

Back to your roots

Given the chance to shine, says **Graham Sherwood**, humble root vegetables may surprise you

THESE DAYS it seems the culinary world is awash with an increasing amount of exotic vegetables and fruits, but root vegetables do not have to be dull and boring in comparison.

Gone are the days of them merely being the back half of the 'meat and two veg' pantomime horse: root vegetables can be a principal player.

A basic definition of root vegetables states they are the fleshy enlarged root of a plant, where carbohydrates are stored, which we then use and eat as a vegetable. Technically, there are two types – those with tap roots and tubers, or those with bulbs, corms and rhizomes – although

in general culinary parlance they are all regarded as the same. While favourites like potatoes, turnips, swedes, parsnips and carrots remain the obvious go-to root vegetable choices, less well-known roots such as celeriac, Jerusalem artichokes, yams, salsify, exotic radishes and sweet potatoes are beginning to appear more often in recipe books.

More and more people are cooking and serving root vegetables in far more innovative ways than the traditional boiled style. Here are a few examples:

Grilling root vegetables isn't the first thing most people think of but they can be delicious when cooked over an open flame. They develop a crunchy exterior

and their starches get a little sweeter and become nicely tender inside. Smaller root vegetables should be grilled whole and halved or thickly sliced if larger. Brush them liberally with vegetable or olive oil, sprinkle with salt and cook on a medium-hot grill until char-marked and tender, usually for about ten minutes per side.

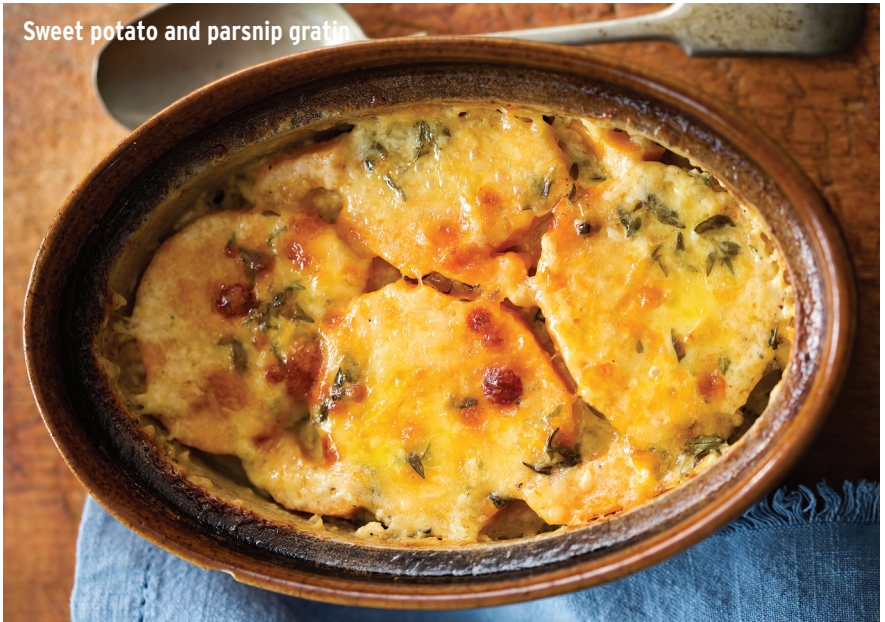
Mashed potatoes are well known, as are sweet potatoes (often sweetened with brown sugar) but other root vegetables like parsnips, turnips, and celeriac can also taste delicious when mashed, either on their own or mixed together with or without the more traditional potato.

Peel the vegetables and cut them into large, even-sized chunks. Place them in a

Roasted Root vegetables

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Sweet potato and parsnip gratin



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pot, cover them with cold water and bring to a boil. Add salt, then cook until the vegetables are very tender, for around 20 minutes. Drain off the water thoroughly; return the vegetables to the pot over heat; shake them to cook off any excess liquid for about five minutes. Pass the vegetables through a ricer or pound with a large fork or masher, adding cream, butter, milk and/or buttermilk, and salt and pepper to taste. Serve while hot.

Crisps again often just bring to mind potatoes, but all root vegetables can be fried into delicious crisps for quick, homemade snacks. Peel the vegetables and slice as thinly as possible (a mandoline works perfectly for this, or else a sharp knife and a steady hand). Rinse the starchier vegetables with cold water and pat them until thoroughly dry. Heat the oil between 350°F and 375°F and fry the crisps in small batches. They should form no more than a single layer in the oil until browning along the edges. Use a slotted spoon to transfer fried chips to a cooling rack or paper towels to drain and cool. Sprinkle them with salt while still warm, but allow them to cool (and crisp) completely before serving.

Hashed roots are delicious when shredded and cooked until brown and crispy and can be made into large cakes

or more delicate patties, as preferred. Simply peel the root vegetables and shred them through the largest holes of a grater. Soak or rinse in cold water, drain, and pat until very dry.

Heat vegetable oil in a frying pan or on a griddle over high heat. Form the shredded vegetables into one large cake or individual burger-shaped patties and sprinkle with salt. In the oil they should sizzle immediately; reduce heat to medium-low and cook until well browned on one side, flip over and cook until the vegetables are tender and the hash browns are brown on both sides. Serve hot.

Glazing is another great way to spruce up root vegetables. There's virtually no end to the range of exotic tasty glazes that might be painted on the skins of roots to transform their flavour. Whether you glaze vegetables in the traditional French method using a pan of shallow water with a mixture of butter and sugar, or using the likes of honey and mustard, balsamic vinegar and maple leaf syrup or olive oil, honey and thyme, glazing root vegetables propels them into something special.

Pickling root vegetables is nothing new, but a great way to present them is to slice them into very thin 'batons' and marinate for a couple of hours in the pickling mixture of your choice, before drying and serving them alongside additional salad items to accompany chicken, burgers, steaks etc. The roots will still have a nice, light crunch.

And here's another way to enjoy root vegetables:

Cheesy root vegetable gratin

SERVES FOUR

- 1-2 long sweet potatoes (about 2in thick), peeled
- 4 large parsnips, ends trimmed and peeled
- 5 medium beetroot, peeled
- 20fl oz double cream, divided 2/3 and 1/3
- 4oz grated Parmesan,
- 1 tbsp freshly chopped thyme, divided, plus more for garnish
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- 2oz shredded Gruyere cheese (or similar)
- Salt and pepper to taste

- 1 Preheat oven to gas mark 6/180°C
- 2 Slice sweet potato, parsnips and beetroot into very thin rounds; a mandoline is preferable for this
- 3 Transfer each vegetable to a separate bowl
- 4 Pour two-thirds of the cream over the bowls of vegetables equally and top each with ½oz grated Parmesan and 1 teaspoon minced thyme
- 5 Season each bowl generously with salt and pepper and then toss ingredients until all the vegetable slices are well coated
- 6 Pour the remaining cream into the bottom of a large (oval) baking dish and sprinkle with ½oz of Parmesan and minced garlic
- 7 Take a few of the sweet potatoes and stack them standing at an angle, at the end of the baking dish
- 8 Follow in the same manner with a row of parsnips, followed by a row of beetroot
- 9 Repeat with the remaining sweet potatoes, parsnips and beetroot, thus creating six rows of root vegetables
- 10 Season top of gratin with salt, pepper and sprinkle of remaining ounce of Parmesan
- 11 Cover with foil and bake for 25 to 30 minutes or until vegetables are soft
- 12 Remove from oven, uncover gratin and top with shredded Gruyere
- 13 Place the gratin under the grill for 3 to 5 minutes or until browned and bubbling on top
- 14 Finish with a sprinkle of fresh thyme leaves. Serve.