



Edible Paradise: Fresh Picks at the Market

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November 2007

■ **Featured Produce:** *Root Vegetables, Winter Squashes*

■ **Recipes:** *Potato Gratin with Ham and Pears, Classic Au Gratin Potatoes, Celeriac Salad, Caramelized Tokyo Turnips, Basic Roasted Roots, and Candied Walnuts*

It's 5:30 AM on Saturday. Do you know where your produce is? If you get it at the Aptos market, some of it is already here, waiting to be off-loaded, and some of it is on its way from places further away. It is being driven by the person who grew it, who will sell it to you, and then will go home at noon to spend time with family, unload, and start all over again. There is so much more to our farmers markets than meets the eye.

It's that time of year when sturdy vegetables begin to make their appearance. Winter squashes, roots like parsnips, celeriac, and turnips, and leafy greens have returned to market. Apples are still coming in in many new varieties, and persimmons are showing up to add splashes of color around the market. Do you know the difference between the Hachiya and Fuyu? Hachiya are the type best eaten very ripe (read "soft") so you don't get a mouth full of puckering tannins. The Fuyu are the ones you eat like apples. Hachiya ripen after a frost, so get yours while still firm, then pop them into the freezer for a couple hours, then set them on the counter and wait. They will soften like custard. The Fuyu are eaten like apples, and make great additions to autumn salads with greens like frisee and escarole with nuts and cheese. Look for fruit that have a nice glow to them and a deep orange tinged with red. They should be firm with a little give, not rock hard, when ripe.

Fall Pears Are In!

This is a great time to learn about pears—ask your vendors about the differences between one type and another. Which ones cook best, which are best to eat out of hand? I heard a customer describe a pear as being "sandy" and that was why she disliked them. I thought that a perfect description for that texture that many loathe about pears. Ask about that at a stand and see if you can learn to pick the perfect pear from a pro. I like pears with salads, and also cooked into soups such as pumpkin or parsnip and ginger. I also layer them into potato

gratins with ham and cheese.

Root Vegetables

Now is the time for roots, one of my favorite times for cooking (really, when isn't it "one of my favorite times"?). I like them roasted, pureed, turned into soups, and made into salads. Short on beauty, long on flavor, roots store well and cook easily enough. Cooked right, the inherent sugars in these vegetables will override the bitter or stinky qualities of things like turnips or rutabagas. Try to avoid over cooking these, and use minimal water. Celeriac, or celery root, could win "ugliest vegetable" award, but I enjoy the bright celery like flavor and touch of sweetness it develops when roasted. It makes an excellent salad that serves well when followed by hearty fare such as roasts or braises.

With all roots, when selecting them, look for firmness, a tight skin, and they should feel heavy for their size. If they feel light there is a good chance the vegetable will be pithy inside, a surefire way to get bitter flavor and poor texture. With parsnips, if you can see the core at either end, check to see that it is not too thick or woody. No amount of cooking will yield a woody parsnip core edible. When purchasing roots, look for specimens that are rock hard. Peel celeriac with a knife and go deep to avoid leaving any skin behind.

Jerusalem artichokes, also known as Sunchokes are at market now. This root from a sunflower has a pleasant nutty flavor that is present raw or cooked. It has been shown to be a good food choice for diabetics, but in some people it can cause a bit of, errr—ah—gas. This effect is more pronounced when eaten raw. To find out if this means you, try just a little and wait and see. These roots are great as soup, scrubbed well and tossed in oil and roasted, or sliced into thick coins and blanched just until beginning to be tender, where they are then tossed into a non-stick pan with some oil and butter and are crisped on both sides. Serve right away. Mix in some slices of French Fingerlings for a wider range of flavors. They are good raw in salads, and I have pickled an excess of them in the same manner that sushi ginger is pickled for a surprisingly good variation.

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Andrew Cohen's culinary career spans over thirty years. A graduate from the esteemed California Culinary Academy in San Francisco, Andrew interned at Chez Panisse with celebrity chef Alice Waters. Chef Andrew writes a monthly column for the Monterey Bay Certified Farmers Market newsletter, Edible Paradise and is a featured columnist for the Santa Cruz Sentinel. To sign up for the free newsletter, go to www.montereybayfarmers.org.

