

CHICORY



Like specialty crops grown in the Yuma area, acreage devoted chicory is minimal, yet an important one for those who produce and utilize it. Although the British and Americans speak the same language, there are cookies and biscuits, and, in this case, endive and chicory. What Americans call endive, the British call chicory, and what the Americans call chicory, the British call endive.

Chicory (*Cichorium intybus*) is a hardy perennial that was brought to North America from Europe in the 1700s, and is now well-established across the continent. Though chicory has a variety of uses, it's best known for its association with coffee.

At many points through history, coffee has become unavailable or too costly. During these times, people have often turned to roasted chicory as a substitute. Folks also used to make coffee from roasted acorns, yams and a variety of local grains. Anything was better than going without!

The root of the chicory plant is long and thick, like the tap-root of the dandelion. When dried, roasted and ground, it makes an excellent substitute for coffee. There is no caffeine in chicory, and it produces a more 'roasted' flavor than coffee does. Many coffee producers offer blends with up to 30% chicory, which cuts down on the caffeine content of your cup. But many folk enjoy a cup of 'coffee' made entirely from ground, roasted chicory. Another perk about chicory is that it's more soluble in water than coffee, which means you use a lot less of it when brewing.

Chicory also offers extra health benefits that you wouldn't normally get from your cup of coffee. It is reported to help cleanse the blood and improve the health of your liver.

The young leaves can be used in salads, and the root can also be boiled and eaten like a vegetable (it's related to endive and radicchio). It's also grown as cattle feed in Europe. The flowers are blue-purple, and will open and close at precisely the same time every day.

Chicory was a popular coffee substitute and economizer for 2 centuries, back when coffee was more prized, and pure coffee was a luxury. In that time, it became a matter of cultural preference to use chicory in coffee, in the United States it was synonymous with New Orleans coffee. The specific taste of famous New Orleans brands is due to the blend of dark roasted coffee and chicory.

Many myths surround the use of chicory in coffee blends. One story holds that the root was accidentally found to be a flavorful additive to coffee as far back as the sixteenth century. Chicory is made from the root of the plant and was used as a filler and flavor enhancer in parts of northern Europe at least as far back as the eighteenth century. Napoleon's armies reportedly brought chicory back to France, where Parisians began to prefer its taste and the thriftiness of adding chicory. Since chicory could be grown in parts of Europe where coffee could not, the root was obviously cheaper. How it made its way to the United States is unknown.

For many years chicory was used to stretch coffee supplies, especially in hard times such as the Civil War. This practice upset many purists, who disdained chicory and other additives. Somewhere along the way, however, those in New Orleans developed a taste for chicory in coffee blends and many prefer it today. Throughout the New Orleans area, chicory has been used as a flavor additive. There, local coffee companies have kept up with demand by offering the same blends with and without chicory. Within the city, coffee and chicory are consumed in greater quantities than anywhere else. Outside of the city, most coffee drinkers drink pure coffee instead.

Chicory leaves and roots are used as a vegetable. Roasted roots are ground and brewed. Chicory is a sedative with potential cardioactive properties. Chicory's oligosaccharides are beneficial in maintaining healthy GI flora. Inulin type fractions of the plant may help certain conditions including constipation, diarrhea, cancer, and cardiovascular disease.

Chicory is a perennial, with a tap root like the Dandelion. The stems are 2 to 3 feet high, the lateral branches numerous and spreading, given off at a very considerable angle from the central stem.

The leaves are used in salads, for which they are much superior to Dandelion. They may be cut and used from young plants, but are generally blanched, as the unblanched leaves are bitter. The young blanched heads also form a good vegetable for cooking.

When infused, Chicory gives to coffee a bitter taste and a dark color. French writers say it suits people who suffer from habitual constipation.

The thick chicory root is roasted and powdered to be added to coffee. The origins of adding chicory to coffee as a filler and flavor enhancer began as early as the 15th century. The tradition spread to the French, and it became common in parts of Europe where coffee could not be grown or because it was cheaper.

Eventually, it became quite popular in the U.S., specifically in New Orleans. Unlike coffee, chicory does not contain caffeine. It tends to have a flavor like chocolate.

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