

Glorious season of fresh vegetables is here

This is a glorious season for vegetarians.

With all the fresh produce available, it is a perfect time to break out of the protein-centered pattern of meal planning. Even when meat is eliminated from the diet, the tendency remains to focus on the obvious protein source (eggs, cheese, and dried beans for a vegetarian) and to view fresh vegetables as appendages to the meal, tacked on because they are good for you and help fill up both your plate and stomach.

This second-class citizen role means that vegetables appear in only two guises: cooked frozen vegetables (even when fresh are available) and tossed salad (too often iceberg lettuce).

Since most of us consume more protein than we need, we can afford an occasional meal in which protein takes a back seat and the vegetables shine. I enjoyed a meal like this recently based on the inspiration of a new (1980) cookbook entitled "A Passion For Vegetables: Recipes from European Kitchens" by Vera Gewanter.

THE FIRST course was green pepper stuffed with a creamy mixture of shredded carrot and chopped onion bound with a homemade, chunky tomato sauce. Served cold or at room temperature, this could be made early in the day and makes an unusual, tasty introduction to the rest of the meal.

To the extent that anything could be termed a "main course," in this dinner, it would be the vegetable tart. Even the crust of this tart was special. Cottage cheese replaced water in the buttery crust (actually I replaced butter with corn oil margarine in the interest of cholesterol-reduction.)

The cottage cheese gave the crust a nice tang to compensate for the loss of butter flavor. I rolled the pie-crust trimmings into crackers which were eagerly devoured along with the pie — a sharp contrast to the usual pattern of the rim of the pie crust being abandoned on dinner plates.

The filling of the tart was not the rich cream and egg custard found in quiches. It was, more simply, a thick layer of spinach topped with creamed mushrooms. A small amount of Swiss cheese was sprinkled over the top and the pie baked briefly at a high temperature to melt the cheese.

THE AMOUNT of spinach called for in this recipe is rather substantial — two pounds. I used "bulk" spinach for this amount, which meant that, after the stems were discarded, it would probably be closer to half of that weight. If you are using the pre-trimmed spinach packed in cellophane

bags, then, you might want to allow only about one pound.

"Cooking" the spinach is as much a matter of reducing the bulk of the spinach so that it fits in a pie crust as of cooking it.

In order to do this, wash the spinach thoroughly, since dirt tends to cling tenaciously in its folds. The best method for this is to submerge the trimmed spinach in a sink full of cool water. Drain the dirty water and repeat until the water remains clear.

Place the spinach in a large, covered pot with only the water clinging to its leaves and cook over medium-high heat until it wilts. Place the cooked spinach in a fine-mesh strainer and squeeze out any excess liquid, pressing firmly with the back of a spoon.

THIS IS THE PERFECT time of year to be lavish with spinach. Until the very hot weather arrives, it is in abundant supply.

Also in good supply are the waxy, tiny new potatoes. Unlike the mature, mealy, baking potatoes, they are so moist and tasty that they can be enjoyed without the addition of butter or sour cream. Simply steam a few and serve alongside the spinach tart.

I rounded out this meal with a salad of red-tipped lettuce, avocado and grapefruit sprinkled with sunflower seeds dressed with vinaigrette made sharp with Dijon mustard.

The effect was a nutritious, filling meal. It was a celebration of the textures, colors, shapes, and flavors of spring vegetables.

TOMATO SAUCE

Serves 4
1 small onion chopped
1 clove garlic, minced or pressed
3 tbsp. olive oil
1 tsp. butter
1 1/2 lb. fresh tomatoes, peeled, or
canned tomatoes, chopped
1 small can tomato paste
Salt and pepper
2 tsp. fresh basil, chopped (or 1 tsp. dried)
1/4 tsp. oregano
Milk (optional)



A Question of Taste

By Hilary Keating Callaghan

Saute the garlic and onion in the olive oil and butter until very light brown. Add the tomatoes, and simmer, uncovered, for a few minutes, then stir in the tomato paste, making sure it blends well. Continue to simmer, uncovered, stirring once in a while, until about half the liquid has evaporated. The time varies according to the original liquidity of the tomatoes, but this should take about 15 minutes. If the sauce tends to become too thick you may have to add a little hot water a few minutes after you have added the tomato paste. Add salt, pepper, basil, and oregano, stir, and continue to simmer for about 10 minutes. Taste, and if the tomatoes have given an acid taste to the sauce, stir in a couple of tablespoons of milk.

Total cooking time is about 30 minutes, and generally a tomato sauce should not be cooked any longer, it may become bitter. The density depends on individual taste — I prefer it rather while others like it better if it is on the thin side.

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COLD STUFFED PEPPERS

4 medium-sized green peppers
1/4 cup oil
1/4 tsp. mustard seeds
1 large onion, chopped
3 medium-sized carrots, shredded
2 stalks celery, chopped
1/2 cup thick Tomato Sauce
1/4 tsp. salt
Pepper
1 tbsp. sour cream
1/4 cup water

Cut off the pepper tops and remove seeds and membranes without disturbing the walls of the pepper.

For the stuffing, heat the oil in a skillet, and cook the mustard seeds until heated. Add and saute the onion, carrots, and celery. When done but still a bit chewy, add the tomato sauce, salt, and pepper and remove from heat. Stir in the sour cream.

Stuff the peppers with the mixture, then stand them in a saucepan. Pour the water into the bottom of the pan, cover, just until heated. Add and saute

the onion, carrots, and celery. When done but still a bit chewy, add the tomato sauce, salt, and pepper and remove from heat. Stir in the sour cream.

