

# Tough love

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*By A.K. Whitney*

It's almost Halloween, and there they are, sitting on bales of hay at your local market, a dazzling variety of multicolored squash of all sizes and shapes, just waiting to be taken home and cooked. But though they may seem a bit scary, trust us - there's no reason to fear the winter squash.

"I understand how intimidating squash can be to some people," said Bradley Miller, executive chef at the Inn of the Seventh Ray in Topanga. "But it can also be fun and very delicious."

"I love squash," said Michael Shafer, executive chef and owner of Depot Restaurant in Torrance. "Especially winter squash. The simplest way to cook a hard squash is to cut it in half, scrape out the seeds, add olive oil, salt and pepper, and bake it at 350 degrees until tender."

Ah, but there's the problem. How do you cut notoriously hard winter squash in half without also losing a finger?

"What I tell novices is to put squashes on a couple of towels to balance them" before using a knife, Shafer said.

Joseph Gillard, executive chef of the Napa Valley Grille in Westwood, suggests using a hammer.

"Place the squash in a paper bag. Cover it with a towel. Then hit it with a hammer."

Once the squash cracks, Gillard added, you can inch a knife into it and cut it open (using a nest of towels to stabilize the squash works here too).

Sound too dangerous?

"You can also roast the squash whole," Gillard said, adding that this works best with smaller squash. (If the squash is too big to fit in your oven, you're going to have to cut it.)

But even then, you're not entirely off the hook.

"Poke holes in it with a skewer, so it won't explode," Gillard added.

You can also use the tip of a knife.

Then, there's using the microwave, though none of the chefs we talked to for this story are fond of that method.

"Microwaving the squash for two or three minutes will soften it," said Robert Schueller, spokesman for Melissa's World/Variety Produce, which is based in Los Angeles. He added that the smaller the squash, the harder it is likely to be.

"All squashes are hollow," Schueller said. "The bigger the squash, the bigger the hollow."

If Schueller's tips don't do it, Karen Caplan, president and CEO of Frieda's Specialty Produce in Los Alamitos, suggests the following:

"To cut hard-shelled squash without losing a finger, it's best to par-cook them first. Poke deep holes in squash (either with fork or knife), then heat whole in the microwave for at least eight to 10 minutes, until the skin is slightly soft. You will then be able to get

your knife through the thick shell more easily. Then you can slice the squash, remove the seeds and continue cooking."

Still sounds like too much trouble? Both chefs and produce companies recommend beginners try the butternut squash, which tends to have the thinnest skin, and can actually be peeled.

"I would recommend peeling the outside of the squash with a vegetable peeler," Miller said. "Notice vegetable peeler, not potato peeler. The reason being is a vegetable peeler is horizontal, which makes for a much easier peel."

OK, so you've finally opened the squash. Now what?

"I treat each squash individually," Gillard said. "Some are drier, some are moister, some are sweeter."

Indeed, Frieda's and Melissa's report there's an eye-popping variety of winter squash, including but not limited to delicata, spaghetti, sweet dumpling, carnival, acorn, and kobucha, and each varies in size, color and sweetness.

Bake it, saute it, then turn it into pretty much anything, from soup to side dish, entree to dessert.

Gillard encourages home cooks to not just think sweet.

"So many people try to make it taste like dessert," he said, adding that, though many squashes are naturally sweet, they taste just fine in savory dishes.

But sweet is good too.

"Toss it with some brown sugar, and bake it," said Rick Wilson, owner of Shenandoah at the Arbor in Long Beach. He also suggested turning cooled squash puree into a souffle of sorts by

adding some eggs and sugar, and baking it.

A mistake some cooks make with squash, Wilson said, is to cook it too much.

"They tend to cook the living daylights out of it," he said.

Consider parboiling cubed squash, or sauteing it, just until al dente (or still slightly chewy), Wilson said.

Some, though, stand by one method. Shafer said roasting is his go-to option, though he will consider grilling or pan frying. Just keep your cooking method dry.

"Water doesn't taste like anything," he said, adding that boiling tends to leave most of the flavor behind.

## **ROASTED VEGETABLES**

3/4 pound small yellow potatoes

2 fennel bulbs

1 onion

1 acorn squash

4 parsnips

2 tablespoons olive oil

1 tablespoon vegetable stock (good quality)

1/2 teaspoon black pepper, ground

1/2 teaspoon salt

1 tablespoon chopped thyme

Sprigs of thyme, for garnish

Slice potatoes in half lengthwise. Cut root ends and stalks from the fennel bulbs; cut each bulb lengthwise through the root end into 4 wedges. Slice onion crosswise into three equal pieces.

