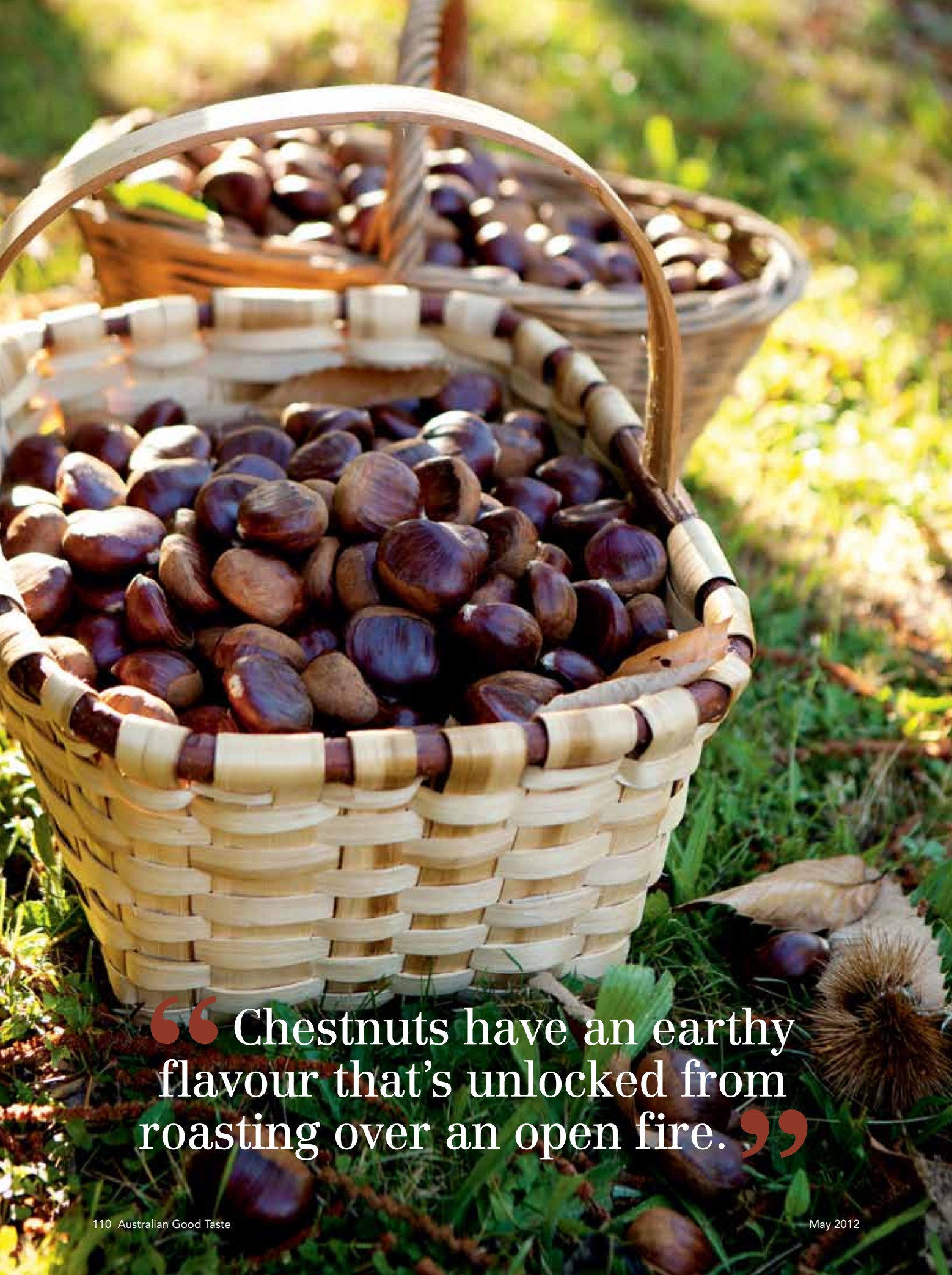


from the source

# under the chestnut TREES

Rohan and Deanne Whelan never set out to become chestnut growers, but with one look at the chestnut trees in Victoria's Alpine Valleys they knew they had found their life's calling.

WORDS KIMBERLY GILLAN PHOTO: MON GRIFITHS



“ Chestnuts have an earthy flavour that’s unlocked from roasting over an open fire. ”



Rohan and Deanne Whelan love their life on the edge of the mountains of Victoria's Alpine Valleys.

**W**hen Rohan and Deanne Whelan first bought their chestnut grove in Wandiligong, a four-hour drive north-east of Melbourne, they'd never even tasted chestnuts. "We loved the trees but we knew nothing about them," admits Rohan. The Whelans soon found some local growers who invited them over to sample the diverse nut. "They showed us how to roast them – they were beautiful," recalls Rohan.

Now, it's no surprise what gets served up most nights at the Whelans. "We have a lot of roast chestnuts," says Rohan. "But we've learnt to slice the outer shell halfway around and pierce the inner shell before cooking them. The first time I tried to cook them in the microwave they exploded with a loud bang and made a white fluffy mess because the moisture inside builds pressure."

