

Uncelebrated celery deserves more respect

By Daniel Neman
St. Louis Post-Dispatch

Celery isn't sexy. I get that. Not many people, when asked "What would you like for dinner?" respond "I don't care, as long as it has celery."

But maybe that should change. Celery is a vegetable whose time has come. It is more — far more — than a mere garnish for a bloody mary or a convenient conveyance for hummus.

As it happens, this is the time of year that celery is at its absolute best, tender and sweet. It is just begging to be used in vibrant and exciting ways. And I don't mean stuffing it with peanut butter.

Not that there is anything wrong with celery with peanut butter. I think we can all agree that celery with peanut butter is the best possible way to eat celery, and maybe peanut butter. It is culinary perfection.

But it is my happy duty to look for other applications of celery that are (nearly) just as stunning, and I found some truly great ones.

Take, for instance, Celery, Blue Cheese and Hazelnut Salad. Already, that sounds better than an ordinary celery dish, right?

It gets better: The hazelnuts are toasted and then glazed with butter, maple syrup and just a pinch of heat from cayenne pepper. Chopped dates — or dried cranberries or cherries — add a pop of chewy sweetness, and the dressing is a simple mixture of olive oil, lemon zest and lemon juice.

Next, I used celery to make a dish that I hadn't had in so long I had completely forgotten about it: cream of celery soup.

Why has this extraordinary dish fallen out of favor? Celery goes with stock and cream every bit as well as mushrooms do. A bit of potato adds depth to the mix, and an onion brings the flavor into focus.

Celery is braised in many parts of the world, and it is high time we did it more here, too. Celery that is braised still

tastes like celery, but its sharp edges have been smoothed over; it has a warmer and deeper flavor.

It is also almost impossibly easy to make, though it takes a little longer (15 minutes) than you might expect. All you have to do is saute celery in butter with salt and pepper for about five minutes, until it starts to become tender. Then you let it simmer in a small amount of beef broth until the broth becomes like a glaze.

Although it is inspired by Asian cooking, celery stir-fry is also universal in its appeal. And it is actually easier to make than the braised celery.

All you have to do is stir-fry julienned celery with a little bit of crushed red pepper and soy sauce. A few drops of sesame oil when you're done only make it better.

I made one last dish, a drink that is a favorite at New York delicatessens: celery soda.

I had never actually had celery soda before. I'd had two responses to the idea every time I saw it at the deli — "ick" and "why?" But I knew that it was hugely popular, especially as an accompaniment to corned beef sandwiches, or pastrami.

Now that I've made it, I totally get the appeal. Celery soda is light, surprisingly mild and wonderfully refreshing. It would be great not only with heavy and fatty meats such as corned beef, it would also be an excellent choice for basically any sandwich.

CELERY, BLUE CHEESE AND HAZELNUT SALAD

Yield: 4 to 8 servings

6 ounces good-quality blue cheese
¾ cup hazelnuts
2 to 3 heads celery, tops removed
1 tablespoon butter
Pinch cayenne pepper
Salt
3 tablespoons maple syrup
¼ cup olive oil (or hazelnut oil, if you have it)

1 teaspoon lemon zest
¼ cup lemon juice
Black pepper
Handful of dried cherries, dried cranberries or chopped dates

1. Allow cheese to come to room temperature. Meanwhile, roast hazelnuts on a rimmed baking sheet in a 300-degree oven for 30 minutes.

2. While the hazelnuts are roasting, use a vegetable peeler to peel away the tough outer strings of the celery. Slice the celery ribs on the diagonal into ¼-inch thick slices.

3. Remove hazelnuts from oven and let cool a few minutes. Rub together in a clean dish towel to remove as much of the dark outer skin as you can.

4. Melt butter in a small skillet; add pinch of cayenne and salt. Add the roasted hazelnuts to the pan and cook on low heat for a few minutes, stirring constantly. Remove from heat and stir in the maple syrup. Leave in pan to cool.

5. In a small jar, mix together the olive oil, lemon zest and lemon juice. Add salt and black pepper to taste. Shake to combine.

