

All About Brussels Sprouts

Members of the cabbage family, brussels sprouts grow on long, curving stalks as small, tightly closed heads that resemble tiny cabbages. The tops of the stalks have spreading leaves, making these impressive-looking plants when in the field. Brussels sprouts grow best in cool, coastal regions and are in season in the fall and winter. They may be boiled, braised or steamed, or parboiled and then sautéed.

Selecting: Buy fresh brussels sprouts that are heavy for their size and bright green, with leaves clinging tightly to the heads. Avoid any with yellowing leaves, which indicate aging. They may be pale green at the base. Check that the stem ends are freshly cut. Also avoid soft heads with loose leaves. Small heads, about 1 inch in diameter, are usually preferable to large ones, which can be almost twice that size. If the large heads are dark green and firm, however, they should taste good.

Storing: Store in plastic bags or the original packaging in the refrigerator for up to 4 days, but try to eat them as soon as possible after purchase. To freeze, rinse and dry the heads and blanch for 4 to 5 minutes, depending on their size. Then refresh in cold water, drain and freeze in sturdy freezer bags or rigid containers.

Roasted Brussels Sprouts with Bacon, Caramelized Onions and Sage

In a large fry pan over low heat, warm the 2 Tbs. olive oil. Add the onions and a large pinch of kosher salt. Cook, stirring occasionally, until the onions are sweet and caramelized, about 30 minutes. Remove from the heat.

Meanwhile, bring a large pot of water to a boil over high heat. Add kosher salt and the brussels sprouts, and cook until bright green and just tender, about 5 minutes. Remove the brussels sprouts from the water and let cool. Cut some of the larger sprouts in half but leave the smaller ones whole.

In a medium fry pan over medium heat, cook the bacon, stirring occasionally, until it is crisp on all sides, about 5 minutes. Pour off all but about 1 Tbs. of the fat. Add the halved brussels sprouts, cut side down, to the pan and cook over medium heat, without stirring, until the sprouts are tender and nicely caramelized. Add the remaining sprouts to the pan and cook until browned, about 5 minutes. Stir in the caramelized onions and sage. Add a few drops of lemon juice and sprinkle with sea salt and red pepper flakes. Drizzle with olive oil and serve immediately. Serves 4.

Adapted from a recipe by Katharine Marsh, The Breslin, New York City

Ingredients for Roasted Brussels Sprouts with Bacon, Caramelized Onions and Sage

2 Tbs. extra-virgin olive oil, plus more for drizzling

2 white onions, thinly sliced (about 2 cups)

Kosher salt, to taste

1 lb. brussels sprouts, trimmed and tough outer leaves removed

4 oz. slab bacon, cut into medium cubes (about ¼ cup)

5 fresh sage leaves, finely chopped

Fresh lemon juice, to taste

Flaky sea salt, such as Maldon, to taste

Crushed red pepper flakes, to taste

Minnesota Wild Rice Stuffing

In a saucepan over medium heat, warm the olive oil. Add the garlic and shallot and cook, stirring occasionally, until fragrant and tender, about 3 minutes. Add the broth, increase the heat to medium-high and bring to a simmer. Continue to simmer until the broth is reduced to 3 cups, about 10 minutes. Stir in the wild rice. Cover, reduce the heat to low and cook until the grains are tender and begin to pop, 30 to 40 minutes. Drain the rice, reserving the cooking liquid. Set aside.

Preheat an oven to 350°F.

In a large sauté pan over medium heat, melt the 4 Tbs. butter. Add the onion and celery and cook, stirring occasionally, until translucent, 6 to 8 minutes. Stir in the parsley, sage, thyme, dried cherries and bread cubes. Stir in the wild rice along with ¾ cup of the reserved cooking liquid.

Transfer the stuffing mixture to an 8-inch square baking dish and cover with a sheet of buttered aluminum foil, buttered side down. Bake for 30 minutes. Remove from the oven and let rest, covered, for 5 minutes. Remove the foil, sprinkle the hazelnuts over the stuffing and serve immediately. Serves 8.

