

Vegetables Make the Meal

Meatless main dish pleases the palate and the eye

BY KAYSEY McLOUGHLIN

I've been a vegetarian all my life, so I'm never at a loss for main dish ideas. New or part-time vegetarians, however, can find it difficult to make vegetables into main courses. While most cooks have a large repertoire of favorite salads and side dishes, they draw a blank when it comes to using vegetables as the central course of the meal.

In fact, when you abandon the notion that the main course must be meat, and when you realize the potential of the wide variety of delicious vegetables, fruits, legumes, and grains, you can enjoy great flexibility. Carefully layered seasoning, robust stocks, and tantalizing sauces will ensure that your meatless recipe is interesting and satisfying enough to be the focus of the meal.

THE KEY TO FULL FLAVOR

This stuffed crookneck squash with tomato and pink-grapefruit sauce is one of my “signature dishes,” often requested by my friends, whether vegetarian or not. The stuffing and sauce can be prepared up to one day ahead, but I wouldn't steam the squash more than an hour ahead of serving, to preserve its sweet flavor and tender texture.

I don't use too many spices and flavorings in this dish, but the ones I do include play an important role. Some contrast with the main ingredients to provide tension—mild vs. peppery, sweet vs. acid. Others amplify the primary flavors, extending the range from high and light to deep and dark.

Understanding this “spectrum” of flavors is key to good vegetarian cooking. Many vegetables provide flavors at the high end of the range—fresh, bright, grassy, green, peppery. The full, earthy flavors that make a dish rounder and mellower (and more reassuring to “meat-eaters”) need to come from skillful seasoning and cooking.

Some “deep-end” seasonings include a splash of aged soy sauce, a pinch of woody, brown spice (such as coriander, cumin, or clove), a rich reduced



Vegetable main courses are hearty and savory. Here, the flavors and colors of stuffed crookneck squash are highlighted beautifully by a tomato and pink-grapefruit sauce.

The author carves the crookneck squash into hollow containers, using a paring knife and melon baller.

CROOKNECK SQUASH WITH CREOLE VEGETABLE STUFFING

Serves four.

- 8 small (3-ounce) or 4 large (6-ounce) crookneck squash
- 2 cups all-purpose vegetable stock (see recipe at right, or use a stock cube)
- $\frac{1}{8}$ teaspoon salt
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup pearl barley
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter
- $1\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon finely chopped garlic
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup chopped onion
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup finely diced carrot
- $\frac{1}{8}$ teaspoon ground nutmeg
- $\frac{1}{8}$ teaspoon ground cayenne
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup finely diced celery
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup finely diced green pepper
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup fresh corn kernels
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon finely chopped fresh rosemary
- 1 teaspoon chopped fresh thyme
- $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon Tabasco, more to taste
- $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon salt

TOMATO AND PINK-GRAPEFRUIT SAUCE

Makes about 3 cups.

- 5 tablespoons unsalted butter
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon finely chopped garlic
- 1 tablespoon rice-wine vinegar
- Juice from 1 pink grapefruit
- 2 pounds tomatoes, peeled, seeded, and chopped, about $2\frac{1}{2}$ cups
- Peeled segments from 1 pink grapefruit, cut in $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch chunks (see Basics)
- Pinch ground cayenne
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon fresh thyme
- Salt



Cut a deep slice from the “bowl” of the squash to form the lid and to open the squash for carving.



Use just the tip of a paring knife for greater control when tracing around the edge of the cut face.



A few deep slashes will loosen the pulp for easy removal.



McLoughlin scoops out the pulp easily with a melon baller. She’s careful not to make the walls too thick, which wouldn’t allow enough room for the stuffing, nor too thin, because they could tear.

vegetable stock (see the sidebar at right), or even a few drops of molasses or Louisiana cane syrup.

Cooking sugary vegetables such as onions and carrots until lightly caramelized also adds full, mellow flavor. In this recipe, I’m using a *mirepoix* (pronounced meer-ah-PWAH)—a mix of several diced aromatic vegetables added for flavoring. Grilling or charring larger vegetables will also add deeper, earthier flavors to a vegetarian dish.

A WHOLE SQUASH AS FOCAL POINT

I’ve chosen yellow crookneck squash as the main ingredient for its mildly sweet flavor and smooth buttery texture, but also for its shape. By featuring a whole vegetable, rather than chunks or slices, this dish takes on more of a “main dish” character. You could almost equate the whole squash with a fillet of fish or a chop (though I certainly wouldn’t!). If possible, choose unblemished, firm young squash, because the pulp and seeds, which are used in the stuffing, are sweet and moist. In more mature squash, the pulp and seeds will be coarse and dry. Regular yellow summer squash can be substituted, but the texture is more watery and the shape is not as pretty.

I carve out the rounded “bowl” of the crookneck squash to form a hollow container for the barley-and-vegetable stuffing. After steaming the squash containers, I fill them with the stuffing and then bake them briefly to unite the flavors of all the ingredients.

