

LA CASITA DE BUEN SABOR

BY LUCINDA HUTSON

Roasted veggies are a party on a platter, delighting the senses in a medley of color, texture and flavor. They warm the kitchen as they cook, filling it with wafts of sweet and seductive scents, making perfect winter fare. Better yet, they're versatile and easy to prepare.

Good seasoning is the secret. Fresh and dried herbs, spices and zesty condiments provide many dimensions of flavor, while roasting concentrates and caramelizes the vegetables' inherent flavors. Once they're out of the oven, I balance flavors with a splash of vinegar or fresh lemon juice and add other elements of surprise at the table. Be creative and have fun!

Think raspberry vinegar, chopped green onions and whole mustard seeds with beets; lemon zest, lemon thyme and ground coriander seeds with asparagus; rosemary, sage and cayenne with fingerling potatoes; shallots, thyme, grated nutmeg and red grapes with Brussels sprouts; butternut squash wedges, apples, pears and mulled spice mix, or—my favorite—sweet potatoes, red bell pepper, whole garlic, cayenne, cinnamon and allspice drizzled with fresh lime juice and chopped cilantro.

APPETIZERS

For a welcome winter alternative to chips and salsa, present roasted vegetables on a pretty plate adorned with rosemary



sprigs. They're nutritious (though rather naughty) when mounded atop rustic bread, warm tortillas, or whole-grain crackers slathered with soft cheese. And move over hummus—instead, try a dip made from roasted veggies pureed with garlic, seasonings, olive oil and perhaps a touch of tahini.

SALADS & SANDWICHES

I sometimes think roasted vegetables taste even better the next day, right out of the fridge. If you can keep from devouring them on the spot, serve on crostini garnished with fresh herb sprigs, fold them into a quesadilla for a meal on the run, or smother them in sandwiches. Mound the savory veggies on a bed of arugula and field greens drizzled with balsamic vinegar for a memorable salad.

SOUPS, SIDES AND HEARTY MEALS

Simmer pureed roasted veggies in rich stock for a fabulously simple winter soup. Toss them with pasta and freshly grated Parmesan for a hearty meal, add them to casseroles, or eat them by the bowlful! Roasted vegetables also make a simple-but-elegant side dish, especially with grilled meats and wild game.

So bring out the party platter heaped high with winter's bounty. Accompany with small bowls of festive condiments, bread, cheese and wine...and let the fiesta begin!

TIPS & TECHNIQUES FOR ROASTING VEGETABLES

PREP

Cut colorful vegetables, such as red onions, red bell peppers, carrots, fennel bulb and potatoes, into large chunks of similar size so that they cook evenly. Peel and seed butternut squash and pumpkin, and cut into wedges. Cut carrots, zucchini, crookneck squash and Japanese eggplant on the diagonal.

Root crops take longer than softer vegetables, such as eggplant and tomatoes. Roast vegetables with different cooking times in separate batches and combine after cooking.

Some veggies roast best on their own: asparagus, Brussels sprouts, cauliflower and unpeeled beets or turnips (cut in half, rubbed generously with olive oil, and roasted cut-side down.)

FLAVORING

Toss veggies in a large bowl, coating well with two or more tablespoons of olive oil. Or, for an Asian flavor, try peanut oil and a few teaspoons of toasted sesame oil.

Sprinkle with kosher or sea salt and pepper, as well as chopped garlic, ginger, shallots, fresh chile peppers and/or lemon zest.

Season with freshly ground spices—coriander seed, pungent and citrusy; whole mustard for tang and crunch; allspice, nutmeg, and/or cinnamon for squash and pumpkin; fennel or anise seeds for fennel bulb, red

bell peppers and onions; dill for asparagus and potatoes; toasted cumin for cauliflower or a Mexican vegetable medley.

ROASTING

Preheat oven and roasting pan to 400-425°.

Spread veggies on pan in a single layer with a little overlap. Roast in batches if necessary. Before roasting, try placing fresh sprigs of rosemary, winter savory, thyme or lavender under vegetables.

Turn once or twice and change position of pan in oven for even roasting. Roasting generally takes between 30 and 45 minutes, allowing for the difference between hard and soft vegetables.

Finish with a quick run under broiler to slightly char veggies.

FESTIVE ADDITIONS AT THE TABLE

Drizzle roasted vegetables with extra-virgin olive oil, white truffle oil and balsamic or other flavored vinegars. Add extra kick with pesto, salsa, chimichurri, vinaigrette, soy sauce or bottled chile sauces like Sriracha or Sambal.

Sprinkle grated Parmesan, Romano or Manchego cheese over veggies.

Add protein and crunch with toasted pine nuts, slivered almonds, pumpkin or sesame seeds. Then sprinkle with a handful of fresh, chopped herbs such as Italian parsley, cilantro, mint, oregano, chives or green onions.