
THE HAPPY FOREVER COMMUNITY GARDEN BEARS FRUIT

BY SIMONA CARINI

This is the second article narrating the story of a tiny community garden: the first was published in the spring issue.

Before becoming involved in maintaining the community garden in my Berkeley neighborhood, I had no experience in the field. I grew up in a small apartment in Perugia, a city in central Italy. The few plants in our house were decorative and relegated to small pots. The only exception was basil, which my mother would plant in a large container every spring and harvest throughout the summer for use in tomato salads and fresh tomato sauce.

Since moving to California, I have tried a few times to grow basil, with lackluster success. One year I would choose a spot with too much sun and the following year one with not enough of it. My partiality for basil received an enormous reward in the luxurious production of the community garden, where the plants thrived with a vengeance. Many neighbors heeded the invitation posted and picked fragrant leaves.

Singing the praises of fresh basil is best achieved by making pesto with it. Pesto originated in the Italian port city of Genoa, and its first published recipe dates to 1863. Last March the first World Championship of pesto was held in its home town. The contestants received the official recipe and their renditions were then judged. The name *pesto* comes from the past participle of the Italian verb *pestare* (to pound). In fact, the original pesto is made by placing the ingredients in a marble mortar and pounding on them with a wooden pestle until the sauce attains the desired consistency. Needless to say, preparing pesto in this way requires a lot of time and elbow grease; the good news is that using a food processor, although frowned upon by purists, is not outlawed. It actually yields a creamier sauce of more consistent texture. The flavor of pesto depends heavily on the flavor of the basil used, but

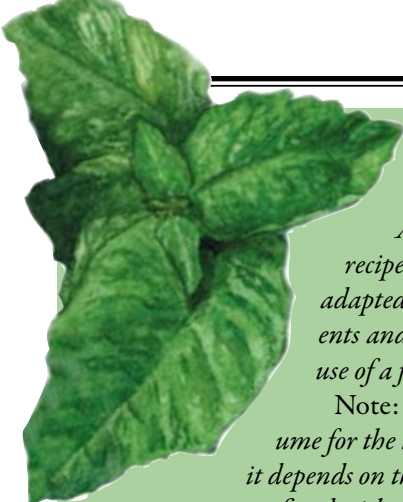


the quality and quantity of the other ingredients play an important role in highlighting the basil's taste, while at the same time providing different nuances.

Most, though not all, the culinary basil cultivars are cultivars of *Ocimum basilicum*, also known as sweet basil. The traditional recipe requires the *Genovese* cultivar, grown in a small area of Genoa called Pra. The locals there say that if the basil is foreign, then the result is not pesto, but I am perfectly content with the sweet basil we grow in California, because it is fresh. I have never tried to make pesto with other types of basil or other herbs. However, an early reference to pesto mentioned parsley and marjoram as possible ingredients, depending on the season. I interpret the latter specification as a prescription for using basil in the summer and for substituting it with other herbs when basil season is over, so that the main ingredient is always newly picked.

The first published recipe included *formaggio d'Olanda* among the ingredients, a testament to the active commerce between Holland and Genoa. Later, pecorino from Sardinia took the place of Dutch cheese. Still later pine nuts were added to the mix (walnuts are a common substitute, used in both Italy and California, which produced 350,000 tons of them in 2006).

Traditionally, pesto is the seasoning of choice for *trenette*, a kind of pasta similar to linguine. I use it also to season potato *gnocchi*. Half a cup of pesto is enough for a pound of pasta. Since the recipe I follow yields one cup, I usually freeze the remaining half a cup for later use. I have not checked with the pesto authorities whether freezing is allowed. It is, however, handy to have a small stash in the freezer. Preparing a dish with bright green pesto can help chase away winter blues and restore faith in the arrival of the



PESTO

Author's version inspired by the recipe from the Pesto Championship, adapted to include some local ingredients and units of measure, as well as the use of a food processor.

Note: the translation of weight to volume for the two cheeses is approximate, since it depends on the grating method. I use the food processor, fitted with the disk with the smallest holes (2 mm), which shreds the cheese finely.

- 2 bunches of fresh sweet basil leaves (2.5 ounces of leaves)
- 1 big or 2 small fresh garlic cloves
- A scant ¼ cup of pine nuts or ⅓ cup walnuts, toasted for a few minutes in a dry skillet
- 1 teaspoon coarse salt
- ¾ cup aged Parmigiano cheese, freshly grated using the food processor (about 2 ounces; see introductory note)
- A scant ½ cup Fiore Sardo cheese (pecorino from Sardinia), freshly grated using the food processor (about 1 ounce; see introductory note)
- ¼ cup plus ½ tablespoon extra virgin olive oil

Wash the basil leaves in cold water and dry them on a towel without rubbing them, otherwise the vesicles containing essential oils, located on the leaves, will break and cause oxidation of color and flavor, with a resulting dark and grass-tasting pesto.