Stuff the peppers with the mixture, then stand them in a saucepan. Pour the water into the bottom of the pan, cover, and simmer for about 20 minutes, or until cooked. (A little more hot water might be needed after about 15 minutes.)

Allow to cool, and serve at room temperature.

(Note: I reduced the amount of oil called for in this recipe to 2 tablespoons and was still very happy with the results.)

TARTE RICHELIEU

Serves 6

1 recipe French Pie Crust

2 lbs. spinach

Salt and pepper

Dash of nutmeg

1/2 lb. fresh mushrooms, sliced thin, or

1 cup imported dried mushrooms, rehydrated and chopped

3 tbsp. olive oil

1/2 cup hot milk

1 tsp. flour

1/2 cup heavy cream

1/2 cup grated Gruyere cheese

Mix the crust, adding ricotta or cottage cheese to the flour and butter instead of water, and only enough cheese to hold the dough together. Preheat

oven to 400 degrees. Bake the crust for 10 minutes. Remove from the oven and raise the temperature to 450.

Cook the spinach with salt, pepper, and nutmeg, then chop coarsely and set aside. Sauté the mushrooms in the oil over a fairly high heat for about 10 minutes, stirring often. Add the milk to the flour a little at a time, and stir into the mushrooms. Stir in the cream at the last minute, and leave the sauce in the pan just long enough to heat.

Place the spinach in the pie crust, leveling the surface, then pour the mushroom sauce on top, again leveling. Sprinkle the grated cheese all over, and bake for 10 to 15 minutes.

FRENCH PIE CRUST

1 1/2 cups flour

1/2 tsp. salt

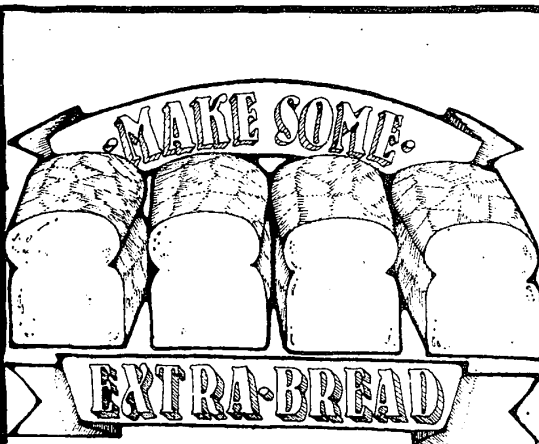
1/4 lb. butter, at room temperature

1 egg yolk

1 tsp. ice water, or more

Mix flour and salt. Cut the butter in small pieces, add to the flour, and mix quickly with two knives or a pastry blender. Mix in the egg yolk and ice water as needed. Do not work the dough more than is necessary to make it hold together.

Wrap the dough in waxed paper and refrigerate at least 2 hours, preferably overnight. Makes two 9-inch shells or one double-crust. (All above recipes are from "A Passion for Vegetables.")



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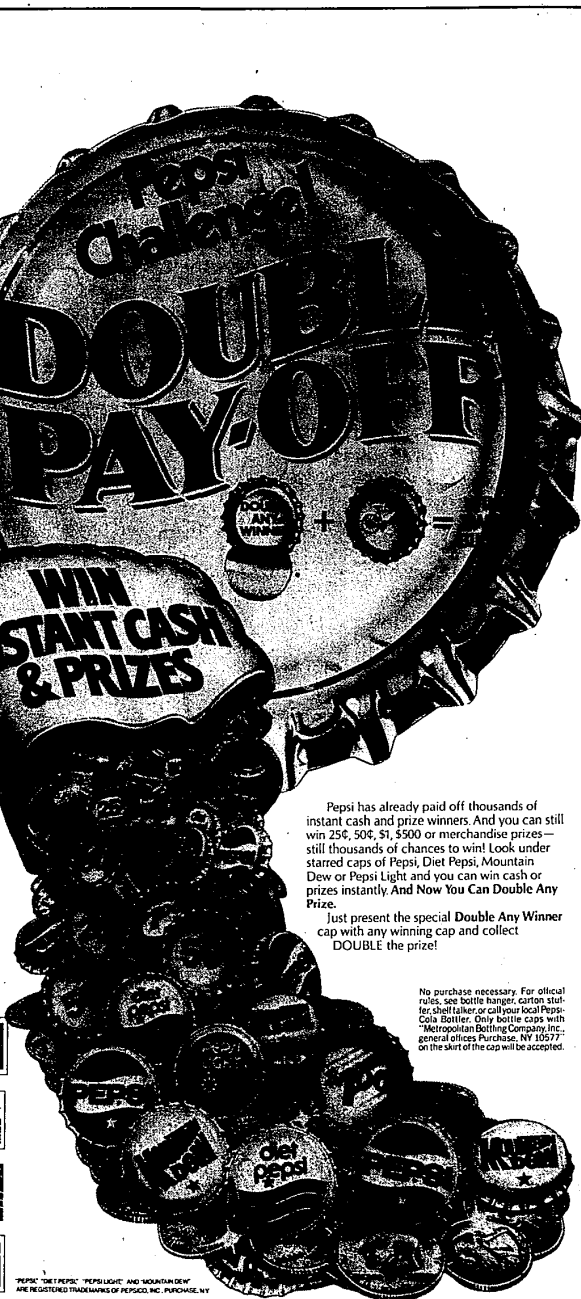
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