

COOKING

Wasabi Here Now

Why real wasabi is worth seeking out



Photos: Katie B. Foster/Tasting Table

BY ALISON SPIEGEL 6/29/16

News flash: That hot green paste you find at sushi bars is almost definitely not wasabi. It's actually a mixture of **horseradish**, mustard powder and food coloring. Hard to come by even in Japan, the real deal is rare. But it tastes so much better—and you should try to find some of it for yourself.

"**Fresh wasabi** has a certain fruitiness and 'greenness' to it," Tyler Malek of Portland-based **Salt & Straw** says. "It's almost like eating ketchup all your life, thinking you know what **tomatoes** taste like, and then, one day, eating a fresh tomato and allowing it to blow your mind."

“It may be surprising to some people, but the pungency of real wasabi is less sharp, compared to the imitation kind. Instead, it is more savory with a real depth of flavor,” chef Masaharu Morimoto, who uses the real stuff whenever possible, says.

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Jennifer Bloeser of [Frog Eyes Wasabi](#) farm estimates, “Ninety-nine percent of people have never seen real wasabi.” Bloeser and her husband, Markus Mead, run one of North America’s only commercial wasabi operations, and the only one in Oregon. They sell to roughly 30 restaurants, some specialty-food distributors and about 1,000 individual clients each year, offering full plants for horticulture, as well as rhizomes (or stems) and leaves for cooking ([see the recipe for wasabi peas](#)).

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Real wasabi is nothing if not high maintenance, taking about a year to mature. Called one the [hardest plants to grow](#), it requires specific conditions not easily found outside certain areas of Japan, where it grows naturally alongside mountain streams. The coast of Oregon happens to have the year-round humidity, shade, cool climate and pristine

water the Brassicaceae need. Frog Eyes farmsimulates wasabi's natural environment by utilizing a coastal stream and the region's reliable rainwater. The plants grow in irrigated gravel beds that are protected by adjustable greenhouse shades.

Photo: Courtesy of Frog Eyes Farm

Horseradish, what you're likely eating instead of wasabi, likes direct sunlight and grows quickly, making it the "cool chick" to wasabi's trophy wife. This makes it a much cheaper alternative to wasabi, which can go for more than \$100 a pound.

Wasabi's neediness doesn't stop after harvest, however. To make the most of the rhizome, you can't just slice it. "You really have to grate for the heat to come through," Ian Purkayastha from [Regalis Foods](#) says. He recommends a sharkskin or porcelain grater, both of which create more friction because of their coarser texture, but a Microplane works, too.

Chef Morimoto also uses the leaves for pickles or marinades at his [namesake NYC restaurant](#); most people don't realize the leaves are edible, but they've got a nice, subtle flavor. You'll also find the watercress-like greens in restaurants like NYC's [Brushstroke](#) and Portland's [Coquine](#) and [Taylor Railworks](#).

Photo: Courtesy of Frog Eyes Farm

Wasabi flowers are edible, too. Malek, who regularly features local ingredients in his ever-changing roster of [inventive ice creams](#), created an exquisite green apple and wasabi sorbet using all parts of the plant, including the flowers, this past spring. Customers, most of whom had never tasted real wasabi, loved the vibrant flavor, Malek says, and he expects he'll use the plant in future flavors.


Be it in sorbet or from a freshly grated rhizome, however you get your hands on Frog Eyes wasabi, the real stuff will wake up your senses in a whole new way. The good news is, with more chefs and diners focusing on transparency and authentic ingredients, we could see more farmers attempting to tame this fickle plant. Bloeser predicts, "This is just the beginning of the U.S. market."

We couldn't wasabi more excited.

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