

The Vegetable Butcher

Now that we've met Cara Mangini (p. 18), author of "The Vegetable Butcher," let's talk about her book. Think of it as the ultimate produce guide. It's one part encyclopedia, providing tutorials on how to select and prepare almost every vegetable imaginable. It's also a traditional cookbook full of recipes. With an index that categorizes the recipes by season, cooking by time of year is a walk in the park. Gone are the days of falling in love with a recipe, only to find out that half of the ingredients aren't available.

The best way to explore any cookbook, though, is to actually cook with it. With a self-imposed mission of crafting a produce-inspired Valentine's Day dinner, I did just that. The goal: create a warm and hearty meal fit for a cold February evening without losing the elegance and romance of Valentine's Day. Another element of my mission? Do it all while giving a fair review of my sister-in-law's cookbook, one that I've watched grow from concept to hardcover. To tackle the former, I took full advantage of the book's aforementioned qualities: used the seasonal index to select my recipes - focusing on the "Fall to Winter" list - and the butchery instructions to prepare any vegetable which I, or my trusty sous-chef, had never cooked. For the latter, I put my trust in Mangini's skill as a writer and chef, and crossed my fingers that neither I nor the book would let each other down.

So what was on this vegetable Valentine's Day menu? For the salad, the winner was the shredded Brussels sprouts with pomegranate seeds, toasted walnuts and Manchego cheese. Topped with a Dijon and lemon vinaigrette, this is a fantastic Valentine's Day salad. Not only is it pretty, dotted with the ruby red pomegranate jewels; but with the nuts and shredded Man-



Photo by Matthew Benson


chego, it is packed with texture and flavor. Admittedly de-stemming and shredding the two pounds of Brussels sprouts took time, but it was a task easily transferred to my helper. A culinary novice who loathes Brussels sprouts, he dutifully followed the butchery instructions outlined in the book, and later, grudgingly, admitted he enjoyed the fruits of his labor.

The main course was the ultra-cozy celery root pot pie. Mangini warns that this is a time-consuming dish, but it will be worth it. She was right on both accounts. All in all, it's a very easy recipe to pull together; it just takes time - lots of time - to peel and chop everything. Also, since the vegetable medley beneath the buttery, flaky pie crust will resemble molten lava for at least 30 minutes after it finishes baking, a cooling period before serving is essential.

Let's talk celery root for a moment, because this was a revelation, at least for me.

If ever there were an ogre of the produce aisle, the gnarled, misshapen, tentacled celery root would be it. I always steered clear of it, not solely based on looks, but because I hadn't the faintest idea what to do with it. The celery root pot pie, along with the tutorial on how to peel and prepare the root, broke down my wall of prejudice. What celery root lacks in aesthetic appeal, it makes up for in flavor and weight. I even learned that it can serve as a stand-in for mashed potatoes. With my aversion officially assuaged, I now have a new vegetable added to my cooking toolbox.

Back to the menu, though. What is Valentine's Day without chocolate? Sad, if you ask me. For that reason, a rich chocolate avocado budino (Italian mousse-like pudding) with cinnamon and sea salt was the perfect grand finale. Avocado in pudding? The answer is "yes!" It will not taste like guacamole, I promise. The key is to make sure the avocados are nice and ripe, so they will whip up into a silky texture. Also, use an ultra-chocolatey cocoa powder. My personal favorite is Droste: It's a few dollars more than the conventional brands, but it is worth it. That richness, along with the cinnamon, cayenne and salt add complexity to the dessert, making the budino a perfect end to a romantic evening at home.

Sure, some omnivores might still be wary of a meatless meal. If my experiment proves anything, though, it's that "The Vegetable Butcher" offers recipes that take eating produce to a new heights. From start to finish, it was a produce-inspired evening that would make both Cupid and St. Valentine proud. 

Shredded Brussels Sprouts with Pomegranate Seeds, Walnuts, and Manchego

Serves 4 to 6

If you are a fan of Brussels sprouts roasted and crispy, you will love them shredded and raw. This slaw-like salad is so good and hearty it can serve as an entrée, or of course as a starter or side. The lemony bright sprouts are balanced perfectly by the creamy sheep's-milk cheese and the tangy crunch of pomegranate seeds. Walnuts and walnut oil add richness, but feel free to use hazelnut oil and hazelnuts, or more olive oil if that's what you have on hand. You can also swap Pecorino or parmesan for the Manchego. This is one for the fall and winter rotation.



from Vegetable Butcher/Workman Publishing/Photo by Matthew Benson

- 2 tablespoons white wine vinegar
- 1 teaspoon freshly grated lemon zest, plus extra for garnish
- 1 tablespoon freshly squeezed lemon juice
- 1 teaspoon Dijon mustard
- Fine sea salt
- Freshly ground black pepper
- 1 pound Brussels sprouts, trimmed and finely sliced
- 1 to 2 tablespoons walnut oil
- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 1/2 to 3/4 cup pomegranate seeds (from 1 medium pomegranate; see Note)
- 3/4 cup toasted walnuts, coarsely chopped
- 2/3 cup freshly grated Manchego cheese (about 2 ounces)

1. Whisk together the vinegar, lemon zest, lemon juice, Dijon mustard, 3/4 teaspoon of salt, and several grinds of pepper in a large bowl. Add the sprouts and toss well to combine and coat the sprouts. Let stand to marinate, 5 minutes.
2. Drizzle in 1 tablespoon of the walnut oil and the 2 tablespoons of olive oil and toss well to combine. Add the pomegranate seeds, walnuts, and all but about 1/4 cup of the Manchego. Toss well and adjust salt and pepper and the walnut oil to taste. Transfer to a serving bowl or individual shallow bowls and top with the remaining Manchego, and sprinkle with more lemon zest if you wish.

Note: There are more reverent ways than this one to separate pomegranate seeds from their pith and membrane, but I recommend the following method for ease, speed, and a no-mess outcome. Trim a small piece off the top, stem end of the pomegranate. Resting the fruit on its cut end, cut it vertically into quarters along its natural ridges. Submerge the sections in a bowl of cool water and use your fingers to gently rub and release the seeds from the pith that surrounds them. The water helps keep the juice from splattering onto you and your kitchen. It also allows the white pith to float to the top, making it easier to skim and discard it. Drain the pomegranate seeds. You will lose some of their tart-sweet juice in the process, but not enough to worry about.