Mince the garlic and toasted nuts in the food processor. Add the salt and the non-pressed basil leaves, then start the food processor again. When the basil drips a bright green liquid, add Parmigiano and pecorino. With the processor running, slowly add the olive oil through the feeding tube. Process only until blended, to avoid overheating the mixture by attrition. Use immediately.

Makes one cup

Note: The olive oil should be sweet and mature, because, besides acting as solvent for the aromatic substances, it binds all ingredients together. On the one hand, olive oil highlights the flavor of basil, while on the other it tones down that of garlic.

fair season. The basil described in the previous paragraphs grew in the Happy Forever Community Garden, a unique patch of paradise cultivated in a Berkeley traffic diverter since June 2006. (We introduced this garden in the Spring 2007 issue of *Edible East Bay*. If you did not have the chance to see it, see subscription information on page 4 for back issues.)

During the first summer, our small patch of urban land did more than produce hefty bunches of basil.

By mid-July the garden looked like a jungle, with squash branches shooting in all directions and growing broad, sturdy leaves. Armed with long gloves, I trimmed back some of the invaders and discovered Persian and lemon cucumbers, the latter particularly tasty and also quite cute, in their sunny yellow attire and delicately prickly exteriors. One afternoon I had an audience of three boys, entranced by my description of the different plants in the garden. They wondered about the edibility of the lemon cucumber, and to allay their skepticism, I regaled them with samples of the unfamiliar vegetable and they walked home talking excitedly about their recent adventure.

My favorite vegetable lay close to the fast-growing corn: green beans. I was amazed at how productive our few plants were—the more beans I picked, the more I found that were ready to be picked. Rachel had planted bush beans, which, unlike pole beans, do not need to climb over a support. I love a salad of green beans. Unlike many people, I like my beans well done, so that they almost melt in my mouth. From a nutritional point of view, it is actually better to keep boiling time to a minimum, which also maintains the bright green color of the beans. After boiling them to the desired level of tenderness, I let them cool to room temperature, then cut them into bite-size pieces and season them with a thread of olive oil and a generous amount of balsamic vinegar. Fresh lemon juice is an alternative to vinegar that produces a more subtle flavor.

GREEN BEAN AND POTATO SALAD

I grew up in Perugia and at age 21 moved to Milan. I quickly discovered that people there used a different name for familiar foods, like green beans, which I called “fagiolini” (small beans). One evening I was invited to a friend's house for dinner and my friend's mother announced that she had made a salad of “cornetti” and potatoes. In my home town “cornetti” are croissants and they are never eaten with potatoes in a salad. The arrival on the table of a bowl full of green beans and sliced boiled potatoes clarified the confusion: in Milan green beans are sometimes called “cornetti” and croissants are called “croissant.”

- 1 pound green beans, top and tail removed
- ⅔ pound small potatoes
- Olive oil, to taste
- Salt, to taste
- 1 clove garlic, minced (optional)
- A few leaves of fresh mint, minced (optional)

Boil the beans to the desired level of tenderness. Boil the potatoes until tender, let them cool slightly, peel and slice them. Place green beans and potatoes in a bowl and season with salt and a thread of olive oil. Optionally add garlic and mint. Toss delicately and serve at room temperature. Serves 4 as a side dish

As a child, my mother would ask me to snap off the top and tail of green beans before she boiled them. It was a tedious task, but the thought of a bowl full of the beloved vegetables carried me through the two-pound pile of beans placed in front of me. Removing top and tail from a bean allows you pull the string along the seams, in case it is tough—a rare occurrence nowadays, thanks to the selection by growers of beans without that undesirable trait.

One evening, Rachel sent me via e-mail an invitation to pick the melon-size yellow squash I had noticed in the southwest corner of the garden and labeled “young pumpkin.” She assured me it was a ripe squash and so I picked it—more like hauled it, actually, given its substantial weight. Back in my kitchen, I wondered how to handle the Brobdingnagian squash. I cut it in half lengthwise and the outer layer was surprisingly yielding to the blade that was expecting pumpkin-grade resistance. I cut one half in half, then sliced each quarter crosswise and finally cut the slices into roughly triangular pieces. Not having other frames of reference for my experiment, I imagined I had zucchini and sautéed the pieces in olive oil and minced garlic for about 20 minutes, then added a generous mix of fresh herbs, which included basil from the garden and oregano from my yard. I served the squash for dinner and it was delicious. Later on we harvested king-sized white pattypan and green round squash, the former an ideal ingredient for frittata and the latter my favorite in terms of flavor. Were the oversize dimensions of our members of the *Cucurbita pepo* species the result of some cross-fertilization event with the giant pumpkin Rachel had planted? We don’t know exactly what happened in the field, but we certainly appreciated the extravagant results.

