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Ragout from the garden

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By Barbara M. Houle

If you're fond of summer squash or zucchini and are looking for new ways to use them in warm-weather meals, try Ken Novotny's ragout recipe, which is an ideal accompaniment to grilled seafood, poultry or rice pilaf.

A ragout is a thick, seasoned stew usually made with meat, poultry or fish. Novotny's vegetarian version combines grilled summer and zucchini squash with tomato and caramelized onion. The vegetable mixture with spices is added to his homemade marinara sauce and simmered before serving. Sea bass and the ragout are an "awesome" combination, according to the chef, who describes his summer specialty as versatile. Novotny of Shrewsbury has been executive chef at the popular Willy's Steakhouse Grill & Sushi Bar and Amici Trattoria Bar, both in Shrewsbury, for 10 years. If you're new in town, we should explain that Willy's and Amici offer very different menus. Amici is at 582 Main St.; Willy's, 2 Grafton St. The restaurants are in separate buildings next to each other, and are connected by an underground tunnel used by employees. Novotny and two sous chefs prepare food for both establishments with the exception of the sushi at Willy's, which is made by professional sushi chefs.

Novotny said he is never at a loss for fresh produce. "At any given time, I can pick up the phone and call Ed Paquette and get whatever vegetable I need," he said, referring to the owner of Paquette's farm stand, Route 140, Shrewsbury. Ed Paquette and his wife, Toni, not only run the farm stand, but they also grow vegetables on more than 30 acres of leased land in Shrewsbury.

The chef is especially fond of the plum tomatoes he buys from Paquette. He rattled off a list of other favorites, including butternut squash, eggplant, beans and corn.

About the chef:

Novotny, who grew up in Washington, D.C., received his culinary training in Virginia. He worked at the former Tiano's and the Beechwood Hotel, both in Worcester. He was an apprentice chef when he met his wife, Debbie, who also is a chef. She works in food service at Shrewsbury Senior High School. The couple have two children, a son, 20, who is a student at Fitchburg State College, and a daughter, 18, a student at Shrewsbury Senior High School.

"I don't have too much time to cook at home," Novotny said. "I'm the guy who usually does all the holiday parties."

The chef grills food whenever he can. "The fire can really flavor foods," he said. "It's all about the smokiness and caramelization."

Tips on buying and cooking summer squash or zucchini, which are fruits treated as vegetables in American kitchens:

Look for firm squash. If dented, bruised or soft, move on. Refrigerate in vegetable bin, using within a few days. The best cooking methods are sauteing, grilling or roasting.

They can be eaten raw in salads.

Here's Ken Novotny's summer dish, which has been featured at Willy's Steakhouse Grill & Sushi Bar. It is an excellent accompaniment to grilled shrimp, swordfish, sea bass, chicken or rice pilaf. Note: The recipe calls for marinara sauce. You can use store-bought, or you can purchase Novotny's marinara sauce at Amici Trattoria. An 8-ounce container costs \$4; 16 ounce, \$6; 32-ounce, \$10.

GRILLED ZUCCHINI AND SUMMER SQUASH RAGOUT

1 large zucchini, sliced 1/2-inch lengthwise
1 large summer squash, sliced 1/2-inch lengthwise
1 medium Vidalia onion, cut into 1/2-inch rings
1 large tomato, diced 1/2-inch
1 teaspoon ground fennel
1 teaspoon ground coriander
3/4 teaspoon ground cumin
1/4 teaspoon garlic powder
1/4 teaspoon ground black pepper
1 large shallot, minced
4 large garlic cloves, minced
2 ounces extra virgin olive oil
6 ounces marinara sauce
Salt and pepper

Mix together fennel, coriander, cumin, garlic powder and black pepper. Brush zucchini, summer squash and Vidalia onion with half of the olive oil on both sides and sprinkle with the coriander and fennel spice mix. Grill squash until al dente. Allow vegetables to cool and dice into 1/2-inch pieces.

In saute pan, add remainder of olive oil and saute shallot, garlic and grilled-diced onion until caramelized. Add zucchini, summer squash, tomato and marinara sauce. Simmer for 5 minutes. Salt and pepper to taste.

