

7 SIMPLE WAYS TO BECOME A BETTER COOK

Find the bonus recipes referenced on page 225 and 231 in the November 2013 issue [here](#).

5 vegetable recipes that have true main-dish satisfaction.

We love the plant-forward thinking in these cookbooks (some of our favorites, in any category). You can find the recipes referenced on page 225 [here](#).

1. Eggplant “Meatballs” in Tomato Sauce

Glorious Vegetables of Italy

By Domenica Marchetti

Chronicle Books 2013

\$19.99 (all prices from Amazon)

This recipe sounds contrived, doesn't it? An effort to create a meat-like dish out of a vegetable. But resourceful Italian cooks have been participating in such trickery for centuries. After all, meat was a scarcity in most Italian homes until fairly recently. Eggplant, with its meaty yet silky texture and its ability to absorb flavor, makes an excellent stand-in in this southern Italian classic. My kids like these patties as much as they like real meatballs.

- 1 large (1-pound) shiny purple or lavender eggplant
- 3 rounded cups fresh breadcrumbs
- 2 large eggs, lightly beaten
- 2 garlic cloves, pressed
- 1/2 teaspoon fine sea salt
- 2 ounces Pecorino-Romano cheese, freshly grated
- 1 tablespoon minced fresh basil
- 1 tablespoon minced fresh flat-leaf parsley
- 1 cup unbleached all-purpose flour for dredging
- Vegetable oil for frying
- 3 cups simple tomato sauce (see recipe), heated to a simmer in a saucepan big enough to hold all the eggplant “meatballs”
- Freshly grated Parmigiano-Reggiano or Pecorino-Romano Cheese for serving

1. Heat the oven to 350°.
2. Using the tines of a fork, prick the eggplant here and there a few times. Set on a small rimmed baking sheet and bake for about 1 hour, or until the skin is crinkled

and collapsed and the interior is completely tender. Remove from the oven and let sit briefly to cool. Slice the eggplant open lengthwise and scoop the flesh onto a cutting board. Discard the skin.

3. Mash the eggplant with a potato masher, or chop it coarsely with a chef's knife. Scoop the flesh into a large bowl and add the bread crumbs, eggs, garlic, salt, Pecorino Romano, basil, and parsley. Fold everything together gently but thoroughly with a wooden spoon or silicone spatula.

4. Spoon about 1 cup of flour into a shallow bowl. Have ready a platter lined with waxed paper. Using your hands, form the eggplant mixture into golf ball-size balls. Dredge the balls in the flour and place them on the prepared platter. Press down on them gently to flatten them just a bit. You should end up with about fifteen 2-inch eggplant meatballs.

5. Pour enough vegetable oil into a deep frying pan or cast-iron skillet to reach a depth of at least 1 inch. Place over medium-high heat and heat the oil to about 375° on a deep-frying thermometer. If you do not have a thermometer, drop a tiny ball of the eggplant mixture into the oil; if it sizzles immediately, the oil is hot enough.

6. Working in two batches, add the eggplant meatballs to the hot oil and fry until golden-brown on the bottom, 2 to 3 minutes. Turn with a spatula and fry the other side until golden-brown, 2 minutes more.

7. Transfer the eggplant meatballs from the frying pan directly to the pan of sauce that is simmering on the stove over medium-low heat. Cook, turning the eggplant meatballs once or twice, until heated through, about 10 minutes. If the sauce seems too thick—the eggplant meatballs will absorb some of it—add 1 or 2 tablespoons of water and gently stir it into the sauce.

8. Serve the eggplant meatballs hot, with a little tomato sauce spooned over them and a sprinkle of Parmigiano cheese on top.

SERVES 4 to 5

Simple Tomato Sauce

Even though I preserve batches of tomato sauce to use through winter, I still rely on sauce made from good canned tomatoes from time to time. Using excellent-quality canned tomatoes and good olive oil is important to the integrity of this simple, everyday sauce. Look for canned diced tomatoes packed in their natural juice rather than in heavy, pasty puree.

