

Commentary Bill Hall Zucchini and tofu brains



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Author Bill Hall of Lewiston is now the Cat Butler.

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Bill Hall/Lewiston Tribune

I heard a scientist on television say that the human brain is about the same consistency as tofu. That explains a lot about the limits of human thinking. Too many of us have tofu for brains.

We prove the limits of the human brain when we choose tofu - and zucchini - for dinner. I mention zucchini in the same context as tofu because both are nearly flavorless foods that are eaten for reasons other than flavor or excitement.

I was reminded of that by a newspaper recipe urging us to cook tofu in hot Mexican sauce. That is a desperate and revealing attempt to impart flavor to a tofu dish. Tofu is not eaten because it tastes so great, or because it tastes at all. It is eaten for two reasons - because it is a large, healthy

dose of the protein vegetarians need in place of meat and because it makes the people who eat it feel morally superior to meat eaters.

Zucchini, by contrast, is not exactly brimming over with nutrition. You could eat tons of it every day and starve to death if you didn't also consume something like meat, tofu or maybe a five-gallon latte.

Zucchini adds crunch and enough bulk in a diet dish to create the illusion of your having eaten. It also has a teensy little, barely discernible flavor, almost all of which is in the skin, so for God's sake don't peel it.

Zucchini is normally used more like celery, something in a stir-fry that you bite down on with your teeth and chew on with a satisfying crunching sound thereby creating the rhythm of your meal.

Tofu, by contrast, is something soft and squishy and a little tough at the same time, but something that a toothless person can easily gum into edible bits. Thus tofu is like chewing on an uncooked brain. And it has flavor only if you scorch it in hot fat.

Tofu and zucchini present a challenge that is the opposite of strong game meat like venison (that's deer meat, you slobbering carnivores). If you tell a deer hunter that venison has a strong, ugly flavor, he will tell you that you just don't know how to cook it. And then he will give you a ghastly recipe of strong flavorings like soy sauce, garlic, Tabasco, Polish mustard, four pounds of oregano, cheap red wine, brown sugar, gooseberry vinegar and crankcase oil.

The challenge of venison is to find a way to outshout the natural mutton flavor. The challenge of cooking with zucchini and with tofu is to pump flavor into the dullness of something that is either empty crunch or feels in your mouth like a chewy brain.

Why then do so many of us, myself included, grow zucchini every summer?

It's one of those things like the pretentious explanation of climbers that they ascend a mountain peak "because it's there."

Zucchini presents a similar rationale. We grow zucchini because we can. Anybody can. A beginning gardener can grow zucchini in heroic amounts that greatly exceed the need for that food, let alone one of faint flavor and marginal nutrition.

A gardener grows zucchini partly for bragging rights. "I planted two seeds and the plant - aided by my green thumb - has produced half a ton of zucchini."

Zucchini is an adventure. It grows with astonishing speed. When you aren't paying attention, small fruit appear under a large leaf and, within four or five days, will become something resembling a beached whale. Zucchini squash is related to watermelons, but, unlike melons, it doesn't have the sense to know when to quit growing.

Unfortunately, when a zucchini gets that large and frightening, it is still edible, but take care because you can get a hernia from simply trying to lift one.

There are remedies for the missing flavor in zucchini and tofu, not the least of which is liberal doses of olive oil, garlic and parmesan cheese - the same secret the French, the English and other barbarians discovered to help them choke down disgusting tidbits like kidneys and dead snails.

But can't we all get along? If we come together as flawed but well-intentioned human beings (albeit with tasteless tofu for brains) we can dine together and find common remedies for under-flavored and over-flavored foods.

For starters, try drizzling venison gravy on your tofu and zucchini.

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