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Carrots Develop a Meatier Reputation

By FLORENCE FABRICANT

THE great French chef Paul Bocuse, dismissing what he saw as young chefs' excessive efforts to be creative, once told me there were already "300 ways to cook carrots, so we don't need more."

If he looked around today, he might think again, or at least increase his tally by a few hundred. At the Boston restaurant Clio, Ken Oringer is serving an entree of heirloom carrots cooked in goat

butter and topped with hay that is then ignited. At Stella Rossa Pizza Bar in Santa Monica, Calif., Jeff Mahin salt-roasts carrots, as one might a fish, and dresses them with a Burgundy-mustard vinaigrette, a dish that customers often order to share along with pizza, as a main course.

Carrots, those little spark plugs in a salad or a stew, have suddenly become an engine driving restaurant menus. Chefs across the country are showcasing handsome, meaty specimens in a

rainbow of colors, dressed and garnished without a sliver of meat or fish. Well, maybe a touch of bacon.

"People are feeling more comfortable with having something like carrots in the center of the plate," said Dan Kluger, the executive chef at ABC Kitchen in New York, where a salad of roasted carrots and avocado has become one of his most popular, and imitated, dishes.

Troy Guard, the chef and owner of TAG in Denver, makes a carrot taco that puts the root vegetable through its paces, with a carrot tortilla and a filling of braised carrots, a salad of raw carrots and cilantro, and guacamole.

"Last year brussels sprouts were really huge," he said. "Now it's carrots."

Why carrots? Chefs point out that vegetables in general are gaining favor as more Americans try to eat healthier. Carrots have the added advantages of being familiar, attractive, versatile and available just about everywhere.

"Everybody likes carrots," Mr. Guard said. "You can use them cooked or raw, the colors are great and I can get lots of varieties from local farms."

Roasting, braising, grilling and more extreme forms of culinary invention, typically applied to a pristine slab of hamachi or a rosy duck breast, are now directed at piles of freshly dug carrots.

As good cooks know, "freshly dug" is as important for carrots as "diver" is for sea scallops. Supermarket carrots are fine for the soup pot, but nothing beats local varieties when carrots really count. Cooks prowling in a farmers' market won't find many vegetables as eye-catching as bunches of white, yellow, orange, red and purple carrots, from slender minis to knobby standard sizes, with chunky Thumbelinas in between.

Then there is the rich, deep flavor of a fresh carrot, especially this time of year. Carrots, it turns out, have their seasons.

"Summer carrots are not as good as fall carrots," said Alex Paffenroth, who grows them in Warwick, N.Y., in the Hudson Valley, and sells them in New York City Greenmarkets. "They get sweeter in colder weather."

Mr. Paffenroth said the mucky earth of upstate New York was better for carrots than the sandy soils in California and Arizona, which require constant irrigation. Though he lost most of last year's crop to Tropical Storm Irene, he said, this year's is exceptional, and more chefs are buying his carrots.

A number of chefs, including Jimmy Bradley of the Harrison and April Bloomfield of the Spotted Pig, use the roots in salads, often with a dusting of seeds or nuts and a creamy dairy topping like yogurt or cheese. At Empellón Cocina, Alex Stupak serves roasted carrots slathered with mole poblano and topped with yogurt and watercress, a dish he says is always in demand.

"I never thought one of my signature dishes would be carrots," he said. "The sweetness of the carrots perfectly balances the bitterness and astringency of the mole."

Like many chefs, Mr. Stupak does not peel his carrots, but simply scrubs



JIM WILSON/THE NEW YORK TIMES

CEDAR-ROASTED CARROTS WITH TOFU AND CARROT PESTO

Adapted from *Commonwealth*, San Francisco

Time: 1 hour

- 28 baby carrots in mixed colors, with tops, or larger carrots halved crosswise and lengthwise, rinsed
- 1 small clove garlic
- Juice of 1/2 lemon
- 1/2 cup plus 1 tablespoon extra virgin olive oil
- Salt and black pepper
- 1/2 pound regular carrots, peeled and diced
- 1 cup fresh carrot juice
- 1 tablespoon finely grated fresh ginger
- 1/2 pound soft tofu, diced
- 2 tablespoons toasted sesame seeds

1. Heat oven to 325 degrees. Soak 4 sheets of cedar paper, about 8 inches square (sold in cookware and Japanese kitchen-equipment stores) in water for 10 minutes. Cut tops off carrots. Reserve 4 sprigs and chop 1 cup, packed, of the tops. Turn on food processor. Drop garlic in through the feed tube and process until minced, scraping down workbowl once or twice. Place chopped carrot tops and lemon juice in processor and process until minced. With machine running, drizzle in 1/2 cup olive oil.

