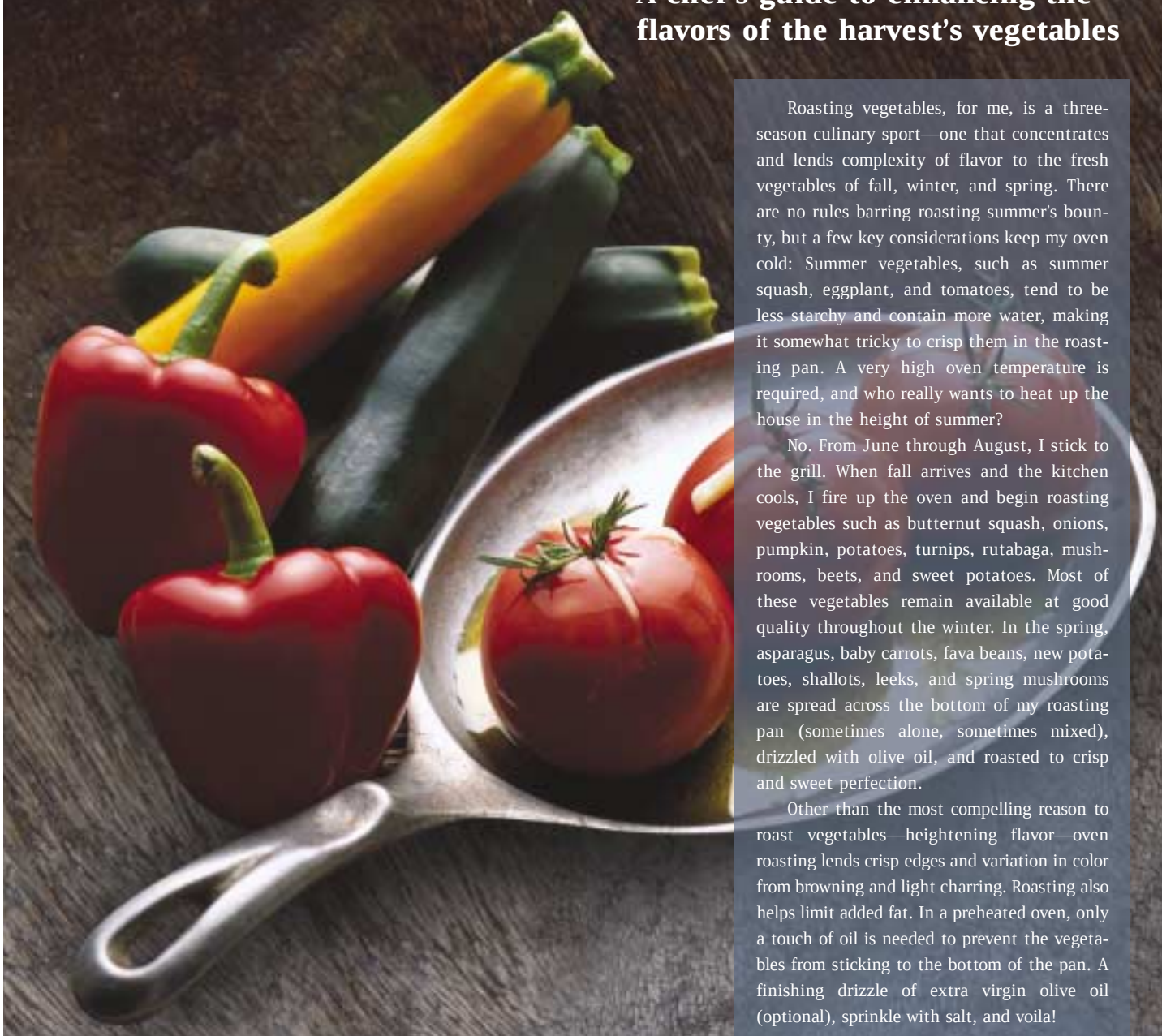
roasting vegetables:

a three-season culinary sport

By Laura Pensiero, RD

A chef's guide to enhancing the flavors of the harvest's vegetables



Roasting vegetables, for me, is a three-season culinary sport—one that concentrates and lends complexity of flavor to the fresh vegetables of fall, winter, and spring. There are no rules barring roasting summer's bounty, but a few key considerations keep my oven cold: Summer vegetables, such as summer squash, eggplant, and tomatoes, tend to be less starchy and contain more water, making it somewhat tricky to crisp them in the roasting pan. A very high oven temperature is required, and who really wants to heat up the house in the height of summer?

