The Soft Approach

A COOK VENTURES PAST THE POINT OF AL DENTE

I blame Julia Child for our national aversion to soft vegetables. It wasn't until she started urging American cooks—in her books and on her PBS series, *The French Chef*—to blanch everything from green beans to kale and then shock them in cold water, that a bright green color and firm texture were programmed in our minds as the platonic ideal. Well, I grew up on soggy broccoli rabe, and that's still my favorite way to eat it. Granted, broccoli rabe that's cooked just beyond its bright green state yet is still unpalatably bitter is a foul punishment. But something happens if you keep cooking it past that point. Eventually it becomes mellow, unctuous—creamy, even—the stems melting away in the mouth as ethereally as the florets. ∞ That was how my grandmother, who hailed from the Abruzzi region of Italy, prepared

BY LESLEY PORCELLI PHOTOGRAPHS BY TODD COLEMAN

Slow-cooked broccoli rabe flavored with crushed red chiles and garlic (see page 94 for a recipe).

You've got to really push the envelope, push through the

it, but early on I noticed that broccoli rabe like my nonna's was nowhere to be found outside our home. In restaurants and on cooking shows, it was prepared one way: blanched, then sautéed. And served one way: safely on the firm side of tender. When I got a kitchen of my own and started collecting cookbooks, I realized that the most respected food authorities were opposed to certain long-cooked vegetables. In the vegetable volume of Time-Life's *The Good Cook* series (1979), the editors advised to "keep the cooking time brief" for all crucifers lest they "become sulfurous." Yet I knew full well that Nonna's broccoli rabe—and my own—never had that offensive smell. And then there was food science writer Harold McGee, whose *On Food and Cooking* (Scribner, 1984) proclaimed, "Prolonged cooking makes members of the onion family more sweet and mellow, but the cabbage family gets more overbearing and unpleasant." Full stop.

McGee explained the chemistry behind that cabbagey stink, but he failed to account for the sweetness that comes around if you brave through that stage and keep on cooking. But, I thought, what about the greens that simmer to sweetness for hours in kitchens across the American South? Or the many Middle Eastern dishes of vegetables rendered luscious via long stewing? None of my heroes acknowledged these foods; none of them, it seemed, had ever left the pan on the heat for too long and made a happy discovery. What did they serve, I wondered, in the heart of winter, when everything else on the plate was roasted, and a bit of squishy comfort was warranted?

It was one thing to note this omission in cookbooks, but another thing entirely to find that among my peers I was nearly alone in thinking there were more options than just al dente. I discovered as much in culinary school, on day one of Vegetable Cookery. Chef Ted, an imposing Doric column of a man, was to lead the lecture. We walked into our kitchen classroom that day to find several pots of water and various vegetables already bubbling on the stove. Without a word, Chef Ted pulled some green beans from a pot and distributed them for us to sample.

"Is that cooked?" he asked the first student who bit into it. "Yes," came the answer. He looked at another student. "What do *you* think?" Again came the answer: yes. Then he looked at me. I took the bean, bright green and firm, and bit down. And there—a telltale squeak between my teeth that I didn't like. "Um, no?" I said. The rest of the class, save one other person, agreed that these beans were perfectly cooked.

"You," said Chef Ted, pointing to me, "and you," to the other who had sided with me, "are the only two who know what a cooked vegetable should taste like." When I asked Chef Ted about it later, he said, "You find in big cities, or with people who think they're more educated about gastronomy, that they'll think crunchy vegetables are properly cooked. It's the influence of French nouvelle cuisine; it was a reaction against classical French not to overcook vegetables. Like anything else that's good, it got misinterpreted in the wrong hands."

Still, "crisp-tender" was the institution, and so we fussed over ice baths

Lesley Porcelli *is a freelance writer and recipe developer living in Syracuse, New York.*

just-cooked stage, and you arrive at that sweet complexity

and obsessed over "setting the color." I became aware of the divide in my thinking in the kitchen: One kind of cooking was restaurant food, and then there was how I preferred to cook at home.

Until the day I stumbled on a dissenting voice, a plea on behalf of the overcooked; unsurprisingly, it came from an Italian, Marcella Hazan. Her cookbooks are full of recipes for vegetables rendered soft and yielding in slow-simmering water–olive oil baths, the cooking liquid itself as delectable as a broth. Nothing complements roast chicken like her braised artichokes and leeks, olive green and silky; her braised celery stalks reveal a luxuriousness you wouldn't expect from celery. I was certain there must be scientific corroboration for what Hazan and generations of cooks before her knew based on experience at the stove. I phoned Dr. Keith Harris, assistant professor of food science at North Carolina State University, to see if he could shed light on that elusive vegetal sweetness that comes with long cooking. "It's true that when vegetables, especially cruciferous vegetables, are cooked, the damage to the plant's tissue brings about reactions between compounds that are usually kept separate," he said—hence the sulfuric aroma. But, he emphasized, if you continue to cook these foods, "at a certain point the aroma will dissipate, and you'll end up with the flavor compounds left in the plant, including its sugars—especially if it's cooked and served in a way that the sugars aren't poured out with the cooking water."

