

Vegetables Become Star Of The Plate

(NAPSA)—As interest in locally grown produce and fresh ingredients rises across the country, a new star is making its way to the center of the plate—vegetables. In recent years, chefs and home cooks alike have taken notice of the rich vegetables that are locally available and the versatility they bring to a meal as the main dish.

Farmers' markets make it easy to find fresh produce worthy of the starring role in any meal. As vegetables become the focus, chefs are finding new ways to prepare and serve up these gems. Edward Leonard, certified Master Chef and Le Cordon Bleu Executive Chef, offers insight on the trend of seasonal specialties.

"Diners have long been in the mind-set that vegetables belong on the side of the plate, next to a protein," said Chef Leonard. "That's shifting as people become more conscious of what they eat and where it comes from. Whether it's rediscovering cauliflower to tasting a wide variety of heirloom tomatoes, we're seeing delicious new dishes that showcase the versatility of vegetables."

According to the chef instructors of Le Cordon Bleu, farmers' markets offer the best options for local produce. Before heading out to the market, they suggest researching which vegetables are in season and potential recipes. Having this information ahead of time will help shoppers make better choices when perusing the produce.

When it comes time to prepare the veggies, consider cooking methods that go beyond steaming and sautéing. Try charring leeks, fresh peppers or aubergine eggplants on the grill. Charring vegetables gives them a boost in flavor, eliminates bitterness and brings out a sweeter flavor. While vegetables can be the feature of the meal, that doesn't mean the dish has to be completely vegetarian. Consider incorporating proteins or meats to elevate the taste and creativity of the dish. For example, stuff tomatoes with ground beef and rice or top a portobello mushroom with crabmeat.



Eggplant rolls with ricotta and Parmesan cheese can be an easy, elegant, vegetable main dish.

"When it comes to seasonal dining, using vegetables as the main dish expands the range of possibilities and takes advantage of the beautiful produce we have available," said Chef Leonard. "At Le Cordon Bleu, we teach our students the importance of using fresh ingredients and encourage them to think creatively when it comes to developing new dishes."

Students at Le Cordon Bleu learn the foundational techniques necessary to use their skills and passion to create exceptional dishes. Exploring farmers' markets provides a great opportunity to learn about different kinds of produce and ways to feature them in seasonal meals, such as this one:

Eggplant Rolls With Ricotta And Parmesan Cheese

Ingredients:

- 1 pound eggplant**
- 1½ cups ricotta cheese**
- ½ cup grated Parmesan cheese**
- ¼ cup shredded fresh basil leaves**
- 3 tablespoons olive oil**
- ½ cup chopped spinach (fresh is best)**
- 2 cups of tomato sauce**
- Fresh basil leaves for garnish**

Directions:

Cut the eggplant lengthwise into ¼-inch slices. Sprinkle the slices on both sides with salt and let them sit in a colander for 30 minutes to remove some

of the bitterness. In medium bowl, combine the ricotta cheese, Parmesan cheese, chopped spinach, shredded basil and olive oil. Pat the eggplant dry, arrange on a baking pan and bake at 350 degrees for about 15 minutes until the eggplant is soft enough to roll. Set aside to cool.

Spread a heaping teaspoon of the cheese mixture lengthwise down the middle of each eggplant slice, leaving a 1-inch border at the wide end, and, beginning at the narrow end, roll up the eggplant jelly-roll fashion.

Pour a small amount of tomato sauce in the bottom of a shallow baking dish and arrange the rolls, seam sides down, in one layer. Pour the tomato sauce over the rolls and cook for another 20-30 minutes, until heated through.

Transfer the eggplant rolls with a spatula to serving plates and garnish with basil and additional Parmesan to taste. Serves 4.

"If you're looking for more tips or want to bring your cooking skills to the next level, check out the enthusiast cooking classes we offer at Le Cordon Bleu," said Chef Leonard. "Our 16 campuses around the country host a variety of hands-on classes where foodies can learn from our professional chef instructors."

To learn more about Le Cordon Bleu, visit www.chefs.edu.