



Misty's View of Cooking: Earthy, Autumn Root Vegetables

have contestants doing virtually the same thing, cooking without recipes. Certainly, it helps to have a few fundamental skills in place before throwing 12 surprise ingredients together without warning. But the test of any cook's mettle comes down to applying common sense along with a thoughtful consideration of taste, texture, and time.

In your home kitchen **there is nothing stopping you from experimenting with food products** in your quest to understand what happens in a pot, pan or oven. Take advantage of the harvest season when everything is in abundance to create some original, seasonal culinary wonders!

Let's make the most of roots! That means carrots, parsnips, potatoes, turnip, rutabaga, and navet, a French white-and-purple turnip. And while squash, pumpkin and fennel aren't roots, they should be included in this list. The easiest and most current way to showcase these earthy, autumn products is to peel them, cut them into similar shapes and sizes so they cook at the same rate, toss them in a blend of fresh or dried herbs, salt and pepper and a good olive oil, and roast them at high heat until tender and caramelized. A medley of three or more root vegetables makes for a lovely side or main dish for your first oven-inspired meal of the season. I love to put the BBQ away as soon as there is a cold snap in the air, and fill my house with the scent of roasting seasonal products.

Another great way to use the same products is in a soup. Take the raw prepared roots, along with diced onions, add them to a sizzling olive-oil-and-butter mixture in a large pot, then turn down the heat to "sweat them" until the onions are tender and the roots are softening on the edges. Throw in a little thyme, cinnamon, allspice, cumin, ginger and your favourite hot sauce for a flavour accent that is reminiscent of pumpkin pie, and India!

Cover this entire mixture with water that rises about one inch above the vegetables. Then let your flavour-building efforts simmer until the root vegetables are tender. Finally, puree this gorgeous veggie stew with either a hand-held immersion blender or in small batches in a blender.

through experiencing a failure or a success.

A recipe written in a book will tell you to add this or that, but it cannot take into consideration the level of flavour that your initial products can give. At certain times of the year, a tomato is sweet, and other times may be sour; squash is

Moroccan tagine dishes make simple, delicious roasted vegetables look sensational.



PHOTOS: MIKE DAVIS

Return it all to a rinsed-out pot. Should your soup look too thick, simply add a touch of 35 per cent cream, which is a product that can be boiled, unlike milk products with less butterfat, and/or a little more water.

Finally, you are ready to finesse your product. First taste it for flavour. Next consider its texture. You are in control. Fix your product using your taste buds and your intuition. Perhaps it tastes good but not sensational. Try improving the flavour by adding a little more salt, unless it is already salty. Add a drizzle of honey or a few pinches of sugar to enhance the medley of flavours. In Thai cuisine and many others, **great tastes are a balance between sweet, salty, acidic and bitter.**

If you added too strong a concentration of spices and you think it tastes terrible, then be happy that **you were responsible for what you created** in the pot. Lesson learned. There is no better way to improve one's cooking than

rich in the fall but weak in flavour and texture in the spring.

Also, recipes do not tend to let one **learn about cooking in a responsive, bio-feedback sort of way.** If you blindly follow recipes and your product fails, you can blame the recipe. If you cook using your critical experience and a method-based approach you will only have yourself to blame for disaster, but you'll have learned more important lessons from your cooking efforts.

At this time of abundant harvest, start a personal relationship with food. Experiment with these seasonal products and learn from your cooking sessions. If recipes are your thing, then challenge them with your own interpretation. One can experiment with the tried and true as well as with the brand new. Enjoy and celebrate the harvest along the Escarpment!

Misty Ingraham is a chef and co-owner of the catering business The Portable Feast at Home, in Ancaster.

So far in my columns I have challenged you to try cooking without recipes; I presented the humble onion as the foundation of all complex dishes and I revealed the professional secret of *mise-en-place*, organization that allows for magical culinary productions. Now, I want to encourage you to go solo and make some of my method-recipe products.

Think "Iron Chef," "Top Chef," "The Next Great Food Network Star!" All these TV programs