

Know your Onions



Garlic



Chives



Spring onions



Brown onions



Leeks



Shallots



Red & White onions



Green onions

So flavourful they can bring tears your eyes, onions and their relatives form the basis of many dishes. **Text:** Roberta Muir

The onion family (*Alliaceae*), is one of the most essential and flavourful of the vegetable kingdom, and is fundamental to most cuisines. As well as your standard onions, there are slender leeks, pungent little bulbs of garlic, the confusingly named shallots, green onions, spring onions and various chives. The typical aroma associated with them is caused by *alliin*, a sulfoxide that breaks down to sulphide compounds when the cells are crushed, so a sharp knife is the best remedy for running eyes when chopping onions.

Onions – brown, white, red (*Allium cepa*)

A chopped onion fried in oil forms the basis of many dishes. Chefs tend to favour brown onions for cooking and sweet white onions for salads, though sweeter-still red onions ('Spanish' onions) are also great in salads. A good pantry staple as they keep for a couple of months in a cool, dry place.

Cook them at home: Peel red onions, slice into thick wedges, brush with oil and barbecue until well coloured for a great barbie accompaniment.

Eat them at: Bistro Moncur, The Woollahra Hotel, 116 Queen Street, Woollahra, 02 9327 9713 (French Onion Soufflé Gratin)

Spring onions (*Allium cepa*)

Also called salad or pearl onions, these immature onions are picked before the bulb has grown too large and developed a papery skin. They have a milder taste than mature onions. Both the small bulb and long green stem are great in salads.

Cook it at home: Quarter bulbs and toss in a hot wok with grated ginger, crushed garlic, strips of chicken thigh, sliced red capsicum, a splash of Chinese wine, soy sauce and sesame oil. Serve with steamed jasmine rice.

Eat them at: The Wharf, Pier 4, Hickson Road, Walsh Bay, 02 9250 1761 (Lamb Shanks Braised with Pearl Onions)

Green onions (*Allium cepa*)

Immature seedling onions that haven't developed to the stage of spring onions are often called shallots, probably because they were substituted in recipes before true shallots were widely available in Australia. Confusingly, they also sometimes go by their American name, scallions, or 'spring onions'. Green onion seems the most accurate description for these slender green stems with white tips and a mild onion flavour.

Cook it at home: Chopped (both white and green parts), they add pleasant bite, crunch and colour scattered across the top of salads or stir-fries.

Eat them at: Firefly Tapas & Wine Bar, Pier 7, 17 Hickson Road, Dawes Point, 02 9241 2031 and Fu Manchu, 249 Victoria Street, Darlinghurst, 02 9360 9424 (in their versions of Peking Duck)

Shallots (*Allium ascalonicum*)

Shallots, sometimes called by their French name, *eschalots*, to avoid confusion with misnamed green onions, look a bit like a cluster of garlic cloves with brown papery skin. Golden shallots, an essential in French cookery with their mild flavour, are chopped finely for sauces and salad dressings. Red shallots are pounded into curry pastes, sliced into salads and deep-fried as a garnish for many Asian dishes.

Cook it at home: Caramelize whole peeled shallots in butter over a low heat, add a good splash of balsamic vinegar and tip into a pie dish; top with shortcrust pastry and bake until golden. Invert and serve.

Eat it at: Arun Thai, 28 Macleay Street, Potts Point, 02 9326 9132 (Duck Larb Salad)

Leeks (*Allium porrum*)

The national emblem of Wales and another essential of the French kitchen, leeks are grown with soil mounded up around their stems to keep them white, so be sure to give them a good wash. They're best cooked

in butter over a low heat until they 'melt'. Whole baby leeks (pencil leeks) can be served like asparagus, drizzled with hollandaise or vinaigrette.

Cook it at home: Cook equal quantities of chopped potato and leek in butter over low heat until leek softens; season and add enough water to just cover, bring to the boil, reduce heat, cover and simmer until potatoes are soft. Pass through a fine sieve, thin with milk or cream, reheat and garnish with snipped chives.

Eat it at: Forty One, Level 42, The Chifley Tower, 2 Chifley Square, Sydney, 02 9221 2500 (Leek Cannelloni Stuffed with Spinach, Leeks & Yabbies)

Chives (*Allium schoenoprasum*)

One of the *finest herbes* of French cuisine, finely chopped chives are great stirred through sour cream to garnish soups or splodge onto jacket potatoes. Flowering chives have small mauve flowers atop their hollow round stems and garlic (Chinese) chives have flat hollow stems and a distinct garlic flavour.

Cook it at home: Stir into whisked eggs for a delicious, simple omelette.

Eat it at: Universal, Republic 2 Courtyard, Palmer Street, Darlinghurst, 02 9331 0709 ('Tongue in Cheek', oxtail consommé)

Garlic (*Allium sativum*)

Garlic, credited with everything from warding off vampires to helping the slaves build the pyramids, has both antibacterial and antifungal properties. Lemon juice or milk help remove garlic odour from hands, and chewing parsley may help remove it from the breath.

Cook it at home: Process the leaves from a large bunch of basil with 3 tablespoons pine nuts, 2 cloves garlic, ½ cup grated parmesan and 3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil for a great pesto.

Eat it at: Bistro Lilly, Shop 6, Observatory Tower, 168 Kent Street, Sydney, 02 9252 1116 (roasted whole, served alongside homemade bread).

Hermes 1/4