



The Ungarnished Truth

Time to treat herbs like any other vegetable — and let them take center stage.

By MARK BITTMAN

Before pesto reached the shores of America, every “fancy” dish in this country carried a sprig of parsley, and for all but a very few of us, that was the extent of our acquaintance with herbs. It was Paula Peck, author of the once-invaluable and now-quaint “The Art of Good Cooking,” who brought to my attention the notion that parsley could play a better, more varied role in cooking if you used it by the handful.

Several years later, pesto filed its immigration papers, gardening became a little more popular and cooking evolved to a more

interesting state. But herbs remain underrated. We add some thyme to stews, we’ve learned that there’s no such thing as too much basil, parsley is recognized for its flavor and all but the genetically twisted appreciate cilantro. (A joke; some of my best friends think it tastes like soap.) But for the most part we are rather restrained in our use of the potent green things.

This is not a proposal to make rosemary salad or tarragon pesto; with some herbs, discretion is necessary. But other herbs can be thought of more like teeny vegetables. Since I recognized this, my repertory of recipes relying on herbs — relying on them, you see, not using them in

supporting roles — has become about 10 times more exciting. Herbs may not be hefty in texture, and they may be stronger-tasting than your average vegetable, but many make terrific main ingredients.

Look no further than tabbouleh, possibly the only herb-centric dish mainstream enough to have been tried by many people in this country. (Pesto is not a dish.) The best tabbouleh is more parsley and mint than bulgur and tomato, and the herbs are what keep it light in texture and refreshing in flavor. Is it a curious

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sensation to chew on a mouthful consisting mainly of chopped herbs? Yes, but real tabbouleh — that's what I'm talking about — is a revelation. (It's not a revolution, though, so no recipe for it here; you can easily find one, I'm sure.)

Beyond that — and before you use herbs as a main ingredient — it helps to know which ones work on a grand scale and which ones don't. Parsley, obviously, works in abundance: it's clean-tasting, pleasantly grassy and almost never overwhelming. You can add literally a bunch (bunches!) of it to salad, soup, eggs, pasta, grains or beans. The same is largely true of basil, and you can use other wild herbs — chervil, chives, cilantro, dill, shiso — by at least the handful. (Mint is also useful but will easily take over a dish if you add too much of it. But all of these are great for making herb pastes, or pestos, alone or in combination. Use the same technique you use for basil pesto.)

I put most other herbs — oregano, lavender, marjoram and rosemary, sage, tarragon and thyme — in the category of strong herbs, which must be used more sparingly than mild herbs. You usually don't want to use more than a tablespoon or so of strong herbs in a dish (though marjoram, oregano and sage can be used in fairly large quantities in specific instances), and sometimes you'll want to use an herb even more sparingly. Tarragon's anise flavor is both wonderful and intense enough to throw off a dish's balance — a teaspoon is usually plenty and, if it's dried, less than that.) Strong herbs cannot serve as a main ingredient, but they can provide good backup for mild herbs.

That's the windup; here's the pitch: four recipes that contain copious amounts of herbs. (I didn't include a recipe for herb salad: toss mild herbs with tender greens, olive oil and lemon juice, the end.) In each case — frittata, pasta, pilaf and soup — the herbs take center stage, with eggs, meat, dairy and grains playing supporting roles. For a change.

Herb-and-Olive Frittata

Time: 20 to 25 minutes

- 4 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 large onion, chopped
- 1 tablespoon minced garlic
- 1/2 cup chopped black olives, preferably oil-cured
- 1 cup chopped fresh parsley
- 1 cup chopped fresh basil
- 1/2 cup chopped fresh dill
- 1/2 cup chopped fresh mint
- 1 tablespoon chopped fresh rosemary or thyme
- 8 eggs, lightly beaten
- 1/2 cup milk
- 1 tablespoon all-purpose flour
- Salt and black pepper

1. Put the oil in a large skillet over medium heat. Add the onion and garlic and cook, stirring occasionally, until softened, 3 to 5 minutes.

2. Add the olives and herbs and cook, stirring occasionally, until they soften and become dry, 2 to 3 minutes. Meanwhile, beat together the eggs, milk, flour and some salt and pepper.

