

Tale from the Garden

When I was growing up I just loved my mother's cooking. And one of my favourite things that she made was her rhubarb crumble. It was just perfect. Sweet and tasty with a perfect crumbly topping. I loved it.

Today, when I was taking Tip for his walk, I passed a man returning from the allotments & carrying a rucksack - & out of the top of the rucksack was a whole bunch of rhubarb! Do you grow rhubarb in your garden? I remember, when I was little, picking rhubarb with my dad in our garden & he told me that, when he was little, he used to like going out into the rhubarb patch, grabbing a stalk and just eating it raw! Too tart for my taste-buds, I'm sure! I'd have to dip it into a bowl of sugar first!

I knew there was a reason why rhubarb crumble has so much sugar in it; rhubarb is, in fact, one of the sourest foods on the planet. And maybe not for my dad, but for most mortals the reaction to eating anything that sour is quite powerful. I understand that science doesn't even have an explanation for how we react to sour foods, but the reaction is quite uncontrollable as we purse our lips and set our teeth on edge and make the strangest of faces.



ANCIENT HISTORY

Many consider rhubarb a fruit due to the dominance of rhubarb dessert recipes. Although botanists and horticulturists do not agree on the classification of this species it is considered a dessert vegetable. More surprisingly, rhubarb's role was medicinal rather than culinary throughout the majority of its period of use. Indeed, widespread culinary uses began only two centuries ago whereas medicinal uses go back 5000 years or more.

The word rhubarb is of Latin origin. The ancient Romans imported rhubarb roots from unknown, barbarian lands. Most experts conclude that the word 'Rhubarb' comes from a French word 'rubarbe' that came from the Medieval Latin word 'Rhuebarbarum' or from the Greek 'Rhabarbaron'. 'Rha' was the name the Scythians, an ancient nomadic people of Eurasia, who lived almost 3000 years ago around the Ukraine, used for what is now the Volga River. Rhubarb grew wild on the banks of the Volga because it loves cold damp climates. 'Barbarum' is a term for 'foreign', and to the Greeks and Romans it was foreign folks around this river that grew the strange plant. So, when you put the two words together you get something like 'Rhubarb'.

The earliest recorded use of rhubarb is 2700BC, although its use is thought to date back much further. At this time, rhubarb's use was as a very important drug, being used for a variety of ailments. Marco Polo is attributed to bringing the drug to Europe in the thirteenth century when it was referred to as the Rhacoma root. The drug was so highly regarded and much sought after that in 1657 in England it could command three times the price of Opium.

The first time the plant was seen growing in Britain was in the sixteenth century when the seeds were introduced in an attempt to grow and process the drug here, but the wrong strain was imported and eventually its use in this country went into decline as the British version simply did not work. The rise of modern medicine eventually took over from this wondrous drug.

RHUBARB IN THE DIET

Rhubarb was first used in English cooking in the late eighteenth century, probably in an attempt to get the benefits of the drug into the body (although it had been used extensively in Syria and Persia since the thirteenth century). The forcing process was discovered in the Chelsea Physic Gardens in 1817, when some roots were accidentally covered with soil in the depth of winter. On removing the soil some weeks later tender shoots were noticed. These were found to have a superior flavour and quality than anything ever seen or tasted before. Rhubarb had at last found favour with the British.

RHUBARB IN YORKSHIRE

In 1877 the forcing of rhubarb began in Yorkshire. The Whitwell family of Leeds are generally regarded as being the first large-scale grower to cause significant damage to the London rhubarb growers. It was the first place in the world where special sheds were erected just for the purpose of growing rhubarb out of season. The soil in the area proved perfect for growth of the substantial root systems necessary to produce sufficient yields of high quality sticks worthy of a premium price & capable of covering the high production costs associated with this crop. As rhubarb's popularity increased so did the producers in this area, numbering at rhubarb's height in popularity, well over 200.

The quality of the Yorkshire crop became renowned, and demand for it became so huge that eventually producers in other areas of Britain simply could not compete, and eventually stopped altogether. The producers were centralised between Leeds, Wakefield and Bradford, which became known world-wide as The Rhubarb Triangle, the centre for the world's production of forced rhubarb.