In the last few years, I've been delighted to detect signs of rebellion among Hazan's culinary heirs. When I was working at a culinary magazine, I walked into the test kitchen one day to find one of the food editors serving green beans cooked in water and olive oil long enough that you could practically bite through them with your tongue alone. And on the menu at Pizzeria Mozza in Los Angeles, I spied a savory pie topped with "long-cooked broccoli" soft enough to spread like butter.

When I talked to Mozza's chef and co-owner, Nancy Silverton, it was like finding a long-lost family member. "You've got to really push the envelope, push through the just-cooked stage, and you arrive at that sweet complexity again," she said. "When I was at Campanile in the '80s, we were doing the California thing of barely cooking baby vegetables; we were so proud of their purity. But the Italians who visited us pooh-poohed it, because they know that more mature vegetables actually have more flavor. They would push us to go for longer cooking times. True Italians have no tolerance for crunchy vegetables."

So there it was: The more I searched, the closer I came to my roots. Still, my own family remains divided on the issue. My husband and son are happiest on the days that I blanch and then quick-sauté the broccoli rabe with olive oil, chile flakes, and garlic. But there are times when I must honor where I came from. I remember the first time I brought a bowl of long-braised broccoli rabe to a gathering of my extended family after both my grandparents had died. "Mmmm," my uncle smiled, after tasting a forkful. "This is just how Dad liked it."

From left: braised celery and tomato; Lebanese-style green beans with chickpeas in olive oil; Indian-style carrots with mustard seeds; and olive oil-braised vegetables (see page 94 for recipes).

Carrot Kari

(Indian-Style Carrots With Mustard Seeds)

SERVES 4–6

Inspired by a recipe in Julie Sahni's *Indian Regional Classics* (Ten Speed Press, 2001), these carrots (pictured on page 93) are stewed long enough to concentrate their sweetness; mustard seeds, curry leaves, and chiles provide warm and earthy notes.

- 2 tbsp. canola oil
- 1 tsp. brown mustard seeds
- 2 tsp. yellow split peas (see page 106), lightly crushed
- 1 tsp. ground turmeric
- ½ tsp. paprika
- 24 fresh or dried curry leaves (optional; see page 106)
- 2 dried chiles de árbol, stemmed and torn into small pieces
- 1¼ lb. small to medium carrots, thinly sliced crosswise
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- Cooked basmati rice, for serving

1 Heat oil in a 12" skillet over medium-high heat. Add the mustard seeds, cover skillet with lid, and cook, shaking the pan occasionally, until the seeds stop popping, about 30 seconds.

2 Remove the lid and stir in the peas, turmeric, paprika, curry leaves, and chiles, and cook, stirring often, until fragrant, about 2 minutes. Add the carrots along with 1 cup water and bring to a boil. Reduce the heat to medium-low, and cook, covered and stirring occasionally, until carrots are very soft, about 20 minutes.

3 Uncover the pan, raise the heat to high, and cook, stirring occasionally, until the excess liquid evaporates, about 5 minutes. Season with salt and pepper. Serve hot or at room temperature with basmati rice.

Cime di Rapa Fritte

(Slow-Cooked Broccoli Rabe)

SERVES 4–6

Notoriously bitter and tough, broccoli rabe becomes mellow and supple when cooked slowly in a bath of water and olive oil. Simply seasoned with garlic and chile flakes, this Italian home-cooking classic (pictured on page 90) is true comfort food.

- 1¼ cups olive oil
- 1½ tsp. crushed red chile flakes
- 12 cloves garlic, thinly sliced
- 2¼ lb. broccoli rabe, thick stems removed, cut into 2" pieces
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste

1 Heat ¾ cup oil, chile flakes, and 6 cloves garlic in a 12" skillet over medium-high heat, and cook, stirring occasionally, until garlic is lightly browned, about 2 minutes. Add broccoli rabe and ½ cup water, reduce heat to medium-low, and cover skillet; cook, stirring occasionally, until very soft, about 1 hour and 15 minutes.

2 Meanwhile, place remaining oil and garlic in a 1-qt. saucepan over medium-high heat. Cook, stirring occasionally, until garlic is crisp and golden, about 5 minutes. Drain, and set garlic chips aside.