Adapted from a recipe by Sara Johannes, WP24, Los Angeles

Stuffing Safety

If you are baking the stuffing inside your turkey, follow these guidelines:

- Prepare stuffing just before roasting. This way, warm stuffing can be put into the bird and directly into the oven. A made-ahead and refrigerated stuffing will take longer to cook. If you do make it ahead, warm it before filling the bird.
- Never put stuffing into a bird the day before (or even several hours before) roasting. The warm stuffing can breed bacteria from the bird.
- Cook stuffings to 165°F on an instant-read thermometer. If it is not done and the bird is, transfer the stuffing to a baking dish and bake until it tests done.
- If adding meat to a stuffing, cook it thoroughly first.

Ingredients for Minnesota Wild Rice Stuffing

2 Tbs. olive oil

1 Tbs. minced garlic

2 Tbs. finely chopped shallot

4 cups turkey or chicken broth

1 cup wild rice

4 Tbs. (½ stick) unsalted butter, plus more for buttering foil

1 cup diced yellow onion

½ cup diced celery

1 Tbs. chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley

1 tsp. chopped fresh sage

1 tsp. chopped fresh thyme

½ cup dried cherries, roughly chopped (about 2½ oz.)

2 cups bread cubes (½-inch dice), toasted

¼ cup hazelnuts, toasted and roughly chopped (about 1¼ oz.)

Mashed Potato Techniques

Cooking the Potatoes: Boiling whole potatoes with their skins on keeps the potatoes from becoming waterlogged, improving the texture of the final dish, and helps to prevent nutrients from being lost in the water. If you want to boil peeled potatoes, cut them into small cubes so that they cook quickly and are exposed to the water as briefly as possible.

Ricing: A method of making a fluffy mash or puree, ricing is most commonly used for preparing extremely fine mashed potatoes. A ricer looks like a small pot with holes in the bottom and a plunger attached to the rim. Cooked potatoes are put in the ricer, which is positioned over a warmed bowl. The potatoes are then forced through the perforations with the plunger, which turns them into soft rice-like kernels. Finally, hot milk or cream and butter is gently stirred into the riced potatoes. The resulting texture is very refined and smooth. You can also rice other sturdy vegetables, such as carrots, parsnips or celery root.

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Technique Class: Sides and Stuffings

While the turkey may take center stage, for many of us, it's the side dishes that steal the show. When it comes to the holiday feast, no menu items are more crucial than the side dishes. You'll probably want mashed potatoes to cozy up to the turkey under a ladleful of gravy, and there should be sweet potatoes or yams to provide golden contrast. The moist and savory bread-based dressings, or stuffings, are many people's favorite part of this festive meal. And last, but certainly not least, are the vegetables and relishes that play an important role in balancing the menu, providing bright color and a pleasant crunch. Whatever your menu choices may be, a bit of each is nice, and there should be a generous array.

All About Potatoes

The Incas of Peru gave us this ancient vegetable. Not only did they cultivate more varieties than we now enjoy, but they also freeze-dried them at high altitudes for long keeping. The potato, a member of the nightshade family and once considered exotic by Europeans, is today a symbol of normality and comfort. Easy to grow and to store, the starchy, faintly earthy-tasting potato is compatible with many other foods and endlessly adaptable to various cooking methods.

Selecting: Most potato varieties are available year-round, although new potatoes may appear only in the spring and early summer and sporadically at other times. Choose firm specimens that are not blemished, wrinkled, tinged with green or cracked. The buds, commonly called eyes, of the potatoes should not have sprouted.

Storing: Store potatoes in a cool, dark place with good air circulation for up to 2 weeks. Do not refrigerate and do not store in the same bin with onions. These vegetables together produce gases that cause rapid spoilage. New potatoes have a much shorter shelf life than other potatoes. To make the most of their fresh, sweet flavor and texture, use them within 2 or 3 days of purchase.

Potato Varieties

There are three basic types: starchy or mealy, waxy and all-purpose.

