

# Make the most of these old chestnuts

**T**HE schoolboys may be knocking the last of the conkers from the trees, and lazily kicking the leaves underneath in the hope of finding one or two unclaimed, but for seasonal foodies the real treat lies not in the horse chestnuts, but in their sweeter, edible cousins.

For, while conkers are inedible, sweet chestnuts are a gourmet autumn treat. The French devour marron glacé, and in London, street sellers roast them in open braziers and sell them in paper bags.

But for a real treat, try harvesting your own, and baking them in a hot oven, or in the embers of an open fire.

Late October is a great time to go on the hunt as the chestnuts are at their ripest, but make sure you take thick gloves – the shells are pricklier than conkers and will puncture even the toughest of hands.

They are usually slightly smaller than those brought from the Continent into the supermarkets. They can be stored for Christmas and, best of all, won't cost you a penny.

Indeed, their use as a food source is why they dot our landscape: the Romans brought the sweet chestnut to Britain to provide a ready supply of chestnut flour, which was a staple of the legionaries' diet.

Be careful not to confuse the nuts with conkers. Sweet chestnuts are in a hairy-looking pod, covered in needle-like spikes, whereas inedible conkers have a thick, smooth shell with shorter, rounder spikes.

While you're out, the Woodland Trust in Merseyside is appealing for the public to help them find the county's oldest trees, so it can lobby for greater protection and monitor current threats.

So far, two sweet chestnut trees have been recorded in Merseyside, with the

largest – having a girth of six metres – found in Calderstones Park, Allerton. Edward Parker, the Ancient Tree Hunt project manager at the Woodland Trust, says: "We know there will be many more out there, so are urging people to help us gain more data. Ancient sweet chestnuts have distinctively twisted, spiral-like trunks when they grow old, so they are easily recognisable to the public, especially at this time of the year while the nuts are available. It's also a great way of stocking up on free food for traditional autumn or Christmas dishes with the family."

Debra Williams, Woodland Trust volunteer from Liverpool, adds: "Foraging is fantastic fun and would make a great day's activity over half-term; and you'll be doing a very worthwhile job if you can find some ancient sweet chestnut trees at the same time. It's a huge task to find all the UK's ancient trees, but until we know where they are it's difficult for the Woodland Trust to protect them."

■ **TO FIND out how to spot an ancient tree and to register it on the Ancient Tree Hunt website, please visit [www.ancienttreehunt.org.uk](http://www.ancienttreehunt.org.uk)**

by **JADE WRIGHT**

## **Chestnut Bourguignon pie from The Vegetarian Society**

Preparation time: 30 mins to 1 hour.  
Cooking time: 1 to 2 hours. Serves 4

### **Ingredients**

125g/4oz dried chestnuts, soaked for 6-8 hours  
2 bay leaves  
1 sprig fresh rosemary or 1 tsp/5ml dried rosemary  
210ml/7fl oz vegetarian red wine  
300ml/10fl oz vegetable stock or water  
25g/1oz butter or soya margarine

8 small pickling onions or shallots, peeled  
125g/4oz chestnut mushrooms, wiped  
125g/4oz button mushrooms, wiped  
2 tsp Dijon mustard  
2-3 tbsp tamari or soy sauce  
Freshly ground black pepper  
Fresh parsley, finely chopped  
225g/8oz vegetarian puff pastry, thawed if frozen  
Pre-heat the oven to 200C/400F/Gas 6.

### **Method**

Place the soaked chestnuts, herbs and 150ml/5fl oz of wine in a saucepan with vegetable stock to cover and cook until just tender – approximately 50-60 minutes. Drain the chestnuts, reserving the liquid.

Melt the butter in a frying pan and sauté the onions until slightly browned. Add the mushrooms and cook for a further 4-5 minutes.

Add the chestnuts, the remaining red wine and sufficient chestnut cooking liquor to cover.

Bring to the boil and simmer for 20-30 minutes to reduce the liquid a little. Stir in the mustard, tamari and black pepper to taste. Cook for a further 5 minutes. Check seasoning and adjust as necessary.

Spoon the mixture into a pie dish. Roll out the pastry on a floured surface and place on top of filling. Bake for about 20 minutes until golden.