Winter Squashes

We are blessed with a tremendous variety of winter squash at out markets and I suggest you get in the kitchen and play with them. The flavors vary from very sweet to a little sweet tinged with earthiness, and texture ranges from fine to spaghetti-like strands. The Japanese squashes such as Hokkaido and Kabocha (“squash” or pumpkin in Japanese) tend to be a little drier in texture, and are great sponges for oils and butter.

Butternut and Acorn are moister varieties, and Spaghetti can be roasted, then scraped out and sautéed in garlic and oil with some sage, then tossed with some late tomatoes just as you would pasta. Split the squash, oil the inside and roast skin up for an hour at 350°F. When the flesh is tender and can be scraped out with a fork, do so. Spread it out a little to cool and allow the liquids to drain off so the texture is a little firmer in the pan. Heat oil, add chopped garlic, then add the squash and sauté to add a little color (this will add sweetness by caramelizing some of the natural sugars), toss in some herbs such as sage, and diced tomatoes. Maybe a splash of white vermouth, salt and pepper, and you’re good to go.

When choosing squash, look for heavy ones with a deep color to them. If they grew on the ground, there will be a pale spot—this should be yellow rather than green. If green, it tells you the squash is not quite ripe. A really shiny squash has been waxed, which we won’t see here, but some will appear to be vibrant and some dull or matte finished. The bright colored ones are pretty, but the duller ones are older and have had time for the sugars to develop. This will mean a deeper and sweeter flavor; so don’t disregard those quieter looking squash.

Winter squash lend themselves to many preparations, but they all start with seeding them. When cutting them open, use a sturdy knife or cleaver, and leave that hammer alone! I have seen at least two people break a knife trying to hammer the blade through a squash! Sometimes it helps to score the flesh where you want to make your cut—the blade will follow the track. Once open, scrape out the seeds. You may want to cook them if they are large. For peeling, see if cutting the squash into smaller parts will work for you, and use a swivel peeler or paring knife. I like squash for gratins, in chunks, soups, and as a filling for raviolis with brown butter and sage.

Another root that will soon be gone from market is jicama from KT Farms. Though small, they are the best I’ve ever had. Fine grained, and so sweet. If you do not know this vegetable, try these. I like them straight, but I know a traditional way to eat them is to dip in lime and chili peppers. And remember, just because Kou is not at market, he’s not on vacation—he’s at the farm getting it ready for his reduced production and for spring.

During this time of year, we do more cooking than ever, and frequently under stressful conditions. Make life a little simpler in the kitchen—use a sharp knife! A sharp knife makes cutting easier, and when you have a lot of it to do it helps fight fatigue. It is safer, too. You pay more attention to a sharp knife, and you don’t have to push as hard. A sharp knife is easy to get here at the market. Terry from

Sharp-Quick will be at the Aptos market weekly in November (except for November 24) and December and the sharpening service is fast (while you shop) and very inexpensive. This is the guy who does the butcher’s knives at Corralitos Market, so you know he knows his stuff. I even let him do my knives...make life a little easier and use a sharp knife.

As we give thanks this month for our blessings, let’s remember to give thanks for our farmers and vendors who work so hard to bring us this bounty. Not only are they up late in the night loading trucks, up really early driving it to us and setting up, then selling it to us cheerfully, they are out in all kinds of weather growing this stuff, raising it, gathering it. Wherever you are, whatever you eat, stop a moment and think kindly about those who help put that food on your plate. And if you can, try to help those that have less than you do. I’m sure they’ll be thankful too. See you ‘round the market.

NOVEMBER RECIPES

For what it’s worth, ‘gratin’ refers to the cooking vessel and the way it is used, not the dish itself. Anything can be cooked “au gratin” and the recipe itself is varied. Potatoes alone, or mixed with other roots such as parsnip, turnip, or onion. Mushrooms, kale, artichoke hearts, olives, all these can go in as well. The dish can be made with or without cheese, with cream, milk, stock, or any combination of these. In summer, I make gratin’s in summer with vegetables that are “wet” (tomatoes, eggplant, etc.) and the only liquid I use is a little bit of flavorful olive oil. You can be precise in the way you lay in the ingredients or you can be casual. Bear in mind that the thickness of the cuts, the density of the vegetables, and how tightly packed in the dish everything is can affect the cooking times.

