

HE mustardy tang of watercress has tickled the noses and tongues of salad lovers worldwide since ancient times.

But it's always held a particularly – you might even say peculiarly - fond place in the hearts of the British, who view it as one of spring's most delicious treasures.

The story of watercress in the UK connects rural farming communities to the urban poor and is bound up with the spirit of entrepreneurship that defined the Victorian age, watercress's heyday. A vital staple, it was known as 'poor man's bread'. In his Life in the London Streets (1881), Victorian chronicler Richard Rowe wrote, "I do not mean that [the poor] eat nothing but watercress, but that if it were not for watercress, they would have nothing to eat."

Victorian food markets rang with the cries of watercress sellers, often young girls, plying their trade. One such, Eliza James, started out aged five in Birmingham before moving to London's Covent Garden. After establishing

James & Son and acquiring watercress beds in Surrey and Hampshire, she eventually gained a near-monopoly on the lucrative trade, along with the moniker 'the watercress queen'.

When Eliza died in 1927, she had amassed a fortune of £20,000 (more than £1 million today). Her spirit lives on at Hampshire-based Vitacress, which supplies bagged leaves to Waitrose. Founded in 1951, it's now one of Britain's largest producers, with eight watercress farms across Dorset and Hampshire, among which are the very beds that Eliza James once owned.

haven't changed much since Victorian times, largely still replicating how the plant grows in the wild. In 2021, British watercress was recognised by the Traditional Speciality Guaranteed (TSG) scheme, which protects food products and guarantees quality, covering everything from water supply and bed design to propagation and harvesting methods. Vitacress MD Andrew Eastwood says the TSG scheme is "the



thing that really unites us all in the world of watercress". The plant thrives in the clean, clear waters of England's chalk streams, explains Leah Mathias-Collins, group

'In the Victorian

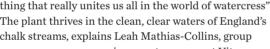
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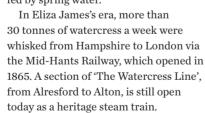
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streams. Way, way back, it would have been river-fed. The chalk streams are temperature, which is ideal for the plants." This led to the formation of formal watercress beds, which are now fed by spring water.

Nowadays, the crop is grown in the UK year-round, but reaches its crunchy, peppery peak around May - just when we begin to crave summer's salad days and the palate-waking tingle of watercress. In Alresford, the occasion is marked with a rambunctious local festival, featuring a watercress-eating championship and a 'watercress king and queen' parade. Eliza James would surely approve.



environment manager at Vitacress. "Watercress has grown up around chalk mineral-rich and the water is a constant















Commercial cultivation methods

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Watercress & goat's cheese Dutch baby

Give watercress a starring role in this crispy baked pancake for two. You can also use baby spinach, pea shoots or rocket.

Serves 2 Prepare 10 minutes Cook 20 minutes

- 3 medium free
- range eggs
- 150ml whole milk
- 100g plain flour
- ½ tsp fine sea salt
- ½ x 20g pack dill, fronds roughly chopped

• 15g unsalted butter

• 100g goat's cheese,

cut or torn into

bitesized pieces

- 1 Preheat the oven to 220°C, gas mark 7, and put in a 23cm ovenproof frying pan or • 2 tsp clear honey round cake tin (don't use one with a loose base) to heat up while you prepare the batter. • 2 tbsp olive oil In a jug, whisk together the eggs, milk, flour and salt until smooth. Stir in most of the dill. 50g watercress Carefully add the butter to the hot pan or tin and swirl it to melt, then quickly pour in
 - 2 Meanwhile, in a small bowl, mix together the honey and oil, then season. Once baked, fill the hollow of the Dutch baby with the watercress, then scatter over the cheese and remaining dill. Drizzle with the honey dressing and serve straight away.

the batter and return to the oven. Bake for 18-20 minutes until puffed and golden brown.

V Per serving 2588k]/620kcals/37g fat/16g saturated fat/45g carbs/8.9g sugars/ 2.2g fibre/25g protein/2g salt



