

Cool Cucumbers, Served Hot

Enjoy one of the most common vegetables at its uncommon best

BY ERICA DE MANE





Cucumbers go well with all types of seafood. Freshly squeezed lemon juice in the warm shrimp salad above creates an acidic counterpoint to the clean taste of the cucumbers.

Roasting intensifies the flavor of almost any vegetable, including cucumbers, making them a perfect choice for gratins. I like to layer cucumbers with fresh fennel and a generous sprinkling of Parmesan cheese, as shown at left.

My first taste of warm cucumbers was a revelation. Their firm, toothsome texture was similar to a sautéed mushroom, while the clean, juicy flavor reminded me of a ripe melon, only not as sweet. As I began to experiment with cooking cucumbers in my own kitchen, I was delighted to discover how well they marry with the Italian ingredients I love. Like melon, cucumbers are a natural partner to prosciutto. Tomatoes, garlic, and vinegar all underscore a cucumber's delicate acidity. I like them, too, with fresh herbs, such as basil, parsley, and fennel sprigs. When cooked, cucumbers retain their freshness and add an acidic counterpoint to meals. They're perfect alongside light dishes, but because of their natural acidity, they provide a nice balance to rich meats as well, like roast duck or calf's liver.

It occurs to me that Americans treat vegetables with almost too much respect. Admonished since childhood to eat vegetables because they

will make us strong and improve our eyesight (no one ever mentions that vegetables simply taste good), we approach them like some kind of cultivated vitamin pill. Having been told that vegetables are most nutritious in their natural state, we hesitate to cook them too long, if at all. Sometimes we don't even peel them. So if undercooked vegetables are tasteless, and the skins are tough and often bitter, no one dares complain. Vegetables are good for you, we say, they're not *supposed* to taste good.

The French, on the other hand, never hesitate to peel, soak, salt, squeeze, blanch, or boil their vegetables. They'll do whatever is needed to bring out the best flavor and texture. Take cucumbers as a case in point. Americans eat them raw with their skins and seeds intact and then complain that cucumbers are bitter and difficult to digest. But in France, they peel cucumbers, strip out the seeds, sprinkle them with salt and vinegar to leach out the



Scoop out all the seeds in one clean stroke. To prepare a cucumber, peel it, trim the ends, halve it, and scrape out the seeds where the bitter juices tend to collect. The author uses a vegetable peeler to get rid of the skin, and then turns it upside down and uses the handle to remove the seeds.



Add flavor and remove water all at once. Toss sliced cucumbers with salt, vinegar, and a bit of sugar to draw out excess water that can dilute their flavor. Cucumbers treated this way will stay firm when cooked, while the marinade adds its own delicious touch of tartness.

moisture, rinse them, and then cook them and season them well. The result is a delicious and delicate-flavored vegetable almost unknown to Americans.

HEAT ENHANCES A CUCUMBER'S NATURAL SWEETNESS

Sautéing is perhaps the best technique for cooking cucumbers. It brings out their natural sweetness, and because the cucumbers cook quickly, they retain some of their original texture. Many cookbooks suggest blanching cucumbers before sautéing, but I find this unnecessary—it only leaches out flavor. In fact, boiling is never a good way to cook cucumbers, and neither is slow stewing, which does nothing but diminish their flavor. Roasting, however, locks in taste, as it does with many vegetables, so cucumbers make wonderful gratins. When seeded, they have a boat shape that makes them perfect for stuffing. *Larousse Gastronomique*, the encyclopedia of classic French cooking, suggests stuffing cucumbers with duxelles (sautéed diced mushrooms), wrapping them in bacon, and baking them in a slow oven.

Cucumbers' high water content does pose a problem when cooking with them. If the excess water isn't leached out beforehand, it can dilute a cucumber's subtle flavor. I usually follow Julia Child's advice of marinating seeded, raw cucumbers in salt, vinegar, and a bit of sugar before cooking. Not only does it rid cucumbers of excess water, but the marinade also adds a delicious bit of tartness to their flavor.