Following is one of my recipes and a classic version of potato gratin.

POTATO GRATIN WITH HAM, CHEESE, AND PEARS

8-10 Medium/largish potatoes such as russets, yukon gold, yellow finns
3 firm apples or pears
2 cups or more grated cheese (I use swiss such as Gruyere or Jarlesberg, or a medium sharp cheddar)
1/2 pound thinly sliced (almost shaved) ham such as black forest—something with a smokiness to it to contrast with the apple and cheese
2 1/2 to 3 cups liquid such as cream, milk, stock, or a mixture of these.
Herbs of your choice—I use thyme and sometimes a little sage or rosemary
2-3 onions, chopped and sautéed until soft (optional)

(1) Pre-heat the oven to 400°. Rub a 9x13 inch gratin dish with a peeled and split garlic clove to impart a subtle garlic flavor without getting chunks of burnt garlic. Rub the dish with a little oil or butter. (Do the WHOLE inside as this will facilitate cleaning the dish

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later)

(2) Using a knife or mandoline, slice the potatoes into uniform slices anywhere from 1/8 to 1/4 inch. Put these into a bowl of cool water to keep them from discoloring and to rinse off some of the starch.

(4) Peel the apples, then cut in half. Core them and slice them thinly.

(5) At this point, if you are using the onions, spread them evenly over the bottom of the dish.

(6) Drain the potatoes and layer overlapping slices on the bottom of the dish a couple layers thick. Season with S&P and some of the herbs.

(7) Lay in the sliced apples or pears and moisten the surface with the a few spoonfuls of the liquid. Lay in a couple more layers of spuds, S&P, then the ham. Again with the liquid and herbs.

(8) Continue with the potatoes until you are ½ an inch from the top or you are out of potatoes. Add in the rest of the liquid or enough to come just below the top layer. Push down with the palm of your hand to get the top layer wet. Season with S&P, a pinch of nutmeg, some herbs, and a sprinkling of cheese if you like. Some people dot the top with bits of butter but I find this to be overkill.

(9) Bake in the middle of the oven for 45 minutes to 1 hour, until golden brown and the potatoes are tender. If the gratin is done but there is too much liquid, stick a paper towel into the corners to draw off the excess liquid. If the opposite occurs, microwave some stock until hot and drizzle into the corner and continue cooking.

This dish is pretty rich, and this version makes quite a bit. There is usually just enough for my wife to take to work left over. If you like, use a smaller dish (11x7 inch or 2 quarts) and cut the recipe down by a third.

To make regular au gratin potatoes, use this recipe without the ham and pears/apples.

Here is another, more classically European version of this recipe.

This is done in an 11x7 inch oval dish.

2 ½ pounds potatoes
3 ¼ cups liquid (milk and cream)
1 cup grated Gruyere Swiss cheese
4 tablespoons butter
Salt, white pepper, and nutmeg
1 clove of garlic, split

(1) Rub the dish with the garlic and grease it with 1 1/2 tablespoons of the butter.

(2) Peel and thinly slice the potatoes.

(3) Layer the potato slices in the dish, almost standing them on edge and overlap like the scales of a fish.

(4) Season lightly with S&P and the nutmeg. Sprinkle with cheese.

(5) Pour in the liquid so it only just covers the top of the potatoes.

(6) Dot with the rest of the butter and bake at 350° for 50-60 minutes, or until the spuds are cooked and the dish is golden.

CELERIAC SALAD

1 medium to large celery root, peeled and julienned on the medium blade of a mandolin. Toss with a light vinaigrette of:

2 tablespoons lemon juice

1 tablespoon white wine vinegar

1 tablespoon rice vinegar

1 minced shallot

Salt and pepper

1 teaspoon minced thyme

6 ounces olive oil

Cress of your choice, or sprouts or baby rocket

(1) Allow celeriac to macerate to macerate at room temperature for 1 hour. Taste for seasoning.

(2) The salad can now be used or stored in the fridge at this point.

(3) Fold in peppercress, Upland cress, watercress, baby rocket, sprouts, or any other small, sharp tender greens in whatever combination you choose. The amount should not exceed a 1:1 ratio, and the greens should not overwhelm the taste of the celeriac.

