

Desserts

Veggies in desserts? Give it a try, chefs say



Tracy Saelinger
TODAY contributor

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Vegetables are popping up on more restaurant dessert menus, and we're not talking about zucchini bread or pumpkin pie.

Celery, beets, parsnips and even eggplant are some of the unusual veggies getting their due in high-end, creative sweets, a trend that chef Dominique Ansel predicted here on TODAY.com about a year ago.

And these aren't cases where vegetables are being "snuck" in, masked and hidden. Chefs are embracing the earthiness, subtle sweetness and even the bitterness that some vegetables bring to dessert.

And celery is making an appearance on multiple dessert menus, which seems surprising, but it's refreshing, points out executive pastry chef Aya Fukai of Sixteen, also in Chicago. It's especially so when blended with pineapple in a granite, as she does. The pineapple-celery granite, which also includes black pepper for kick, is part of the restaurant's 16-course winter tasting menu.

A perfume-designer friend actually inspired the celery compote that chef Roberto Santibañez serves with almond cake and raspberry rose ice cream as a special at Fonda, his contemporary Mexican restaurants in New York City.

A dinner party where they worked and played with scents and food sparked the idea of celery as a sweet. "When cooked with sugar, the celery becomes more like green apples, and this transformation makes it so versatile," Santibañez says.

Intrigued? Santibañez shared his recipe for celery compote with us — pair it with spiced desserts or something nutty, he says, like carrot cake, gingersnaps or almond cake.



Celery Compote with Cake

Courtesy of Fonda

Sweet celery compote

Roberto Santibañez, Fonda Restaurant

Makes: 1 generous cup (almost 1 1/4 cups)

- 1 pound celery (1 small bag; 2 bunches)
- 1/2 stick butter (1/4 cup)
- 2 small bay leaves
- 1/2 cup sugar
- 1 1/2 tablespoons lime juice, from 1 large, juicy lime
- 1/8 teaspoon fine salt

1. Wash the celery very well. Chop it up in small pieces (remember we will blend it after it cooks so don't go crazy with "the perfect cut").

2. Heat a small saucepan over medium high heat and add the butter. When hot and bubbly, add the celery and the bay leaves, cook for 5 minutes, stirring frequently. Cover tightly and cook until celery is very soft, about 30 minutes. Discard bay leaves.

3. Let cool just long enough to handle and blend to a puree in a good blender at high speed. Pour the celery puree back in to the same saucepan, add the sugar, lime juice and salt. Bring back to a boil and cook, string often, for 20 minutes. Pour the compote into a mason jar or any other glass container and refrigerate until ready to use. Serve with spiced or nutty desserts, such as carrot cake, almond cake or ginger snaps.

