taste buds

chef Larry Janes

Aromatic the word for rice

It was inevitable: rice, the food that is relied upon as a dietary staple by more than half the world's population, is beginning to be appreciated in the United States.

There are more than 40,000 varieties of rice in the world but only a handful of them are changing the way Americans think about this simple grain.

Walk into any trendy restaurant in metropolitan Detroit and rest assured that rice will have some sort of premier presence on the menu. With the exception of Oriental eateries, plain old white rice took the last slow boat to China and, it is hoped, will never return. In its place, the new and coming rices to watch for will have exotic names like Basmati, Texmati, Wild Pecan, Arborio, Jasmine and Black Japonica.

Most common on the trendy rice circuit these days is the very aromatic Basmati, heralding from Pakistan and Northern India. This thin, long-grain, cream-colored rice fills the kitchen with an aluring aroma from the minute it begins to cook — an aroma which lingers all the way to the table and stays on the palate.

NOT TO BE outdone, the Americans have since developed a strain similar to Basmati called Texmati. This domestic version, grown in Texas, smells much like popcorn and carries a typically nutty flavor at about half the price of the imported competition.

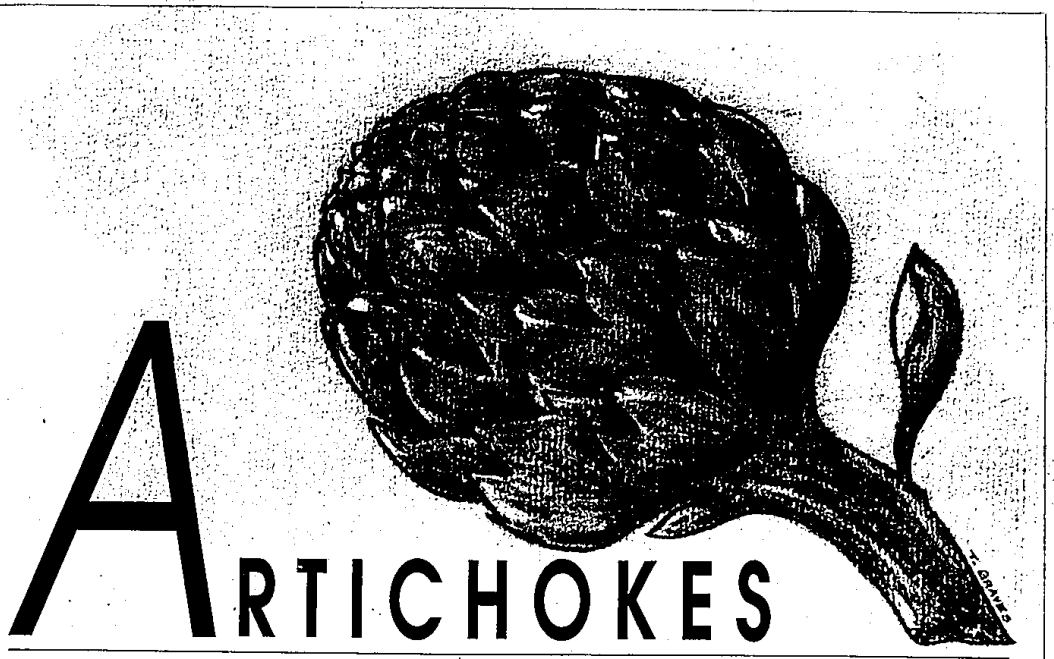
Arborio rice is a short-grained import hearlding from Italy. With nearly 80 percent of the rice eaten in America being a long-grained version, the short grains are gaining in popularity, mainly because they are softer, stickier and, if anything, more versatile in cooking. Their outer layer softens more readily and has a tendency to absorb the flavors in the cooking medium more than long grains. Arborio makes a great rice used in the preparation of risotto, a classic creamy rice dish flavored with chicken stock, butter and Parmesan cheese.

Here's a rice that's creeping up in popularity: Knoriko Wild Pecan. This aromatic rice grown in New Iberia, La., is neither wild nor tastes of pecans, but it smells nutty when cooked. Mike Davis, president of Conrad Rice Mill, the oldest operating rice mill in the USA, says they called it Wild Pecan because, "When we think of nuts, we think of pecans, and the best pecans are wild."

Already appearing on the best-dressed plates on the West Coast are telltale signs of Jasmine and Black Japonica rices. The Jasmine variety is a long-grain rice that cooks up like a short grain, soft and moist. And, yes, it does have a faint aroma of Jasmine, something that West Coasts chefs are sporting as the latest food trend.

The Black Japonica variety appearing from Japan has unusually tinted indigo-colored bran layers that leach out during the cooking process, turning the cooking water and rice purple. Unfortunately, this rice looks better than it tastes and can usually be found being mixed with other rices, mainly for the interesting color contrasts.

So if you thought that the only thing Momma could cook was something from an Uncle Ben's box, try one of the new aromatics and watch the family's taste buds say "Wow!"



ARTICHOKES

By Geri Rinschler
special writer

IT'S JUST ABOUT this time every year that I reminisce about Sunday dinners at my grandparents' home.

On a typical Sunday all seven Familetti grandchildren would assemble to our assigned chairs awaiting a banquet-sized dinner. No matter what the season, pasta was always the first course, followed by a meat course of roasted veal, chicken or stuffed beef. As enjoyable as those first two courses were, I couldn't wait for my favorite, stuffed artichokes.

Now this was not a weekly standard on my grandmother's menu because she only prepared artichokes when they were in their prime during April and May or during the second artichoke season in late fall or early winter. So, having been brought up on these edible thistles, I was shocked to find out in my teenage years that many folks didn't even know they were edible.