### fresh country air

Farming was the last thing on Rohan and Deanne's minds when they started looking for a country retreat in 1997. "We'd done a lot of hiking around nearby mountains and loved the area," recalls Deanne. As soon as they laid eyes on the 1.5-hectare Wandiligong property in the Alpine Valleys, they knew they'd found their new home – and livelihood.

Nestled on the edge of a mountain range, the steep block was home to a group of chestnut trees, some dating back 130 years. The area's cold, wet winters and hot, dry summers make ideal conditions for growing chestnuts. "It was great because we wanted somewhere we could eventually live," explains Deanne.

They kept their home in Geelong, about a five-hour drive south-west of the property, and started coming to →



Little Scruffy loves farm life, too.



### buying chestnuts

You'll find fresh chestnuts in the chilled cabinet in the fresh produce section of Woolworths.



With easy-to-climb trees, the Whelan chestnut grove is a natural playground for kids Harry and Matilda.



Wandiligong for holidays and to harvest chestnuts from mid-March to early-May. "We usually have friends and family come up to help because they like it – it's relaxing under the trees," says Deanne. "Picking chestnuts is never something we've looked at as work, we've always seen it as something we enjoy doing. You end the day feeling like you've done something."

### growing collection

Since purchasing the grove, Rohan and Deanne have planted 150 trees, bringing their collection to 200. "Our nut production has gone up a lot because of the grafting and planting – we're thinking we'll pick about five tonnes of chestnuts this year, compared to two tonnes in the past," says Rohan.

Lucky for the Whelans, who didn't have a farming background, there's no complex science to determining

when the chestnuts are ripe – all they have to do is look around. "We know they're ready when they've fallen on the ground," says Deanne. "When it's in full 'drop' there'll be a carpet of husks and nuts under all the trees. Most husks contain about three nuts."

After they've scooped them up and removed the nuts from the spiky husks, the Whelans pack up their beautiful chestnuts and get them ready to send to Woolworths. But they always keep enough of their bounty of fresh chestnuts to use in their own kitchen.

After 15 years working on their chestnut grove, Rohan and Deanne have tasted chestnuts in every possible way – from the sweet chestnut puree they spread on freshly baked scones to Deanne's favourite chestnut soup. Made with a puree of fresh chestnuts and cream, this hearty soup is a favourite of the Whelans and a rich reward for their hard work during the harvest.

### \* try this

- For tasty nibbles to serve with drinks, sauté peeled chestnuts in olive oil, fennel seeds, dried chilli flakes and sea salt until golden and tender.
- To make a delicious autumnal dessert, simmer peeled chestnuts in port. Add strips of orange rind and a little caster sugar. Cook until the chestnuts are tender. Serve with double cream.

## roast chicken with chestnut stuffing

Bacon, mushrooms, chestnuts and fresh herbs make a rich stuffing for chicken.

**Serves** 4

**Prep** 20 mins (+ 10 mins cooling time)

**Cooking** 1 hour 40 mins

**15g butter**

**2 tbs olive oil**

**½ brown onion, finely chopped**

**2 rindless bacon rashers, finely chopped**

**2 garlic cloves, crushed**

**100g Swiss brown mushrooms, finely chopped**

**1 tbs chopped fresh sage**

**2 tsp chopped fresh thyme**

**450g fresh chestnuts, peeled**

**60g (1 cup) fresh breadcrumbs**

**½ tsp finely grated orange rind**

**1.8kg whole chicken**

**8 French shallots, peeled**

**3 parsnips, peeled, thickly sliced**

**60ml (¼ cup) dry sherry**

**250ml (1 cup) chicken stock**

**1** Preheat oven to 180°C. Heat the butter and 1 tbs oil in a frying pan over medium heat. Cook onion, bacon and garlic, stirring, for 4-5 minutes or until soft. Add mushroom, sage and thyme. Cook, stirring, for 4 minutes or until soft. Add 150g chestnuts. Stir for 1 minute. Stir in breadcrumbs and orange rind. Cool for 10 minutes.

**2** Stuff the chicken with breadcrumb mixture. Use kitchen string to tie legs

together. Place chicken, shallot and parsnip in a flameproof roasting pan. Drizzle over the oil. Season.


**3** Roast, turning the vegetables once, for 1 hour. Add the remaining chestnuts. Roast for 15-20 minutes or until the chicken is cooked through.

**4** Transfer the chicken and vegetables to a plate. Keep warm. Pour pan juices into a jug. Skim fat from the surface.

Add sherry to pan. Cook, stirring, over medium heat for 2-3 minutes or until reduced by half. Add pan juices and stock. Cook, stirring, for 4-5 minutes or until reduced slightly. Strain into a jug. Serve with the chicken and vegetables.

**Per serve** 67g protein • 48g fat

(14g saturated fat) • 51g carb

9g dietary fibre • 3800kJ (910 Cals) 

FRESH CHESTNUTS ARE AVAILABLE IN SELECTED WOOLWORTH'S STORES.  
RECIPE: KATRINA WOODMAN FOOD PHOTOGRAPHY CRAIG WALL STYLING MARIE-HELENE CLAUZON FOOD PREPARATION SONJA BERNYK

## \* foodie trick

To peel fresh chestnuts, score the skins and roast at 180°C for 15-20 minutes. Wrap in a clean tea towel and cool for 5 minutes before peeling.