

TASTE

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TASTE BUDS



CHEF LARRY JAMES

Sweet-tart rhubarb springtime delight

If there was one plant that always flourished in the Janes Gang garden it was rhubarb. Like the chives and wild leeks that reappear every year, no matter what I do to the garden, the rhubarb remains ever faithful.

Rhubarb is an odd plant. Its roots are touted as being medicinal, the stalks make a pie that tickles your taste buds, and the leaves are so high in oxalic acid that they can kill. How can something so good, so tasty, so beneficial, be so deadly?

Grandma Janes (we called her "mimmi") was a champion at canning rhubarb, and concocting all sorts of jams, jellies and sauces. Of course, when you're 10 years old, and sent over to grandma on your Schwinn to fetch a jar from the cellar, it wasn't appreciated. To this day, I can vividly remember standing at her side, watching her "put up" the late spring bounty of rhubarb.

Grow your own

"The Joy of Cooking" claims that rhubarb is at its best when grown in a hothouse setting because "when grown under wraps, the stems are more tender and sweeter than those grown in a garden." Not being one to argue with one of the best selling cookbooks of all time, I would add that home-grown rhubarb is best when picked early. When allowed to mature, the stems get a bit rubbery, and necessitate peeling before cooking. If you happen to come across some rhubarb later in the season, a handy dandy vegetable peeler used to remove just the outer layer of skin will give you succulent rhubarb that can be cooked or frozen for use later in the season. If you are thinking about heading out to a greenhouse in search of rhubarb plants, you will really have to search because most of the rhubarb plants come from mail order supply houses. After planting they need at least a full year in the ground before they begin to produce. Your best bet, of course, is to locate an already prolific plant and in the spring or fall, divide the roots.

Rhubarb is one of the fruits that work best in conjunction with other fruits, especially those higher in sugar and sweetening power which offset rhubarb's tartness.

Purists can cut rhubarb into 1-inch chunks and place in a heavy saucepan and just lightly sprinkle with water. Cover and bring the pot to a full steam, then reduce the heat to a simmer, shaking the pot frequently until the chunks are tender enough and can be pierced with a fork. Because rhubarb is a tart fruit, a generous sprinkling of sugar during the light steaming wouldn't hurt. As the sugar melts with the excess moisture, the rhubarb almost "poaches" in this liquid and the final product is quite delectable. Although I have the Janes Gang heritage, I have, in all honesty, only the cooked rhubarb in one way, that being in a simple pie. More on that to follow.

Freezing

"The Farm Journal of Freezing and Canning" says that rhubarb lends itself well to just that. Canning and freezing should be done as soon after cutting as possible for optimum flavor and vitamin content. Although I have yet to attempt the canning of the delectable stalk, I have in the past frozen the spears. This is done by washing the spears, cutting them into large chunks and then by dumping them into a pot of boiling water for about 30 seconds. The rhubarb is then drained, patted dry and placed in freezer bags, labeled and frozen for later use.

In the Janes Gang garden, we have but one lonely rhubarb plant. It thrives well in deep, well drained soil. Although all the garden books claim that rhubarb needs "full" sun, our lonely bush might be lucky enough to get only 3-4 hours of sun because of the large shade tree. This sole plant produces enough rhubarb throughout the season to easily make a dozen or so pies with enough left over for a half dozen frozen packages for fall and winter use.

