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Attack of the Killer Squash

Sometime very soon, anyone who has been growing summer squash is going to have a whole lot of overgrown squash taking over their garden. Once squash get going they tend to grow faster than most people can keep up with. So what does one do with garden full of overgrown, not quite so attractive squash?

Everyone likes pesto, so how about *Summer Squash Pesto*. This is basically a standard basil pesto with steamed squash blended into it. I client of mine requested this just last week and I was very pleased with the result. The squash mellows out the intense flavors of basil pesto and gives the resulting puree a lightness of sorts. This recipe is wonderful alone with pasta, but with a little ingenuity it can be turned into a *Summer Pesto Frittata* or served as the filling for a *Zucchini Pesto Calzone*.

Summer Squash Pesto

1/2 lb summer squash, roughly chopped
3 cloves garlic
1/2 cup pine nuts, freshly roasted
2 med bunches of basil
1/4 cup freshly grated parmesan cheese
1 tbsp lemon juice
1/4 - 1/2 cup olive oil
salt and pepper



Fill a medium saucepan with about 1/2 inch of water and bring it to a boil. Then reduce to a simmer, add the squash, and cover. Cook until the squash is aromatic and soft. Meanwhile mince the garlic in a food processor and then add the pine nuts, followed by the basil, parmesan, lemon juice and olive oil. When the squash is done pour it through a strainer and rinse it with cold water to cool it off. Then add the squash to the pesto and blend along with salt and pepper to taste until combined. Makes 2-3 cups.

Another great use are *Zucchini Fritters*. Because the squash is grated, one can utilize those football sized squash that are dying to be picked. This recipe is more or less a potato pancake made with squash instead of potatoes. All of the traditional favorites will go well with these tasty morsels. In my house it is always sour cream and apple sauce, but for those of you that

want to get a little fancy you might want to try them with *Spiced Creme Fraiche and Tomato Jam*. The following is Alice Waters' recipe, it serves as a great foundation for many variations. Try adding different herbs and spices or substituting different citrus zest. For example, the addition of fresh oregano, dill and paprika, or ground cumin, cilantro and lime zest, or even just some fresh basil. Hey, you got plenty of squash to experiment with right?

Zucchini Fritters

1 lb green zucchini
salt and pepper
1 clove garlic
1 small bunch chives
zest of 4 lemons
1 tbsp potato starch
1 egg
2 tbsp olive oil



Grate the zucchini and salt them. Let stand for 30 minutes in a colander. Squeeze the zucchini dry with your hands or wring it out in a towel. Peel and chop the garlic fine along with about 1 tbsp of the chives. In a large bowl combine the zucchini with the garlic, chives, lemon zest, potato starch, and the egg, lightly beaten. Heat the olive oil in a nonstick pan over medium heat. For each fritter pour a generous tablespoonful of the batter into the pan. They will look like little pancakes. Turn them over after about 3 minutes, or when golden. Cook 2 minutes on the other side. Drain on paper towels. Serves 4.

If these recipes don't inspire you to start cooking up the summer squash, maybe the following list of health benefits will. The pulp and seeds of summer squash can inhibit the development of viruses and carcinogens in the digestive tract, minimizing the risk of stomach and intestinal cancers. Summer squash has also been known to strengthen the immune system, prevent birth defects, fight depression, and cut the risk of lung cancer.

For more info on summer squash and great recipes that utilize them, don't hesitate to contact The Educated Vegetable for a private cooking class. Recently called "The Vegetable Assassin" by a local caterer, Micah Elconin, is serious about creating inventive vegetarian dishes. Don't miss out.

Educated Tips: Melons

When the weather heats up in the peak of summer many of us start craving melons. There is really nothing more refreshing than a sweet juicy melon. However, like most produce, the difference between a good and bad melon is significant. I like the good melons so I decided to start asking questions. Without hesitation I turned to my favorite produce purveyor Jennifer Walsh. Jennifer and her husband, Jim, are the owners of Mesa Produce, a local produce stand (well actually it's a garage, but whatever...). They sell almost exclusively organic locally grown produce. Jennifer and Jim have taught me much about the importance of local and thus seasonal produce. Yes, I do most of my dry goods shopping at Lazy Acres, but I always am happy to visit Jennifer and Jim (literally one block away) to pay about 1/2 as much for produce that is far superior.

Tell us about the different varieties of melon available and their general time frames...

