said. He also likes to braise them whole and then quickly sear them "so they char on the outside, which adds a little contrast to the sweetness." Many recipes call for discarding the upper green part of the leeks because they tend to be fibrous, but these can be added to stocks to boost their flavor and to pureed vegetable dishes for a dash of color, added Haimowitz.

Readily available from the west coast year round, leeks can be produced locally 12 months of the year, said Rick Van Vranken, agricultural agent for the Rutgers Cooperative Extension of Atlantic County, one of the state's prime leek growing areas. This season, however, he expects local leek acreage to be down because sales for the green have been poor of late. "We had some exceptional yields last summer, but they just couldn't move them in the wholesale market," he said. This month growers will start planting early spring varieties in their fields and seeding the summer crop in their greenhouses. "If they have an over-wintered crop, they will harvest them late next month. They have to let them grow and clean up the dead leaves," said Van Vranken.

At market, good quality leeks will sport straight shanks and sturdy, vibrantly colored leafy parts. Shoppers should avoid those with tan spots, which indicate soft rot, as well as those that appear slimy or yellowed or show signs of blue mold at the root crowns. Dehydrated leeks will have tattered, limp or scraggly leaves. The smaller the leek, the more tender it will be, so those no more than an inch and a half in diameter will taste best. Grocers keep leeks looking fresh by trimming the tops and removing outer layers that get slimy. At home, consumers can do the same while keeping leeks refrigerated and away from odor-sensitive foods that can absorb their aroma.

Leeks tend to be sandy because growers keep the shanks white by mounding soil around them to block sunlight. To prepare them for cooking, advised Haimowitz, trim the tops and roots, slit them lengthwise, fan them out, and "wash, wash, wash, letting the water get between all the layers." St. Patrick's