



A Question of Taste

By Hilary Keating Callaghan

Broiled peppers have mellow, sweeter flavor

As I write this column, green peppers are selling at an astronomical price from three for \$1 for respectably-sized specimens.

One produce manager speculated that this might have something to do with the droughts this past winter. Whatever the reason, I object in principle to paying that price and have been trying with limited success — to avoid buying them. In the process I have discovered just how much I rely on green peppers in everyday cooking. Spaghetti sauce, Mexican hot sauce, casseroles and salads — all suffer without green pepper.

Anyone who wants to assure themselves of a good supply of peppers — at least for a few months — might want to plan now to grow their own. Among the best varieties are California Wonder and California 300. The regular shape of these types, without folds or convolutions, make them ideally suited for stuffing and for broiling.

Peppers are broiled by exposing them to direct heat until the skin is blackened.

This can be done by holding them over an open flame with a long-handled fork or by laying them on a cookie sheet and placing them about six inches under a broiler (either gas or electric), turning them as the upper side chars until the entire surface is blistered and blackened.

The peppers should then be enclosed in a paper bag until cool. At this point, the skin will easily lift off. What remains is the tender, cooked flesh which seems to have a mellow, sweeter flavor than when raw and which readily absorbs other flavors.

THE PEPPERS for Red Pepper and Jerusalem Artichoke Gratin are prepared in this way.

The tender scarlet peppers and the crisp, white Jerusalem Artichokes make a beautiful contrast in color and texture. The heavy cream adds richness and the Parmesan baked on top makes a crisp, cheesy crust for this incredibly delicious vegetable side-dish.

The difficult part of this recipe is obtaining sweet red peppers. A much less visually interesting — but equally tasty — dish can be had by substituting green for red peppers.

Red peppers are, in fact, green or yellow peppers which have been left to ripen for an extra week or two on the vine. A fairly long growing season

(about three months of warm, humid weather) is needed for this transformation.

Consequently, most sweet red peppers are produced in southern states and rarely seem to find their way to Michigan markets. Local growers can, however, simulate this longer growing season by using transplants for an earlier harvest — another good reason to grow your own.

Another recipe which makes delectable use of green or red peppers is from The Romagnoli's Meatless Cookbook. The Pepper Casserole is another rich vegetable side dish.

As might be expected, however, the Romagnoli's recipe is rich with olive oil rather than heavy cream and is replete with fresh basil (something else the home gardener may want to cultivate).

RED PEPPER AND JERUSALEM ARTICHOKE GRATIN

- 1 lb. Jerusalem artichokes
- 1 lb. red bell peppers, peeled and seeded (see above instructions for peeling)
- ¾ cup heavy cream
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste
- ¼ cup (1 oz.) freshly grated Parmesan cheese

Preheat the oven to 400 degrees. Peel the Jerusalem artichokes and cut them into ¼-inch thick slices. Cook in a large pot of boiling salted water for about 7 minutes, until just tender when pierced with a knife. Drain and refresh under cold water.

Cut the peppers into 1¼-inch squares, roughly the same size as the artichoke slices.

Lightly butter an 8-inch gratin pan. Alternate the pepper and artichoke slices in the pan, overlapping them

slightly. Pour the cream over the vegetables. Sprinkle with salt, pepper and Parmesan cheese.

Bake for 20 to 25 minutes, or until most of the cream has been absorbed and the gratin is bubbling and brown. Let sit for 5 minutes before serving. Makes 4 servings.

PEPPER CASSEROLE

- 8 large basil leaves (about 1 tsp. dried)
- 6 sprigs Italian parsley
- 1 garlic clove, peeled
- 5 tbsp. olive oil
- 2 medium onions, peeled and finely sliced
- 3 sweet peppers, red, green or yellow
- 1 small zucchini
- 4 oz. mushrooms, cleaned
- 1 chicken bouillon cube
- 3 tbsp. wine vinegar
- ¼ to ½ tsp. salt, or to taste
- Freshly ground black pepper to taste
- 2 potatoes, peeled

Mince herbs with garlic and put mixture in flameproof casserole along with olive oil and onions. Sauté over medium heat until the onions are limp.

Cut peppers into 1-inch square pieces. Slice the zucchini into thin rounds. Cut mushrooms in half.

Add the vegetables to the onions. Break up the bouillon cube, adding it to the vegetables. Add the vinegar, salt, and pepper and stir well. Cover the pan with a tightly fitting cover, lower the heat, and cook 15 minutes.

Slice the potatoes in very thin rounds and add them to the casserole at the 15-minute mark. Stir, cover and cook another 15 minutes or until the peppers are cooked but still firm to the bite. Taste for seasonings, and adjust if necessary. Serves 6.

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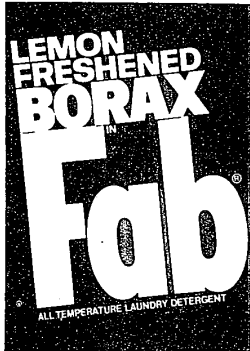
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