Other summer recipes to enjoy:

These recipes are from The Culinary Institute of America's "Vegetables" (Lebhar-Friedman, \$40).

TOMATO, CORN AND BEAN SALAD

1 16-ounce can black beans, rinsed, drained
3 ears sweet corn, cooked, kernels cut off cob (or substitute 1 10-ounce package frozen corn, thawed, drained)
2 large tomatoes, seeded, diced (or use two cups of cherry tomatoes, halved)
1/2 red onion, finely diced
1/2 cup chopped fresh cilantro
1/4 cup olive oil
3 tablespoons fresh lime juice
1/2 teaspoon ground coriander
1 teaspoon ground cumin

Salt and pepper to taste

Mix all ingredients in medium bowl. Season salad to taste with salt and pepper. (Salad can be prepared 1 day ahead. Cover and refrigerate.)

TZATZIKI SAUCE

1/2 cup plain yogurt

1/2 cup sour cream

1/2 cup grated cucumber, squeezed dry

1 teaspoon minced garlic

1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil

1 tablespoon minced fresh mint or dill

1 teaspoon lemon juice

1/2 teaspoon lemon zest

Salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste

In a food processor, combine the yogurt, sour cream, cucumber and garlic. Puree until smooth. Transfer to a bowl and fold in the olive oil, mint or dill, lemon juice and zest. Stir until combined and season with salt and pepper. Refrigerate until ready to serve.

Makes 1-1/2 cups.

From the New York Times "Country Weekend Cookbook" (St. Martin's Press, \$32) edited by Linda Amster are these recipes:

BAKED GARLIC, TOMATO AND ZUCCHINI CASSEROLE

4 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil

8 large or 16 medium tomatoes, cored and cut in 1/2-inch slices

6 medium zucchini, stems removed, cut on the diagonal in 1/2-inch slices

12 cloves garlic, peeled and sliced

10 sprigs fresh basil, leaves only, shredded

1/2 cup grated goat cheese, Parmesan or Asiago cheese

Coarse salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Use 1 tablespoon of the oil to coat a large, shallow casserole. Layer the tomato and zucchini slices alternately, overlapping slightly. Sprinkle with the garlic, basil and cheese. Add salt and pepper to taste. Drizzle with the remaining oil. Bake about 30 minutes, until the vegetables are tender. Serve hot or at room temperature. Makes 20 servings.

ITALIAN TOMATO-POTATO SALAD

1 pound new potatoes, unpeeled

1 pound fully ripe tomatoes, preferably vine-ripened

1 large red onion

2 to 3 tablespoons capers, preferably packed in salt

1-1/2 cup black olives

1 tablespoon red wine vinegar

1/4 cup extra virgin olive oil

2 teaspoons dried oregano

Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

Put the potatoes in a large pot, add water to cover, salt lightly and boil for 20 to 30 minutes, or until tender when pierced with a toothpick. Drain, cool slightly and peel while warm.

Cut the tomatoes in half horizontally and squeeze into a sieve or strainer set over a bowl, pressing the seeds to extract the juice. Discard seeds.

Cut the tomatoes into chunks and add to the juice.

Peel the onion, cut in half horizontally and then into 1/4-inch thick slices. Slice the potatoes into 1/2-inch thick rounds. Rinse the capers to eliminate excess salt or brine. In a large, shallow bowl, toss the potatoes, onion, tomatoes, olives and capers together with the vinegar, olive oil, dried oregano and salt and pepper to taste. Serve at room temperature. Makes 6 servings.

ART: PHOTOS

PHOTO: (PHOTO 1) T&G Staff/PAUL KAPTEYN; (PHOTO 2) ALEX WITKOWICZ

CUTLINE: (PHOTO 1) Executive chef Ken Novotny of Shrewsbury, left, checks summer squash with Ed Paquette of Shrewsbury, owner of Paquette's farm stand. Novotny buys produce from Paquette, who grows corn, butternut squash, eggplant and other vegetables on leased land in Shrewsbury. (PHOTO 2) Executive chef Ken Novotny of Willy's Steakhouse Grill & Sushi Bar and Amici Trattoria Bar, both in Shrewsbury, supports local agriculture.