



## JUDITH ELEN CUTTING BOARD

Fennel sat  
beside onions  
and leeks,  
lowly but  
indispensable

above  
Fennel has ancient  
roots, but is more in  
demand than ever

Fennel comes in bulbs (big or baby) and as feathery, aniseedy wild fennel. If the wild herb proves elusive, “you could use the fronds from the top of the fennel bulbs, but the flavour will be different and not so long-lasting,” says Giorgio Locatelli.

Italian cuisine loves fennel, fronds *and* bulbs (finocchio). London restaurateur Locatelli advocates dishes that fill the mouth with flavours: tomato for sweetness, something peppery, such as rocket, and “something aniseed, like raw fennel, which is so underused in salads in the UK” (*Made in Italy*).

Fennel is ancient. Whether alleviating baby’s gripe or as an ingredient for absinthe, fennel has a history. It appears in medicinal recipes from ancient Egypt to 11th-century Byzantium. It’s linked with the ancient Greek city of Marathon, home to fennel fields and the first marathon runner.

Arabic cuisine, prizing aromatics and perfumes, ranked flavourings in a hierarchy: costly musk and amber at the top, rosewater, spices such as cinnamon, dried fruits, nuts, fresh fruits, honey and, finally, herbs and vegetables, a category in which fennel sat beside onions, garlic and leeks, lowly but indispensable.

In the kitchens of medieval Europe, fennel and other vegetables complemented rustic cereals (barley, spelt). By the late middle ages, with cultivated fields encroaching on wilderness, farms and cottage gardens grew all the wintery vegetables we know (plus such long-forgotten oddities as tares, vetches, flat peas), but people still roamed woods and meadows gathering wild fennel, along with sage, asparagus, watercress and mushrooms.

Fennel is a hardy perennial. A white bulb, ribbed like textured fabric on its outer layers, with bright green, feathery fern-like fronds sprouting from upward-pointing stalks. Buy firm, greenish-white bulbs (keeps three to five days in a paper bag in the fridge). It’s high in potassium, devoid of fat and cholesterol.

Maeve O’Meara’s Italian “winter salad” combines finely sliced baby fennel, blood orange and chervil. “Salads are not just for summer,” she notes (*Food Safari*, Hardie Grant). Also in this book, is a Greek dish, from Melbourne chef George Calombaris: tender lamb cooked in yoghurt and honey, served with fennel salad.

My Sicilian cookbooks (bulbs should be kept in cold salted water once cut, one says) add black olives to fennel and orange salad (another adds smoked herring pieces). Another dish cooks sliced fennel and green olives with diced lamb in white wine, finally adding orange juice and zest.

Rita Faranda grows fennel bulbs at Werribee South, and will have them on Sunday at **Flemington Farmers’ Market**. In South Australia, at **Victor Harbor**, Francesco and Sarina Virgara have fragrant fennel bulbs from their farms at Myponga and Willunga Plain. Greg Chadban from Cessnock, has it at **Newcastle**. In **Albany**, Western Australia, it’s getting a bit cold for fennel, but Bathgate Farms may still have some.