CARAMELIZED TOKYO TURNIPS

1 bunch Tokyo turnips

1 tablespoon butter or neutral oil

1/2 tablespoon sugar

Salt and pepper

Some water

(1) Peel the turnips and cut into pieces ¾ inch at the wide end.

(2) In a sauté pan just big enough to hold them without crowding, bring enough water to cover the turnips to a boil. Add a large pinch of salt.

(3) Add the turnips, lower the heat to a simmer and cook the turnips just until they are no longer raw and have softened just enough so a sharp knife can just poke in.

(4) Drain the turnips, discard the water, and return the turnips to the pan. Place the pan back over the heat, bring heat to medium, and sprinkle the sugar evenly over all. Allow the sugar to begin to caramelize. It will start to turn brown, and you will smell it. (If it smells like it might be burning remove from heat immediately)

(5) Add the butter, and swirl around, tossing to coat evenly.

(6) Reduce heat to low and cook slowly, tossing to allow the turnips to develop crisp surfaces. Taste occasionally to be sure they are not overcooked—they will turn mushy and bitter. Serve as soon as they are done. I like them with roast chicken, braised meat, and seared salmon.

BASIC ROASTED ROOTS

Root vegetables—potatoes, parsnips, turnips, celeriac, Sunchokes, carrots, etc.

Olive oil—enough to coat the vegetables when cut up

Herbs—rosemary, thyme, sage, savory

Salt and fresh ground pepper

Optional—Garlic cloves

- (1) Pre-heat oven to 400°F.
- (2) If you wish, rub the bottom of an ovenproof dish with a peeled clove of garlic. Rub well to coat the pan with garlic oil. If you look carefully you can see the oil coating the dish. This will impart garlic flavor without leaving bits of garlic to burn and taste bitter.
- (3) Peel and cut enough vegetables to a uniform size to fill the dish with out crowding. Some vegetables cook faster than others. If mixing types, know that parsnips and turnips and celeriac cook faster than potatoes, so cut them a little bigger. Parsnips are high in sugar so watch them for burning, and cook higher in the oven.
- (4) In a large bowl, toss the vegetables with enough oil to coat them. Put into the prepared cooking dish, then sprinkle with salt and pepper to taste. Scatter herbs over the dish.
- (5) If you wish, scatter unpeeled cloves of garlic around as well. These will cook to a paste inside the jackets and you can squeeze the contents of the cloves onto bread or use in other preparations.
- (6) Cover the dish tightly with aluminum foil or a tight fitting lid and place in the center or upper part of the oven.
- (7) Roast for 30 minutes. After 30 minutes, remove the foil and check that the vegetables are tender enough to be easily pierced with the tip of a knife. If not, re-cover and cook 10 minutes more.
- (8) If the vegetables are tender, return to the oven and cook for 15 minutes to brown and crisp the roots. Shake the dish occasionally to turn the roots. When they are evenly cooked, they are ready to serve.

Though the recipe seems long, once you have done it is incredibly simple. After you have cooked a few different roots you will see the differences in the cooking times and will be able to account for them easily enough.

CANDIED WALNUTS OR PECANS

1/4 cup brown sugar

1 tablespoon neutral flavored oil such as grapeseed

1 tablespoon distilled vinegar

1 cup walnuts (I like the “sun kissed” walnuts from Minazzoli for their mild taste and lack of tannins. Tannins are what make the inside of the mouth and teeth feel as if they were just shaved.) You can use pecans for this as well.

- (1) Spray a sheet of foil with non-stick spray or use a Silpat (or other

silicone non-stick mat) mat, and place on a sheet pan.

- (2) In a heavy bottomed saucepan, stir the sugar, oil and vinegar together over medium heat until the sugar melts and a syrup forms and starts to bubble, around 3 minutes.
- (3) Mix in the nuts and stir gently until the nuts are toasted and syrup coats the nuts evenly, about 7 minutes.
- (4) Turn nuts out onto prepared foil or Silpat mat. Use a fork to separate nuts and cool completely. The coating will harden as the nuts cool.
- (5) Store in an airtight container away from heat and out of sight or there won't be any left before you can say “stuffing!”