

Try something different: cook with fennel

This year can be as exciting as a dull, as romantic or as lonely, as you want to make it.

One thing you can do to get off to a good start is to perk up your menus with items you haven't tried before. Be daring, and get out of that rut you've been in.

Most Americans have become acquainted with fennel seeds. Their anise-seed-like flavor is commonly used to season Italian sausage, meatballs and other foods. But fewer cooks are familiar with the fennel bulb, and many don't even recognize it when they come across it in the produce department.

If you haven't tried using it as a vegetable, you've been missing out on a good thing. In Italy, fennel is the symbol of flattery and the emblem

of herodasm, and is believed to have an aphrodisiac effect on those who consume it.

Any plant claimed to make you brave, glib and sexy is certainly worth trying, wouldn't you say?

Almost all of the fennel plant is edible — the seeds, the stalk, the leaves and the bulb. The bulb is delicious sliced and served raw in salads, like celery, or cooked in any number of ways. Use the stems as you would asparagus, and the leaves to add flavor to soups and salads.

Here are a few fennel recipes you might like to try.

FENNEL AND GREEN BEAN SALAD

2 pounds fresh green beans
2 tablespoons mustard
1/4 cup good olive oil
3 tablespoons freshly chopped parsley
3 large fennel bulbs
6 tablespoons lemon juice
3 tablespoons basil or chives
salt and pepper to taste

Trim the beans, and blanch for five to seven minutes in boiling salted water. Drain, and rinse with cold water.

Cut fennel bulbs in half, and remove the cores. Then slice thinly, crosswise.

Mix with green beans, and pile into a large bowl.

In another bowl, mix together the mustard, lemon juice and olive oil, and salt and pepper to taste. Pour over vegetables, add herbs and toss well.

Refrigerate to marinate, until ready to serve.

FENNEL AND CUCUMBER SALAD

1 cucumber, thinly sliced
2 fennel bulbs, (sliced, and cut into match-like strips)
1/4 teaspoon fresh or dried chopped mint
2-3 hard-boiled eggs, sliced or diced
salt and pepper to taste
6 thinly sliced radishes

Lemon changes sauce

An article on "Winter Pasta Sauces," in the January issue of *Gourmet*, notes that zesty lemon transforms a more common Alfredo sauce.

LEMON CREAM SAUCE

1 1/2 cups heavy cream
1 tablespoon freshly grated lemon rind
1 stick (1/2 cup) unsalted butter, cut into pieces
1 1/2 cups freshly grated parmesan
freshly grated nutmeg to taste

In a small heavy saucepan combine the cream and the rind, bring the mixture to a boil, and boil it for three minutes. Reduce the heat to moderately low and add the butter, whisking until it is melted. Add the parmesan, the nutmeg, and salt and pepper to taste, whisking until the parmesan is melted, and serve the sauce immediately. Makes about 2 1/2 cups, enough for one pound dried pasta, cooked, such as fettuccine.



kitchen witch

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1/2 cup olive oil
1 clove garlic (finely minced)
2 tablespoons lemon juice

Mix together vegetables, and chill until ready to use.

Combine lemon juice, olive oil, mint, garlic and salt and pepper. Blend well, and toss the dressing with the vegetables. Garnish with hard-boiled eggs.

SWISS FENNEL SALAD

2 medium fennel bulbs
3 tablespoons lemon juice
5 tablespoons dry white wine
1/4 cup walnuts (chopped)
2 medium apples, one red, and one yellow or green
1/4 cup walnut oil (see note)
salt and pepper to taste

Trim and core the fennel bulbs. Slice thin, and cut into julienne strips, two or three inches long.

Core, but do not peel, the apples, and cut into julienne strips the same as the fennel.

Mix fennel and apples together in a bowl, and toss with lemon juice, wine, salt, pepper and walnut oil. Place on salad plates, and sprinkle with chopped walnuts. Garnish with fennel sprigs, if desired.

Note: Most kitchen specialty shops and even some drugstores carry walnut oil. (Do not confuse it with the small, quarter-ounce, highly concentrated bottles used for candy making.) If you have not tried walnut oil before, I would suggest that you may want to use only 1/4 of a cup, blended with an equal amount of light vegetable oil, until you get used to its very assertive flavor. Keep walnut oil refrigerated, as it spoils easily.

