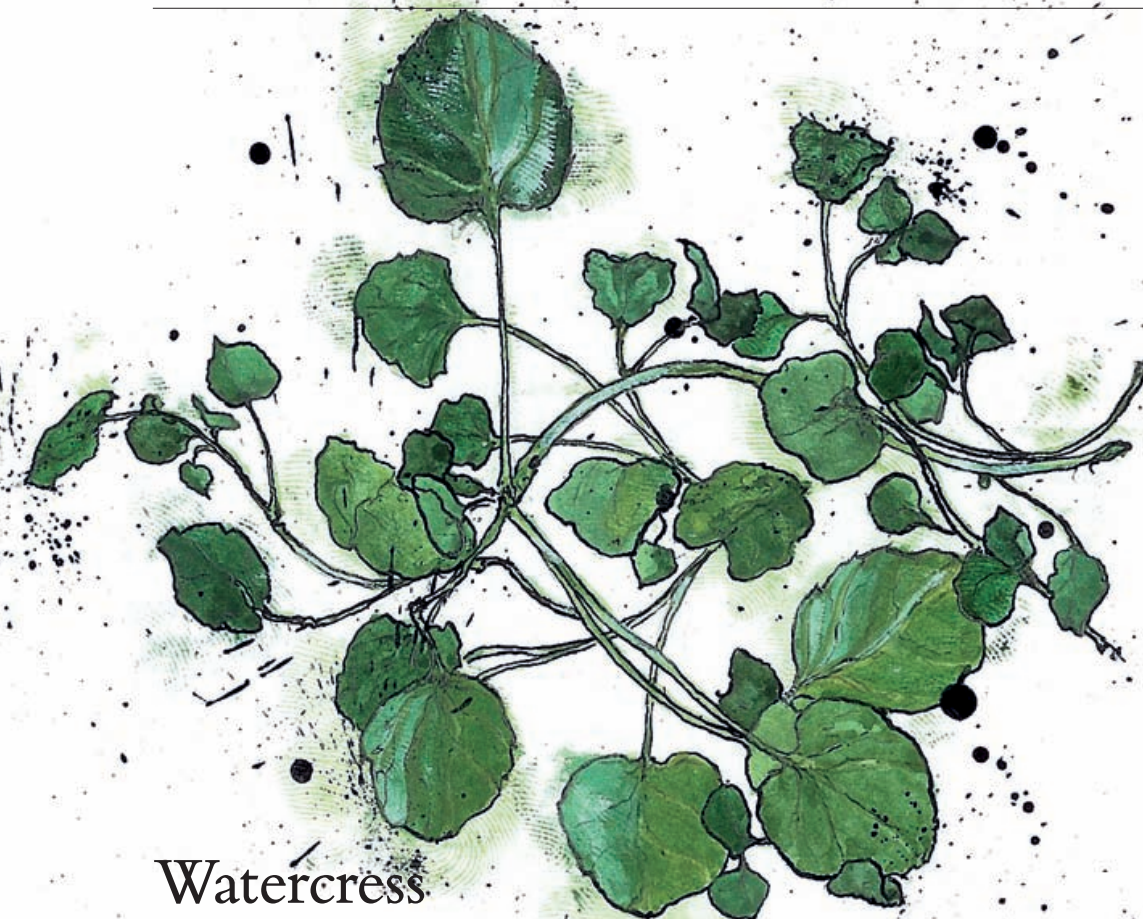


FLAVOURS OF THE MONTH

April

With spring finally sprung, it's time to tuck in to the wide variety of tastes suitable to this most vibrant of seasons, says Tonia George. Illustrations by Emma Dibben