3 To serve, season broccoli rabe with salt and pepper and top with reserved garlic chips.

Loubieh Wa Hommus Bi-Ziet

(Lebanese-Style Green Beans With Chickpeas in Olive Oil)

SERVES 4–6

Slow-cooked vegetable dishes like this one, a cumin- and paprika-spiced stew of beans and tomatoes (pictured on page 92), are a standby in many parts of the Middle East. Here, tomatoes and green beans release some of their flavor into the cooking liquid, creating a rich broth.

- ¼ cup olive oil
- 2 tsp. cumin seeds
- 4 cloves garlic, peeled and finely chopped
- 1 medium yellow onion, thinly sliced
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- 2 tbsp. tomato paste
- 1 tbsp. paprika
- 1½ lb. green beans, strings removed
- 1 28-oz. can whole, peeled tomatoes with juice, crushed by hand
- 1 15-oz. can chickpeas, drained and rinsed

1 Heat the oil in an 8-qt. saucepan over medium-high heat; add cumin seeds and cook, stirring often, until fragrant, about 1 minute.

2 Add the garlic and onion, season with salt and pepper, and cook, stirring often, until soft and lightly browned, about 12 minutes.

3 Add the tomato paste and paprika, and cook, stirring occasionally, until tomato paste is lightly caramelized, about 2 minutes. Add the green beans, tomatoes, chickpeas, and 3 cups water, and bring to a boil. Reduce the heat to medium-low, and cook, partially covered, stirring occasionally, until very tender, about 1 hour. Let sit for at least 15 minutes before serving to allow the flavors to meld.

Olive Oil–Braised Vegetables

SERVES 4–6

Based on a recipe from Traci Des Jardins, chef and co-owner of Jardinière in San Francisco, this flavorful mix of broccoli, cauliflower, zucchini, and potatoes (pictured on page 93) is braised in olive oil that's been infused with rosemary, chile flakes, lemon, and anchovies.

- 1 cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 tbsp. anchovy paste
- ½ tsp. crushed red chile flakes
- 6 sun-dried tomatoes, thinly sliced lengthwise
- 6 cloves garlic, peeled and smashed with the side of a knife
- 6 sprigs rosemary
- 1 lemon, ends trimmed, thinly sliced crosswise, seeds removed
- 1 large zucchini, cut diagonally into 1½"-long pieces
- 1 lb. baby Yukon Gold or new potatoes
- 1 medium head broccoli, cut into florets, stalk cut into large pieces
- ½ medium head cauliflower, cut into florets, stalk cut into large pieces
- 2 tbsp. finely chopped parsley
- 2 sprigs marjoram, stems removed
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste

1 Put the olive oil, anchovy paste, chile flakes, sun-dried tomatoes, garlic, rosemary, and lemon slices in a 6-qt. Dutch oven. Place over medium-high heat and cook, stirring occasionally, until fragrant and the garlic and the lemon slices are lightly browned, about 5 minutes.

2 Add the zucchini in a single layer and cook, without stirring, until lightly browned, about 5 minutes. Flip the zucchini, and cook for 5 minutes more.

3 Add the potatoes, broccoli, and cauliflower to the pot and stir once or twice to coat in oil. Cook, covered, without stirring, until the vegetables begin to brown and soften, about 30 minutes.

4 Stir vegetables gently, replace the lid, and reduce the heat to medium-low; cook until the vegetables are very soft and tender, about 60 minutes more.

5 Remove the vegetables from the heat, and stir in parsley and marjoram. Season with salt and pepper.

Sedano e Pomodori Brasati

(Braised Celery and Tomato)

SERVES 4–6

This recipe, adapted from one in Marcella Hazan's *Essentials of Classic Italian Cooking* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), produces results that are surprising from celery: creamy, sweet, luscious. The stalks' stringy fibers, often removed before cooking, here act as a brace to help the vegetable (pictured on page 92) keep its shape through a long simmer.

- 3 oz. pancetta, cut into 1" matchsticks
- ¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 large yellow onion, cut in half, cored, and very thinly sliced
- 2 lb. celery stalks, trimmed and cut diagonally into 2" lengths
- ¾ cup whole, peeled canned tomatoes with juice, crushed by hand
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste

1 Put pancetta in a 6-qt. saucepan and place over medium-high heat. Cook, stirring occasionally, until its fat renders, about 12 minutes. (If the pancetta begins to brown too fast, reduce the heat to medium-low.) Using a slotted spoon, transfer the pancetta to paper towels to drain, and set aside.

2 Add the olive oil to the pan, and return to medium-high heat. Add the onion, and cook, stirring occasionally, until soft and light brown, about 10 minutes. Add the celery, tomatoes, and ¼ cup water, and season with salt and pepper. Cover pan with lid, and cook, stirring occasionally, until celery is very tender, about 1½ hours.

3 Divide the celery with its juices between serving bowls, and sprinkle with the reserved pancetta. Serve hot or at room temperature.