WHAT'S THE BEST VARIETY FOR COOKING?

The most common cucumber in this country is a thick-skinned, rather short variety with a watery inner core of seeds. I think its flavor holds up better than other varieties when cooked. Look for dark green ones with none of the yellow streaks that indicate aging. Choose firm, smallish cucumbers; the larger ones can be tough. In the supermarket, these cucumbers are usually waxed, a grower's trick to retain humidity and lengthen shelf life. The wax is

nontoxic, of course, but it can cause pesticides to cling to the vegetable's surface, so I remove the skin or scrub it vigorously before eating. European hothouse cucumbers, sometimes more than a foot long, are also available in many grocery stores. Hothouse cucumbers are almost seedless and have thin, light green skins. Grown here, they don't have that slight trace of bitterness found in the more common varieties, but because their flavor is so mild, it tends to fade when cooked. Stubby Kirby cucumbers taste a little like watermelon rind to me. You can use them for cooking, but once you remove all the seeds, there isn't much left. Kirbys are best reserved for pickling.

Store cucumbers in a cool, moist environment of 40° to 50°F. Refrigerate them in plastic bags and they'll stay fresh for about a week, depending on how old they were when purchased. Bitterness tends to collect in the ends and in the seeds, so be sure to trim a half inch at either end and scrape out the seeds. Salting only pulls out excess water; it doesn't make cucumbers less bitter.

CUCUMBER & FENNEL GRATIN

Blanching the fennel before baking makes it more tender and toothsome in the finished dish. *Serves four.*

2 medium cucumbers, peeled, seeded, and sliced thin

Salt

Juice from ½ lemon

1 large fennel bulb, cored, sliced thin, and blanched for

2 min. in abundant, lightly salted water

3 Tbs. butter, melted

Freshly ground black pepper

½ cup freshly grated Parmesan cheese

Toss the cucumbers with about ½ tsp. salt and the lemon juice and let drain in a colander about 30 min. Rinse and pat dry.

Heat the oven to 350°F. In a shallow baking dish, combine the cucumber and fennel slices. Pour in the melted butter and season with salt and pepper. Toss well.

Bake uncovered, tossing occasionally, until the vegetables are tender, about 30 min. Sprinkle with the grated Parmesan. Return to the oven and bake until the cheese is melted and just starting to brown, about 5 min. longer. Serve immediately.

WARM CUCUMBER & SHRIMP SALAD

Boldly flavored with capers, garlic, and basil, this salad makes a refreshing main dish. Serve it in smaller portions for a first course. *Serves four.*

FOR THE DRESSING:

1 tsp. fresh lemon juice
Salt and freshly ground black pepper
2 Tbs. extra-virgin olive oil

FOR THE SALAD:

1 large cucumber, peeled, seeded, and sliced thin
1 Tbs. mild white-wine vinegar, such as champagne or rice
1 tsp. sugar
Salt
1 Tbs. olive oil
4 thin slices pancetta (unsmoked Italian bacon), chopped fine
1 lb. medium shrimp, peeled and deveined, tails intact
1 clove garlic, minced
1/3 cup chopped fresh basil
1 Tbs. Italian capers, rinsed
Pinch cayenne
Juice of 1/2 large lemon
Freshly ground black pepper
1 bunch arugula (about 4 cups, loosely packed)

For the dressing—Combine the lemon juice, salt, and pepper and whisk until the salt dissolves. Add the olive oil and whisk until well combined.

For the salad—In a small bowl, toss the cucumber slices with the vinegar, sugar, and about 1/2 tsp. salt. Let stand at least 30 min. Drain and pat dry.

