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Passion for Parsley

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We toss a sprig aside unceremoniously before digging into our chops or chicken. We sprinkle it thoughtlessly on pasta, eggs, hors d'oeuvres or any dish that needs a little color.

For many North American cooks, parsley isn't an essential part of cooking. It is an extra, an embellishment, most often relegated to the bottom of the ingredient list and the vegetable drawer.

But savvy chefs know that almost everywhere else in the world, parsley is a staple, valued for its snappy, herbaceous, almost citrusy flavor.

"Parsley, rather than being a mere garnish, is a central flavoring element in Middle Eastern cuisine," says Jessica Prentice, a chef and director of education for CUESA, the Center for Urban Education about Sustainable Agriculture, the organization that oversees the San Francisco Ferry Plaza Farmer's Market.

Parsley appears as a main ingredient in tabbouleh, the classic Middle Eastern salad, and Prentice recommends using chopped parsley to perk up homemade or store-bought hummus.

Parsley is always used in a bouquet garni to flavor stocks, soups and stews. Also, a versatile sauces of chopped parsley, garlic, oil and often lemon and breadcrumbs pop up all over the world, going by the name persillade in France, chimichurri in Argentina, and gremolata in Italy.

These zesty sauces are often used to brighten the rich, robust flavors of plain grilled steaks, meat and vegetable stews, braised lamb or veal shanks or roasted rabbit.

Cooks who really love parsley find that if they don't have fresh parsley in their refrigerator, something is missing from their cooking.

"I love parsley," says Prentice, "I use it in bean and grain salads, and anywhere I use garlic."

"The flavor is very green—slightly bitter, slightly biting, a bit sweet and very savory. I'll even use it as a substitute for a salad when I'm rushed."

Of the two most common varieties of parsley—curly and flat-leaf Italian— the Italian is far superior for culinary use. It has a more pronounced, complex flavor. Chris Rossi, chef and owner of Citron

restaurant in Oakland, incorporates Italian parsley into a variety of dishes. "It's kind of like salt. We use in almost everything, but you'll never see a sprig of parsley as a plate garnish."

Rossi does use parsley along with other herbs to infuse extra virgin olive oil for use in vinaigrettes and to decoratively finish plates with its neon green color.

Rossi also makes a mixed herb salad using parsley and an assortment of other herbs, such as tarragon and chives, along with salad greens. "I love the way parsley, combined with other herbs, looks," says Rossi. "It gives visual height to the plate, and tastes fresh picked out of the garden. It provides that last minute, refreshing spark to the plate, and complements the richness of the other ingredients."

A little salad of fresh parsley leaves can be a nutritious way to dress up a piece of grilled fish. Simply toss whole Italian parsley leaves with shaved fennel or slivered radish, dress it with a squeeze of lemon, a drizzle of extra virgin olive oil and some fresh black pepper, and serve it right on top of the fish.

Parsley added to mushrooms sautéed in wine or sherry just as they come off the heat, elevates and enhances the gentle earthiness of the mushrooms, adding complex layers to this humble side dish.

"Seared mushrooms with parsley is a great winter pizza topping when combined with goat cheese," says Prentice, "It's a good alternative to tomato sauce when tomatoes aren't in season."

One of the most versatile ways to use parsley is in pesto. "People want pesto year round," Prentice says, "so why not make parsley pesto when basil isn't in season?" Parsley pesto brightens the flavor of hearty winter vegetable soups. It is also great on pasta or fish. Its intensely green flavor melds beautifully with rich, silky fish and the smoky flavors of the grill.

Prentice often chooses parsley as an alternative to celery. The two vegetables are botanical relatives. There's even an extremely uncommon variety of parsley called Neapolitan, or celery leafed parsley, which is grown for its stalks, and is eaten like celery.

"Parsley is a diminutive relative of the celery," says farmer Andy Griffin of Mariquita Farms in Watsonville Ca. "There is no reason to remove the stems. Just chop the stems up finely with the leaves and use them together. Like celery, the stems are where most of the flavor is."

Griffin has grown all types of parsley. In addition to Italian, parsley, he grows Hamburg parsley, a rare variety grown for its sweet, earthy, parsnip-like roots.

Because demand for parsley root has been on the rise, Griffin has been growing more than he ever has before.

"Chefs were more excited by parsley root than I thought and bought a lot of it this winter," he says.

Griffin has also been experimenting with producing a more constant year-round supply of the winter root vegetables.

Hamburg parsley root looks like small parsnips attached to a bunch of Italian parsley. The leaves and stems can be separated from the roots and used just like a regular bunch of parsley. The roots taste like a cross between turnips and celery root, but with an unmistakable parsley flavor.

Parsley root can be grated and used raw in salads, roasted like carrots or potatoes, or added to any stew where rutabagas or turnips are appropriate. Griffin likes to boil and mash parsley root to add a celery note to his mashed potatoes.

Mariquita Farms sells most of its parsley root to restaurants, although Griffin's farmers' market shoppers will often purchase it by mistake instead of parsnips, and then become fans after learning the root's true identity.

This underused vegetable deserves wider recognition, but it can be difficult to find. Farmers' markets and grocery stores with large produce sections, such as Berkeley Bowl, are among the best places to look.

It's easy to be enthusiastic about parsley. This seemingly demure herb can be a culinary powerhouse. Pick up a bunch and try some of the following recipes. Use it generously and thoughtfully, and you might just fall in love with more than its bright green color.