Rhubarb, a native of Siberia was originally found growing on the banks of the river Volga. This tells us two important things about the plant's requirements – first a cold climate & second plenty of water. The third significant requirement is a nitrogen-rich fertilizer. The Rhubarb Triangle, situated in the shadows of the Pennines, provided all of these essentials – first, the area was a natural frost pocket & second, the high rainfall was perfect! Because of these two factors the Pennines also gave rise to the woollen industry in the area. As sheep grazed on its bleak hills, they provided the wool for this other important Yorkshire industry. The Yorkshire water provided the power to work the massive looms. And almost as if following some great master plan, the woollen industry gave the rhubarb industry the third important plant requirement, SHODDY, a waste by-product to them, but to the rhubarb industry, high nitrogen feed, cheap and readily available. The beauty of the nitrogen it supplies, is that it is released slowly over a three-year period as the fibres break down.

The massive Yorkshire coalfields provided a cheap local source of fuel to heat the sheds. Geographically, centrally positioned in Great Britain & coincidentally where railroads crossed, the producers had a transport system to any corner of the country, so that the days harvest could be in the market the next morning. Special trains left the area nightly, mostly bound for the old Covent Garden market, and from there large amounts were sold on into Europe. The trains became known as the Rhubarb Express trains as they rushed to get their valuable cargo to market, carriage after carriage containing only rhubarb.

During the Second World War the government controlled the price of Yorkshire forced rhubarb at one shilling per pound to keep it financially within the means of the ordinary people. Rhubarb became part of the staple diet of war time Britain, and Yorkshire forced rhubarb became almost a national institution. The industry became one of the largest providers of employment for the area, as production year on year increased.

Family secrets of production and each family's individual much prized strains were handed down from generation to generation. Family names such as Cartlidge, Wade, Asquith, Smith, Dobson, and Oldroyd became synonymous with Yorkshire rhubarb, and growers 'fought' to gain the much-prized awards for their own particular strains at the annual rhubarb show.

THE 'CRUMBLING' OF AN EMPIRE

Unfortunately when you are at the top the only way is down, as with any over-exposed celebrity. War time Britain's palate was rather on the sweet side, and they simply could not get the sugar that they required to bring this sharp flavoured vegetable to their taste. Eating

large amounts of an item that many found too sharp did rhubarb no favours. However well-meaning, the parents who made children, 'eat up your rhubarb, its good for you' helped to turn a generation away from rhubarb as they were nearly force fed the stuff! Lumpy custard and stodgy green rhubarb crumble for school dinner won rhubarb no friends either! Although the children probably did not know why, rhubarb **was** good for them! It actually helped, along with the rest of their diet, to keep them very healthy. Sticks of rhubarb and a bag of sugar given to children to substitute their sweet ration, now bring back fond childhood memories to many.

After the war, overseas trade resumed and quick easy refrigeration made a wide range of new tropical fruits readily available. Poor old rhubarb was left on the shelf (or in this case the garden)! This spelt disaster for the Rhubarb Triangle, as the producers were massively over producing, resulting in a loss on their production costs, some went bankrupt, others sold up before they did, others turned to other crops Year on year growers left the industry. Being part of the heritage of the Wakefield / Leeds area, visitor's now flock to the Wakefield annual rhubarb festival as the humble rhubarb sheds have become a tourist attraction. Though perhaps not so humble when the likes of Rick Stein, Nigella Lawson, Anthony Worrell Thompson, Jamie Oliver, Phil Vickery, James Martin, Brian Turner and Hugh Fernley Whittingstall, all sing the praises of Yorkshire Forced Rhubarb! Indeed, Traditionally Grown Yorkshire Indoor Rhubarb is to the rhubarb industry what champagne is to the wine industry.

