the why and the wherefore: cabbages

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Cabbage suffers from an image problem. Children don’t like it because of the school version and its ill-handling also has ruined the reputation of brussels sprouts. The reason why children don’t like cabbage (or mini cabbages) and they are quite right to object, is because it is not only overcooked but it is too old.
Cabbage is actually quite delicious and sweet, but only if it is eaten within two hours of harvesting. After that the flavour begins to deteriorate and after that, an unpleasant odour develops. Mustard oil. Those of a scientific bent may be aware that mustard oil is only a few molecules away from mustard gas, the notorious poisoning agent associated with the First World War.

“When brassicas are bashed they start to produce mustard oil,” says my scientific friend Peter. “The more a cabbage is bashed, the more mustard oil it produces. One of the nastiest smells you can get is of rotting cabbages.” It would follow then that school dinner cabbages have had a few knocks before being boiled to death.
Supermarkets too are guilty of cabbage bashing. The odyssey of a cabbage from farm to supermarket to kitchen is a long one. The absolute ideal would be to grow your own and make cutting a cabbage the last thing you do at the allotment before going home for lunch. Cook at once. Or, buy one from a farmer’s market in which case it will have been harvested the day before.

Don’t forget to cook it quickly. Brussels sprouts, the most demonised of brassicas, are the most easily redeemed. They have an in-built preservative system if you buy them on the stalk, being under the impression that they are still growing. They do not become anti-social as quickly and have every right to be served with pride at times of winter celebration. Why not try a recipe for Sweet-and-sour marinated cabbage - a delicious Scandinavian recipe, or shredded Brussels sprout salad recipe with orange and mustard dressing?

Thanks for reading!

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