- 2 garlic cloves, lightly crushed
- 1/4 cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 (28-ounce) cans diced tomatoes, with their juice

Fine sea salt

5 large fresh basil leaves, shredded or torn

1. Warm the garlic in the olive oil in a large saucepan over medium heat. Use a wooden spoon to press down on the garlic to release its flavor. Cook for about 2 minutes, or until the garlic begins to sizzle. Don't let it brown. Carefully pour in the tomatoes and their juice (the oil will spatter) and stir to coat with the oil. Season with 1 teaspoon salt and raise the heat to medium-high. Bring the sauce to a simmer, reduce the heat to medium-low, and simmer gently, stirring from time to time, for 30 to 35 minutes, or until the sauce has thickened and the oil is pooling on the surface.
2. Remove from the heat and stir in the basil. Taste and add more salt if you like. If not using immediately, transfer the sauce to a container with a tight-fitting lid and refrigerate for up to 3 days or freeze for up to 3 months.

SERVES 8

2. Eggplant with Buttermilk Sauce

Plenty: Vibrant Recipes from London's Ottolenghi

Yotam Ottolenghi and Sami Tamimi

Chronicle Books 2011

\$19.99

I can't think of a more rustically elegant (is that a contradiction in terms?) starter.

Serve with some robust white bread or pita and you are, literally, in food heaven. In

the recipe you'll find Sami Tamimi's technique for getting the seeds out of the

pomegranate, which I am afraid is now a very well-known secret.

- 2 large and long eggplants
 - 1/3 cup olive oil
 - 1 1/2 teaspoons lemon thyme leaves, plus a few whole sprigs to garnish
 - Maldon sea salt and black pepper
 - 1 pomegranate
 - 1 teaspoon za'atar
- Sauce:**
- 9 tablespoons buttermilk
 - 1/2 cup Greek yogurt
 - 1 1/2 tablespoons olive oil, plus a drizzle to finish
 - 1 small garlic clove, crushed
 - Dash of salt

1. Preheat the oven to 400°.

2. Cut the eggplants in half lengthways, cutting straight through the green stalk (the stalk is for the look; don't eat it). Use a small sharp knife to make three or four parallel incisions in the cut side of each eggplant half, without cutting through to the skin. Repeat at a 45° angle to get a diamond-shaped pattern.

3. Place the eggplant halves, cut-side up, on a baking sheet lined with parchment paper. Brush them with olive oil – keep on brushing until all of the oil has been absorbed by the flesh. Sprinkle with the lemon thyme leaves and some salt and pepper. Roast for 35 to 40 minutes, at which point the flesh should be soft, flavorful and nicely browned. Remove from the oven and allow to cool down completely.

4. While the eggplants are in the oven, cut the pomegranate into two horizontally. Hold one half over a bowl, with the cut side against your palm, and use the back of a wooden spoon or a rolling pin to gently knock on the pomegranate skin. Continue beating with increasing power until the seeds start coming out naturally and falling through your fingers into the bowl. Once all are there, sift through the seeds to remove any bits of white skin or membrane.

5. To make the sauce. Whisk together all of the ingredients. Taste for seasoning, then keep cold until needed.
6. To serve, spoon plenty of buttermilk sauce over the eggplant halves without covering the stalks. Sprinkle za'atar and plenty of pomegranate seeds on top and garnish with lemon thyme. Finish with a drizzle of olive oil.

SERVES 4 as a starter

3. North African Squash and Chickpea Stew

River Cottage Veg: 200 Inspired Vegetable Recipes

Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall

Ten Speed Press 2013

\$22.99

- 2 tablespoons sunflower oil
- 2 large onions, diced
- 2 garlic cloves, finely chopped
- 1 celery stalk, finely diced
- 1 teaspoon ground turmeric
- 1/2 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 1/2 teaspoon ground ginger
- Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 1/2 cup red lentils
- 1 (14-ounce) can chickpeas, drained and rinsed
- 8 saffron strands, toasted and crushed
- 2 cups roasted tomato sauce (see recipe below) or canned tomato sauce
- A good handful of parsley, coarsely chopped
- A large bunch of cilantro, coarsely chopped
- 10 ounces winter squash or pumpkin
- 5 cups vegetable stock (see recipe below)
- 1 bay leaf
- 2 ounces orzo or other small pasta
- Dates, to serve (optional)

1. Heat the oil in a large saucepan over medium heat. Add the onions and saut until just starting to turn golden. Turn down the heat to medium-low and add the garlic, celery, turmeric, cinnamon, ginger, and 1 teaspoon pepper. Saut for a couple of minutes.

