

## Seasonal cook



Photo: Domino Productions

# Prised possession

They can be tricky to open but chestnuts reward the determined, writes **STEVE MANFREDI**.

**C**hestnuts look intimidating. As they fall from the tree, the nuts are encased in prickly, porcupine-like husks. Part of this husk is open – a sign that the nut is ripe and ready – and if it falls a certain way it resembles a round, green face with a huge grin.

These days there are machines that release the nuts from the husks but once upon a time they were prised open by hand, using thick gloves. The shiny brown nut inside is heart-shaped, with a small “beard” at the tip. This is the chestnut that appears in the shops. Getting it out of its thick, mahogany skin and fine pellicle is the key.

The most common way to prepare chestnuts is to roast them. Make a cross on the flat side of each nut with the point of a sharp knife. This will release steam as they cook, avoiding explosions.

Place the cut nuts under a moderately hot grill for about 10–15 minutes, depending on their size. Parts of their skin will char. This is normal. When ready, take the nuts out and place in a clean tea towel. Wrap them up for five minutes then give them a little squeeze. Unwrap and remove both the outer shell and the pellicle, then eat or use in recipes.

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## CHESTNUT CREPES FILLED WITH SWEET RICOTTA

This is a dish from Balla head chef Gabriele Taddeucci's family. Known as *necci*, these crepes are native to north-western Tuscany. This is the simple version but they can be enhanced with pieces of roast chestnut mixed through the ricotta filling or even with some chopped dark or milk chocolate.

**200g chestnut flour**  
**2 eggs**  
**Pinch salt**  
**30ml extra virgin olive oil**  
**450ml water**  
**300g fresh ricotta**  
**1 level tbsp icing sugar**  
**60g brown or organic panela sugar**

Sift chestnut flour through fine sieve. Beat eggs in a bowl and add sifted flour and salt. Work until there are no lumps left. Beat in olive oil. Slowly add water in a stream and mix until batter is smooth and runny. Refrigerate mix for at least an hour. Mix together ricotta and icing sugar. Refrigerate until required. Heat a 22-25cm non-stick pan. There is no need to add oil or butter if pan is non-stick. Ladle enough batter for 1 crepe into hot pan. Once it starts to bubble through, flip crepe gently to cook other side. Repeat until all batter is used. They can be refrigerated for a few days then heated in microwave before serving. To serve, cut each crepe in half. Place a few spoonfuls of ricotta mix on each half and roll into a cone shape. Serve sprinkled with sugar.  
**Serves 8-10 as dessert (pictured)**  
**Wine** Late-picked semillon or vin santo

## CHESTNUT AND LEEK SOUP

If you'd prefer to make this soup meat-free, use water instead of chicken or veal broth.

**500g fresh chestnuts**  
**1.5L chicken or veal broth**  
**3 cups thinly sliced leek**  
**100g butter**  
**50ml extra virgin olive oil**  
**Salt and pepper**  
**Parmesan, to serve**  
**Country-style bread, to serve**

Score chestnuts and place in a pot covered with cold water. Bring to the boil and reduce heat to a simmer for 5 minutes. Drain, cool chestnuts and remove skin and pellicle. Place peeled chestnuts in a pot with broth and leek and simmer gently for about an hour. Finish by mixing in butter and olive oil. Season with salt and pepper and serve with freshly grated parmesan and toasted country-style bread.

**Serves 6**  
**Wine** Pinot noir

## Full bottle

### QUAFFING

**GRAN SASSO**  
**MONTEPULCIANO**  
**D'ABRUZZO 2010, \$10**

This bargain red from Gran Sasso in Italy's Abruzzo region always punches way above its price point and never disappoints. It's super smart, fresh and vibrant, loaded with sweet berry fruit but still very much a savoury wine, with plenty of spice and sage, a hint of menthol and an appealing woody character. It's medium bodied and lovely to drink now, with its soft, supple tannins. There's also enough tangy acidity to cut through rich meat dishes, such as *osso bucco*.



### TRYING

**BLACK ESTATE PINOT**  
**NOIR OMIHI WAIPARA**  
**2009, \$48**

New Zealand winemaker Nicholas Brown has a special patch of land at Waipara, just north of Christchurch. He makes a pinot noir that's unmistakably from that region. It has a wonderful earthy rhubarb character, matched to a core of juicy, ripe black fruits. It's medium bodied but structured, with firm yet round, ripe tannins. It will benefit from a few more years in the bottle. To appreciate now, decant it. The acidity means it can cut through rich duck or spicy barbecue pork buns.



### CELEBRATING

**VEUVE FOUJY & FILS**  
**BLANC DE BLANCS**  
**BRUT, \$60**

For months, I've been enjoying this stylish blanc de blancs. It is subtle, with fine acidity and a tiny bead on the pour. Long-lasting with a floral and spice scent, there's richness and complexity on the palate followed by some creaminess mid-palate. All this is laced with lemony sherbet notes, ending with a dry, persistent finish and the freshness of a non-vintage. Serve slightly chilled with fresh oysters.

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