FENNEL STEMS

Trim the fennel stems, and parboil them in salted water for about five minutes. Drain, and arrange them in a buttered casserole dish. Sprinkle with grated or shredded cheese of your choice, and chunks of butter. Brown in the oven.

Or, you may wish to cover the parboiled stems with cream sauce, and simmer them a few minutes before serving.

FENNEL AU GRATIN

4-8 fennel bulbs
3 tablespoons parmesan cheese
1/4 cup butter or margarine
3 tablespoons flour
2 cups milk
salt and nutmeg to taste
1 egg yolk
1/4 cup ham, dried, or cut into strips (optional)

Clean and quarter the fennel, and parboil about five minutes. Drain and cover with half the butter or margarine. Set aside, and prepare the sauce. Melt the remaining butter in a pan, and stir in the flour. Cook for one full minute. Remove from the heat, and add cold milk, gradually, stirring constantly.

Return to the heat, and cook for 10 minutes, stirring occasionally. Remove from the heat, and add salt and nutmeg to taste. Add egg yolk, two tablespoons of parmesan cheese, and ham, if using it.

Arrange the fennel and sauce in layers in a buttered, ovenproof dish, ending with a thin layer of the sauce. Sprinkle with the remaining parmesan, and dot with butter. Bake in a 400-degree oven for one-half hour,

or until a golden crust has formed on the top. Serve hot.

MONKFISH AND FENNEL

(Monkfish, also known as goosefish, belly fish and angler, and sometimes called "poor man's lobster," has only recently become popular in America.

If you are not familiar with this fish, it will be a pleasant surprise the first time you taste it.

In France or Italy, where it is called lotte, rape or boudoir, it is believed to sharpen the intellect.)

This recipe requires advance preparation. Marinating, begun the day before, tenderizes the fish and adds a gingery, Oriental taste to the white sauce.

1 1/4 monkfish, cut into 16 medallions
1 tablespoon grated fresh ginger
8 tablespoons olive oil
2 tablespoons butter
2 teaspoons chopped green onions
1 tablespoon flour (plus flour for dusting the fish)
1/2 cup clam juice mixed with 1/2 cup water
1/4 cup dry white wine
1 pound fennel bulbs
1 large red onion (thinly sliced)
1/2 cup chives, cut into one-inch lengths
1 tablespoon minced parsley

Sprinkle the fish pieces on both sides with salt and pepper. Mix ginger and four tablespoons olive oil and cover fish evenly. Place in a plastic zip-lock bag, marinate for 24 hours.

Heat one tablespoon of butter in a small saucepan. Add green onions, and cook until softened. Add one tablespoon flour, and cook until slightly brown, stirring constantly. Add clam juice, water and half of the wine. Bring to a boil. Cook over low heat for about 15 minutes, or until about one-half cup of sauce remains.

Cut fennel bulbs into halves or quarters, depending on the size, and then cut into thin slices. Heat two tablespoons of olive oil in a large skillet over moderate heat. Add fennel and cook three minutes, tossing often, until about half tender. Then add onions, and continue cooking until fennel is just tender (about two-three minutes).

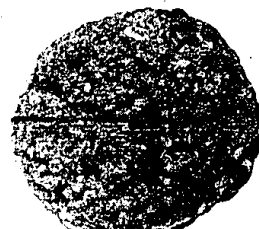
Dust fish pieces with flour, and brown in the remaining oil in another skillet. Be careful not to let the fish stick to the pan. Arrange the vegetables and fish on an oven-proof platter, and keep warm in the oven while you finish preparing the sauce.

To make the sauce, add remaining wine to the pan the fish was cooked in, and stir over moderate heat until bits are loosened from the pan. Add this to the wine sauce, and blend in a blender until smooth.

Return sauce to pan, add chives and parsley, and bring to a simmer. Remove from heat, and add the last one tablespoon of butter. Remove fish and vegetables from the oven, and spoon on the sauce. Serve at once.

Note: If you have any problems finding fennel or monkfish, call Gundella at 427-1072 for a list of places that carry them.

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