2. Now add the lentils, chickpeas, saffron, tomato sauce, parsley, and about half of the cilantro. Cook over low heat for 15 minutes.

Meanwhile, peel and seed the squash and cut into large cubes. Add to the pan with the stock and bay leaf. Cover and simmer gently for about 30 minutes. Add the pasta and simmer until it is cooked. Season with salt and pepper to taste.

3. Serve immediately, scattered with the remaining cilantro leaves and with a few dates on the side, if you like.

Vegetable Stock

A good vegetable stock, built around the deep savory notes of bay and celery and the delicate sweetness of onion and carrot, is invaluable for giving body to many soups. You'll also find it indispensable for stews, risottos, gratins, and curries. I always try to keep some of this in the freezer—though it can be rustled up in no time if you have the ingredients on hand.

- 2 large or 3 medium onions
- 3 large or 4 medium carrots
- 3 to 4 celery stalks
- 1 garlic clove
- 1 tablespoon canola oil
- 1 or 2 bay leaves, coarsely torn
- A sprig of thyme, and/or parsley stalks, if you have them
- A few black peppercorns
- 1/2 small glass dry white wine (optional)

1. Coarsely grate onion, carrots, celery, and garlic—or chop them, if you prefer, but in fairly small pieces. Heat the oil in a large pan over medium heat and tip in the vegetables, garlic, herbs, and peppercorns. Sauté, stirring from time to time, for about 5 minutes or until the vegetables have softened slightly (you're largely doing this to mellow the raw onion).
2. Add the wine, if you are using it, then 7 cups boiling water from the kettle. Bring back to a boil and simmer, uncovered. If all your vegetables were grated, the stock will be ready in about 10 minutes. If they were in larger chunks, give it 20 to 30 minutes. Either way, strain the stock and use right away, or cool, then refrigerate and freeze.

Yield: 1½ quarts

SERVES 6

Roasted Tomato Sauce

This intense tomato sauce is a River Cottage classic and an absolute mainstay of my cooking. I prepare pan after pan of it from the tomatoes I grow at home, and freeze batch after batch for use in the coming months. I make no apologies for including the recipe again here because it's such a useful and delicious thing. The consistency of the sauce can vary quite a bit, depending on the tomatoes you use—sometimes you end up with a thick puree, and sometimes with a rich liquid. The flavor should always be good, though. Simmer the sauce to reduce and thicken it as necessary.

3 to 4 pounds ripe tomatoes, larger ones halved

3 garlic cloves, finely chopped

A few sprigs of thyme

A couple of sprigs of marjoram (optional)

2 tablespoons canola or olive oil

Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper

1. Preheat oven to 350°.
2. Lay the tomatoes, cut side up if halved, on a baking sheet. Scatter over the garlic and herbs, and trickle over the oil. Season with plenty of salt and pepper.
3. Put the tray in the oven for about an hour, maybe a bit longer, until the tomatoes are completely soft and pulpy, and starting to crinkle and caramelize on top.
4. Set the tomatoes aside to cool off for half an hour or so. Then tip them into a large sieve and rub through with a wooden spoon, or use a food mill. Discard the skin and pips. Your tomato sauce is now ready to use.

Yield: 2 cups

4. Portobello and Celery Root Shepherd's Pie with Truffle

Vedge: 100 Plates Large and Small That Redefine Vegetable Cooking

Rich Landau and Kate Jacoby

The Experiment 2013

\$14.97

Shepherd's pie: what might seem pedestrian and quaint can be made chic and sophisticated. We use a whole portobello mushroom as the base and then top it with mashed celery root and potatoes spiked with truffle. There's plenty of work going into it ahead of time to give beautiful results, but the final step, heating the stuffed portobello cap, can be done just before serving.