Persillade

This simple French condiment of parsley, garlic and (sometimes) breadcrumbs, is commonly used to stuff and encrust a leg of lamb prior to roasting, but it's also great sprinkled on lamb stew, grilled fish, steamed clams, bean soups, scrambled eggs, pasta, rice or roasted potatoes.

Makes about 1 1/4 cups (keeps covered in the refrigerator for about 1 week)

2 cups packed Italian parsley leaves
4 teaspoons finely chopped garlic
4 tablespoons fine bread crumbs
2 tablespoons olive oil
Salt to taste
Freshly ground pepper to taste

Finely chop parsley leaves. In a small bowl, mix parsley with garlic and breadcrumbs. Add olive oil, salt and pepper, and mix.

Chimichurri Sauce

This Argentinean green sauce is traditionally served over grilled beef. I love it on flank steak or a juicy rib eye, but its fresh, bright, tangy flavor also pairs well with roasted pork and grilled chicken or fish. You can add a dollop to vegetable soup, mix it with mayonnaise for a great artichoke dip, spread it on a chicken, turkey, or vegetable sandwich or stir it into cooked rice or mashed potatoes.

Makes about 1 cup (keeps covered in the refrigerator about 5 days)

1 cup finely chopped Italian parsley
4 teaspoons finely chopped garlic
1 tablespoon chopped shallots
1/8 cup finely chopped fresh (not dried) oregano
2 tablespoons sherry vinegar
1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice
1/4 teaspoon hot paprika or cayenne
3/4 cup mildly flavored olive oil (or half olive oil and half mild vegetable oil)
1/2 teaspoon kosher salt
Freshly ground pepper to taste

Place all ingredients except oil in a food processor or blender. Process ingredients for a few seconds to blend them. Then, with the motor running, slowly pour in the oil in a thin stream. Once all of the oil is incorporated, taste for salt and pepper.

Moroccan Tuna and Chickpea Salad

This salad is quick and easy and utilizes ingredients commonly found in the avid cook's pantry. It makes a fine side dish to accompany any simple chicken or fish supper, but my favorite use for this salad is as a picnic or brown bag lunch. It holds well, tastes great cold or room temperature.

Makes 3 cups (serves 3 or 4 as a side dish)

1 15 ounce can chickpeas, rinsed and drained well
5 1/2 –6 ounces good quality canned tuna packed in oil (Italian or Spanish varieties are dependably good)
2 celery ribs, cut in half lengthwise, and then sliced thinly on the bias
3 tablespoons lemon juice
1 teaspoon sherry vinegar
3 tablespoons olive oil
2 teaspoons harissa paste in a tube (or to taste) (can be found in ethnic and specialty markets)
2/3 cup finely chopped Italian parsley
1/2 teaspoon Kosher salt (or to taste)
Freshly ground black pepper to taste

Place all the ingredients in a bowl. Mix well and taste for salt and spice. Serve immediately or within two days.

Parsley Root Bisque

Serves 6-8 as a first course

This is the very soup that introduced me to the considerable charms of parsley root. Try it and see how compelling this humble seeming root can be.

2 tablespoons mild vegetable oil
2 cups chopped yellow onions
2 pounds parsley root, peeled and cut into 1 inch chunks
8 cups chicken stock
1 (2 inch) piece cinnamon stick
2 teaspoons Kosher salt (or to taste)
Freshly ground black pepper
1 cup heavy cream

1. In a large soup pot over low heat, warm the oil. Add the onions, cover, and cook, stirring occasionally, until the onions are soft and translucent (ten minutes). Add the parsley root and stir to coat. Add 1/2 cup of stock, the cinnamon stick and salt and pepper. Cover and cook, stirring occasionally, until the parsley root is almost tender, about 20 minutes. Add the remaining stock and the cream, and simmer, uncovered, for an additional 20 minutes. Cool slightly. Remove cinnamon stick.
2. In a food processor or blender, process the soup until smooth and pass through a fine mesh strainer. Return to pan and heat over low heat until hot. Serve immediately.
3. This soup was served with a light sprinkling of toasted and ground sweet spices like star anise, cinnamon and cloves, along with a drizzle of honey. It would also be great

with thin slivers of Prosciutto or crunchy croutons.

Parsley Oil from Citron Restaurant

Chef Chris Rossi of Citron Restaurant shared his recipe for parsley oil, which he uses to decorate with its bright green color, and in vinaigrettes. Drizzle the oil over soups or grilled fish or make a simple vinaigrette using 1 part mild vinegar, such as champagne, and 3 parts parsley oil along with shallots and salt and pepper. Use the vinaigrette over winter greens with goat cheese or grilled chicken or fish.

Makes 1 cup

- 1 large bunch Italian parsley (about 2 cups loosely packed leaves)
- 1 tablespoon each chopped, thyme, tarragon and basil
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1 clove garlic
- 1 cup mildly flavored olive oil (it's best to use an oil with low acidity to keep the herbs bright green)

Place all the ingredients except the oil in a blender. It is best to use a blender and not a food processor for this recipe. Process the herbs until they are chopped, stopping and pushing down with a wooden spoon occasionally. With the blender running, slowly drizzle in the oil in a thin stream. Once all of the oil is added, continue processing for about a minute to get a very smooth texture. Let the mixture sit for 5 minutes. Strain the parsley oil through a fine mesh sieve fitted with cheesecloth. Will keep in the refrigerator for about 2 weeks.

