

Pommes de Terre at the Market



BY VARU CHILAKAMARRI

Until recently, my flirtation with French culture has led to disappointing results. I was the high school student whose inability to roll the French “R” was compounded by the unlucky fate of having French teachers named Madame Roberts and Madame Ralls. And, despite all its critical acclaim, I just couldn’t get into Amélie. But lately, it seems like France

has given me another chance, by treating me to its more palatable offerings.

I just finished reading Julia Child’s autobiography, *My Life in France*. Julia’s inquisitive approach to cooking inspired me so much that one weekend I turned down my usual selection of celebrity magazines at Trover Books, and instead purchased *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*. It cost me a small fortune and had no color pictures of food or celebrities, but what I learned shocked me almost as much as bald Britney. Apparently, I had been cooking vegetables wrong my whole life. Oh mon dieu!

Admittedly, I had rarely cooked vegetables with the intention of eating them plain. I always sautéed, fried, or baked vegetables for dishes like stir-fry, curry, or pasta. I never paid much attention to whether I boiled the water before or after plopping in the veggies—at the end of the day, they always got cooked. On the rare occasions that I had prepared something like simple asparagus, I just assumed that I had to forego either color or texture. But this all changed when I read Julia’s book. Her straightforward explanation of the “blanching” method of cooking vegetables was easy: place vegetables in a pot of rapidly boiling salted water; cook until tender but not mushy; then immediately dunk the veggies in ice cold water to stop the cooking.

The first time I followed this approach, all I had on hand was corn on the cob—but Julia would have been proud. Not only were the kernels a rich canary yellow and bursting with flavor, but they cooked in just a few minutes. I immediately went to Eastern Market to find out what other treasures I had missed.

One of the first times I visited the Market, I didn’t know where to begin, so I just bought a few items from every stand. By the time I discovered the interior of the Market, the only thing left to buy was fruit. I stopped at a corner produce stand which was neighbor to loaves upon loaves of baked breads. I purchased only blueberries and pears, but when the friendly vendor handed me my bag, he threw in a banana as well. The spontaneous gesture was charming . . . the merchant didn’t ask if I ate, or even liked, bananas; he just gave it to me as a sign of good will—a symbolic “thank you, come again.” So, I did.

The essence of a great market is the feeling of freedom it inspires within you. Julia Child discussed the outdoor French markets at great length in her autobiography, from the regional fish and herbs sold there, to the individual personalities of the vendors. But what struck me about these markets was that their down-to-earth atmosphere seemed to invite visitors to shop with a sense of ease and spontaneity. Maybe it’s because the goods in these markets are more than just items with barcodes. There are no long labels to read on the back of a broccoli; no aisles teeming with calorie traps and carefully crafted product placements. The food in the French markets—just as in Eastern Market—is pure and simple, and you really can’t go wrong. It was in that spirit that I roamed Eastern Market in search of more vegetables to cook. For once, I didn’t set out with a particular list in hand. I just let the plan come to me.

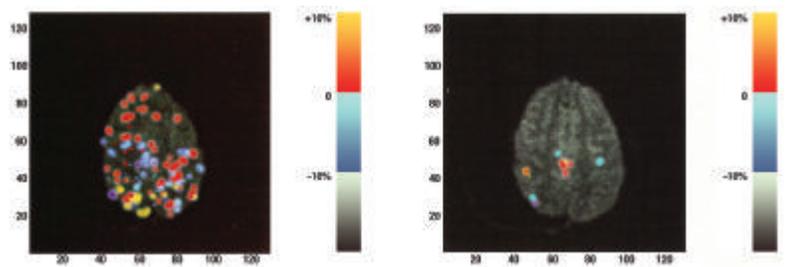
I grabbed a handful of fresh baby spinach, a bunch of asparagus, and then a bag of assorted soup vegetables, such as carrots, potatoes and green beans. I was wild. I was crazy. I had no idea what I would make, but the vegetables sure looked good. Maybe I’d finally found the “French” way after all? But just to be sure, I picked up a bottle of wine on my way home for good measure. ■



Market Salad

- 4 small red potatoes
- 2 carrots
- 1 handful of green beans
- 1 handful of asparagus (½ a bunch)
- ¼ cup (or more) of goat cheese
- ½ can of whole beets
- 1 bunch of baby spinach
- ¼ cup of olive oil
- 2-3 tablespoons of red wine vinegar
- 1 teaspoon of garlic powder
- salt and pepper, to taste

1. Quarter the potatoes; cut the carrots into slender 2-inch long matchsticks; and cut the green beans and asparagus stalks into 2-inch long pieces.
2. Blanch these vegetables by placing them all in large pot of rapidly boiling, liberally salted water. Remove the vegetables from the water with metal tongs or a slotted spoon when they are cooked enough for your taste – you could cook them for as little as 3 minutes, but I prefer cooking them for 10-15 minutes so that they are fully cooked but still have a bit of a bite. You may also wish to remove the asparagus first, followed by the beans, carrots, and then potatoes, as they each reach tenderness at slightly different times. Dunk the veggies in ice cold water and then allow them to drain.
3. Chop the canned beets and set aside. Crumble about ¼ cup of the goat cheese and set aside.
4. Layer the blanched vegetables over a bed of baby spinach. Top with the beets and goat cheese.
5. Whisk the oil, red wine vinegar, garlic powder, salt, and pepper together, adjusting the quantities to your taste. Drizzle over the salad and serve.



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