5	medium portobellos, stems reserved, caps wiped clean
4	tablespoons olive oil
1 1/2	teaspoons salt
1	cup peeled, diced carrots
1	cup peeled, diced turnips
1/2	cup chopped onions
1	teaspoon minced garlic
1	teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
2	teaspoons Dijon mustard
2	teaspoons chopped fresh thyme
2	cups peeled, diced celery root
1	cup peeled, diced Yukon Gold potatoes
1/2	cup vegan sour cream
1	tablespoon white truffle oil

1. Preheat the oven to 400°.
2. Dice the portobello stems and one of the caps to match the size of the diced carrots and turnips. Set aside.
3. Using a pastry brush, apply 2 tablespoons of the olive oil to the remaining 4 portobello caps. Place them on a sheet pan, rounded sides up, and sprinkle with 1/2 teaspoon of the salt.
4. Roast the caps for 8 to 12 minutes, or until they have lost some of their water volume—you will see liquid build up outside the mushroom shell. Remove from the oven and set aside.
5. Toss the diced portobellos, carrots, turnips, onions, and garlic with the remaining 2 tablespoons olive oil, 1/2 teaspoon of the salt, and 1/2 teaspoon of the pepper. Spread the mixture on a sheet pan and roast until the carrots and turnips are fork-tender, 12 to 15 minutes.

6. Remove the roasted vegetables from the oven and toss in the mustard and thyme. Set aside.
7. Bring a medium pot of salted water to a boil over high heat. Add the celery root and potatoes and boil until fork-tender, 8 to 12 minutes.
8. Drain the celery root and potato, reserving 1/4 cup of the cooking water. Transfer the celery root, potato, and reserved cooking water to a food processor and add the vegan sour cream, truffle oil, and the remaining 1/2 teaspoon salt and 1/2 teaspoon pepper. Pulse until smooth and creamy.
9. Turn the remaining Portobello caps upside down and stuff them with the roasted diced vegetables.
10. Seal the caps by completely covering the diced vegetables with the celery root and potato puree.
11. Return the caps to the oven and bake until the puree on top starts to brown, 6 to 10 minutes. Serve immediately.

SERVES 4

5. Sweet Potatoes with White Miso Ginger Sauce

Vegetable Literacy: Cooking and Gardening with Twelve Families from Edible Plant Kingdom, with over 300 Deliciously Simple Recipes

Deborah Madison

Ten Speed Press 2013

\$25.99

- 4 (6-ounce) sweet potatoes, scrubbed
- 1 clove garlic, chopped
- 1 (1-inch) piece ginger, peeled and coarsely chopped
- Few drops of agave nectar, or pinch of sugar
- 1 heaping tablespoon white miso
- 1 tablespoon rice vinegar
- 1 teaspoon light sesame oil, plus more for browning (optional)
- 1 tablespoon toasted sesame oil
- 2 teaspoons black sesame seeds, toasted in a dry skillet, to finish

1. Put the sweet potatoes on a steaming rack over boiling water, cover, and steam until tender, 30 to 40 minutes, depending on their size. Or cook them in a pressure cooker (preceding recipe).

2. While the sweet potatoes are cooking, make the sauce. Pound the garlic and ginger in a mortar or process in a small food processor until smooth, then work in the agave nectar, miso, vinegar, both sesame oils, and 1 tablespoon water.

3. When the sweet potatoes are tender, halve them lengthwise. Serve them just as they are, or brown them, cut side down, in a little sesame oil in ridged cast-iron pan or skillet over medium heat. Their natural sugars will caramelize and turn an appetizing golden brown.

Arrange the sweet potatoes on individual plates or a platter and spoon the sauce over them. Finish with the sesame seeds and serve.