3. Turn heat to low and pour the egg mixture into the skillet, using a spoon if necessary to evenly distribute the herbs and olives. Cook, undisturbed, until the eggs are just set, 5 to 10 minutes. (You can set the top further by putting the pan in an oven at 350 for a few minutes or by running it under the broiler for a minute or two.) Serve hot, warm or at room temperature.

Yield: 4 to 6 servings.

Pasta With Green Meatballs And Herb Sauce

Time: 30 to 40 minutes

- 2 cups finely chopped fresh basil
- 1/2 cup finely chopped fresh parsley
- 1/2 cup finely chopped fresh chives
- 1 thin slice white bread
- 1/4 cup milk
- 1/2 pound ground sirloin, pork or lamb or a mixture
- Salt and black pepper
- 6 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 pound pasta
- 1 garlic clove
- Freshly grated Parmesan cheese for garnish

1. Mix together the basil, parsley and chives. Soak the bread in the milk for 5 minutes, then gently squeeze any excess milk from the bread; discard the milk. Combine the bread with the meat, 1 cup of the herbs and some salt and pepper; shape the mixture into 1-inch meatballs.

2. Bring a large pot of water to a boil and salt it. Put 2 tablespoons of the oil in a large skillet over medium heat. When the oil is hot, add the meatballs in a single layer (work in batches if necessary). Cook,



turning occasionally, until brown on all sides, 5 to 10 minutes.

3. Cook the pasta in the boiling water until tender but not mushy. While the pasta is cooking, purée 1 1/2 cups of the herbs with 4 tablespoons oil, the garlic and some salt and pepper in a mini food processor or blender; leave the sauce rough or add a little water if you want it smoother. Drain the pasta, reserving about a cup of its cooking liquid. Toss the pasta with the herb sauce and most of the remaining herbs, adding the reserved liquid if the mixture seems dry. Top with the meatballs, garnish with Parmesan and the last of the herbs and serve.

Yield: 4 servings.

Green Rice Pilaf

Time: 30 to 40 minutes

- 2 tablespoons neutral oil (like grapeseed or corn)
- 1 medium onion, chopped
- 1 tablespoon minced garlic
- 1 1/2 cups rice, preferably basmati
- 2 1/2 cups vegetable or chicken stock or water, or more as needed
- Salt and black pepper
- 1 1/2 cups chopped fresh parsley
- 1 1/2 cups chopped fresh cilantro
- 3/4 cup chopped fresh chives
- 3/4 cup chopped fresh mint
- Zest of 1 lemon
- Soy sauce for serving

1. Put the oil in a deep skillet or large saucepan over medium-high heat. When it's hot, add the onion and garlic and cook, stirring, until softened, about 5 minutes.

2. Add the rice and cook, stirring, until glossy, about 1 minute. Add the stock or water and a good sprinkling of salt and pepper and bring to a boil.

3. Turn the heat down to low, cover and cook until the rice is tender and the liquid

is almost entirely absorbed, about 15 minutes. Uncover, remove from the heat and stir in the herbs. Replace the lid and let rest off the heat for at least 10 minutes or up to 20 minutes. Uncover and stir in the lemon zest; taste and adjust the seasoning. Fluff the pilaf with a fork, and serve warm or at room temperature with a drizzle of soy sauce.

Yield: 4 to 6 servings.

Lemony Parsley-and-Egg Soup

Time: 30 minutes

- 2 tablespoons butter
- 1 medium onion, chopped
- 4 cups parsley (about 3 bunches)
- 6 cups vegetable or chicken stock
- Salt and black pepper
- 4 eggs
- 1/2 cup freshly squeezed lemon juice
- 1/2 cup heavy cream, optional
- Sour cream for garnish, optional

1. Put the butter in a large saucepan over medium-high heat. When it melts, add the onion and cook, stirring occasionally, until softened, about 5 minutes. Add the parsley and cook, stirring occasionally, until it wilts, 3 to 5 minutes. Stir in about half the stock.

2. Purée the soup in the pan with an immersion blender, or cool slightly, pour into an upright blender and purée carefully. Return to the pan with the remaining stock. Heat through over medium-low heat, then season to taste with salt and pepper.

3. Beat together the eggs and lemon juice, then slowly add about 1 cup of the hot soup, whisking all the while. Gradually stir the egg mixture back into the soup. Taste and adjust the seasoning, then stir in the cream if you're using it, or serve garnished with a dollop of sour cream, if you like.

Yield: 4 servings. ♦