

Hogtown HomeGrown

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Grits, greens and gravy—part two

Admit it, your CSA basket is overflowing with green leaves—kale of every variety, chard, mustards, collards, bok choy, escarole, cabbage and more. The farmers and their soil seem to be working overtime painting the fields every shade of green. If that weren't enough, root crops like beets have the most luscious-looking leaves and the turnip greenery is looking very tasty as well. What's a cook to do?

This is the time of year when the markets are overflowing with greens. When they are so abundant week after week it just seems like too much of a good thing! Greens can be the ideal tonic to counteract the sluggishness of our digestive systems after a long winter of comfort foods and the never-ending holiday feast of rich treats. Some of us know greens are good for us, but just can't handle the taste. Others just get tired of the same old lump of steamed or boiled greens gracing our plates with every meal.

In Granny's kitchen, greens were just another local veggie cooked up and presented as part of an ample dinner menu. Yes, there was always a little fatback, streak of lean or salt pork in them, to provide salt, flavor and fat. Leftovers were kept on the stove until suppertime and often served with a wedge of cornbread to soak up the pot liquor. A sprinkle of pepper vinegar brightened the flavor and distracted the tongue from any bitterness. Of course, a New Year's menu was never complete without the traditional greens to ensure "folding" money for the coming year.

Many Florida cracker settlers survived on a subsistence diet of "grits, greens and gravy" during the lean months or years. Some kind of fatty meat, usually pork, cooked with the greens provided flavor as well as the fats needed to keep hunger at bay and help their bodies absorb more of the greens' abundant vitamins and minerals. Greens grow easily in poor soil and flourish during the colder months when other vegetables are dormant. These days, even though there are grocery stores on every corner, Southern kitchen gardens almost always include some type of green.

During my visits to Italy in the past couple of years, I noticed that almost everyone grew something in their yards and most gardens were filled with some type of green. As our trains sped by, I could see that even small homes and apartments built near the railroad tracks had a tiny patch overflowing with "cavolo nero."

We took a cooking class from Andrea Consoli at La Fate in the Trastevere neighborhood of Rome. The chef came directly from the daily farmers market with a big bag of groceries. Large flat green leaves peeked out from the top and he apologized to the mostly American class that we would be cooking with a vegetable not available in the United States—cavolo nero or black cabbage. One look at his bag and I smiled—it was what we call Tuscan or dinosaur kale.

During this class I learned there is no need to serve greens the plain way our Southern tradition has dictated. Thinly sliced or finely chopped, Italians cook them in soup, pasta and risotto without objection from even the fussiest eater. So think outside the box—go international! Stir some cooked greens into mashed potatoes to make the dish called colcannon in Ireland. Mix greens into beaten eggs and bake into a Spanish frittata or torta. Wrap cooked greens and feta into phyllo dough for Greek spanakopita.

Green Basket's (www.greenbasket.me) Andi Houston introduced me to the idea of creamy greens at an Eat Local Challenge cooking demonstration, a couple of years ago. Her idea sparked an inspiration of my own that you can find on page two—Kale Alfredo. No pasta, but enough creamy goodness to inspire greens lovers to swoon and fussy eaters to at least try kale.

So what do you do with the person who refuses to eat their greens? Just keep serving them in every creative way possible. At some point, there is a good chance that they will finally develop a passion for all things green.



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VALENTINE'S DAY THE LOCAL WAY!

Got a sweetie with a sweet tooth? There are plenty of local chocolatiers to satisfy those cravings. But if you and your sweetie want something a little out of the ordinary, try Blue Oven Kitchen's Chocolate and Bubbles, February 14th, 6-8pm. Sample some of Dorn's sparkling wines, romantic reds and international cheeses. Watch local cooks make various delights—a savory pasta dish with cocoa pasta—cookies with chocolate, coffee and pecans—hand-dipped local strawberries—decadent chocolate candies.
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What's Fresh Right Now?

Beets

Bitter Melon

Broccoli

Cabbage—green/red, napa, savoy, cone

Carrots—orange/red/yellow/purple

Cauliflower—white/green, romanesco

Celery

Citrus—white/pink/red grapefruit, sweet/sour oranges, tangelos, juices, lemons, mandarin/satsumas, kumquat, calamondin

Cucumbers—mini seedless

Eggplant

Garlic—chives, elephant

Greens—wild/regular arugula, kale, collards, mustards, broccoli leaf, turnip, bok choy, chard, dandelion, escarole, sorrel

Herbs—parsley, cilantro, lemongrass, lime leaf, dill, rosemary, basil

Honey

Kale—red/white russian, tuscan, curly

Kohlrabi—green, purple

Lettuce—bibb, oak leaf, green/red leaf, romaine, spring mix

Microgreens—assorted

Mushrooms—shiitake, dried varieties

Onions—green scallions

Peppers—red/green bell, poblano, cubanelle, jalapeno, ghost

Potatoes—small red, white/orange sweet

Radish—red globe, daikon, black

Shoots—pea, sunflower, mix

Sprouts

Strawberries

Tomatoes—grape, green, sun gold, cluster, cherry, red/yellow small roma

Turnips—large/small varieties

Local and Fresh— Russian Kale

Of all the kale available at the farmers markets, my favorites are the red and white russian varieties. Their softer texture and natural sweetness make them easy to cook and appealing to even new kale eaters.