So what's your taste? Sweet or sour? I'm going to venture a guess that there might be something sweet *and* something sour in everyone's favourite recipes. Certainly, rhubarb crumble needs a mix of both to be delicious! Sugar & rhubarb are not so pleasing on their own but when put together, something different from either is produced - and it's scrumptious! Put together and a whole new and improved flavour is created. Here's the point: ***without the different, the better would not exist.***

The same goes for relationships in the Body of Christ. "Different" is what the church is made of. Different people. Different generations. Different genders. Different spiritual journeys to Christ. Different cultures. Different colours. Different ideas. Different gifts. Different loyalties. Different passions. Different righteous causes. Different opinions. What God is doing in and through the church is a mix of sweet and sour that only he can concoct. But he is determined to make it work because, as with food, so with people: ***without the different, the better would not exist.***

I would suggest that universal sameness in the church would stunt our growth. I suspect that God meant us to be different, sweet & sour, to balance and enhance each other, transforming us into something more stunningly beautiful than we would otherwise be (Ephesians 5 v26-27 'to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.')

In Romans 8 v28 the Apostle Paul promised '... that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.' This tells us that ***Different*** is what we ***need***. The sweet and the sour in our experiences, perspectives, and opinions are part of the '***all things***' that work together '***for our good***'. They are essential ingredients to produce a better ***us***.

WELCOME ONE ANOTHER

The apostle Paul talks about sweet and sour opinions in the church, that mix of opinions for which God has a sanctifying purpose. Read Romans 14 v1 – 15 v7 entitled 'The Weak and the Strong', and you'll see that his main point bookends the text - "Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgement on disputable matters" & "Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God." We are to welcome the 'others' in our lives who have opinions different from our own, even as God has welcomed us all in Christ. 'Welcome' is a hospitality word, encouraging us to receive others by inviting them into our hearts in order to embrace them in fellowship, communion, and unity.

We are not to keep differing people and opinions at a distance but welcome them in, with a commitment ***not*** to quarrel about the varying opinions each may hold. This is a tall order,

given how tightly we hold and boldly we proclaim our opinions. But Paul's point in Romans 14 is that united love, righteousness, peace, and joy in the indisputable and essential truth of God in Jesus Christ, are more important than all our opinions about anything else.

WE AREN'T THE FIRST TO FACE THE CHALLENGE

Clearly, we are not the first Christians to face the challenge of strong divergent opinions that we hold dear. While Romans 14 v2-5 might sound like Christian controversies trivial by our standards, those first-century debates about holy days and diet were rooted in deep cultural traditions and convictional differences, not to mention long-standing ethnic privilege and prejudice. These were not mere debates about whether there should be red meat on the menu or red-letter "holy" dates on the calendar. They were debates about which culture and traditions were superior. They were arguments between people who saw the world through very different eyes and thought their vision was best.

In the Roman Church - as in nearly all New Testament churches - there were privileged and powerful Romans (viewed by non-Romans as oppressors), Greek intellectuals who scorned uneducated and uncouth barbarians, privileged Jewish religious purists, current slaves along with their masters, ethnic outcasts, male and female sexists, immigrant dark-skinned Africans and the very much despised, white-skinned Scythians (descendants of fearsome, hard-drinking, pot-smoking warrior tribes). You see this diversity in the early church when piecing together passages such as Romans 1 v13-14, Galatians 3 v28 & Colossians 3 v11. Throw in the assorted former money-hoarders, gossips, alcoholics, fornicators, adulterers, homosexuals, thieves, swindlers, and molesters that, though saved, surely brought their own guilt and shame baggage into the early church, and it was a very interesting band of believers indeed!

This conglomeration of the *different* meant that New Testament churches included all the ingredients of stubborn ethnic prejudice, political oppression, educational disparity, class disadvantage, liturgical preferences, and cultural styles - all of which injected constant stress into their relationships. Sweet and sour were part of the mix. So, if our churches have similar issues, we are at least in good company.

Paul shows us that there is one supreme Agenda, overruling all others, and that is, that we really *must* welcome one another so that the sweet and sour edifying effect of true diversity in unity may be experienced. In short, Paul shows us that at the end of the day, we will not be judged so much for the opinions we have held as for the character (and love) with which we have held our opinions. What will matter most - and the standard by which we will be measured - will be whether we allowed the different in our lives to lead to the better. Remember: Sugar & rhubarb are not so pleasing on their own but when put together, something different from either is produced - and it's scrumptious! Put together and a whole new and improved flavour is created. Here's the point: *without the different, the better would not exist.*