I grew up calling summer squash *zucchini* and eating a lot of it, grudgingly as a child, greedily as a teenager and then an adult. *Frittata di zucchini* is a dish my mother makes quite often in the summer. She has a special frying pan to cook frittata and her flipping technique is flawless: as a prop she uses a plate that is slightly wider than the frying pan. She places the plate face down over the pan and with a secure gesture flips the pan so that the frittata lands neatly on the plate. She then puts the pan back on the burner and slides the frittata into it, so that the erstwhile top is now the bottom. I have always admired her skill in handling this tricky maneuver and always dreaded having to follow in her footsteps. To play it safe, I use the broiler to cook the top side. The risk in this case is to forget the frittata in the oven, so setting the kitchen timer is warmly recommended.

While the other plants were thriving and generously donating their fruits, the Sungold cherry tomatoes were running late. The plants were doing well, graced with tiny yellow flowers, but they were not showing signs of fruit. It would have been nice to assemble a salad of tomatoes and cucumbers and enliven it with basil, all growing within a few feet of each other, but it was not meant to be. Toward the end of September the basil plants started to flower, clearly signaling the end of their production cycle, the cucumbers were no longer at their peak, but the tomatoes still lingered in the



FRITTATA DI ZUCCHINE

Author’s own interpretation of a classic Italian dish. I like frittata with lots of zucchini and the recipe below satisfies my personal taste. The recipe can be varied to use more eggs or less zucchini, or another type of summer squash. Adjust cooking time as needed by watching carefully over the pan.

Olive oil

¼ cup minced onion

1 pound zucchini, cut into ⅛ inch-thick slices
(if zucchini are more than 1 inch in diameter, cut in half or quarters lengthwise)

Freshly ground pepper (optional)

5 extra-large eggs (or 4 eggs and 2 egg whites)

¼ cup milk

Salt to taste

Preheat the broiler. Generously spray with olive oil the bottom of a 10-inch frying pan with an oven-resistant handle. Add the onion and sauté for a few minutes until colored. Add the zucchini slices and cook over low heat until they are slightly soft (about 15 minutes), stirring often.

Break the eggs in a small bowl and beat lightly with a fork. Add the milk and salt to taste and beat for a few more seconds. Optionally sprinkle some pepper over the zucchini and stir. With the help of a wooden spoon, distribute the zucchini slices so that they form an even layer. Slowly pour the beaten eggs over the zucchini. Cook on low heat until the frittata is mostly set: the top will be slightly running.


Place the pan on the middle rack of the oven. Broil for a few minutes until the top of the frittata is golden brown. Remove the pan from the oven and, with the help of a spatula, slide the frittata onto a serving plate.

Cut into wedges and serve immediately. Serves 4–5

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PASTA WITH CHERRY TOMATOES AND RICOTTA SALATA OR MANOURI

Author's own recipe, which she could never make with the garden's Sungold tomatoes, because her husband ate them as soon as she brought home a freshly picked batch. I originally used ricotta salata, but then I discovered manouri, a soft Greek cheese made from full-fat sheep's milk, and found that it works well in this recipe.

- 1 pound of short pasta (penne, gemelli, etc.)
- ½ pound ricotta salata or manouri (Greek cheese)
- 1 dry pint cherry tomatoes, halved
- Salt, to taste
- A few leaves of fresh basil, shredded

Bring a pot of water to rolling boil and toss the pasta into it. Place the ricotta or manouri in a serving bowl and use a fork to break it into small pieces. Add 1–2 tablespoons of hot water from the pot and work it into the cheese. Add the halved tomatoes to the bowl and salt to taste. Cook the pasta until it is firm to the bite (*al dente*), drain thoroughly and pour into the serving bowl. Sprinkle the basil over the pasta. Toss well: the heat of the pasta will soften the tomatoes, which will release their juice.

Serve immediately. Serves 6

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preparation stage, like a prima donna purposely delaying her arrival at a party in her honor.

Finally, after all the corn, green beans, gypsy peppers, cucumbers, and squashes had been harvested, tiny green berries appeared, forerunners of longed-for tomatoes. Soon after, the green globes turned dark orange or bright red and offered themselves to be picked and placed in the mouth, like savory chocolate truffles. The tomatoes ended up having to share the stage, though, with the giant pumpkin, which took residence next door to them, in the southeast corner of the garden. The story of our urban pumpkin wears the colors of the fall season and I will therefore tell it in the next issue: Stay tuned for another episode of the garden's saga. ☪

The Happy Forever Community Garden, located on Domingo Avenue at Hazel Road in Berkeley, is always open to receive visitors.