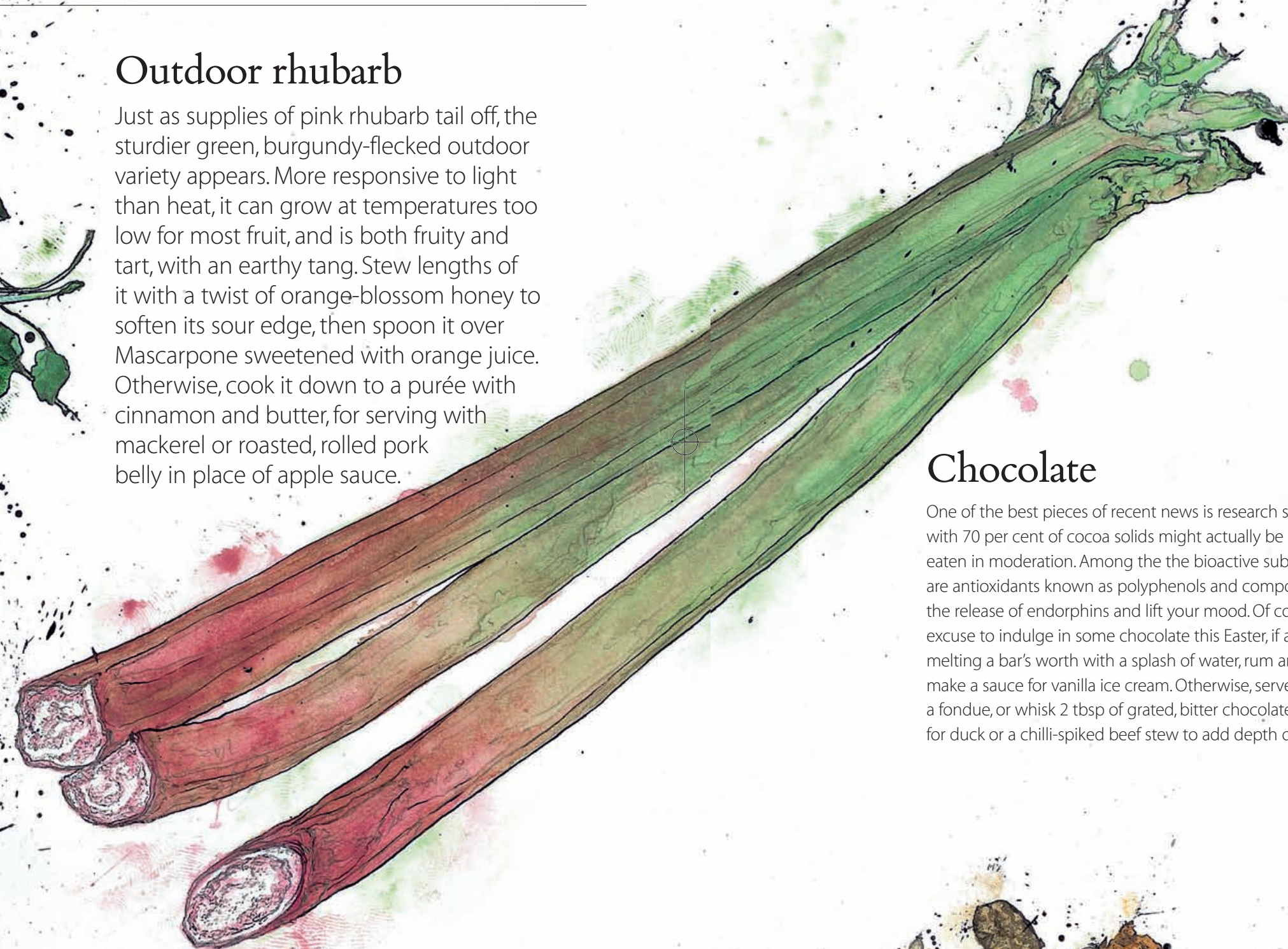
Watercress

Spring is in the air, and a warm salad full of vibrant peppery leaves is just the dish to span the seasons. Watercress has a tougher texture than the more trendy salad choice, rocket, but it has powerful antioxidants and is rich in iron and calcium as well as vitamins A and C, so it makes the base of a fabulous healthy supper. Try it with slices of ripe pear and crumbled, aged Caerphilly, dressed with lemon-infused olive oil. Alternatively, you might like to whiz it up with some toasted almonds, garlic and Parmesan and a good glug of fruity olive oil for a pesto to gloss strands of tagliatelle or to spoon onto fillets of crispy, pan-fried fish.



Outdoor rhubarb

Just as supplies of pink rhubarb tail off, the sturdier green, burgundy-flecked outdoor variety appears. More responsive to light than heat, it can grow at temperatures too low for most fruit, and is both fruity and tart, with an earthy tang. Stew lengths of it with a twist of orange-blossom honey to soften its sour edge, then spoon it over Mascarpone sweetened with orange juice. Otherwise, cook it down to a purée with cinnamon and butter, for serving with mackerel or roasted, rolled pork belly in place of apple sauce.



Duck eggs

These smooth, chalky-white eggs with a delicate blue tinge look more precious than hen's eggs. They are, indeed, much richer in flavour, with creamier whites and sunset-coloured yolks inside. For a soft-boiled dunking egg (which you can also peel), simmer for 5 minutes, take off the heat and allow to sit for 5 minutes. Try dunking with steamed asparagus wrapped in Parma ham or toasted sourdough spread with Gentleman's Relish whipped in to unsalted butter. Duck eggs are low in the foam-producing protein globulin, so don't whisk them. Instead, save them for extra-rich crème brûlées, vanilla custards and creamy scrambled eggs.



Cornish wild sea bass

Plump, line-caught wild Cornish sea bass is at its best right now. The flesh of sea bass is delicate, and should be paired with a light, warm dressing rather than a thickly coating sauce. As with all fish you buy whole, look for bright eyes and a smell of the sea for freshness. To keep fish succulent, don't slash the skin: it provides a natural casing to the flesh. Roast whole fish with cherry tomatoes on the vine, crushed black olives and a liberal sprinkling of balsamic vinegar and olive oil. Otherwise, you can pan-fry seasoned fillets in sizzling oil with a restrained shake of nutty cumin seeds; squeeze over a little orange or lemon juice and scatter with fresh coriander and chopped chilli to serve.

Chocolate

One of the best pieces of recent news is research suggesting chocolate with 70 per cent of cocoa solids might actually be good for you, when eaten in moderation. Among the the bioactive substances in each chunk are antioxidants known as polyphenols and compounds which stimulate the release of endorphins and lift your mood. Of course, this is a great excuse to indulge in some chocolate this Easter, if any were needed. Try melting a bar's worth with a splash of water, rum and a knob of butter to make a sauce for vanilla ice cream. Otherwise, serve with tropical fruit as a fondue, or whisk 2 tbsp of grated, bitter chocolate into a red-wine gravy for duck or a chilli-spiked beef stew to add depth of flavour.



Mixed spice

This thoroughly British blend of aromatic spices is often to be found sprinkled in fruit cakes, biscuits and, over Easter time, in the hot cross bun. It's bought ready-ground and mixed, but there's no reason why you shouldn't make your own warming blend, which will be much more pleasingly pungent. So break up a small stick of cinnamon, along with 1 tbsp allspice, 2 tsp cloves, 3 blades of mace and a ground quarter of a nutmeg. Put in a coffee-bean grinder and blend till you have a fine powder. Store it in a used spice jar and you can feel quite pleased with yourself every time you reach for it. If you have a jar of the bought stuff that's been lurking in your pantry a while, you can awaken the aromatics by lightly toasting it in a dry frying pan before adding to biscuit mixes.

