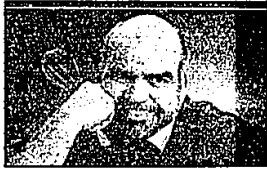


MONDAY, AUGUST 10, 1992

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TASTE BUDS



CHEF LARRY JONES

Ripe summer melons melt in your mouth

"It is almost sacrilegious to do anything more with a small ripe melon than to eat it with a silver spoon," wrote Marion Harland in 1897 in her book "Breakfast, Luncheon and Tea." Although I do appreciate exquisite tastes, I'm not really into polishing the family silver just to sit down and enjoy what is turning out to be another bumper year for the melon industry. Thanks to an unusually rainy summer, Michigan melons should be peaking very soon.

The aroma of fresh melons is almost intoxicating. A recent trip to Eastern Market found vendors who were offering a sample slice of their delicious ripe melons to passersby. It was a royal refreshment under the steamy midday sun.

Nowadays, there are a greater variety of melons available in this country than anywhere else in the world. With modern refrigeration and storage techniques and the ability to get the melons to markets with great haste, melt-in-your-mouth juiciness is a check-out lane away.

Melon history

So how did we happen to stumble on this glorious tidbit of nature? Believe it or not, the melon is an ancient fruit. The oldest European cookery book, written by the great Roman gourmet Apicius in the first century, gives his recipe for melon with honey dressing.

That melon was probably the forerunner of what we call the muskmelon, a large genus whose familiar members today include cantaloupes, crenshaws, honeydews and Persians. Both the muskmelon and the watermelon are believed to have originated in Africa.

To judge quality in all melons, look for symmetry in shape and uniformity in color. A melon that is flattened on one side may be underdeveloped — not only its shape, but also in its texture and flavor, which may be under par.

Checking ripeness

Avoid any melon that feels soft and mushy when pressed or shows bruises, dark spots, cracks or withered skin. Ripeness is the most important characteristic to look for in melons and is best revealed by the characteristic warm, flowery aroma detectable when one sniffs the skin. The blossom end of a ripe melon should yield to the touch without being mushy.

Cantaloupes are the most popular melon and are available mainly from May through October. The lovely orange color and mellow taste make it a favorite for cooking and vibrant desserts. For the uninitiated, Howell is the melon capital of Michigan and many say that a fresh Howell cantaloupe is nothing short of heavenly all by itself.

For a unique appetizer, I like to serve fresh Howell melons wrapped in a paper-thin slice of prosciutto and a sprinkling of black pepper. For a good muskmelon, pick a firm and heavy melon with a distinctive, sweet aroma. Among the muskmelons, honeydew is second to the cantaloupe both in popularity and abundance. The season runs from June to October.

Ripeness is easiest to judge in the honeydew; unripe melons will be greenish, with little aroma and wax. As the melons ripen, the skin takes on a white, waxy finish. Ripe honeydews will be tender at the blossom and have a distinct aroma. The best will have a skin the color of light butter. Honeydews are best mixed with other fruits (in salads) and they will make a superb complement to poultry or fish.

Unusual melons

Persian melons look very much like cantaloupes but are slightly larger with a more finely textured rind. Available in the west from July to October, they are mainly sighted in our area in August, September and early October. They are well worth looking for, as their perfect texture and flavor make them prime candidates for eating just as Mrs. Harland described, with only a spoon.

The Crenshaw is, to my own personal taste, the queen of melons. The intense bright, buttercup yellow of their rough rind is a sure sign of ripeness. Like Persian melons, the best Crenshaws can be had from August to September in our area.

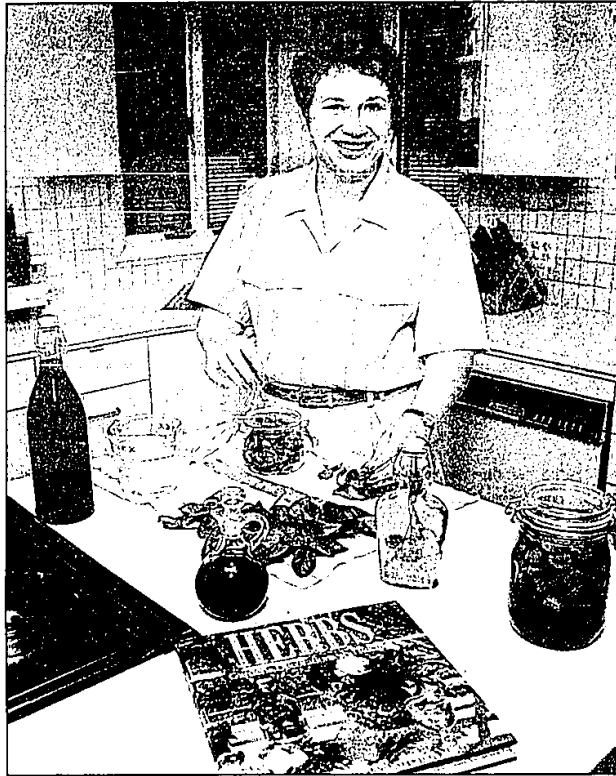
Watermelons are by far one of the most abundant and popular melons available in every market. What would summer be like without this refreshing fruit? There are many varieties, from round to oval with green or striped rinds and white, yellow or red flesh. Look for firm, juicy flesh with a good bright color and avoid melons with a pale dry or mealy flesh. After the fruit has been eaten, save the rind for chutney and preserves!

Chinese winter melon is available all year because the fall harvest can be stored for use in the winter and spring.

See recipes inside.

Summer in a bottle

Create your own flavored vinegars



STEPHEN CASTELL

Flavorful: Diane Schmitt makes flavored vinegar with herbs and berries she grows in her garden. The vinegars are simple to prepare and make wonderful gifts.