- Starchy or mealy potatoes, such as russets, are best for baking and mashing because they cook up dry and fluffy but do not hold their shape well.
- Waxy potatoes, such as red or white potatoes, are low in starch. Use them for potato salads and other recipes where you want them to hold their shape and are not relying on their starch content to thicken a soup or sauce.
- All-purpose potatoes have a medium starch content and are good for both uses. Yukon Golds are among the best known.

All About Sweet Potatoes

Another of the New World’s contributions to the world larder, the sweet potato has either yellow-brown skin and yellow flesh, or dark reddish or purplish skin and dark orange flesh. The latter is commonly known in the United States as a yam, although it is a different species from the true yam.

Selecting: Sweet potatoes are available year-round, but their true seasons are fall and winter. Choose firm, unblemished sweet potatoes without any breaks in their thin skin.

Storing: Sweet potatoes do not keep well. Store them in a cool, dark place, but plan to use them within a week or so.

Sweet Potato Gratin with Pecans

Either type of sweet potato—the red-skinned, orange-fleshed variety or the tan-skinned, meaty yellow ones sometimes sold as yams—can be used to make this gratin. The latter will produce a thicker, denser dish than the former, which will be thinner and creamier.

Preheat an oven to 350°F.

Spread the pecans in a single layer in a pie dish. Toast, stirring occasionally, until the nuts are fragrant and barely golden, 10 to 12 minutes. Remove from the oven and let cool. Increase the oven temperature to 400°F.

In a fry pan over medium-high heat, cook the prosciutto, stirring, until crisp, 2 to 3 minutes. Set aside.

Place the sweet potato slices in a single layer in the top pan of a double boiler set over boiling water. Cover and steam the potatoes until tender when pierced with a fork, 10 to 15 minutes. When the slices are cool enough to handle, peel them and transfer to a bowl. Using a fork or potato masher, mash the potatoes until nearly smooth. Add 1 Tbs. of the butter, the crème fraîche, salt and pepper and stir to blend. Stir in the prosciutto. Spread the sweet potato mixture in a shallow 1- to 1½-quart baking dish.

Coarsely chop the toasted pecans. Sprinkle the chopped pecans over the sweet potato mixture. Cut the remaining 1 Tbs. butter into bits and dot the top.

Bake until the butter has melted, the top has formed a lightly golden crust and the sweet potatoes are hot throughout, about 20 minutes. Serve immediately. Serves 6.

Adapted from Williams-Sonoma Essentials of Breakfast and Brunch, by Georgeanne Brennan, Elinor Klivans, Jordan Mackay and Charles Pierce (Oxmoor House, 2007).

All About Stuffing

For many people, the savory stuffing is the best part of any holiday feast, and the variations on this homey side dish are endless. To form the base of your stuffing (also known as dressing), choose from rustic country bread, corn bread, wild rice and even homemade biscuits. Then embellish your creation with meats, such as Italian sausage or crispy bacon, fresh or dried fruits, wild mushrooms and nuts. Chopped fresh herbs round out the flavors.

Chestnut and Cranberry Dressing

Cranberries needn’t be relegated only to the relish that accompanies the holiday feast. Here, tangy dried cranberries are combined with a traditional chestnut dressing that is also delicious served alongside roast pork, ham and, of course, turkey.

Preheat an oven to 350°F. Butter a 2¼- to 3-quart baking dish.

In a small saucepan over medium heat, warm the stock until steam starts to rise, 3 to 5 minutes. Remove from the heat and add the dried cranberries. Set aside.

In a large fry pan over medium heat, melt the butter. Add the onion, celery and carrot and sauté, stirring occasionally, until tender and translucent, 2 to 3 minutes. Using a slotted spoon, transfer to a bowl.

In the same pan over medium heat, sauté the sausage, stirring and crumbling with a fork, until lightly browned and cooked through, about 10 minutes. Using a slotted spoon, transfer the sausage to the bowl with the vegetables.

