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Real wasabi: Japanese horseradish returns to its pungent, vegetal roots



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on October 11, 2011 at 5:50 AM, updated October 11, 2011 at 5:51 AM

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Oregon Artisans: An occasional FOODday



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Thomas Boyd/The Oregonian

Jennifer Bloeser, co-owner of Frog Eyes Wasabi, harvests wasabi rhizomes at their Cloverdale greenhouses.

fresh wasabi -- Japanese horseradish -- grated over the top. The condiment, revered in Japan and nothing like what passes for wasabi in this country, was gloriously pungent and vegetal. Eight years later, Mead, a city planner, and his wife, Jennifer Bloeser, a marine biologist, grow and harvest wasabi on the Oregon coast using traditional Japanese methods.

series highlighting some of the innovators in our state's artisanal food scene.

Back in 2003, Markus Mead touched down in Japan for a skiing and surfing vacation. Somewhere along the way, he got sidetracked. "I spent more time eating ramen and enjoying the pleasures of the table than anything else," he says.

Besides delicious ramen, what really turned his head was the

Recipes included with this story: [Wasabi Mashed Potatoes](http://www.oregonlive.com/foodday/index.ssf/2008/06/recipe_detail.html?id=8024) (http://www.oregonlive.com/foodday/index.ssf/2008/06/recipe_detail.html?id=8024), [Wasabi Vinaigrette](http://www.oregonlive.com/foodday/index.ssf/2008/06/recipe_detail.html?id=8023) (http://www.oregonlive.com/foodday/index.ssf/2008/06/recipe_detail.html?id=8023), [Wasabi Martini](http://www.oregonlive.com/foodday/index.ssf/2008/06/recipe_detail.html?id=8022) (http://www.oregonlive.com/foodday/index.ssf/2008/06/recipe_detail.html?id=8022).

Who: Frog Eyes Wasabi, one of a handful of U.S. growers and the only wasabi producer in Oregon.

The market: Since harvesting their first wasabi in spring, their prized rhizomes have caught the eye of chefs on both coasts and show up on tables in

Fresh wasabi grown in Oregon (<http://videos.oregonlive.com/oregonian/2011/10/fresh-wasabi-grown-in-oregon.html>)

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Fresh wasabi is difficult and expensive to grow, and nothing like the stuff that passes for wasabi at U.S. Japanese restaurants. Now an Oregon couple is growing it on the coast near Pacific City, and shipping it to Michelin-starred restaurants on both coasts and in Europe.

throughout Europe. Chef Masaharu Morimoto of "Iron Chef America" fame loves it, Mead says, and requested an

emergency shipment to New York a few weeks ago.

You won't find it on local menus yet, but chefs from Park Kitchen and Bamboo Sushi are interested.

The Oregon edge: Wasabi turned out to be a perfect match for land the couple already owned near Tillamook. "It's light-phobic and it doesn't like to freeze or get too hot, which fits the coast perfectly," Mead says. A year into the business, plants are producing high-quality wasabi in 12 months vs. the typical 18. In fact, Frog Eyes holds the record for the largest wasabi grown in North America, after Mead harvested a 246-gram (about 8-ounce) rhizome the size of a fat ear of corn. "Every week we're finding larger and larger plants. And we're just getting started."



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http://media.oregonlive.com/foodday/index.ssf/2011/10/real_wasabi.html (think asparagus or artichoke).

Thomas Boyd/The Oregonian

Special graters turn the wasabi into paste that doesn't look like the green stuff on sushi plates.

The eats: Don't confuse fresh wasabi with the green paste you'll find at most Japanese restaurants in the U.S. That's horseradish paste mixed with varying amounts of wasabi and spiked with food coloring. The real deal is sharp and pungent, with the punch fading quickly into a distinct vegetal finish

Hot or sweet: Frog Eyes produces two varieties of Wasabia japonica, Daruma (neon green, modest heat with a touch of sweetness) and Mazuma (darker with a purple ring inside, very hot and robust). "People are amazed that there is such a distinct difference," Mead says. The hotter Mazuma is good

with meat dishes, soup and dressings, he says, while sweeter Daruma works well with noodle dishes, cabbage salads and veggie wraps.

The plants: Thick, knobby rhizomes sprout from the plant just above ground level and are harvested when they're 3 to 6 inches long. The palm-size leaves and long stems also are edible; Mead likes to stir-fry them or use the stems in a Bloody Mary.

The farm: Mountain streambeds are the plant's natural habitat. Though some Japanese wasabi is cultivated in soil, the highest quality product is water-grown, with plants sprouting from gravel-laced terraces through which streams are diverted. At Frog Eyes, they use a proprietary cultivation method pioneered 15 years ago by former botany professor Brian Oates, another Northwest wasabi grower. Plants take root in gravel-laced beds inside a greenhouse and get regular water from an overhead irrigation system.

Prep it: Grate wasabi just before serving it; the flavor fades quickly once the cells are crushed and the paste is exposed to air. Use a Microplane, a ginger grater, even a cheese grater.

Eat it: Of course it's delicious with sushi and sashimi, but also, suggests Mead, on hamburgers and steaks and mixed into eggs, soup, salad dressing and Asian noodles. Wasabi-infused vodka makes a great Bloody Mary. There's also mashed potatoes laced with grated wasabi, and one of Mead's favorite pasta dishes that combines udon noodles (hot or cold), sautéed green vegetables and onions, sesame oil, soy sauce and grated Daruma wasabi.

Keep it: Refrigerate fresh wasabi (the rhizome) as you would fresh ginger, wrapped in a damp paper towel or loosely in plastic. It will keep for at least a week or two.

Find it: Locally at Uwajimaya, New Seasons' Cedar Hills store.

Price point: \$5-\$7 per ounce, which is about 1 inch of rhizome, enough for dozens of



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sashimi bites or several large bowls of pasta.

Prepping fresh wasabi:

1. Brush rhizome with a stiff brush under running water to clean. Remove any untrimmed roots.
2. Cut about 1/4 inch below leaf stems.
3. Using a grater, grind from the cut end of the rhizome using a circular motion and keeping the rhizome at a 90-degree angle to the grater. This is important: It minimizes dissipation of volatile chemicals, which (like onion and horseradish fumes) cause tearing.
4. Grate only what will be consumed within 15 to 20 minutes, as the flavor will start to dissipate.

-- Leslie Cole

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I think this wasabi is also available at the Flying Fish Company on Hawthorne at the produce stand | Newest Oldest
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Fresh Wasabi really is wonderful. Good article Lesli. Could we have a few pics of Jennifer? | Oct 17, 2011 |
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I had some fresh Wasabi at a Japanese restaurant in L.A. a few years ago that was not at all like the varieties described here. This was white and cut in slivers about the size of a toothpick. I have looked everywhere for it and cannot find it. It was incredible, too -- crunchy, refreshing and spicy at the same time, great stuff. Does the author know anything about that variety? | Oct 12, 2011 |
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This sounds great! I can't wait to see if Park Kitchen gives it a shot. | Oct 11, 2011 |

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