Vinegar isn't just for making pickles. Herb and fruit flavored vinegars add zest, not calories to meats, vegetables and salads.

BY GERRI RINSCHLER
SPECIAL WRITER

Among the remnants of the short-lived nouvelle cuisine era, flavored vinegars continue to grow in popularity. As one of the world's oldest flavoring staples, vinegars are no longer reserved just for canning, pickling and dressing salads.

Sauteed or grilled poultry, meats and vegetables become rejuvenated with a splash of berry or herb flavored vinegar. They add a bit of zest and leave your palate refreshed without adding fat or calories to a fruit or vegetable salad.

Berry vinegars such as strawberry, blueberry or black raspberry and herb vinegars made with tarragon, dill or a bouquet of Provençal herbs are simple to prepare. They can be packaged in decorative cut glass bottles to be given as gifts which one would assume you slogged over for weeks.

The process requires very little. Fresh berries or herbs are infused with heated vinegar. The infusion is then left to steep. A few days later it is strained into sterilized bottles and sealed.

Diane Schmitt of Birmingham fell in love with homemade vinaigrettes and flavored vinegars while studying classic French cuisine at La Varenne cooking school near Paris.

Every summer she prepares a variety of berry flavored and herb vinegars after harvesting wild black and red raspberries and herbs from her garden. "These are great to have on hand in the winter when no one has access to fresh herbs and fruits," she said.

This summer Schmitt infused seven different flavored vinegars to keep on her pantry shelf to use throughout the year and to give as gifts. She recommends using distilled white vinegar for all the berry vinegars because the berry juices will dilute the base resulting in a full-bodied vinegar.

When preparing tarragon vinegar, she generally uses a cider vinegar as the apple cider flavor blends nicely with tarragon. Her "garden vinegar" is made with white wine vinegar, oregano, sage, thyme, mustard seed, and a few cloves of garlic.

Shirley Siegel of Troy has been making flavored vinegars for about five years and recently taught a class in Troy. Siegel is a stickler when it comes to sterilization equipment and follows through with the selection of her ingredients. She stresses using fresh fruit at the peak of perfection. "You can't use anything else if you want a pure vinegar to last."

See recipes inside.

WINNER DINNER RECIPES

Serve this delicious Armenian dish with a fresh fruit salad. Take your pick from the wide selection available — melons, berries, nectarines, etc.

Serve them by themselves or on top of vanilla yogurt, or combine them in a colorful fresh fruit salad.

STUFFED SUMMER VEGETABLES (DOLMA)

- 1 pound lean ground beef or lamb
- 1 large onion, chopped fine
- ¾ cup uncooked rice
- ½ bunch (½-cup) fresh parsley, chopped fine
- ¼ cup fresh dill, chopped fine
- 2 cloves garlic, crushed
- 4 green or red peppers
- 2-3 medium zucchinis
- 4-5 medium tomatoes
- 1 can chicken broth or stock, 15 ounce size
- ½ fresh lemon, squeezed and strained
- 2 tablespoons tomato sauce or puree
- Plain yogurt, 16 ounce size
- 2-3 garlic cloves, crushed

Cut off the tops of the green peppers and tomatoes and reserve for lids.

Core peppers. Scoop out insides of tomatoes and chop reserve pulp.

Core out zucchini pulp, leaving a shell.

In a large bowl, combine beef, onion, rice, reserved tomato pulp, parsley, dill garlic and seasonings. Knead until ingredients are blended.

Heat the broth, tomato sauce and lemon juice in a small saucepan. Stuff the vegetables and place in a 9 by 13 baking dish. Pour the broth in the dish ¼ inch deep.

Cover with aluminum foil and bake at 350 degrees for 1 to 1½ hours until the vegetables are tender and the rice is cooked.

Serve with plain yogurt on the side, or for an extra taste treat, add two or three (or to taste) additional crushed garlic cloves to the plain yogurt. Serves 6.

PITA CRISPS

3-4 rounds pita bread, separated into halves margarine or butter Parmesan cheese Garlic powder to taste

Open up three to four rounds of pita bread. Spread a little margarine or butter on the inside of each half.

Sprinkle with a little Parmesan cheese and garlic powder to taste. Broil until golden brown and bubbly.

Savor fresh vegetables



BETSY BRETHEN

Going to the farmer's market on Saturday mornings has always been one of my favorite things to do, especially at this time of the year.

This week's Winner Dinner, submitted by Judy Mardigan Nagra features a delicious Armenian recipe for stuffed vegetables that will allow you to make the most of the colorful produce and fragrant herbs that are ever so tempting.

Nagra, her husband Si, and two young children have lived in Plymouth for seven years. As well as being actively involved with her children, Nagra works with her husband at Health De-

cisions, Inc., a health benefits consulting firm that they founded six years ago.

An avid cook and cookbook reader, Nagra loves to go to the Eastern Market in Detroit on Saturday mornings, bring home bags of goodies, and spend the rest of the day cooking up a storm.

She particularly likes to make the recipe she submitted for this column as it was one that her mother, Louise Mardigan, used to frequently make. Although her mother passed away seven years ago, Nagra's appreciation of her Armenian heritage, and her love of cooking and entertaining, serve as daily reminders of the happy times she spent with her mother in the kitchen.

Submit recipes to be considered for publication in this column, or elsewhere, to: Winner Dinner, P.O. Box 3503, Birmingham, MI 48012.



SHARON LEVINE/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Winner dinner: Judy Mardigan Nagra and her children, Charlie, 4, and Sandy, 2, make stuffed summer vegetables, a delicious Armenian dish.