

Beet stunner will win over the haters

Beets: People either love them or hate them, and this can create a divide at the dinner table. Now, I can't promise that any of your beet-averse family members or friends will do a complete 180-degree turn on their opinion when it comes to these earthy roots. I can suggest, however, that this gratin might be your best chance to convert them.

Baby beets are mild and sweet, and their flavor is less assertive than their grown-up relatives. In this recipe, they are thinly sliced and blanketed in creamy layers of garlic, orange-infused sour cream and nutty, piquant Gruyere cheese. If you must cloak a vegetable, this is the way to do it.

Happily, all the flavors meld together, and while the beets are undeniably present, they are not overwhelming in flavor. As the beets roast, they release their juices, resulting in a dish streaked with vibrant flourishes of color. At the very least, everyone can agree that it makes for a stunning vegetarian showstopper. So, go ahead and give it a try. Let the skeptics eat with their eyes, and just perhaps, they'll be convinced to pick up a fork.

I prepared this recipe with a variety of red, golden and Chioggia beets. So long as you scrub them well, you don't need to peel them. (Their skin is a great source of nutrients.) Assemble the gratin in a casserole dish, or divide it between smaller vessels, such as individual ramekins or small cast iron skilletes, for fun family-style dining.

Baby Beet Gratin With Orange and Thyme

Active time: 25 minutes
Total time: 1 hour and 15 minutes
Yield: Makes one (8-by-8-inch) gratin, serves 4 to 6

Ingredients:
 Unsalted butter
 2 cups (16 ounces) whole milk sour cream
 2 garlic cloves, minced
 1 teaspoon finely grated orange zest
 Kosher salt
 Freshly ground black pepper
 2 pounds baby beets, about 12, trimmed



LYNDA BALSLEV/TASTEFOOD

Baby beet gratin is blanketed in creamy layers of garlic, orange-infused sour cream and nutty, piquant Gruyere cheese.

and scrubbed clean
 4 ounces finely grated Gruyere cheese
 Chopped fresh thyme leaves

Steps:
 Preheat the oven to 375 degrees. Butter an 8-by-8-inch gratin dish.
 Whisk the sour cream, garlic, orange zest, 1/2 teaspoon salt and 1/4 teaspoon black pepper in a bowl.
 Thinly slice the beets, preferably with a mandoline.
 Arrange one-third of the beets slightly overlapping in the baking dish. Spoon one-third of the sour cream mixture over the

beets, carefully spreading to cover. Sprinkle one-third of the cheese over the top. Lightly season with salt, pepper and a pinch of thyme. Repeat with two more layers.
 Transfer the gratin to the oven and bake until the beets are tender and the gratin is bubbly and golden, 50 to 60 minutes. Serve warm.

Lynda Balslev is an award-winning cookbook author, recipe developer, tester and editor. Taste Food is distributed by Andrews McMeel Syndication.

Omicron less likely to affect taste, smell

Worried about the stress that comes with the current COVID pandemic? Exercising, a healthy diet, and sleeping enough can all help you be less stressed. You can also meet with friends and family online to help keep friendships that may have been changed by the pandemic. If the weather is good, join the Brody Medical students for their Walk With A Doc at 9 a.m. on Feb. 5 at Lake Laurus. Dr. Simone Montoya, a neuro-radiologist with give brief comments before the walk.



KATHY KOLASA

QI lost my sense of taste and smell on day three of my mild COVID. Is there any new information? KN, Greenville

ATaste and smell are important parts of our lives, like helping us enjoy food. With the spread of the Delta COVID-19 variant, loss of taste and smell were common problems. But is this still a common problem with the new omicron variant? Michael Larkins, a second-year Brody medical student has looked for the answer and here is what he found in the scientific literature to share with you. You might also look at the article we ran

in the Reflector on April 7, 2021. Many of us have likely gotten used to being asked if we've had any loss of taste or smell when we get tested for COVID. Many people have had these problems during the pandemic. Research has found that the loss of taste and smell can mean you have a COVID infection, with some people having these problems even after their other complaints go away. However, more recent data on the newer omicron virus variant shows that the loss of taste and smell is less common.

The delta version is thought to have caused loss of taste and smell by possibly hurting the nerves in our noses that help us smell. The virus could then also get into our lungs, making it hard to breathe. New research has come out saying losing your sense of taste and smell can be related to your genetics as well. However, since the omicron variant is different from other versions, it appears that you may not need to be

as worried about losing your sense of smell and taste as you may have been before. Omicron may be easier to give to people compared to other COVID versions, but it might not be as harmful.

For those who have lost their taste and/or smell, there are no FDA-approved medications to bring them back at this time. There is some evidence that medications used to treat swelling or inflammation might be helpful but a bit more research is needed. Scientists are seeing if fish oil can bring back lost smell and taste after someone has COVID. Studies have shown that fish oil helped heal nerves hurt during surgery, so the idea is that this may also extend to healing the nerves in your nose impacted by COVID. There are also reports that scent training, like using strong coffee smells, can help bring back the memory of food and drink smells.

