

## **Dandelions**

*by Chef Brian Henry*

The dandelion is one of the most common and recognizable weeds. It can be found in most countries around the world that have seasonably warm climates. The English name dandelion originated from the Old French "dent de lion" meaning lion's tooth, which describes the plants coarsely-toothed leaves. The more modern French name for the dandelion is pissenlit, which means "pee the bed" and accurately describes the plant's diuretic properties.

Like many Canadians I'm driven to the puritan standards of having a weed free lawn. My wife and I have been spending a lot of time in the garden eradicating it of weeds. The irony in weeding my lawn and garden is that I find myself tearing up and destroying a number of plants that I often dress up and serve to clients as food and call it cuisine. I've concluded that plants are only considered to be weeds when we cannot put any financial value to them.

We can thank the early English settlers for bringing the dandelion to Canada. It was originally grown in their gardens as a food source. The leaves commonly known as dandelion greens can be eaten cooked or raw and are often used as an ingredient in soups or salads. They are closest in culinary character to mustard greens. The young leaves and unopened buds are best consumed raw in a salad. These younger raw leaves have a slightly bitter taste and work best with a sweet vinaigrette which can be paired with hard boiled eggs. The larger and older dandelion leaves become woodier and should be cooked in ways similar to spinach by utilizing methods like steaming or sauté.

Other culinary applications for dandelion leaves and flowers include dandelion wine and jams or jellies. Dandelion roots are often roasted and ground up to be used as a coffee substitute. I should note that it contains no caffeine and tastes nothing like coffee. Most honourably for this lowly weed the Dandelion root is a registered drug in Canada, and is sold principally as a diuretic.

If Popeye only knew that dandelion leaves carrying more iron and calcium than spinach and is a great source of vitamins A and C, he may have quit sailing and become a dandelion farmer like Raymond Loo of P.E.I. Last week Loo forged a contract with a Japanese company to produce almost 1 400 kg of dried dandelion root. His product will be sold as a coffee substitute in Japan.

I couldn't help but wonder why I couldn't market my dandelion roots to Japan as I'm sure I could fill the order for 1 400kg in short time. I looked into this a bit further and discovered that the novel Anne of Green Gables is well recognized in Japan and its main character Anne is a Japanese icon. Coincidentally Raymond Loo operates his farm on the land of the original Green Gables farm.

Regardless of where you choose to harvest your dandelion greens from this weeks recipe is for a Warm Bacon Dressing that I recommend using on a dandelion greens salad. If you're not savvy with trying dandelion greens then try my Warm Sweet Bacon Dressing on spinach leaves.



CHEF BRIAN HENRY