

Rustic And Refined Ratatouille

This humble peasant dish is so rich and flavorful, it could almost pass for dessert

By Jennifer Wolcott
CORRESPONDENT OF THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR

Ratatouille is the essence of early autumn captured in a single pot. Tomatoes, eggplant, squash, peppers, onions, garlic, and herbs are at their peak of freshness and therefore, their best tasting, most locally accessible, and often least costly. One would think cooks everywhere would be snapping up these ingredients at the closest farmers' market and rushing them back to the stove to make multiple batches of ratatouille.

Mais non. At least in America, ratatouille seems better known as Pixar's delightful animated film by the same name than as a dish that delectably melds some of the best crops of the year. Ratatouille is nowhere to be found in supermarket deli cases, where it could easily co-exist beside other prepared foods such as quiche, chicken stir-fry, or manicotti. Forget locating it in the frozen food section, and don't even think to look for it on a restaurant menu.

Some suspect that eggplant is to blame. Fat, purplish-black, and often mushy when cooked, it is perhaps

the least-loved vegetable in the land – and it figures prominently in this dish. Others point to ratatouille's lack of sophistication, but there's no one like Thomas Keller to have changed that – for Hollywood, anyway. As consulting chef for the film, the owner of such refined restaurants as The French Laundry in Napa Valley and Per Se in New York, created an upscale ratatouille dubbed "Confit Byaldi," with its elegant spirals of eggplant, tomato, and zucchini placed atop a bed of multicolored peppers.

Ratatouille's beginnings might have been meek, but in many other countries this humble dish has since been elevated to staple status.

Ratatouille (from the Occitan "ratatolha" and the French "touiller," meaning to stir) originated in Nice, France, as a peasant dish that made efficient use of the season's bounty. It turned out to taste good, too, and since then, Provençal cooks have incorporated this stewed-vegetable dish into their repertoires along with such culinary treasures as tapenade, pistou, and bouillabaisse.

Similar dishes to ratatouille are also staples in the cuisines of Belgium, Greece, Turkey, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Spain, and the Philippines.

There are almost as many methods for making the dish as there are names for it. Some insist on sauteing each vegetable separately, then

combining them in layers; others toss them all into sizzling hot oil together, and still others skip the stove, opting to bake the dish instead. Julia Child preferred a little of each – stovetop cooking in layers and then baking the dish like a casserole.

If you're looking for a recipe that is simple without sacrificing flavor for convenience, you might like one I happened to stumble upon. It's from "Chocolate & Zucchini," a delightfully written and carefully researched food blog that is one of my favorites. It seems a little tongue-in-cheek when Clotilde Dusoulier, the site's founder and only voice, calls her take on this dish "Ratatouille Confit au Four," (see recipe) for it is hardly as hoity-toity as its name.

She arrived at her no-fuss, oven-roasted recipe after disappointment with stovetop ones that she found turned to a pot full of waterlogged mush. She admits that she rather likes the method of cooking each vegetable separately – except that it is "too time-consuming for everyday cooking."

She insists that her recipe is not only easy but also "almost sweet with a wonderful, roasted flavor, the texture so rich and pleasing it almost felt like you were eating dessert."

If you just can't shake the image of the spectacular-looking ratatouille

that adorable Remy (the animated rat who starred in "Ratatouille") served to the grumpy Parisian restaurant critic, you might want to attempt a simpler variation of it that was developed by food blogger Deb Perelman. The founder of "Smitten Kitchen" was indeed so smitten by the beauty of the dish that after seeing the movie, she donned her apron and set to work duplicating Keller's creation. She published the results along with some gorgeous photographs on her site. Either variation, like most stews, only improves with age. Or as Dusoulier says: "It gets even better the next day and the day after that, so it's an ideal make-ahead dish."

So for all of its simplicity and seasonality, ratatouille couldn't be more ready for its close-up.

- 2 onions
- 2 cloves garlic
- 1 eggplant (the traditional ratatouille from Nice does not use eggplant)
- 1 zucchini
- 2 green peppers
- 8 small tomatoes
- 2 sprigs fresh rosemary
- 3 sprigs fresh thyme
- Salt and pepper to taste
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- Preheat oven to 350 degrees F.
- Peel and slice the onion and garlic. Rinse the remaining vegetables, trim, and slice them. Rinse the herbs.

Combine everything in an oven-proof dish. Season with salt and pepper and drizzle with the olive oil. Toss to ensure even coating.

