

# Scientists disagree about the origins of kale

By Pagan Kennedy, New York Times

Scientists disagree about when humans first tasted kale. But it is known that the ancient Greeks cultivated leafy greens, which they boiled and ate as a cure for drunkenness. And early Roman manuscripts include references to “brassica,” a word that encompassed wild turnips, cabbages and kalelike plants.

By the Middle Ages, kale had spread through Europe and Asia. The Italians developed plants with “dinosaur” scales, while the Scots created varieties with leaves like frilly petticoats. The Russians produced kale that could survive in the snow.

But by the time Tim Peters, who was then farming in Oregon, began experimenting with the plant in the 1980s, kale had become “boring.”

“You only saw the green kind in the supermarket,” he says, “if you could find it at all.”

To create his own varieties, Peters planted Siberian kale on his farm, and also along roadsides, so that bees could cross-pollinate the vegetables with neighborhood weeds.

“I love working with bees,” Peters says. “They’ll do stuff that you didn’t dream of.” One day he noticed that some of his blue-green Siberians had produced “babies” that looked nothing like their parents – they were red, with vellum-thin leaves. “I’d never seen kale like that before. I sent samples to seed companies, and they told me that it belonged to the red Russian family.”

Peters, it turned out, had created several new types of red

Russian kale, a varietal that had been around for centuries. He named one particularly delicate strain Winter Red. As kale caught on, so, too, did Winter Red: some companies grew “huge productions of it and released it as ‘Red Russian’ or ‘Russian,’” he says.

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