In a large frying pan, heat the olive oil over medium-low

heat. Add the pancetta and cook until it has rendered its fat and has just started to brown, 8 to 10 min. Increase the heat to medium, add the shrimp and garlic, and cook briefly, just until the shrimp starts to turn pink, about 1 min. Add the cucumber and sauté until the shrimp is cooked through, about 1 min. longer. Remove the pan from the heat. Add the basil, capers, cayenne, and lemon juice. Taste for seasoning and add salt and pepper as needed.

Toss the arugula with the dressing and arrange on a serving platter. Spoon the shrimp and cucumbers on top. Serve immediately.

SWORDFISH WITH CUCUMBER & RED PEPPER A SCAPECE

The cucumber *scapece* (pronounced ah SKE-pah-CHAY) can be served with other fish besides swordfish, and it makes a refreshing sauce for grilled chicken or pork, too. *Serves four.*

FOR THE CUCUMBER A SCAPECE:

1 medium cucumber, peeled, seeded, and diced
Salt
2 Tbs. olive oil
1 small onion, diced
2 cloves garlic, minced
1 large red bell pepper, roasted, peeled, seeded, and diced
Pinch cayenne
Pinch cinnamon
1 tsp. sugar
1 Tbs. white-wine vinegar
5 sprigs fresh mint, leaves chopped; more whole sprigs for decoration

(Ingredient list continues)

A favorite Italian method of preserving vegetables, called a *scapece*, combines cucumbers with sugar, vinegar, and fresh mint. The result is wonderfully tart and just a bit sweet, without tasting excessively "pickled"—the perfect complement to swordfish steaks.





FOR THE FISH:

2 Tbs. unsalted butter
4 swordfish steaks, about 4 oz. each
Salt

Toss the cucumber slices with about ½ tsp. salt and let drain in a colander at least 20 min.

In a large frying pan, heat the olive oil over medium-high heat. Toss in the onion and cook until just starting to brown, about 10 min. Add the garlic and cook about 1 min. longer. Stir in the cucumber slices and cook to release their perfume, about 3 min. Stir in the roasted red pepper, the cayenne, cinnamon, sugar, vinegar, and salt to taste. Cook until the liquid has evaporated and the sugar begins to caramelize, 3 to 5 min. Add the chopped mint leaves. Transfer to a bowl.

In the same frying pan, melt the butter over medium-high heat. Sprinkle the swordfish steaks with salt and put them in the pan. Cook until browned, about 5 min. Turn the fish over and continue cooking until done, about 3 min. longer. If there's excess oil in the pan, drain some of it off.

Return the cucumber sauce to the pan to heat it through and to absorb the swordfish cooking juices. Spoon the cucumber *a scapece* over the swordfish steaks and decorate with fresh mint leaves, if you like. Serve immediately.

SAUTEED CUCUMBERS WITH PROSCIUTTO & CREAM

Serve these delectable cucumbers as a side dish with chops or roasted meats. *Serves four.*

3 medium cucumbers, peeled, seeded, and cut in medium slices
1 tsp. white-wine vinegar
½ tsp. sugar
Salt
2 Tbs. unsalted butter
2 thin slices prosciutto, cut into thin strips
½ cup heavy cream (preferably not ultrapasteurized)
Freshly ground black pepper
4½ tsp. chopped flat-leaf parsley

In a small bowl, toss the cucumbers with the vinegar, sugar, and a bit of salt. Let sit about 30 min. Drain well and pat dry.

In a large sauté pan, melt the butter over medium heat. When frothing, add the cucumbers and toss well. Sauté until the cucumbers are tender and begin to color slightly, 5 to 10 min. Add the prosciutto and the cream and heat through. Let the cream bubble for a minute to thicken slightly. Taste for seasoning and add salt and pepper. Toss with the parsley and serve immediately.

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Cream and prosciutto make a lean vegetable rich and savory. You can leave out the prosciutto and cream, if you like, and add just a squirt of lemon juice for a simpler dish. Another good variation is substituting sliced wild mushrooms for the prosciutto, with or without the cream.