Cover the dish with foil and bake for 45 minutes. At this point, the vegetables should be cooked, and there should be cooking juices at the bottom of the pan.

Remove the foil and bake for another 30 to 45 minutes, keeping an eye on the progress, until the cooking juices have evaporated and the vegetables have taken on a nice roasted aspect.

Remove the sprigs of herb, and serve immediately, or at room temperature, or cold. It gets even better the next day and the day after that. Serves 4. From Clotilde Dusoulier of chocolateandzucchini.com

'Ratatouille's' Ratatouille (Inspired by the animated movie)

- 1 cup tomato puree
- 2 garlic cloves, thinly sliced
- 1 small onion, finely chopped
- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- Salt and pepper
- 1 small eggplant
- 1 small zucchini
- 1 small yellow squash
- 1 long red bell pepper
- 3 sprigs fresh thyme
- Goat cheese, for serving
- Preheat oven to 375 degrees F.
- In a large baking dish, pour tomato puree and spread until it is evenly distributed. Drop the sliced garlic cloves and chopped onion into the puree, stir in 1 tablespoon of olive oil and season the sauce generously with salt and pepper.
- Trim ends off eggplant, zucchini, and yellow squash. Also trim ends off red pepper and remove its core,

leaving the edges intact.

With a mandoline or very sharp knife, cut the eggplant, zucchini, yellow squash, and red pepper into very thin slices, about 1/16 of an inch thick.

Arrange slices of prepared vegetables concentrically from the outer edge of the baking dish to the inside, overlapping so that only a small part of each flat surface is visible, alternating vegetables.

Drizzle the remaining tablespoon olive oil over the vegetables and season them generously with salt and pepper. Remove leaves from the thyme sprigs with your fingers, running them down over the stem. Sprinkle fresh thyme over the dish.

Cover the dish with a piece of parchment paper cut to fit inside (This is tricky, Deb admits, adding that it is the most difficult step of an otherwise fairly simple recipe.)

Bake for about 50 minutes, until vegetables have released their liquid and are clearly cooked but not limp. They should not be brown around the edges, and the tomato sauce should be bubbling around them.

Serve with a dab of goat cheese on top and with crusty french bread – or atop polenta, couscous, or another grain of your choice.

From Deb Perelman of smittenkitchen.com.

Birth Announced

Joshua Price and Alicia Deshong of McConnellsburg, announce the birth of a son, Deacon Michael Price, October 18, 2008, at 3:22 a.m., at Waynesboro.

He weighed 4 pounds, 9.7 ounces and was 16 1/2 inches long.

Deacon has an older brother, Andrew.

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Heather (Berkley) Keefer, formerly of Holiday Hair, Radio Hill, Chambersburg, and LA Looks, 2nd St., McConnellsburg, has returned to hairdressing in Fulton County! Heather is the newest stylist at Dorothy M. Berry's Beauty Salon, 721 LWE, McConnellsburg. She has nearly 12 years experience as a licensed cosmetologist and is excited to be working in her hometown again. Her hours are Tues., Thurs. and every other Friday 9-1 and Sat. 8-12. Please call 717-485-9500 to schedule an appointment with Heather K!
10-9-31

AUCTION FUNDRAISER
Kindred Spirits will be holding an auction for DONNA HESS (She has had three spine surgeries and has been unable to work.)
SAT., OCT. 25
Greenhill Sewing Club
5:00 p.m. Dinner
6:00 p.m. Auction
We will have gifts to take chances on and a 50/50 drawing. Donations of any gently used or new items would be appreciated. Items may be dropped off any time after 10 a.m. on the day of the auction at the sewing club. Baked goods are welcomed. Will have Brian Tucker and Mark Noe prints to be auctioned off. Please come and help support the fundraiser.
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MINI MESSAGE
John 7:45-46 "Then came the officers to the chief priests and Pharisees; and they said unto them, Why have ye not brought him? The officers answered, Never man spake like this man."
The priests and Pharisees desired to see Jesus arrested and silenced because He was presenting Himself as the Messiah and they refused to believe what He was saying. They taught a rigid system of works for salvation, Jesus taught salvation by faith. It wasn't through obedience to the Law that salvation came, but by faith in God. John 5:30 says "Search the scriptures: for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me." Friend, if you would truly know Jesus, and the gift of salvation He desires you to have, read your Bible - John's gospel is a good place to start - and come to Christ for eternal life.