No. From June through August, I stick to the grill. When fall arrives and the kitchen cools, I fire up the oven and begin roasting vegetables such as butternut squash, onions, pumpkin, potatoes, turnips, rutabaga, mushrooms, beets, and sweet potatoes. Most of these vegetables remain available at good quality throughout the winter. In the spring, asparagus, baby carrots, fava beans, new potatoes, shallots, leeks, and spring mushrooms are spread across the bottom of my roasting pan (sometimes alone, sometimes mixed), drizzled with olive oil, and roasted to crisp and sweet perfection.

Other than the most compelling reason to roast vegetables—heightening flavor—oven roasting lends crisp edges and variation in color from browning and light charring. Roasting also helps limit added fat. In a preheated oven, only a touch of oil is needed to prevent the vegetables from sticking to the bottom of the pan. A finishing drizzle of extra virgin olive oil (optional), sprinkle with salt, and voila!

C cuisine: roasting vegetables

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The point of roasting vegetables is to evaporate much of the water, concentrating the flavor and caramelizing the natural sugars. A golden exterior and tender moist interior is the benchmark for properly roasted vegetables. If the vegetable is somewhat starchy (eg, potatoes, parsnips, sweet potatoes) some crisping is desired. When the process goes wrong, usually due to overcrowding the pan or too low an oven temperature, the vegetables end up steaming in their own liquid—no crisping, no browning, no concentration of flavor.

A Roasting Primer

1) High, dry heat is required. An oven temperature of approximately 450˚ F is particularly important during the first 15 minutes of roasting. If the vegetables require further cooking, reduce the temperature to 375˚ to 400˚ to continue cooking without overbrowning.

2) Think about how long each vegetable takes to cook and cut into pieces accordingly. For roasted potatoes, peppers, and onions, it is best to cut the quick-cooking peppers into large pieces, the onions into quarters if medium size—eighths if large—and the potatoes in 1- to 2-inch pieces.

3) Use a roasting pan with low sides that is large enough to hold the vegetables in one layer. Stacking or layering will cause steaming.

4) Do not stir vegetables during the first 10 to 15 minutes of roasting. Gently stir or shake the pan after they are well seared to help evenly brown.

5) If using vegetables that require longer cooking times (potatoes, rutabaga, turnips), add garlic cloves and herbs during the last 15 minutes of roasting to prevent burning and bitterness.

Using Roasted Vegetables

Roasted vegetables are a great stand-alone side dish—think roasted shallots, baby carrots, beets, butternut squash, or any of the limitless seasonal combinations. They also work well when mixed into or topping salads. The most popular salad at my restaurant, Gigi Trattoria in Rhinebeck, N.Y., is the Barbina, which includes baby greens, roasted beets, roasted butternut squash (asparagus in the spring and string beans in the summer), toasted walnuts and crumbled Coach Farm goat cheese, with a sherry-shallot vinaigrette. Customers love the combination of the slightly bitter greens, sweet roasted vegetables, toasty nuts, and tangy goat cheese.

Leftover roasted vegetables can be mixed into scrambled eggs, omelets, or frittatas or fill burritos, tacos, quesadillas, and the layers between the sheets of pasta in seasonal lasagnas. These diverse and delicious recipes should get you going with ideas.

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What to Roast and When to Roast It

- **Fall:** beets, broccoli, brussels sprouts, onions, peppers, mushrooms, sweet potatoes, rutabaga, turnips, harvest squash
- **Winter:** endive, carrots, parsnips, rutabaga, turnips, harvest squash, potatoes, sweet potatoes
- **Spring:** artichokes, asparagus, baby carrots, baby turnips, new potatoes, fava beans, mushrooms
- **Summer:** [If you're going to turn on the oven in summer] eggplant, summer squash, and cherry tomatoes.

Roasted Brussels Sprouts, Baby Carrots, and Pearl Onions

These oven-caramelized fall vegetables will convert die-hard brussels sprout foes into instant supporters. Brussels sprouts belong in the protective cruciferous vegetable family (broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower, kale, mustard greens, etc). For optimal health, we should eat one serving per day of one of these tasty and versatile vegetables.

