

Pasta with Butternut Squash and Sage

The blandness of butternut squash usually gets camouflaged inside ravioli. Our goal was to bump up its flavor to bring it out of hiding.

≧ BY FRANCISCO J. ROBERT ≦

Butternut squash needs heavy-duty coaxing to draw out its inherent charms. Long on silky texture, this watery vegetable is woefully short on flavor. No wonder it's usually pureed and hidden away inside ravioli, not featured prominently in simpler pasta dishes. To make butternut squash worthy of an "outside job" (one that didn't require hours of rolling, then filling, fresh pasta), I needed to amplify its mild flavor.

First, I tried roasting the squash in the oven. The high, dry heat did a nice job evaporating the excess water (the enemy of deep flavor), but it took too long, about 45 minutes. Next, I tried sautéing peeled and diced squash in a hot pan with olive oil. Stirred constantly, the squash cooked consistently—but browning was another story. I repeated the test, this time without stirring. Much better. After about five minutes, enough moisture had evaporated from the squash to begin browning, producing nice, flavorful caramelization.

I tossed the cooked squash with boiled pasta (choosing short, tubular penne), along with some chopped fresh sage and a little olive oil, hoping to call it a day. Not so fast. The flavor of the squash was still too delicate—especially with so potent an herb as sage—and it didn't really meld with the pasta.

This dish clearly needed some sort of sauce, but what? I tried making a basic broth by boiling squash scraps (the seeds and fibers) in a little water. Though more flavorful, it wasn't transformative enough to justify the extra effort. Next, I tried removing half the sautéed squash and making a puree with chicken broth, then introducing this back into the mix. Not bad, but—once again—too many steps (and too many pots) to justify the modest improvement.

The sauce idea was a step in the right direction, however. That's when it hit me: a short braise. Too much liquid—or too long a simmer—would surely yield soggy squash. But if I used just enough to deglaze the pan, and then simmered the squash briefly, it might yield just the texture I was looking for. I sautéed the squash over high heat until caramelized, added two cups of chicken broth, then braised it for a few minutes. Success: Not only did



A short, tubular pasta works best in this recipe.

this method produce silky squash, but the sauce was just the right consistency to cling to the penne.

My pasta was coming along nicely, but I was having herb issues. Too much sage yielded pockets of sharp, strident flavor that some tasters called "medicinal." Too little and you could barely taste it at all. Either way, it was hard to control. Taking a cue from countless test kitchen recipes that tame strong flavors—garlic, herbs, chiles—by making an infused oil, I cooked some fresh sage leaves in olive oil, then used the herb-infused oil to sauté the squash. Close, but too subtle. I repeated the experiment, also adding a tablespoon of minced fresh sage to the squash as it cooked. This time, the sage infused the entire dish.

When some tasters still weren't wowed by the overall flavor of the dish, I knew it was time to break out the big guns: smoky bacon. A classic companion for butternut squash and sage, bacon also adds heft to a meal. Could I use bacon as my starting point, using the rendered fat instead of olive oil to cook the sage and the squash? Sure enough, it worked like a charm.

To fine-tune the sauce, I added a tablespoon of butter and a teaspoon of sugar, which brought out the sweet, nutty notes of the butternut squash. Sautéing scallions in the butter added brightness and a dash of nutmeg contributed earthiness. Just before serving, I tossed the squash and sauce with the pasta and the crisped bacon, then rounded out the dish with grated Parmesan and bracing lemon. Toasted sliced almonds were the final touch to a satisfying meal—easily cooked in under an hour.

PASTA WITH BUTTERNUT SQUASH AND SAGE

SERVES 4 TO 6

Don't be tempted to use dried sage in this recipe.

- 4 slices bacon, halved lengthwise, then cut crosswise into ¼-inch pieces
- 8 large fresh sage leaves, plus 1 tablespoon minced (see note)
- 1 medium butternut squash (about 2 pounds), peeled, seeded, and cut into ½-inch dice
- 1 tablespoon unsalted butter
- 6 scallions, sliced thin (about 1 cup)
- ¼ teaspoon freshly grated nutmeg
- 1 teaspoon sugar
- Table salt and ground black pepper
- 2 cups low-sodium chicken broth
- 1 pound penne or other short, tubular pasta
- 2 tablespoons grated Parmesan cheese, plus extra for serving
- 4 teaspoons juice from 1 lemon
- ⅓ cup sliced almonds, toasted

1. Cook bacon in 12-inch skillet over medium heat until crisp, about 8 minutes. Add whole sage leaves and cook until fragrant, about 1 minute. Strain mixture through fine-mesh strainer into small bowl, reserving bacon fat and bacon-sage mixture separately.

2. Return skillet to high heat, add 2 tablespoons reserved bacon fat (adding olive oil if necessary) and heat until shimmering. Add squash in even layer and cook, without stirring, until beginning to caramelize, 4 to 5 minutes. Continue cooking, stirring occasionally until spotty brown, 3 to 4 minutes longer. Add butter and allow to melt, about 30 seconds. Add scallions, nutmeg, sugar, ½ teaspoon salt, ¾ teaspoon pepper, and minced sage; cook, stirring occasionally, until scallions are softened, about 3 minutes. Add broth and bring to simmer; continue to cook until squash is tender, 1 to 3 minutes longer.

3. Meanwhile, bring 4 quarts water to boil in large Dutch oven over high heat. Add 1 tablespoon salt and pasta. Cook until just al dente, then drain pasta, reserving ½ cup cooking water, and transfer back to Dutch oven.

4. Add squash mixture to pasta; stir in 2 tablespoons Parmesan cheese, lemon juice, and reserved bacon-sage mixture, adjusting consistency with reserved pasta liquid. Serve, passing almonds and Parmesan separately.

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HOW TO MAKE

• Pasta with Butternut Squash and Sage

VIDEO TIP

• How to prepare and dice squash