



Chef Amber Balshaw is the owner of Preferred Sonoma Caterers, with over 20 years in her field. Executive Chef at her own PSC, a past Pastry Chef, and a valedictorian of the Culinary Institute of America. Amber is a true foodie, she loves food in all its forms and all aspects of culinary world. Please send your comments to Amber@SonomaCaterers.com and see more of her at Blog.SonomaCaterers.com.

CHEF'S CORNER

Root Vegetables -- So Much to Love!

by Amber Balshaw, Preferred Sonoma Caterers



Rutabagas, parsnips and carrots, oh my. The last of the winter crops are still around, so let's take the time to enjoy them while we can. Although they have never been the most beautiful items from the garden or the most fashionable on the menu, they have been a staple -- and with the current "back to basics" trend, they are being elevated to new levels.

These vegetables are high in starch and can be fibrous. Two of the best cooking methods are roasting and soup. When shopping for your root vegetables, make sure to choose medium-size roots (too large can be fibrous and too small underdeveloped) that are heavy for their size (they have been stored correctly and not dehydrated). They will hold quite well in your refrigerator, 2 to 3 weeks in the crisper drawer, but take them out of their bags and allow to rest loose.

CARROTS are making a huge come back with organic

farmers -- you can find them in a great array of colors, from yellow to red and classic orange. The heirloom varieties are best at a small-to-medium size for great flavor. PARSNIPS are actually white carrots with a similar sweet flavor but a bit heartier in texture.

TURNIPS are a round white root, often with purple shoulders; they are much wetter and crisper than the other root vegetable, both the root and greens are often eaten, and they have a great peppery flavor. Try cutting them up like carrot sticks. RUTABAGAS, also known as yellow turnips, are actually a cross between a turnip and a cabbage and a bit meatier with a sweeter flavor.

Roasted Root Vegetables (serves 6 to 8)

- 1 lb each Carrots, Turnips, Rutabagas, Parsnips
- 1 Red Onion
- 1 Fennel Bulb
- ¼ cup Olive Oil
- Salt and Pepper

Peel all of the root vegetables and cut into similar size pieces (I enjoy carrot stick size as they pile nicely on the plate). Peel the red onion and cut into wedges. Clean the fennel and cut into wedges. Place all in a mixing bowl and toss with olive oil (this can be done several hours in advance). Lay out in a single layer on a baking sheet and bake till tender. I like a higher heat (400 to 425 degrees for a bit of color around the edges) for 25 to 30 minutes. They should be fork tender.

YAM versus SWEET POTATO, which is which? To really confuse things we rarely

ever see a true yam in the U.S. Yams are tropical tubers, sweeter than sweet potatoes and often with red or purple flesh (but they can be white), with a brown or black skin. For our purposes let's stick to our local definition.

In the U.S., yams and sweet potatoes are both actually varieties of sweet potato, but very different in color and texture. What we call "sweet potatoes" usually have lighter colored flesh with a thin light colored skin. The "yam" is the darker red skin with a vibrant orange flesh (full of beta carotene). Both skins are completely edible.

Recently at home I did a sweet potato / yam tasting. Purchasing one each of similar size, I washed and pricked the skin with a fork and placed them in the oven to bake just like a russet potato. They took a bit longer than a potato (about 1 hour). Then I split them open and served with butter, salt and pepper. The sweet potato was lighter and fluffier, obviously a higher starch potato, whereas the yam was sweeter and denser. Yams (orange flesh / dark skin) are best for things like casseroles and hash. Sweet potatoes (white flesh / light skin) are better for baking, mashing or making fries.

I used the remainder of the yam to make a quick hash to have with breakfast the next day.

Yam Hash (serves 2 to 3)

- 1 baked Yam, peeled and chopped into 1" square
- ½ Yellow Onion, diced
- 2 Tbl Butter
- Salt and pepper

Sauté the onion in butter, when tender add in the chopped yam, sauté gently until the yam browns, being careful to watch since the high sugar content will burn.

Mashed Sweet Potatoes (serves 4 to 6)

- 4 lbs of Sweet Potatoes
- ¼ cup Butter
- ¼ cup Milk
- Salt and Pepper to taste

You can also add a dash of cinnamon or 1 to 2 tablespoons of Honey or Maple syrup. Peel the sweet potatoes and cut into quarters, place in a pot and cover with 3" to 4" of water. Boil till fork tender, 15-20 minutes. Remove from the heat and drain completely. Mash by hand or with a mixer. This reheats very well and is great for potlucks.

Enjoy!



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Read more from our Chef Amber Balshaw in her column here in the Petaluma Post and on her blog Everything Culinary at blog.SonomaCaterers.com