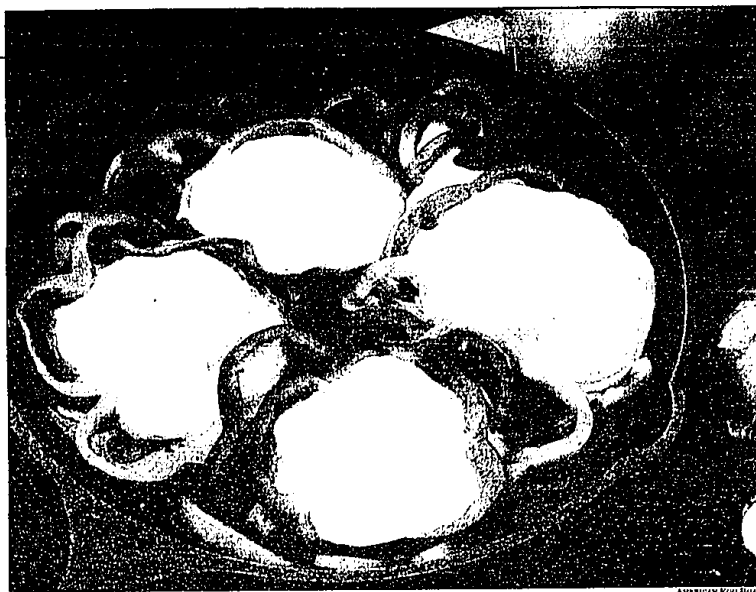
I would be remiss in my duties as a reporter not to mention my favorite rhubarb recipe and from whence it came. A dear friend from Plymouth, Mary Lou Richenbach-Stone who once took the daring initiative to prepare her rhubarb pie for me, has stumbled upon a winning recipe by my standards. If I've made this pie once, I've made it a hundred times; it's that good! M.L.'s original hand-written recipe holds a coveted spot in my recipe box. You won't believe how easy it is, yet how good it tastes. Thanks again Mary Lou!

Chef Larry Janes is a free-lance writer. He welcomes your calls and comments. To leave a message for him, dial (313) 953-2247 on a touch-tone phone, mailbox 1886. See recipes inside.

LOOKING AHEAD

What to watch for in Taste next week:

■ Hunting for mushrooms



Skillet supper: Pepper 'N' Egg Skillet Supper made with thinly sliced red, green and yellow peppers, onions and eggs, is a rainbow of flavor and color that cooks in minutes.

Pair eggs, veggies for dinner

Years ago, when Mom said, "Eat your vegetables," she was probably referring to a small dish of overcooked peas or stringy green beans on your plate along with some very buttery mashed potatoes. Today, when nutrition professionals remind us to eat more vegetables, they'd prefer we eat them raw or crisp-tender without big dollops of fat, and they mean three to five 1/2 to 1-cup servings a day!

For many of us, that's a tall order. But, it's not as hard as it may seem to set your diet right. You can add vegetables to already favorite foods—swapping them as an omelet filling, for example. Or, you can plan to serve vegetable main dishes occasionally. Just be sure to include a good protein source during the day.

With the exception of nuts and cooked dry beans and peas, the protein in vegetables is incomplete protein, lacking in some of the protein building blocks that your body can't make. Once you begin to include more and more plant foods in your menus, you can try to mix and match them to make their protein complete. But, even many vegetarians find it much easier to simply include complete protein sources such as eggs or milk products in their diets.

It's particularly easy to incorporate eggs into vegetable entrees, and there's no better time than May, which is National Egg

Month. You can serve eggs over a bed of vegetables, blanket them in a pureed-vegetable sauce or mix them with milk to make a vegetable-filled quiche, strata or frittata. With their appetite appeal and unassuming flavor, eggs can enhance vegetable dishes without overpowering them. As a bonus, most egg dishes are quick and easy to cook.

For good balance, in addition to some of the highest quality protein available, nutrient-dense eggs provide varying amounts of some of the vitamins and minerals that are not abundant in vegetable foods. If you use no-fat cooking methods, each large egg

will cost you only 75 calories and 5 grams of fat, most of which is unsaturated.

"Eggs are one of the most nutritious and versatile foods available," said Lois Thieleke of Birmingham, an Extension Home Economist for the Michigan State University Extension, Oakland County. "The white contains mostly water with some proteins, while the yolk contains fat, cholesterol, protein, vitamins and minerals."

Food economists at the American Egg Board recommends storing eggs in their carton on an inside shelf. Repeated opening and closing of the door causes

temperature fluctuations and can result in breakage. The egg carton also helps keep the eggs from picking up odors and flavors from other foods in your refrigerator.

"Eggs fresh, in shell, will keep three weeks in the refrigerator. Eggs cannot be frozen in their shells," said Thieleke. "Hard-cooked egg whites become tough if frozen. Hard-cooked yolks and raw whole eggs, whites and yolks can be frozen for use later. The thawed product may be somewhat thicker than a fresh egg. Thaw in the refrigerator. Raw yolks and whites can be stored 2-4 days in the refrigerator, 1 year in the freezer. Store hard-cooked eggs 1 week in the refrigerator. Opened cartons of liquid pasteurized eggs or egg substitutes will keep three days in the refrigerator, but don't freeze. Unopened cartons can be stored 10 days in the refrigerator and 1 year in the freezer."

