

# An apple a day

Apples are easy to grow, have many health benefits and are a versatile cooking ingredient, says *Mary Llewellyn*, who also makes a few suggestions on what to do with them



**A**utumn is well under way and, for me, there's no fruit that better catches the change in season than an apple. Trees with branches bent under the weight of plump apples in an array of colours from brightest green through yellow and on to rosy red symbolise this time of harvest, when traditionally we would have been busy picking, preserving and storing fruits and vegetables ready for a lean winter.

Now we are less in tune with the seasons, sadly, but I still believe we all respond to the changing temperature and lowering light that autumn brings and begin to hanker after foods that are warming and comforting after the summer's barbecue grills and salads.

Apples are the easiest of fruits to grow, naturally fitted to our climate and needing little attention, so they make the perfect addition to a nursery garden.

They are also incredibly versatile, picked and munched straight from the tree – beware of the wasps – or chopped, grated, baked, stewed, dried, and perfect in both sweet and savoury dishes.

## NATURAL MEDICINE

As well as all that flavour and culinary versatility, apples are one of nature's healers. Behind every good cliché there's a fact, and the saying 'an apple a day keeps the doctor away' is no exception.

Apples have long been used to keep people healthy and fight back

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when illness strikes. They are a source of:

- vitamin C, which boosts the immune system and helps fight infections
- B vitamins riboflavin, thiamine and B6, which support healthy blood, eyes, skin and the nervous system
- minerals such as calcium, potassium and phosphorous
- anti-inflammatory phytonutrients
- dietary fibre – the NHS recommends that two- to five-year-olds should consume 15g of fibre a day, which makes a medium-sized

unpeeled apple nearly a third of their daily requirement, containing about 4.4g of fibre.

It seems there is very little an apple can't help with. Scientific studies show apples can aid gut health, support weight loss, fight colds, lower inflammation, fight infection, lower bad cholesterol, protect against heart disease and even help prevent Alzheimer's.

As a child, I remember being given stewed apple as a remedy for sickness. Apparently, the high pectin content that helps to thicken apple puree also helps to settle upset tummies. I used the same advice with my own children, adding a few slices of ginger to the recipe as it is often recommended as a cure for nausea.

### PIPS AND PEEL

After all this positivity, just a couple of health warnings: apple pips contain tiny amounts of poisonous cyanide so, while it's almost impossible to eat enough seeds to hurt yourself, it's probably best not to let children eat the seeds if possible.

Much of the nutrition and fibre in an apple is in or just below the skin so it's best to leave that on if your recipe allows, but always wash apples before eating them.

Findings by the Pesticide Action Network UK reported by the Soil Association showed traces of 123 pesticides on fruit and vegetables provided to schools via the Department of Health's School Fruit and Vegetable Scheme – and, it claims, these could damage children's neurological development. This does need to be weighed against the health benefits of eating more fruit and vegetables, of course, but if you can, buy organic, locally grown apples – or grow your own – to make the most of the health-giving properties.

### APPLE-ICIOUS DISHES

So, what are the myriad ways of slipping some apples into your children's diet?

#### Apple purée

I mentioned stewed apple as a remedy and I like to make that with Bramley because they cook down to a soft purée with the need to mash or blend. If you like a bit of texture, add a chopped dessert apple, which will keep its shape when cooked.

The purée will need a little bit of sweetening because Bramleys are pretty sharp, but it's best to underestimate the amount because you can

always add more and every apple is different. I use ginger to flavour my purée, but lots of spices work well: try cinnamon (of course), nutmeg, mixed spice, cardamom or a small bay leaf.

Once you have your basic apple base, you can mix it into natural yoghurt or your morning porridge, serve it with roast pork, cooked ham, as a dip for toast or eggy bread or stir a spoonful into a pork casserole to thicken the sauce and add a hint of sweetness. I'm just imagining a delicious ice-cream made of smooth and creamy vanilla custard, gently swirled with spiced, tart apple purée. Yum!

#### Tarte tatin on an open fire

Faced with a glut of glorious, plump Bramley apples at our Keynsham nursery, I recently posed a cookery challenge to our Forest School lead, Tim. Could he make tarte tatin on an open fire? Turns out it can be done.

Although dessert apples are usually used for this classic French upside-down tart, the Bramleys worked well as they got tender quickly before the pastry burnt on the hot fire. So, thin apple slices dipped in a bit of sugar and spice, then lay in a pan of bubbling butter and top with discs of puff pastry. Cook until caramelised then flip into a second pan to brown. Maybe not the healthiest, but delicious.

#### Savoury treats

*River Cottage Baby and Toddler Cookbook* features cheese and apple on toast, which is a favourite at nursery, as well as beetroot coleslaw with apples and a pork and apple hash.

Try grating your favourite dessert apples into the sausage-meat of your homemade sausage rolls, or adding it to the mix of your pork meatballs. It could be used to make the sweet part of a sweet and sour sauce for an Anglo-Chinese noodle dish, too.

I like to add finely chopped apple to puy lentils cooked with vegetable stock, fine-diced celery and a bay leaf, just before the end of their cooking time. This is a great accompaniment to meat or topped with halloumi cheese. Roasted root vegetables, tray bakes, stuffing, soups, stews... all those delicious autumnal dishes just waiting to be enriched with a little bit of apple. ■

*Mary Llewellyn is operations manager at Snapdragons. Snapdragons Keynsham has the Food For Life Partnership Gold Catering Mark and was winner of the Nursery World Nursery Food Award in 2012 and 2014.*

## MORE INFORMATION

- Information on the nutritional content of apples from *Medical News Today*, [www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/267290.php](http://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/267290.php)
- Dietary fibre information, [www.nhs.uk/chq/pages/1141.aspx?categoryid=51](http://www.nhs.uk/chq/pages/1141.aspx?categoryid=51)
- '123 Pesticides On Children's Fruit', <http://bit.ly/2gQyl6X>
- *River Cottage Baby and Toddler Cookbook* by Nicki Duffy (Bloomsbury, 2012)

# Cookery corner

## Apple and celeriac soup

This deliciously creamy soup combines the delicate flavour of celeriac with a fruity hit of fresh apples. A mix of dessert and cooking apples makes it a little less sweet with a refreshing zing.

We're growing lovage in our herb garden, and this would work brilliantly with the flavours, but we've used thyme here because lovage is hard to find. If you want to cook the soup at home for grown-ups then top with a dollop of fiery horseradish.

### Ingredients

- ✓ 2 tbsp olive oil
- ✓ 2 onions, diced
- ✓ 1 stick celery, chopped
- ✓ 1 celeriac, chopped
- ✓ 2 Cox's apples, peeled, cored and chopped
- ✓ 1 Bramley apple, peeled cored and chopped
- ✓ 4 sprigs of thyme
- ✓ 2 litres low-salt veg stock
- ✓ 200ml crème fraîche

### Method

- ✓ Heat the oil in a large pan and cook the onions and celery until soft but not brown.
- ✓ Add the apples and celeriac then cook for five more minutes, stirring to stop them sticking.
- ✓ Pour in the stock and add three sprigs of thyme.
- ✓ Bring to the boil, then gently simmer for around 30 minutes or until the vegetables are soft.
- ✓ Remove from the heat and allow to cool for a few minutes before blending with half the crème fraîche.
- ✓ Serve with a little swirl of crème fraîche in each bowl and a pinch of fresh thyme leaves.