According to food authority Waverly Root, in his last culinary endeavor, "Food" (Simon & Schuster, 1980), artichokes were a rare and unknown luxury in the United States in the 1920s. Most reference books site that the artichoke was first introduced into Europe in the 15th century.

CHRONICLERS such as Jane Grigson give Catherine de Medici credit for popularizing artichokes. It's said that once, "She ate so many artichokes at a wedding feast in 1575 that she nearly burst." This was considered scandalous because young women in the 16th century were not supposed to eat in public any foods considered to be aphrodisiacs.

It is certain that artichokes grew in the vicinity of Naples in the 15th century, and their popularity spread to other parts of Europe, especially France and Spain. Most food authorities agree the Spanish first brought artichokes to California where they are cultivated today. Nearly 50,000 tons of artichokes are harvested each year in Castroville, Calif., which claims to be the artichoke capital of the United States.

I have to admit that the artichoke may be one of the most artistically designed vegetables, but it also is the most time-consuming to prepare and eat. Once you have mastered the fine art of preparing them and the pleasure of eating them, the extra care and cooking time won't matter to you at all.

Shopping for this luxurious vegetable is as easy as selecting cucumbers, once you know what and what not to look for. When shopping, look for artichokes which are large, rounded and tightly packed. Loose, spreading leaves are a sign of over-maturity.

In the spring, the leaves should and will be a brighter green than those in the fall. To make sure the artichokes are fresh, squeeze the top of the vegetable with your fingers. Generally, if you hear a squeaky sound, they are fresh and moist. Store them wrapped in a perforated plastic bag in your refrigerator. They will last up to one week, before using them.

ONCE YOU ARE ready for cooking, you need to take a few precautions to prevent discoloration. I often wear thin disposable plastic gloves so that the artichoke's natural color doesn't stain my hands. Whether you prepare them whole to be served with a sauce or for stuffing, use only a stainless steel knife or scissors.

After rinsing the artichokes in cold water, pat dry. With a large knife, cut off the stem flush with the base. This is done so the artichoke will stand upright when steaming. Remove the loose or discolored leaves around the base. Trim the top by cutting off one inch evenly across, using a large knife. Once that is done, trim the prickly point of each leaf using a scissors.

Next step is to remove the feathery choke out of the center. This may require a little twisting and tugging. Lastly, carefully scoop out the tiny, sometimes pinching fibers which are attached to the artichoke bottom. Best method to accomplish this is to scrape them out by using the tip of a teaspoon. After that last, somewhat tedious job is completed, squeeze lemon juice into the cavity and on the freshly trimmed leaves to prevent discoloration.

In almost all artichoke recipes, you need to boil or steam them in either acidulated water (with lemon juice) or water with olive oil. To prevent further discoloration or a bitter flavor it is pertinent that the artichokes are cooked only in a stainless-steel, enamel, cast-iron or tin-lined copper pot.

For medium-to-large-size artichokes, simmer them in liquid three-four inches deep, uncovered. Cooking them with the lid on the pot also will cause them to discolor. Once tender, they may be removed gently with a pair of tongs, draining off excess water. At this point they can be served with a garlic butter sauce or a mayonnaise-mustard sauce.

TO SERVE THEM with a stuffing, follow the procedure just described but parboil them only about 20 minutes, then drain and fill or stuff. When using traditional Italian cheese or bread stuffing, as my grandmother did, an additional 20-30 minutes of steaming is necessary after stuffing. The artichokes are cooked when the leaves pull out easily and

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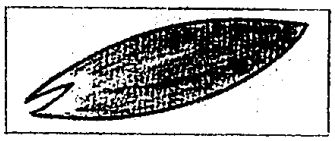

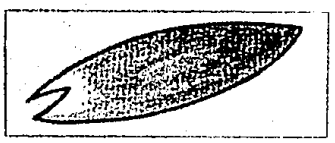

His store is a natural

By Joan Boram
special writer

Just don't call it a health food store.

Nature's Market owner Todd Guleich is affable, voluble and believable, but he does get upset when people confuse whole foods with "health" or "natural" foods.

"This business is a marriage between a dream and a commitment," he explains. "My original college major was in fisheries and wildlife; I switched to economics because there was potentially more money in business. When I graduated I went into banking.

"But last January I decided to quit chasing the dollar, follow my natural inclinations and become involved in environmental issues. I had always wanted to have my own business, and a natural foods store is the epitome of environmental responsibility, so here we are."

Nature's Market, "Where Foods Have Integrity," opened June 23. Business is doing well, though not as well as a former banker would hope. Business has only doubled, instead of tripled, as Guleich had projected. The word is out, though, and business gets better all the time.

"Whole foods emphasize wholesomeness and purity, explains Guleich. "Whole foods are usually organically produced and will include some of the highest- quality natural foods available. You will find no refined sugars, bleached flours, stabilizers, dyes, etc., in whole foods.

"NATURAL FOODS, on the other hand, are made with all natural ingredients, but there's considerable use of synthetically derived chemicals as pesticides or enhancers in these products. Even foods with natural extracts from plants or animals change the natural chemical compostion of the foods.

"Generally, health foods are more vitamin-supplement oriented. In fact, about 50 percent of the profits in most "health" food stores come from vitamin supplement sales. Also, most health food stores are vegetarian oriented. Nature's Market has many vegetarian clients, but we do sell organically grown meat.

"It all boils down to the integrity of foods: Mother Nature got it right the first time. Whenever we add substances to foods to affect appearance, flavor, shelf-life or texture, we take something away from the food's original flavor and nutritional value.

"But even more important, research is beginning to expose the adverse health effects of the many foreign substances that we have been using in the production and processing of our foods.

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Todd Gulich holds natural turkey and apple juice. He is surrounded by organically grown produce at Nature's Market Whole Foods in Rochester Hills.

Photos by Jim Rider