

A very versatile vegetable

In the latest of his seasonal food features, **DORY MASRI**, head chef at Norwich's popular Last Wine Bar, celebrates a Mediterranean favourite vegetable — the aubergine.

LAST
Wine Bar & Restaurant

Although they are available most of the year, July is when the aubergine comes into season. I think this is one of the most visually attractive vegetables around, although we really only see one type in this country now — the familiar elongated purple aubergine.

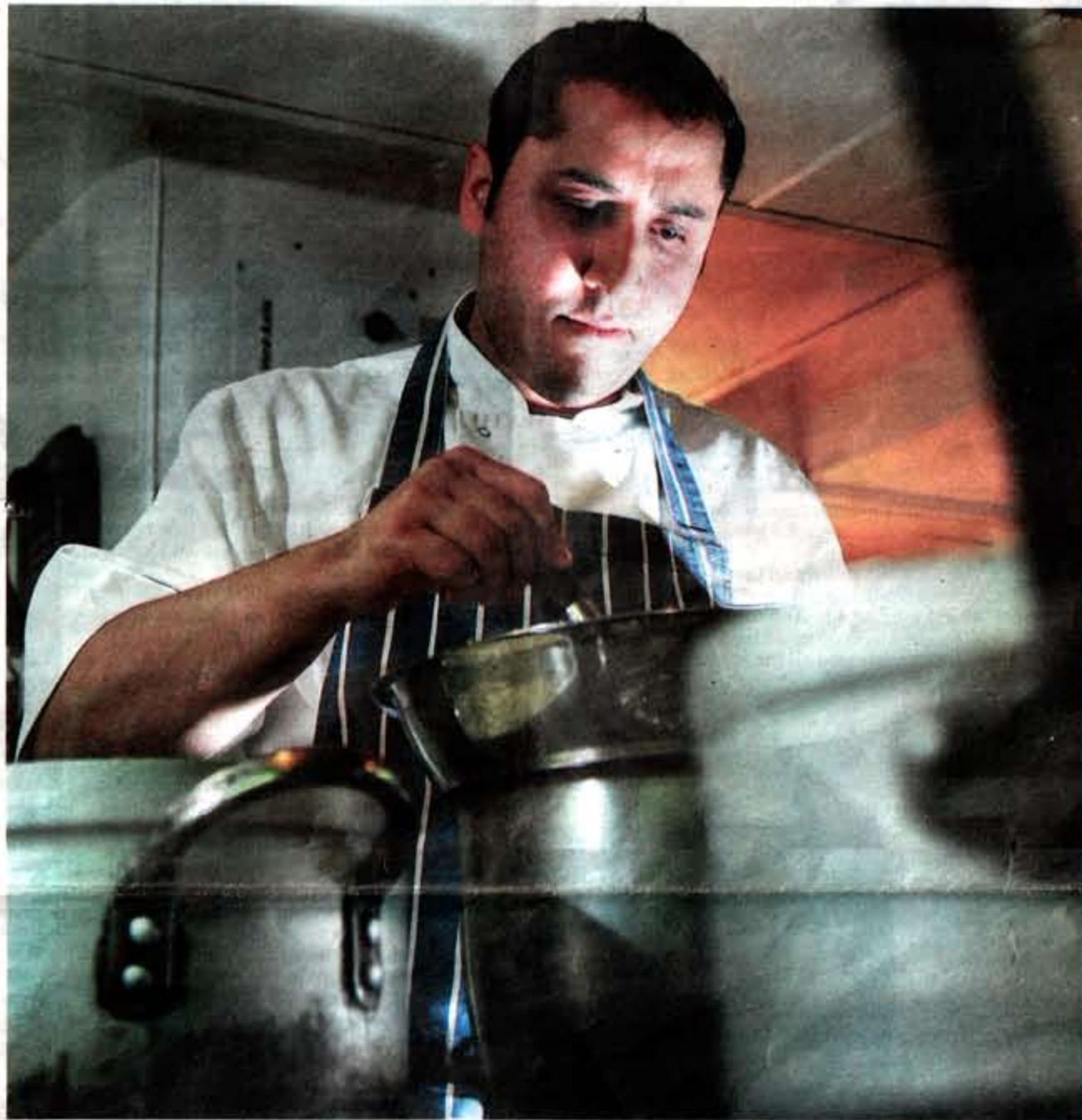
In fact, early European versions were white, and much the same shape and size as hen's eggs — hence the American name for them: eggplant. And in some countries you can find tiny, viridian green examples. But for us, aubergine means deep purple.