Melons like heat! More specifically, hot nights. If the mercury stays on 100 for too many days in a row then the melons 'burn up'. The watermelons will become soft before they are picked or ripen too quickly leaving them tasteless and not sweet. Cantaloupes can crack. This decreases their shelf life considerably, and the whole softness and lack of flavor is also a problem. Honeydews are the same story. June, July, and August are peak times, but I've seen as late as September and as early as late May produce some succulent fruit. We try to have 5 or more varieties in stock during peak time. Crenshaw, orange flesh honeydew, rocky sweet, cantaloupe, green honeydew, Persian musk and crunchy are a few of our more popular ones. Yellow watermelon, canary, gold honeydew, sharlyn, and ambrosia (a local treat) pop up from time to time as well. Local melons should be from Santa Ynez, or other warm places. Coastal areas just don't have enough heat to get the sugars up.

What should one look for when buying a melon?

Each melon is different. Your nose should do most of the selecting. Cantaloupes should have a thick mesh and sweet scent. Pushing on the ends of the melons is a horrible thing to do. Whoever promoted this theory was looking to unload some soft fruit. If a cantaloupe is too firm and under-ripe, but one, two, or three people come along and gab their thumbs into its delicate ends, it will become soft, instantly. This does not mean that the cantaloupe suddenly ripened; it means that it is a bruised under-ripe tasteless melon. All you should do is smell the musk melon. If you get a subtle whiff of sweetness, viola! You have a ripe melon. Now some of us prefer soft fruit, so the melon should not be a candidate for softball practice. No thumbs please. Also another thing to look out for are lumps. Cantaloupe do not have a natural wax, therefore they will become imperfect as they slowly ripen off the vine.

This leads to our next melon, the honeydew. As a honeydew ripens its skin becomes increasingly waxy. Yes, it feels just like a candle. You can even use your fingernail to write your name on the skin. The melon should have a sweet smell and a warm color tone. Honeydews can be pretty firm to your hand and still be soft and sweet on the inside. No thumbs! One major difference between cantaloupes and honeydews are their stems. Honeydews have them and cantaloupes don't. Never



purchase a cantaloupe with a piece of stem still stuck to it. This melon was harvested too early. The cantaloupe will separate from the vine when it is ready to be picked. But honeydews are cut not plucked. Their stems will be intact and as they ripen a separation will start. I know of a local farmer who always planted his cantaloupe on a hillside. Every morning he would gently tap the melon. If it was ready the vine would let go and the melon would roll to the bottom of the field. He just picked them up at the bottom where his boxes were waiting.

Now watermelon selection is a lesson in music. Ever played the drums? When a drum head is too loose the drum sounds flat with the drum-stick not bouncing up too well. When the drum head is too tight, the sound is very sharp. The vibration is too short or quick to stop. But a well tuned drum has a steady vibration and you can drum roll till the cows come home. Watermelons are the same. When the melon is filled with juice they will vibrate when slapped. I like to set them on the counter, pound them with my fist, while my other hand gently feels the vibration. Most commonly the sound is described as hollow empty. I like to say "in-tune". All this beating up on the defenseless watermelon has only told you one thing....how juicy will it be. Sweetness is almost impossible to detect without pulling out a knife. My only suggestion is the color of its belly. A melon left on the vine long enough to suck up some summer sweetness should have a yellow underbelly. White is a sure sign of immaturity. Unfortunately, this is not fool proof. So lets cut open a few and eat just the "hearts" (centers). Two things to avoid are soft and lightweight watermelons. They will be pithy inside.

Any favorite preparations?

As you know I am a Texan. We like our watermelons with plenty of salt and our cantaloupes with both salt and pepper. Nothing better than a sweet juicy melon slices as a side dish during supper. But I have been known to fill a cantaloupe half with vanilla ice-cream, leaving off the salt and pepper of course, for desert. Micah, you being a fancy chef and all would probably like one of those cold melon soups. YUCK!!!

Any other secrets that you want to divulge?

The biggest secret is about cantaloupes. Their sponge like skin can grow bacteria very well. When a knife is pushed through the skin it can contaminate the flesh. Yep, that's right, salmonella is too common. Previously Mexican cantaloupes were banned from this country for a period of two years. Only one grower was given permission to import during the off season. They dug their own well and tested water purity frequently. Cases of food poisonings decreased substantially during this time. If you are uncertain of the cantaloupes origin, then wash the skin with soapy water before cutting. And don't eat pre-sliced. Packaged food is not a prize winning idea.

If you have never been to Mesa Produce, you are missing out on a true Santa Barbara treasure. Mesa Produce is located at 2036 Cliff Dr on the corner of Cliff and Camino Calma.