



VIP

VERY IMPORTANT  
PRODUCT

Words Susan Low

Punchy, peppery and bang in season right now,  
watercress has been a delicacy, a staple  
– and even an excuse for a celebration

# Best of the bunch



**THE 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.

Commercial cultivation methods 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

environment manager at Vitacress.

"Watercress has grown up around chalk streams. Way, way back, it would have been river-fed. The chalk streams are mineral-rich and the water is a constant temperature, which is ideal for the plants." This led to the formation of formal watercress beds, which are now fed by spring water.

In Eliza James's era, more than 30 tonnes of watercress a week were whisked from Hampshire to London via the Mid-Hants Railway, which opened in 1865. A section of 'The Watercress Line', from Alresford to Alton, is still open today as a heritage steam train.

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.

**'In the Victorian age, it was known as "poor man's bread"'**



*These pages:* Vitacress in the late 50s: at Spitalfields market (opposite); harvesting at St Mary Bourne, Hampshire, and bunching at Manor Farm, Dorset (above). Today: picking by hand (right) and rolling watercress before harvesting (below) at Pinglestone Farm  
*Below left:* a Victorian Christmas card featuring a street seller »





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
  - 2 tsp clear honey
  - 2 tbsp olive oil
  - 50g watercress
  - 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 round cake tin (don't use one with a loose base) to heat up while you prepare the batter. In a jug, whisk together the eggs, milk, flour and salt until smooth. Stir in most of the dill. Carefully add the butter to the hot pan or tin and swirl it to melt, then quickly pour in the batter and return to the oven. Bake for 18-20 minutes until puffed and golden brown.

**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.

**V Per serving** 2588kJ/620kcal/37g fat/16g saturated fat/45g carbs/8.9g sugars/2.2g fibre/25g protein/2g salt

**COOK’S TIP**  
If you have time, let the batter rest for 20 minutes before baking to ensure a light and even texture.

RECIPE SILVANA FRANCO  
PHOTOGRAPH ANDREW BURTON  
FOOD STYLING HANNA MILLER  
STYLING DAVINA PERKINS

WAITROSE PROMOTION

**HITTING THE SWEET SPOT**  
Watercress contains sulfoquinovose, a sugar shown to have similar benefits to the prebiotic fibres in plants, which feed the good bacteria in our gut and may help to improve its overall health.

**THE EYES HAVE IT**  
An 80g portion of watercress provides more than a quarter of your recommended daily intake of vitamin A. This powerful antioxidant offers multiple benefits, including helping to maintain eye and skin health as well as immune function.

**RAW AMBITION**  
With a punchy, peppery flavour, watercress is often eaten raw. This also helps maintain its high levels of vitamin B, which is reduced during cooking.

**VITAMIN BOOST**  
A handful (40g) of watercress has more than the recommended daily allowance (RDA) of vitamin K, a vital vitamin for blood clotting and bone health.

Give it the GREEN LIGHT

Beyond packing a flavour punch in salads, watercress is also a nutritional powerhouse, bursting with vitamins and minerals

**DRINK UP**  
Watercress brings delicious freshness to smoothies, especially when combined with ginger, apple and other zingy flavours. As it contains lots of different minerals – including calcium, magnesium, potassium, iron, manganese and copper – it will add to the nutrient value of your drink, too.



Waitrose Watercress (£1.55/80g)