6. To assemble, layer a shallow platter or dish first with the sliced celery, then cherries, then crumble the blue cheese over it and sprinkle with glazed hazelnuts (you may have to use a wooden spoon to scrape them out of the pan). Just before serving, pour dressing over top.

CREAM OF CELERY SOUP

Yield: 6 servings

1 head celery, ribs chopped, leaves reserved
1 large waxy potato, chopped
1 medium onion, chopped
4 tablespoons (½ stick) butter
Kosher salt
3 cups chicken broth
Scant ¼ cup fresh dill
½ cup heavy cream
Olive oil for serving

Combine celery, potato, onion and butter in a large

saucepan over medium heat; season with salt. Cook, stirring frequently, until onion is tender, 8 to 10 minutes. Add broth; simmer until potatoes are tender, 8 to 10 minutes. Puree in a blender with dill. Strain. Stir in cream. To serve, top with reserved celery leaves and a light drizzle of oil.

BRAISED CELERY

Yield: 4 servings

8 ribs of celery, rinsed and trimmed, leaves chopped and reserved
1 tablespoon unsalted butter
Pinch kosher salt
Pinch freshly ground black pepper
½ cup good quality beef stock or broth

1. Peel any of the fibrous outer stalks of celery with a vegetable peeler and slice into 1-inch pieces on the bias.

2. Heat the butter in a 10-inch saute pan over medium heat. Once melted, add the celery, salt and pepper and cook for 5 minutes until just beginning to soften slightly.

3. Add the beef broth and stir to combine. Cover and reduce the heat to low. Cook until the celery is tender but not mushy, approximately 5 minutes. Uncover and allow

the celery to continue to cook for an additional 5 minutes or until the liquid has been re-

duced to a glaze. Transfer to a serving dish and garnish with the reserved leaves.

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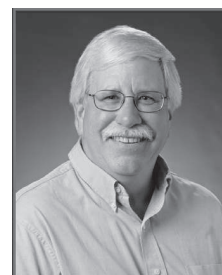
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CACTI

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Thanksgiving cactus — *S. truncata*. *Zygocactus truncata*

Also known as crab cactus, its joints are 1 to 2 inches long and sharply toothed with two large teeth at the end of the last joint. Short-tubed scarlet flowers have pointed, spreading petals. It blooms from November to March.

There are many varieties in white, pink, salmon, orange and apricot.

Easter cactus — *Schlumbergera gaertneri*. *Rhipsalidopsis gertneria*

Much like Christmas cactus, with the same drooping stems, but more upright, with more rounded stem joints. Bright red flowers to 3 inches long are upright or horizontal rather than drooping. Blooms April to May, often develop-

ing in September. There are many varieties in shades of red and pink.

To furnish sunlight for indoor plants, use full spectrum lightbulbs or fluorescent tubes. Many plants seem to do well in artificial light of this type.

If you have garden questions or comments, please write: greengardencolumn@Yahoo.com. Thanks for reading!

DORY

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Now Thanksgiving is on our calendar for family dinners and happy greetings for those who are so well-placed, some with just memories to entertain the soul.

And, here amid all of the various occasions gathered together like a garden of cultivated vegetables and fruits, I sit now and then with crochet hook and yarn in hand trying to beat the calendar clock now set for regular rather than Daylight Saving Time with yet another special day in mind.

When the month of December, already so widely

advertised in stores, arrives I seek to be ready with my own living room transformation for Christmas, the highlight of the year.

The red and white skeins of yarn unwind and transform from their cozy nests into a granny square afghan for the daveno. The weaving of the effort nimbles the fingers and fills another portion of one's memory to be gathered in later.

How quickly the years seem to flow by while we are involved in several occasions at one time and then wonder why it is so when long ago they took their own special place and savor, now just

marking time to a faster beat.

And, while we try to hang back with the changing colors of all leaves and scattered among our many activities in hopes they last longer to enjoy for their own importance, another visitor threatens to engage our time to jump quickly from one to another in time and space.

The New Year of 2020 approaches on the wing. Happy New Year since it's almost gone by.

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