They were originally grown in India, and were brought to Europe by Arab merchants in the 11th century. Those of you who frequent Indian restaurants will know the aubergine-based dish brinjal bhaji, and our own name for the vegetable comes from this, via the Catalan berenjena.

This is a southern European vegetable, requiring warmth and abundant irrigation, which is why they are associated with Mediterranean cooking. So it is perhaps surprising that the UK sits in tenth place in the league table of production, with an output of nearly 200,000 tonnes a year (admittedly this is less than one per cent of world output — China and India together account for more than four-fifths of the world's aubergines).

You should always pick up an aubergine before buying it — it should feel heavy in your hand. The skin should be firm, bright and shiny, with no wrinkles or brown patches, and the stalk should be green and fresh-looking.

Some people steer clear of cooking aubergines, fearful of the hassle of peeling them and sprinkling them with salt to draw out the bitterness.



The good news is that today's commercially cultivated aubergines don't have that bitterness, and don't need peeling or salting.

Aubergines are such a versatile vegetable, that it is a joy to cook with them. From simply griddling them on the barbecue (brush them with olive oil first), stuffing them with cheese and tomato, as an integral part of moussaka, or as part of the classic Italian dish, melanzane parmigiana.

Today I am suggesting two recipes where the aubergine complements other ingredients. In the first, the chargrilled flavours of the griddled aubergine slices contrast with the lightness of the whipped goats cheese; in the second, I have stuffed it with one of its natural flavour partners, tomato, and served it with a Middle-Eastern prawn dish, wrapped in kataifi pastry. This is a kind of shredded filo-type pastry,

and you may have to seek it out in a Greek or Turkish shop.
Next month: Basil

What's In Season

- Vegetables: Cherries, fennel, radishes, peaches, Jersey Royal new potatoes
- Meat: Mackerel, clams, rabbit

Chargrilled Aubergine With Whipped Goats Cheese, Mint, Cucumber And Olive Oil

Serves 4

2 aubergines
250g goat's cheese, at room temperature
100 ml double cream
cucumber
a few springs of mint
250ml extra virgin olive oil
a lemon
salt and pepper



- Slice the aubergine into circles about 1cm thick. Put them in a bowl, and drizzle with the olive oil, and season with salt and pepper.
- Heat the barbecue or a flat griddle until it is really hot, and then cook the aubergine slices for 30 seconds on each side.
- Mix the goat's cheese and cream together until smooth and creamy.
- Arrange the aubergine slices on a plate. Spoon the creamy goat's cheese on the aubergine.
- Chop the mint and cucumber and sprinkle on the top.
- Drizzle with olive oil and a squeeze of lemon juice.

Kataifi-Wrapped Tiger Prawns With Fennel And Tomato-Stuffed Aubergine

Serves 4

2 aubergines
4 peeled tiger prawns
1 fennel bulb, chopped
onion, chopped
2 cloves of garlic, chopped
1 fresh chilli, deseeded and chopped
500g cherry tomatoes, halved
a few sprigs of thyme and basil
250ml sherry vinegar
1 pack of kataifi pastry
500ml rapeseed oil



- Cut the aubergine in half length ways and scoop some of the flesh out, and keep this aside for later.
- Drizzle the aubergine halves with some olive oil. Season with salt and pepper, and bake in the oven for 15-minutes at 170°C/325°F.
- Meanwhile, in a pan sweat down the onion, garlic, fennel, chilli and the reserved flesh in a little olive oil until soft.
- Add the sherry vinegar and reduce by half.
- Add the cherry tomatoes, thyme and basil, and cook for further three minutes. Season with salt and pepper.
- Wrap the tiger prawns with the kataifi pastry and fry in hot rapeseed oil until golden in colour. Pat dry on a kitchen paper.
- Arrange the aubergine on a plate, spoon the vegetable mix into the aubergine halves, and lay the tiger prawns on the top.