



In centuries past, in any English garden with even just a few fruit trees, one of them was sure to be a quince. Then they almost disappeared ? or at least became a rare exotic, an enthusiast's talking point, at best. Happily, they seem to be enjoying something of a revival, with more and more people planting their own. I say happily, because they are a true culinary gem. A quince tree in fruit is a beautiful thing, too, with those downy, golden orbs hanging temptingly amid generous oval leaves, brightening truculent autumn skies. Quinces are not easy to buy, either, so that's all the more reason to grow your own in order to enjoy their tangy, perfumed sweetness in savoury and sweet dishes throughout the cooler months. Quince trees originated in the Caucasus. They're part of the rose family, a relative of apples and pears, and have a long and exalted history. The "apples" referred to in the story of Adam and Eve, and in the Song of Solomon, were almost certainly quinces. It's highly likely the golden apple of Hesperides, which Paris gave to Aphrodite, was also a quince. In classical legend, it's the fruit of love, marriage and fertility.

More recently they have been planted in gardens for their decorative red flowers, glossy foliage and attractive autumn fruits.

The zingy sweetness of the quince goes beautifully with the rosy lamb. If you like, add a handful of rocket and/or coriander leaves to the salad, but it's delicious just as it is. Serves four as a starter, two as a main.

1 tsp coriander seeds

1 tsp cumin seeds

Zest of 1 orange

¼-½ tsp chilli flakes

3 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil

500g lamb leg steak, butterflied (ask the butcher to do this for you), trimmed of excess fat

1 large quince, washed but unpeeled

2 tbsp runny honey

Juice of 1 lemon

1 sprig fresh rosemary

Flaky sea salt and freshly ground black pepper

(1) In a small, dry frying pan over a medium heat, toast the coriander and cumin seeds until just fragrant ? about a minute. Grind roughly with a pestle and mortar, and combine in a bowl with the orange zest, chilli flakes and oil. Add the lamb, rubbing the marinade well into the surface; cover and marinate for two to four hours, turning over once or twice.

(2) Halve the quince lengthways, remove the core, then cut each half into four segments. Put these into a small pan with the honey, lemon juice, rosemary and enough water just to cover. Bring to a simmer, partially cover and poach gently until tender ? depending on the size of the quince, about 30-45 minutes. Remove from the poaching liquid with a slotted spoon and place in the marinade with the lamb. Turn everything over with your hands so the quince slices are well coated.

(3) Warm up a small griddle pan or frying pan over a high heat. Fry the seasoned lamb steak for a couple of minutes a side, then leave on a warmed plate to rest for five minutes while you cook the quince. Griddle or fry the quince segments on both sides until starting to caramelise.

(4) Cut the lamb into thin slices and arrange on plates with the quince. Deglaze the pan with some of the poaching liquid, then pour the pan juices over the meat and fruit, sprinkle on some flaky sea salt and serve immediately.

{fcomment}