SERVES 4

Chef Grace Young prefers carbon steel or a thin cast-iron wok to achieve that full sear. Find her recipe for **Burmese Chinese Chili Chicken**, referenced on page 231, here.

Stir-Frying to the Sky's Edge: The Ultimate Guide to Mastery, with Authentic Recipes and Stories

Grace Young

Simon and Schuster, 2010

\$22.99

Irene Khin Wong, owner of Saffron 59 Catering in New York City and a native of Myanmar (formerly Burma), taught me this recipe, one of her signature dishes. Wong's parents were both born in Myanmar but her father's family was originally from Guangzhou, China. Wong remembers as children she and her siblings loved Burmese food, but because her paternal grandmother lived with the family they mainly prepared traditional Cantonese stir-fries; her father and grandmother did not eat chilies, nor did they enjoy the spices typical of Burmese cooking.

This recipe reflects the fusion of Chinese, Burmese, and Indian cuisines. The paprika, cumin, and chili powder are Indian spices that were incorporated into Burmese cooking, creating layers of lush flavor—a great counterpoint to the mild heat from the fresh chili in this stir-fry. At first bite the heat level is mild but gradually builds as you eat. Wong says instead of chili powder she sometimes uses 1/8 to 1/4 teaspoon cayenne.

She also prefers dark meat but you can use chicken breast. The chicken is cut into large, thick slices. This recipe requires a wok. I tried cooking it in a skillet and the spices burned.

Chinese Burmese Chili Chicken

- 1 pound skinless, boneless chicken thigh or breast, cut crosswise into 1/2-inch-thick large slices
- 2 tablespoons peanut or vegetable oil
- 1 1/2 teaspoons cornstarch
- 3/4 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 teaspoon freshly ground pepper
- 2 teaspoons sweet paprika
- 1 teaspoon ground cumin
- 1 small yellow onion, quartered and cut into 3/4-inch chunks
- 2 teaspoons minced ginger
- 2 teaspoons minced garlic
- 1 medium red bell pepper, cut into 1-inch squares (about 1 1/3 cups)

- 1 medium green bell pepper, cut into 1-inch squares (about 1¹/₃ cups)
- 2 teaspoons fish sauce
- 1 Anaheim chili cut into scant 1/8-inch-thick slices, with seeds (about 1/4 cup)
- 1 medium zucchini, halved lengthwise and cut into scant 1/2-inch-thick slices (about 1¹/₂ cups)
- 1/2 teaspoon chili powder

1. In a medium bowl combine the chicken, 1 tablespoon of the oil, 1 teaspoon of the cornstarch, 1/2 teaspoon of the salt, and pepper. Stir to combine. In a small bowl combine the remaining 1/2 teaspoon cornstarch and 1/3 cup cold water. In another small bowl combine the paprika and cumin.

2. Heat a 14-inch flat-bottomed wok over high heat until a bead of water vaporizes within 1 to 2 seconds of contact. Swirl in the remaining 1 tablespoon oil, add the onions, then, using a metal spatula, stir-fry 30 seconds or until the onions begin to wilt. Push the onions to the side of the wok, carefully add the chicken, and spread it evenly in the center of the wok. Cook undisturbed for 1 minute, letting the chicken begin to sear. Stir-fry 30 seconds or until the chicken is almost opaque. Add the ginger, garlic, and the paprika mixture, and stir-fry 1 minute or until the aromatics are fragrant and the chicken is well coated in the spices.

3. Add the red and green bell peppers, reduce the heat to medium, and stir-fry 2 minutes or until the peppers begin to soften. (Do not be alarmed if the spices stick a little to the bottom of the wok.) Add the fish sauce, chilies, zucchini, and the remaining 1/4 teaspoon salt, and stir-fry 1 minute or until almost all the liquid has evaporated. Restir the cornstarch mixture, swirl it into the wok, increase the heat to high, and stir-fry 1 minute or until the chicken is just done and the vegetables are crisp-tender. Remove the wok from the heat and stir in the chili powder.

Serves 3 as a main dish with rice or 4 as part of a multicourse meal.