Carve and steam the squash. Wash the squash, blot them dry, and trim the dry stem ends. To decide where to slice the squash so that it sits attractively on the plate, place it on the counter and let it roll into its natural resting position. Cut a thick slice from the long side that’s now parallel to the counter, to form a lid (see the photos at left). With the tip of a paring knife, carefully score a line $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch in from the edge of the cut face of the squash to make a border. Cut several slashes across the surface, and then scoop out the pulp with a melon baller or a small spoon to form a hollow container. Repeat with the other squash. Chop the pulp fine and set aside.

The squash needs very brief cooking because the thin walls in the hollowed-out portion will collapse and tear if overcooked. To stop the cooking immediately after you remove the squash from the

steamer, put them in a large bowl of ice water. Steam the squash in a covered steamer, 6 to 7 minutes for the squash containers and 2 to 3 minutes for the lids. Immerse them in the ice water, remove them immediately, drain, and pat dry.

A GRAIN AND VEGETABLE STUFFING

The starch from the barley will mix with the stock and help bind the vegetables. The grain also adds an appealing chewiness.

Cook the barley first, before beginning your *mirepoix*. Bring 1¼ cups of the stock and the salt to a boil. Add the barley, cover, and simmer until the stock has been absorbed and the barley is plump and tender, 30 to 40 minutes. Set aside.

Lightly brown the mirepoix. I use butter in this recipe because I like the slightly nutty flavor it gives the stuffing, but olive oil would work, too. The brown, woody flavor of the nutmeg and the slight caramelization of the *mirepoix* vegetables add depth of flavor to the dish.

Heat the butter in a large frying pan until just foaming, add the garlic and onion, and sauté over medium-high heat until the onion turns clear. Add the carrot, nutmeg, and cayenne and continue cooking until the carrot is slightly soft and the onion begins to caramelize. Stir in the squash pulp, celery, green pepper, corn, and rosemary, and cook until the vegetables soften, another 3 to 5 minutes.

Finish cooking the stuffing. Add the remaining stock, the barley, thyme, Tabasco, and salt. Cook until all the ingredients are tender and the stock has reduced and been absorbed, stirring frequently, 10 to 12 minutes. Season with salt to taste and remove from the heat.

Fill the squash containers. Packing the stuffing firmly into the hollowed-out squash and then reheating everything together improves the dish by allowing the flavors to marry. Fill each squash with the stuffing, packing firmly with a spoon yet taking care not to tear the sides. If you like, the lids may be set back on top, or served alongside, topped with a spoonful of stuffing. Place all the filled squash and lids on a baking tray, cover with foil and bake at 400°F until heated through, about 15 minutes. (If the squash have been stuffed ahead and refrigerated, reheat at 375° for 35 to 45 minutes.) Serve with Tomato and Pink-Grapefruit Sauce and a bottle of Côtes du Rhône.

Vegetable stock from peelings and parings

I make an all-purpose vegetable stock from the remnants of several days of cooking—trimmings and peelings that might otherwise be wasted, which I hoard like a small treasure in an accessible container just inside my freezer. When I'm ready to make the stock, I inventory what I've saved by just looking at the frozen "lump" to see what vegetables I need more or less of. I add a *mirepoix* and a little seasoning to round out the flavor. In this way, intensity and usefulness are standardized.

Good items to collect for all-purpose stock include corn cobs and husks, snow-pea strings, tiny garlic cloves too small for peeling and chopping, tomato skins and seeds, eggplant skins, clean potato parings, lettuce, and bits of apple or pear. If you're not sure whether an ingredient will add a nice flavor, simmer it on its own in water and then taste it. If you like it, add it to the main stock pot.

Throw away woody stems, rough peelings, hard seeds, and blemished, gritty, or too-old pieces—remember you're going to eat this.—K.McL.

ALL-PURPOSE VEGETABLE STOCK

Makes 1 quart.

All your accumulated scraps, including, or plus, the following:

2 cups coarsely chopped onion
1 cup coarsely chopped celery
2 cups coarsely chopped crookneck squash or 2 corn cobs, cut in pieces
1¾ cups coarsely chopped carrot
1 cup seeded and coarsely chopped green pepper
1 cup coarsely chopped tomato
⅛ tsp. black peppercorns
⅛ tsp. coriander seed
⅛ tsp. fennel seed
10 stems parsley, cilantro, or thyme, or a combination
1 bay leaf
3 cloves garlic
3 quarts water

Bring to a boil, simmer approximately 1½ hours until reduced by ⅔, then strain.

A SPARKLING SAUCE

In this easy recipe, pink grapefruit is an unexpected ingredient that adds a lot of fruitiness and a nice bitter edge. Rice-wine vinegar adds another sweet-sharp note. (If I don't have rice-wine vinegar, I use a drop of honey and white-wine vinegar.)

In a large frying pan (preferably not cast iron), heat 2 tablespoons butter and sauté the garlic until golden. Add the vinegar and grapefruit juice, and simmer over high heat until reduced by half, 2 to 3 minutes. This is important, because if the liquid isn't reduced enough, the sauce will be too thin and taste acidic. Add the chopped tomato and the grapefruit pieces and cook over medium heat for about 5 minutes. Turn off the heat, add the cayenne and thyme, and then whisk in the remaining butter. Add salt to taste.

Kaysey McLoughlin has cooked professionally in fine restaurants for over a decade, in Chicago, New York, and New Orleans. She recently moved to Tennessee with her husband and her baby son, who is a third-generation vegetarian. ♦