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# Winter Squashes

## What do you do with those things?

**T**his time of the year is great for picking up winter squash from local growers and farmers markets. Mistletoe and I were on our way to one such market when we stopped for some caffeine and sugar. It was a happening scene, everybody outside on the wooden benches drinking coffee in the late autumn sunshine, but Mistletoe and I were on a mission, so we didn't linger. As we mustered thrust for escape velocity from the social vortex, my financial advisor buddy blocked the exit.

"Chef Boy Ari," he said, "I'm not satisfied with my winter squash. I slice it in half and bake it face down for about 45 minutes at 400. Then I serve it with some butter and maple syrup — it's pretty good, but it gets old. What do you do with squash?"

Jeez. What a question to be saddled with as I'm trying to quit the scene. What *don't* I do with squash?

In my younger days, some friends and I had a pumpkin pie business. I should clarify: When I say pumpkin pie, what I really mean is winter squash pie. Delicata, red kuri, carnival, acorn, butternut, buttercup, kabocha, and a host of other winter squashes including pumpkin all make great pies. We did, too. We had a nice run for a while, sold a lot of pies, but as often happens when you turn a passion into a business, soon it wasn't fun anymore. Pumpkin pie became a chore, rather than a treat.

Before we cashed out and moved on, I had the opportunity to prove, scientifically, that it is possible to live happily for many days on a diet of pumpkin pie. In addition to the nutrients supplied by the flour, butter, milk and eggs, winter squash is chock full of starch, vitamins and beta-carotenes.

Pie presides over the *sweet* genre that includes many culinary interpretations of the winter squash. But in my book, the sweet genre is eclipsed by the many savory ways that squash can be prepared. Unfortunately, too many people get advice similar to what our financial advisor followed down his path to sweet mediocrity. In fact, it's kind of ironic when people take it for granted that squash should be sweetened. I mean, it's already sweet for *fa fok's* sake. Enough already!

What follows is my standard manner of preparing squash. This technique can be modified in any number of ways to suit your taste.

First, cut off the stem and the nub at the bottom. Then cut the squash in half, and use a spoon to scrape out the seeds and slimy membrane stuff. Some squash, like kabocha, have edible skins, which disperse their vitamins into the mix. If your squash's skin is the inedible sort, peel it with a knife. Then cut the cleaned

halves into chunks of about 2 inches square. Place the chunks in 2 inches of boiling water in a pan with a tight-fitting lid. Pour in some olive oil and let it boil.

If you don't like the idea of peeling the squash with a knife, you can put the cleaned half-squashes in the pot and steam till soft enough to scoop out and proceed. But this way you have to wait for it to cool enough to scoop, so I don't think you're saving time. I think the best option is to eat the skin, squash-variety permitting. If you don't know about the edibility of a certain skin, experiment in small quantities like our hunting and gathering forefathers.

Now it's time to think about flavoring. Last time, I poured some grapeseed oil in a cast iron skillet and then added chopped bacon on medium heat. When the bacon started to brown, I added some deer-burger and cooked until brown. Then I removed the browned meat from the pan, added more grapeseed oil, chopped onions, sweet peppers, hot peppers and a pour of vinegar from a jar of pickled peppers. You can substitute wine for the vinegar if you like.

At this point, the squash on the other burner was getting soft, and the water had almost all boiled off. I added some more water so the squash wouldn't burn.

Back at pan #2, I added the browned meat, and then cheese curds, to the sizzling veggies. Cheese curds have the amazing characteristic rare in the cheese family of not melting, holding onto their form even as they get decadently soft. As soon as all these flavors began their harmonious convergence, I stirred in the chopped garlic. Just as the intoxicating smell of garlic grease began diffusing through the kitchen, I dumped the contents of pan #2 into the squash and stirred it all together.

On this particular occasion I was in the market for a thick consistency, so all I did was add just the flavor with soy sauce and pickle-jar vinegar and call it good. But another variation would be to add more water or even some milk or cream and go the soup route.

The meat, of course, is optional, and there are many other veggies you can incorporate. Roots, like carrots or potatoes or turnips, can be added with the squash to the boiling water pan. Greens, mushrooms, leeks and any number of other veggies can go into the sauté pan. Herbs can be added, a little at a time, if you like. I also like mustard seeds. When serving, a garnish of chopped green onion or cilantro adds a nice touch to the finished product. So does a fat dollop of mayo.

**EW**

*Chef Boy Ari, aka Ari LaVaux, is currently living and cooking in Missoula, Mont. He can be reached at flash@flashinthepan.net*

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