

Not just desserts

Roy Porter

Rhubarb: The Wondrous Drug. By Clifford M. Foust *Princeton University Press: 1992. Pp.371. \$35, £27.50.*

RHUBARB pie, tart and crumble, even rhubarb wine: the rhubarb that we loathed as children and later came to like as adults is, in the literal sense, a common-or-garden plant. We might naturally associate it with the laxative plant that was championed by Culpeper and other herbalists and that, as the diaries and letters of yesteryear show, was highly popular to relieve constipation. But that, as Clifford Foust's unusual and eye-opening book demonstrates, is only half true and but the tip of the tale.

For one thing, the medicinal and kitchen uses of rhubarb are essentially separate, and its culinary vogue came quite late. Rhubarb was barely known as a dessert before the end of the eighteenth century: old varieties were too bitter. It took new hybrids, improved horticulture (especially the perfection of forcing techniques) and the mass availability of cheap sugar to turn rhubarb into what Foust calls a "culinary craze". (One suspects it became a favourite of the Victorian housewife partly thanks to her punitive 'eat it, it's good for you' mentality.) The West Riding became the great home of the British rhubarb growers, for, like Yorkshirefolk, the plant thrives in damp, overcast conditions, tolerates atmospheric pollution and dislikes strong sunlight.

But the stewed rhubarb that bubbles under pie crusts is not the rhubarb that loomed so large in the traditional doctors' armamentarium. For medicinal purposes, it is not the stalk but the root, firm yet spongy, that is used. And apothecaries' rhubarb (*Rheum officinale*) was derived from several different varieties, with the finest always imported. Ever since the Greeks, rhubarb had been justly famed for its laxative properties, eliminating noxious humours and cleansing the system. Acknowledged as safer than such drastic, scouring cathartics as colocynth and mercury, rhubarb was also preferred for its absence of griping after-effects. And some claimed for it "miracle qualities" too: an eighteenth-century puff declared that "Quintessence of Rhubarb" clears the "skin of Leprosy, Morpew, Scurg, Freckles, Spots, &c. and curses all continual Fevers of what kind soever". Many of the top quack nostrums, such as Morison's Pills and Gregory's Powder,

had a rhubarb base.

The Greeks got their rhubarb from Asia, and thereafter the East remained the chief source. Like opium and coffee, it grew, wild and cultivated, in the Ottoman Empire, and was traded by Levant merchants from ports such as Smyrna. Known by leading botanists such as James Sherard as "rapontic rhubarb", Turkish rhubarb gradually came to be grown in Europe. Dried, powdered and made into pills, syrups and electuaries, this *R. rhaponticum* certainly worked. But there was a widespread suspicion that it wasn't True Rhubarb. This — like

IMAGE UNAVAILABLE FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS

Rhubarb's culinary vogue came quite late.

all wonders — was believed to stem from the mysterious Orient, somewhere in Tartary or the forbidden Middle Kingdom, glimpsed by Marco Polo and Jesuit missionaries, but as late as 1800 still out of bounds to Western traders.

Some Asian rhubarb deriving from the regions between Siberia and Mongolia filtered to the West, overland by caravan via Moscow and St Petersburg, under a state monopoly set up by Peter the Great. By the 1730s, London druggists were importing about 9,500 pounds of the Russian root annually. In an amusing anticipation of recent events, Catherine the Great chose in 1781 to revoke the monopoly in the name of efficiency, proclaiming free trade in rhubarb.

With Russian rhubarb, the problem was not quantity but quality: frequently it arrived decomposing and worthless. This gave the East India Company the

chance to grab the pick of the trade, shipping the root from India and Chinese trading posts. Rhubarb was responsible for a fair portion of the company's profits — not surprisingly, perhaps, as by 1740 a staggering 16,000 pounds were being imported annually, some for re-export (just how constipated were the British?).

Even so, who knew whether even East India Company rhubarb was the real thing, *R. officinale* or *R. sinicum*? Indeed, did True Rhubarb really exist? Or was it, like the Holy Grail, much bruted but just a figment of the imagination? This enigma explains why so many explorers and diplomats strove to smuggle back seeds, rather than merely ship back the root — although the energetic efforts of the Chinese to keep their 'gold mine' all to themselves long proved successful. As Foust shows, it was not until around 1850 that, botanically speaking, China was opened up by explorers such as Joseph Hooker, pressing up from India through Nepal.

Back home in the United Kingdom, exertions were directed towards perfecting the supply. From the 1750s, the Society of Arts offered premiums for tip-top home-grown medicinal rhubarb; but although, thanks to enterprising market gardeners, domestic cultivation spread, the Urals-derived *R. undulatum* largely grown in Britain never matched expectations. After 1800, efforts concentrated on laboratory analysis of the root, both to clarify its active pharmacological ingredients and to determine the chemical differences between the types. In both areas, hopes exceeded success, as was also the fate of attempts to extirpate adulteration. Some dealers proved remarkably impenitent about the practice of blending with sawdust. Surely, they argued, adulteration was acceptable for exports to foreigners? Was not passing-off English-grown palmated rhubarb (*R. palmatum*) as Asiatic rhubarb — better and more expensive — an act of patriotism? And was not *caveat emptor* the rule?

As will be evident, *Rhubarb* is an appealing book because it skilfully interweaves the threads of science, trade, exploration and medicine. The sheer scale of the operation proves the error of supposing that drugs have become big business only in the present century. Who would have thought that a humble laxative was long one of the pillars of East-West trade? □

Roy Porter is at the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine, 183 Euston Road, London NW1 2BN, UK.