Process to a purée. Season with salt and pepper and set aside.

2. Place baby carrots in a large bowl and toss with 1 tablespoon olive oil. Drain cedar paper and spread in the bottom of a roasting pan. Spread carrots evenly on top, cover with foil, place over medium-high heat until the oil starts to sizzle, then place in the oven until carrots are tender, about 30 to 40 minutes, depending on the size of the carrots. Remove from oven and wrap loosely in the foil to keep warm.

3. Combine diced carrots and carrot juice in a saucepan and cook on medium about 5 minutes until about half the liquid has evaporated. Transfer to a blender, add grated ginger and process to a purée. Season with salt and pepper and keep warm. Microwave tofu 1 minute to warm it, or warm in a steamer.

4. Make a pool of carrot purée on each of 4 dinner plates, spoon the tofu on each and arrange the roasted carrots on top. Drizzle the pesto around, garnish with some sprigs of carrot tops and scatter sesame seeds on top. Serve warm.

Yield: 4 servings



ANDREW BURTON FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

ROASTED CARROT AND AVOCADO SALAD

Adapted from *ABC Kitchen*, New York

Time: 1 1/2 hours

- 3 garlic cloves, peeled
- 1 teaspoon cumin seeds
- 1 teaspoon fresh thyme leaves
- 1/4 teaspoon crushed red chile flakes
- Salt and black pepper
- 1 tablespoon red wine vinegar
- 4 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 1 pound medium-size carrots, peeled
- 1 orange, halved
- 1 lemon, halved
- 1 avocado, pitted, peeled and cut in thin wedges
- 1 1/2 cups packed radish or other sprouts
- 3 tablespoons sour cream
- 3 tablespoons roasted hulled pumpkin seeds

1. Heat oven to 400 degrees. In a small food processor or a mortar, pulse or pound the garlic with the cumin, thyme, chile flakes, 1 1/2 teaspoons salt and 3/4 teaspoon pepper to make a paste. Add

vinegar and 2 tablespoons of the oil, and mix well.

2. Arrange carrots in a roasting pan and spread spice paste on top. Place orange and lemon halves, cut side down, on carrots. Roast until carrots are tender and starting to brown, about 45 minutes.

3. Using tongs, arrange carrots on a serving platter. With a dish towel to protect your hands, squeeze juice from the roasted orange and lemon halves into a measuring cup. You should have about 1/2 cup juice. Beat in remaining 2 tablespoons oil. Season with salt and pepper. Drizzle some of this sauce over the carrots.

4. Arrange avocado over carrots, then scatter sprouts on top. Drizzle with reserved sauce, top with dollops of sour cream and a sprinkling of the seeds. Serve.

Yield: 4 servings

them. "These days the skin is pleasantly thick, like sweet potato," he said.

And many cooks have found that the vegetable's dense texture makes it a fine substitute for meat. At Swine, Phil Conlon offers spiced carrot mousse as a vegetarian option on a charcuterie platter. Carrots are famously ground into tartare, at the table, at Eleven Madison Park.

Jason Fox at Commonwealth restaurant in San Francisco said the vegetable also pairs well with red wine. Lately, Mr. Fox has been roasting carrots on cedar paper and serving them with a carrot-top pesto. Several other chefs find that even the feathery tops are worth

using as an herb in dressings and sauces to drizzle on carrot salads or pasta dishes.

Carrots can start with the cruditées and the pickle jar, and carry on through appetizers, salads, entrees and even dessert. Though carrot cakes have been popular for decades and sweet carrot halvah is an Indian staple, chefs like Seth Siegel-Gardner and Terrence Gallivan at Provisions, in Houston, are making carrot ice cream and cotton candy. David Bouley is using carrot powder as a sweetener in pastries like macarons and dacquoise.

Mr. Guard, creator of the carrot taco, put it best: "Carrots are universal."