Home economist Sylvia Treiman, who answers the food and nutrition hotline for the MSU Extension, Oakland County, adds — "Cook eggs thoroughly — yolk and white both should be firm. Recipes that use raw eggs should not be used, because salmonella bacteria may be present, and cause food poisoning. Substitute pasteurized egg products for fresh eggs in recipes. Use dried egg white powder in place of fresh egg whites for royal icings, meringues or chiffon pies."

• See recipes inside.

V-EGG-IE-LICIOUS IDEAS

- If you're not accustomed to having lots of fibrous vegetables in your diet, increase your intake slowly to give your body time to adjust to more roughage.
- To get the most vitamins, minerals and fiber from vegetables, leave the skins on whenever possible and eat them raw or cook them lightly. If you prefer long-cooked vegetables, try to use the cooking liquid as part of the liquid in the recipe or save it to use as the base for homemade soup so the vitamins don't go down the drain.
- To keep fat low, steam your vegetables in a nonstick pan coated with cooking spray rather than sautéing them. Instead of fatty toppings, look to herbs, spices, vinegar, mustard, salsa and similar condiments for seasoning.
- For a new taste treat out of leftovers, steam or microwave leftover rice and vegetables until they're heated throughout. Top with a poached egg and pizza sauce.
- Invent your own skillet supper. Steam shredded, chopped or sliced vegetables in a nonstick pan coated with cooking spray. Drain, if necessary. Beat eggs with milk and herbs. Pour over the vegetables and scramble until there's no trace of liquid egg in the pan.
- Layer fresh sliced vegetables, crisp greens and hard-cooked eggs on a French or Kaiser roll and top with your favorite flavor of low- or no-fat salad dressing.

Spontaneous meals with grilled chops

Grilling — a low-fat cooking method that offers great taste — has become an American classic. Grilling brings out the best of these fresh flavors of the season and the savory taste of pork chops.

"Grillers today want versatility, flavor and convenience and the basic pork chop has that," said Anne Roberts, a home economist and director of marketing and education for the Michigan Pork Producers Association. "Like the abundant fresh produce of the season, pork chops offers bold taste with little fat."

Roberts recommends four basic tactics for cooking chops — using gas, an indoor grill or barbecue — to bring out the natural flavor of pork chops without adding fat.

- Cook chops following these basic steps:
- Season the pork chops with the flavorings of your choice. Place chops directly over the heat source and cover with grill hood. Turn chops once for even browning and cook to medium doneness, 6-8 minutes for 3/4-inch thick chop, 8-10 minutes for 1-inch thick chop and 12-16 minutes for 1 1/2-inch thick chop.
- Pork is best when cooked to medium doneness — it might have a slight blush of pink in the cen-

ter at an internal temperature of 160 degrees F. Touch the center of the chop with tongs — if it's done perfectly, there should be a slight "give."

■ If you're brushing chops with a sauce or glaze, don't sauce too soon. Brush on sauces about 5 minutes before chops are done — this prevents sauces from burning while maximizing flavor.

■ If marinating chops, use excess marinade to baste while grilling; then discard any leftover marinade. Let pork bath in marinade overnight, or for about 30 minutes before grilling.

■ A sprinkling of fresh herbs including your choice of dill, rosemary, cilantro or tarragon add flavor without fat. Sprinkle fresh herbs on top of chops or even on grilled vegetables to add some punch.

For satisfying side dishes, grill whole or halved fresh vegetables, brushed with olive oil. Grilled corn on the cob, potatoes, sweet onions, sweet potatoes and bell peppers make colorful — and flavorful — side dishes. Or, create a medley by seasoning chopped veggies with ground black pepper, garlic and oregano, wrapping tightly in foil and grilling for 10-15 minutes.

Pork and fruit are a natural pair. Grill wedges



NATIONAL PORK PRODUCERS COUNCIL

Chops are choice: Bring the great taste and versatility of pork chops to the grill. Flavor with marinades, rubs and glazes, or top a chop at the table with salsa or relish.

of ripe melon or halves of peaches, pears and green apples until lightly browned and serve with pork chops. See recipes inside.