Although part of the large Brassica family including broccoli, cauliflower, cabbages, and brussel sprouts, kales do not form a head. From curly to flat, kale is classified by leaf type.

Curly kale is best cooked, but the russian and tuscan varieties taste wonderful raw. Try making salads with different types.

Look for healthy leaves with plump stems. To store, wrap in a towel or paper towel and then place in a plastic bag. For best results, use within one week.

Kale Alfredo

INGREDIENTS

1 bunch kale (red or white russian)
1 Tablespoon unsalted butter
4 cloves garlic, smashed and chopped
2-3 Tablespoons cream or whole milk
3 Tablespoons grated parmesan, divided
freshly-ground black pepper to taste

DIRECTIONS

Immerse kale in a big bowl of cool water and wash well by rubbing each leaf with your hands until all sand and grit is removed. Pat dry, slice into 1/2 wide ribbons and set aside.

In a large saucepan, melt butter over medium heat. Sauté garlic until softened. Stir in greens and cook to desired doneness.

Just before serving, remove from heat. Add cream and 2 Tablespoons parmesan. Stir to melt parmesan and coat kale completely.

Top with remaining parmesan and freshly-ground black pepper. Serve hot.

Cover and refrigerate leftovers.

Basic Risotto

INGREDIENTS

- 1-2 Tablespoons butter (olive oil may be substituted)
- 1 cup finely chopped veggies (mushrooms are our favorite)
- 1 cup **arborio** rice
- 1/2 cup white wine (broth may be substituted)
- 3 cups hot no-chicken or veggie broth (keep it over low heat to maintain simmer)

DIRECTIONS

In a deep saucepan over medium heat, melt butter and sauté veggies until tender. Add rice, stirring to coat completely. Immediately pour in wine and stir well. Adjust heat so that mixture is simmering, but not boiling.

Once the wine has nearly evaporated, add 1/2 cup hot broth. Stir risotto continuously while it simmers and add more broth as each addition evaporates.

After about 18 minutes, taste rice for doneness. The outer coating should be soft with a small portion of the center still a little firm. Add more broth only if rice is not cooked.

Serve immediately. Butter or olive oil may be stirred in at the last-minute for a creamier texture. A small amount of finely grated aged cheese may also be added just before serving.

Cover and refrigerate leftovers.

Arrancini

INGREDIENTS

- 2 cups leftover risotto (cool or room temperature, not cold)
- 1 cup whole wheat flour
- 12 small fresh mozzarella balls (bocconcini) or 12 small cubes of mozzarella
- 2 eggs, well beaten
- 1 cup plain panko crumbs
- 2 cups olive oil

DIRECTIONS

With floured hands, use about 1/4 cup risotto to form each ball around the cheese center. Dredge in flour and set aside. May be made ahead and refrigerated until ready to fry.

To prepare to fry, lightly dredge each ball in flour again. Dip in egg, allowing excess to drip off. Roll in panko crumbs to coat completely. Set aside until all arrancini are coated.

Heat oil in a deep, narrow pot. Test with a crumb of panko—it should bubble furiously.

Add arrancini 3 or 4 at a time and fry for 2-3 minutes. As they cook, turn them to make sure they cook on all sides. Remove with slotted spoon and drain on brown paper bags. Place in a 250 degree oven to keep warm. Repeat until all arrancini are fried.

Serve immediately. Cover and refrigerate leftovers. Reheat in oven or toaster oven.

SERVING SUGGESTION: Make a puddle of your favorite spicy tomato sauce. Place arrancini on top and add a few large shavings or shreds of parmesan.

Tricks and Tips

I have always wanted to eat arrancini, but when we were traveling in Italy, all the restaurants we found put meat in the middle, so I never had one there. Recently, at a celebration dinner at Amelia's, we ordered risotto as a side-dish instead of pasta. We couldn't finish it and our entrees too, so we took the leftovers home. I knew this was my opportunity to try to make arrancini.

Chef Andy Fass's amazing Wild Mushroom Risotto was filled with some large pieces of mushroom. It was a challenge to roll the balls around the cheese, while tucking in the mushrooms, but it worked. The fresh mozzarella melted beautifully, but it gave off a little liquid as it heated. When we cut through the crispy outer coating, that little bit of whey blended right into the creamy cheese and rice center.

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Tricks and Tips

Long ago, puddings were savory, sweet, boiled or baked, but custards were specifically egg-thickened. Their histories remained separate until Alfred Bird invented custard powder in 1837. Bird used cornflour (cornstarch) instead of eggs to create thick desserts. Since the eggs were gone, custards were soon more commonly called puddings.

Tangerine Pudding

INGREDIENTS

- 4 Tablespoons cornstarch
- 3 Tablespoons sugar
- 2 cups freshly-squeezed tangerine juice

DIRECTIONS

In a heavy-bottomed saucepan, combine cornstarch and sugar. Add juice and whisk until completely smooth.

Place saucepan on medium heat and bring to a slow boil, whisking continuously. Cook for about 2 minutes, until thickened and glossy.

Remove from heat. Pour into individual serving dishes.

Refrigerate until completely chilled and set up.

Serve cold. Cover and refrigerate leftovers.

VARIATION: Orange juice may be substituted. Use freshly squeezed juice for best results.