

Get to know Belgian endive

— with the help of cheese

By MELISSA D'ARABIAN
Associated Press

Fresh-faced, yet utterly jet-lagged. That's how I arrived in France for the first time. And that's how I was introduced to Belgian endive.

Madame Gabillet was hosting me for my college semester abroad and she welcomed me pretty much right off the plane into her chilly, dark home. Dinner was waiting, so we sat right down and rather silently (since I didn't yet speak a word of French) began the meal. That's when I saw a vegetable I didn't recognize.

Was it cabbage? No. But whatever it was, it was bathed in a luscious cream sauce with Gruyere bubbling on top. It was a fitting welcome to what would be a cold and rainy few months. I understood precious little of what my host family said to me that night, but I did catch the name of the tender, slightly bitter, delight that we ate — Belgian endive.

Madame Gabillet loved Belgian endive (and luckily, as I discovered, so did I). She served it chopped and sauteed in sweet butter, or sliced and tossed raw in a mustardy vinaigrette, or — my favorite — baked in a white

cream sauce with onions and cheese.

Back in the U.S., I saw Belgian endive slowly make its way into supermarkets. These days you can find it pretty much all year. They look like a cross between an elongated oversized Brussels sprout and a very small head of compacted romaine lettuce, but more yellow. Both Belgian and regular endive are part of the chicory family and sport a slightly bitter flavor.

Each Belgian endive has only 15 calories, but packs tons of fiber, vitamin C and calcium. And for something that sounds so exotically European, it's downright inexpensive.

So grab a few and try them in some of your favorite recipes that star other greens — raw in place of escarole, sauteed instead of cabbage or kale, simply grilled or roasted with olive oil, salt and pepper and squeeze of lemon. Or try my version of the dish that started it all — Madame Gabillet's Belgian endive gratin.

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AP Photos/Matthew Mead

In this gratin, Belgian endive is baked in a white cream sauce with onions and cheese.



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Belgian Endive Gratin

Start to finish: 45 minutes (15 minutes active)

Servings: 4

2 tablespoons butter
1/2 small yellow onion, finely chopped
3 cloves garlic, minced
1 teaspoon dried tarragon
2 tablespoons all-purpose flour
2 cups reduced-fat milk
1 tablespoon Dijon mustard
Salt and ground black pepper
4 small to medium Belgian endives
3/4 cup shredded Gruyere cheese

Directions:

1. Heat the oven to 350 F. Coat a medium (9-by-9-inch) baking dish with cooking spray.
2. In a medium saucepan over medium heat, melt the butter. Add the onion and cook until translucent, about 5 minutes. Add the garlic and tarragon, then cook until fragrant, another minute. Whisk in the flour and cook, stirring, for 2 minutes. Add the milk, whisking constantly. Cook over medium heat, stirring, until the sauce begins to thicken, about 6 minutes. Turn off the heat, stir in mustard, then season with salt and pepper. Set aside.
3. Cut off the woody stems of the endive and slice them in half lengthwise. Season them with salt and pepper. Place the endive in the prepared baking dish. Pour the sauce over the endive halves. Cover with foil and bake for 15 minutes. Remove the foil, then sprinkle the cheese evenly over the top. Return to the oven for another 15 minutes, or until the endive is tender.
4. If desired, increase heat to broil and broil the gratin until the cheese is bubbly and browned, about 1 minute. Be careful, as the cheese will burn quickly. Let cool for a few minutes before serving.

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Nutrition information per serving: 230 calories; 120 calories from fat (52 percent of total calories); 14 g fat (8 g saturated; 0 g trans fats); 45 mg cholesterol; 16 g carbohydrate; 3 g fiber; 6 g sugar; 12 g protein; 540 mg sodium.