1 pound baby carrots, stem trimmed
1 pound brussels sprouts, ends trimmed and halved
1 1/2 cups pearl onions (fresh, peeled or frozen, thawed and drained)
3 garlic cloves, crushed
1 1/2 tablespoons olive oil
salt and pepper
1/4 cup water

Preheat oven to 425˚ F. In a 13- x 9-inch roasting pan, combine carrots, brussels sprouts, onions, garlic, and olive oil. Season with salt and pepper and toss or stir to combine; the vegetables can overlap slightly but should generally fit in one layer.

Roast in upper third of oven, stirring once halfway through roasting, until vegetables are brown and tender—about 30 minutes total. Stir in water, scraping up brown bits. Serve warm or room temperature. Drizzle with extra virgin olive oil if desired.

Makes six servings

PER SERVING: Calories 115 (33% from fat); Fat 3.5 grams (saturated 0.5 grams, monounsaturated 2.5 grams, polyunsaturated 0.5 grams); Protein 4 grams; Carbohydrate 19 grams; Fiber 6 grams; Cholesterol 0 milligrams; Calcium 63 milligrams

Autumn Roasted Vegetables With Mushrooms

At Gigi Trattoria, roasted vegetables are a *contorni*, or side dish, on our menu for much of the year. The recipe below, with mushrooms, beets, and sweet potatoes, celebrates the arrival of fall. In the spring, we add asparagus and spring mushrooms and omit the turnips and beets.

8 medium shiitake mushrooms, stems trimmed, caps halved
4 baby turnips, peeled and halved (if using medium turnips, cut into quarters or eighths)
6 baby carrots, peeled
2 medium sweet potatoes, peeled and cut into 1/2-inch thick wedges
2 small golden beets, cut into eight wedges*
1 medium red onion, cut into eight wedges
3 fresh rosemary sprigs
2 garlic cloves, crushed
3 tablespoons olive oil
Salt and freshly ground black pepper

*Do not substitute red beets unless you cook them separately, as they tend to "bleed" and discolor the other vegetables.

Preheat oven to 450˚ F.

Place the vegetables, rosemary, and garlic in a large mixing bowl. Drizzle with olive oil and season with salt and pepper.

Spread the vegetables in one even layer on a large nonstick pan and place in the oven. Roast for 20 minutes, or until golden brown, then turn them using a spatula safe for nonstick cookware. Lower heat to 375˚ F and continue roasting until the vegetables are crispy and tender when pierced with a knife—about 15 minutes. Remove rosemary sprigs and serve warm or at room temperature.

Makes six servings

PER SERVING: Calories 123 (38% from fat); Fat 5.5 grams (saturated 0.7 grams, monounsaturated 3.3 grams, polyunsaturated 1.5 grams); Protein 4 grams; Carbohydrate 17 grams; Fiber 4 grams; Cholesterol 0 milligrams; Calcium 44 milligrams

Roasted Shallots

Shallots are members of the protective allium family of vegetables, which includes onions, chives, leeks, and garlic. All are culinary workhorses, lending the base of flavor to so many dishes, soups, stews, roasts, sauces, etc. Shallots have a delicate flavor and sweetness, are less powerful than onions, and are a wonderful stand-alone dish. Serve these caramelized sweet shallots with a holiday spread or everyday meal. Any leftovers can also be sliced and then used to top pizzas and mixed into salads or egg preparations.

2 pounds shallots
2 fresh rosemary or thyme sprigs
2 tablespoons olive oil
salt and freshly ground black pepper

Preheat the oven to 450˚ F.

Peel the shallots, then trim the root end; be sure to leave it intact as it will hold the shallot together as it cooks. Halve any large shallots so they are all approximately the same size.

Place the shallots in a small roasting pan and drizzle with the olive oil. Add the rosemary or thyme and season with salt and pepper. Toss to combine.

Roast until tender and lightly browned—about 20 minutes.

Makes eight servings

PER SERVING: Calories 111 (33% from fat); Fat 3.5 grams (saturated 0.5 grams, monounsaturated 2.5 grams, polyunsaturated 0.5 grams); Protein 3 grams; Carbohydrate 19 grams; Fiber 1 grams; Cholesterol 0 milligrams; Calcium 22 milligrams

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