In a large bowl, stir the egg while slowly pouring in the stock and cranberries. Add the bread and toss until well blended. Let stand, stirring occasionally, until the stock is absorbed, 6 to 8 minutes. Add the vegetable-sausage mixture, the chestnuts, sage, thyme and parsley. Season with salt and pepper and stir to mix.

Transfer the stuffing mixture to the prepared baking dish. Bake until the dressing is browned and crispy, 45 to 50 minutes. Serves 10 to 12.

Williams-Sonoma Kitchen

Dressing or Stuffing?

Some people define dressing as stuffing that is cooked outside of the bird in a baking dish, although in many regions the two terms are interchangeable. The advantage to baking the dressing in a separate vessel is that it allows for faster roasting and more accurate timing of the turkey. When dressing is baked in a well-buttered dish, it acquires lots of crisp brown crust that contrasts deliciously with the rich moist interior.

Ingredients for Chestnut and Cranberry Dressing	
3 cups unsalted chicken stock	
1 cup dried cranberries	
4 Tbs. (½ stick) unsalted butter	Ingredients for Squash Puree with Brown Butter and Sage
1 yellow onion, chopped	3 lb. butternut squash, whole (or 2 lb. pre-cut cubes)
1 celery stalk, chopped	1 cup water
1 carrot, peeled and chopped	Salt, to taste
½ lb. bulk pork sausage	3 Tbs. unsalted butter
1 egg, lightly beaten	8 fresh sage leaves
1-lb. loaf country-style bread, crusts removed, cut into ½-inch pieces, toasted	Freshly ground pepper, to taste
2 cups prepared French chestnuts, halved	
2 Tbs. chopped fresh sage	
1 tsp. chopped fresh thyme	
2 Tbs. chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley	
Salt and freshly ground pepper, to taste	

All About Winter Squash

Both winter and summer squashes are members of the gourd family and are native to the Americas. Compared to summer squashes, winter squashes have a strong taste and dense texture (with the exception of the long strands of the spaghetti squash).

Squash may be baked whole or in halves, slices or cubes; or they may be cubed or sliced, then steamed or simmered and pureed if you like. Small winter squashes, such as acorns and golden nuggets, are the perfect size for halving, stuffing and baking. Large squashes, such as butternut, may be sliced and baked, or cut into pieces and then cooked and pureed. Sliced or cubed squash is also good in soups and stews or glazed and baked.

Selecting: Some winter squash varieties are available year-round, but the widest selection is found during fall and winter. Squashes should be firm and unblemished and feel heavy for their size.

Storing: Cut winter squashes may be kept in the refrigerator for up to 1 week; whole winter squashes may be kept for months in a cool, dark place.

Squash Puree with Brown Butter and Sage

Winter squash takes far less time to cook to the right consistency for mashing when you use a pressure cooker. Pre-cut butternut squash can often be found in the produce section of the grocery store. The flavors of brown butter and sage are the perfect accompaniment to turkey.

If using a whole squash, peel it and cut it into 2-inch cubes, discarding the seeds and strings. In a pressure cooker pot, combine the squash cubes and water and season lightly with salt. Lock the lid into place and cook on high pressure for 8 minutes. Quick-release the steam. When the pressure valve drops, remove the lid, tilting it away from your face to allow residual steam to escape.

Meanwhile, in a small saucepan over medium-low heat, melt the butter. When the butter bubbles at the edges and is foamy, add the sage leaves. Reduce the heat to low and continue to cook, swirling the pan occasionally, until the butter solids are browned and the sage leaves are crisp, about 5 minutes. Using a slotted spoon, transfer the sage to a small plate. Set the sage butter aside.

Drain the squash in a colander and transfer to a large bowl. Using a potato masher or the back of a large slotted spoon, mash the squash into a rough puree. Stir the sage butter into the mashed squash and season with salt and pepper. Divide the squash among serving plates and garnish each serving with a fried sage leaf or two, crumbling the leaves over each portion if desired. Serves 4 to 6.

Adapted from The Pressure Cooker Cookbook, by Tori Ritchie (Weldon Owen, Inc., 2010).