Cut squash lengthwise into quarters; discard seeds. Cut each quarter crosswise into 2 pieces. Cut parsnips lengthwise in half, then halve each piece.

Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Place vegetables in a large roasting pan. Toss vegetables with the olive oil. In small bowl, mix vegetable stock, pepper, salt and thyme. Toss the seasoning mixture with vegetables in the roasting pan.

Roast vegetables 30 minutes, stirring once. Continue roasting 20 to 30 minutes longer, until vegetables are tender and nicely browned.

Remove vegetables to warm large platter. Deglaze pan with 2 tablespoons hot water, stir to loosen brown bits off bottom of pan.

Taste first to ensure liquid did not take on a burned taste. Pour liquid from each pan over vegetables. Garnish with thyme sprigs.

**–From Melissa's World/Variety Produce.**

## **STUFFED SPAGHETTI SQUASH ITALIANO**

1 spaghetti squash

1 cup shredded Cheddar cheese

1 cup grated zucchini squash

1 cup tomato sauce

1/4 teaspoon salt

1/4 teaspoon pepper

1/8 teaspoon dried basil

Dash of garlic powder

2 tablespoon grated Parmesan cheese

To cook the spaghetti squash, heat 2 inches of water in a large saucepan or skillet.

Halve squash lengthwise; scoop out seeds. Place squash cut sides down in skillet; cover and bring to a boil. Reduce heat to simmer; cook, covered, for 20 to 25 minutes, or until squash separates easily with a fork. (Or, to cook in the microwave, place halves cut side down in a microwaveable dish with 1/4 cup water; cover loosely. Microwave on high for 7 to 10 minutes, turning dish a quarter turn every 3 minutes. Let stand, covered, 5 minutes.)

Scrape the interior of the cooked squash with two forks to separate the pulp into spaghetti-like strands. Place in a large mixing bowl and reserve the empty shell halves.

Add the Cheddar cheese, zucchini, tomato sauce, salt, pepper, basil and garlic powder to squash pulp and mix well. Spoon the mixture into the empty squash shells. Sprinkle with Parmesan cheese. Place on a baking sheet and bake at 350 degrees for 20 minutes or until bubbly.

Makes 6 to 8 servings.

**–From Frieda's Specialty Produce.**

## **BUTTERNUT SQUASH SOUP WITH FRANGELICO FOAM AND FIVE SPICE POWDER**

For the Soup:

1 pound butternut squash, cut, peeled, seeded, medium diced  
(reserve some for garnish)

1 tablespoon maple syrup

2 tablespoons unsalted butter

1/2 teaspoon fresh grated nutmeg

2 tablespoons unsalted butter

1 small onion, chopped

6 cups vegetable stock

Salt and freshly ground white pepper

1 empty wine bottle, for presentation

1 funnel

Frangelico Foam:

1/2 cup whipping cream

1 teaspoon Frangelico liqueur

1/2 teaspoon Five spice powder, for garnish

4 cinnamon sticks for garnish

Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Place squash in a roasting pan, toss

with maple syrup, dot with pieces of butter and sprinkle with nutmeg.

Roast until tender and sweet. While squash is roasting, melt 2 tablespoons butter in a large skillet. Add onion, and saut until golden.

Heat up vegetable stock to a boil, then reduce heat to a simmer. When squash is ready (reserve about 1/4 for garnish), transfer to a blender, filling up the blender with stock, onion and squash (this will have to be done in batches). Season the mixture with salt and pepper and blend on low and then move up to high. PLEASE REMEMBER TO HAVE THE LID ON THE BLENDER AND TO BE EXTRA CAREFUL BECAUSE THE SOUP IS VERY HOT!!! Blend until smooth.

Using the funnel, pour your soup into the wine bottle. THE WINE BOTTLE WILL BE HOT SO USE A DECORATIVE CLOTH TO CARRY.

Whip the cream and Frangelico until a stiff peak can be made with the cream.

For presentation: Place your reserved warm diced squash into large coffee or cappuccino cups, then place the Frangelico foam on top and sprinkle with a pinch of five spice powder.

Then, place one cinnamon stick in each cup for garnish and aroma.

Present the cups to the table. Once presented, pour the soup from the wine bottle into the cups.

Serves 4.

**–From Chef Bradley Miller, Inn of the Seventh Ray.**