For those still having trouble with lost smell or taste after COVID, you should try to maintain a healthy diet with lots of fruits and vegetables, even when it's boring to eat without taste. Spices (especially strong ones, like pepper) can make foods taste better if your

smell and taste are not what they used to be.

The most common problems with the omicron variant are a runny nose, headache, and feeling tired. Other complaints include fever, sneezing, sore throat, and cough, along with more serious problems like having trouble breathing.

While less likely to cause you to lose your sense of smell or taste, omicron is still harmful, especially for those who are older or are already sick. As of now, the two main COVID variants in the U.S. are delta and omicron. Unfortunately, for most people, it is not possible to know which version you have, as current COVID tests do not check.

The CDC checks samples from around the U.S. every week using special testing to see what version they are. However, because the samples are not marked with who they came from, it is usually not possible to find out which version you have.

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HIGHLIGHTING YOUR HEALTH



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Making daily notes and journaling are among tools to help cope with stress and maintain a healthy mental outlook, said Dr. Ashley Britton of ECU's Brody School of Medicine and Vidant Medical Center.

Practice developing resiliency to improve your mental health

The promise of fresh starts and setting new goals have become synonymous with the New Year. As you reflect on the physical, professional and financial goals you hope to accomplish in 2022, do not forget to take your emotional well-being into consideration.

"It is important to take time and make mental health a priority in your life, just as you would seek proactive lifestyle activities such as physical exercise and healthy eating," said Dr. Ashley Britton, clinical assistant professor and psychologist at ECU's Brody School of Medicine and Vidant Medical Center. "To keep mentally fit, you should focus on enjoyable and meaningful activities as well as practice activities to keep your brain stimulated."

The ongoing pandemic continues to disrupt lives and profoundly impact mental health, but there are tips for helping us cope with the toll the pandemic is taking on us both mentally and physically. Maintaining structure and routines will greatly help with fortifying your mental well-being.

Chronic stress demands elevated levels of energy and cognitive hypervigilance but is not sustainable. In fact, chronic stress is extremely harmful to our health in the long term. Our bodies address stress through a process called General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS) that aims to manage stress and return us to normal, healthy levels of functioning, according to Britton. General adaptation syndrome affects the body in three stages.

The first stage is the alarm reaction stage also known as "fight or flight," where your body sends a distress signal to the brain, causing it to release hormones including adrenaline. The second stage is the resistance stage, when your body is trying to recover from the alarm reaction. If there is persistent stress, you could experience lack of concentration and short term memory issues. The third stage is known as the exhaustion stage or the "burned out" feeling, which the extended pandemic has caused many of us to experience.

"In 2021, there was the sense that people were just trying to push through the pandemic," Britton said. "However, for 2022, it is the time to practice resiliency and move forward by renewing or creating new connections to friends and resources."

Connecting to others is a key factor in building resiliency, whether it be through phone conversations, virtual conversations or safe socially-distanced or masked physical interactions. Communicating with others not



ASHLEY BRITTON

only helps you feel connected, it also helps you focus on what others around you are going through and takes you out of your

own problems. Focusing on what is positive in your life and what is going well is another important factor in becoming more resilient.

"Having work teams participate in a 'weekly wins' session, where you either recognize a positive experience from the week or something in the week ahead is an excellent activity to promote focus on positivity," Britton said.

Another tip for improved mental health is having a particular tangible item in your possession that can help to ground you in times of stress.

"A photo, ring, bracelet or other personal item can help you focus on your positive connections to them and help keep you present in the moment," Dr. Britton said. "Keeping your mind stimulated helps direct your thoughts and activities away from negativity and on something that can add to your life, a new hobby or skill. Painting or journaling are some examples of activities to engage the brain in creative pursuits that help with purpose and positivity."

As you incorporate these helpful tips into your plans for better mental health, be sure to stay on top of your continuing health care needs. Get plenty of sleep and exercise, and stay up-to-date on doctor appointments and screenings.

As you set goals and plans, remember to give yourself a break when encountering life's inevitable bumps. Self-compassion is about being inwardly understanding and encouraging in the face of setbacks — a reaction we commonly extend to friends and family members but can forget when it comes to ourselves.

If you or someone you love are experiencing depression or anxiety, reach out for help. The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline can be reached at any time at 800-273-TALK (8255). Integrated Family Services provides Mobile Crises services in many eastern North Carolina counties. Call 866-437-1821 or visit integrated-family-services.net.

Highlighting Your Health is an educational segment courtesy of Vidant Health News. Vidant Health is a mission-driven, 1,708-bed academic health system serving a region of more than 1.4 million people in 29 eastern North Carolina counties.