

A Conversation about Vegetables

I was shopping at New Seasons, Portland's local chain of natural foods store, and was looking over the vegetables in the produce aisle. A woman turned to me and asked "What is that?" as I was reaching for some parsnips—a carrot look-alike except for its creamy-white flesh. "Oh, this? It's parsnip root."

"What do you do with it?" she asked again. "Well, you can cube it and use it in soup, mash it like you would potatoes, or you can toss chunks of it with olive oil, salt, and pepper and high-heat roast it. I love it, almost more than carrots."

As I was bagging my parsnips, I noticed a brown, hairy, long and thick stick-like root and asked the produce manager, "What is this?" "Oh, that's burdock root. Have you ever tried it?" I had not. He proceeded to tell me how to cook it.

It struck me as an amusingly circular story. Why don't we know more about the underworld of roots and tubers? Sure, the popular ones stand out—the rosy beets, the glowing carrots, the always agreeable potato, and the smooth-skinned radishes. But under the dirt grows so much more. Lurking on the sidelines, waiting to get noticed, are hearty, healthy, nutrition-packed, budget-friendly vegetables that deserve their turn in the spotlight.

In the same way, the leafy greens have a pecking order, too. Spinach is a standout, Swiss chard looks regal with its ruby red and golden stems, but kale, a mat grey-green sturdy leaf, gets less attention—shoved to the side in a small heap.

I made a decision while strolling the aisles, finishing up the rest of my shopping, that I was going to cook some of the less popular vegetables. Every week, I am going to buy an uncommon vegetable and figure out an interesting way to cook it. Instead of buying Swiss chard, I'll buy kale. Instead of mixing radicchio into my salad greens for color and bite, I'll choose dandelion greens.

With the farmers' markets now open and the produce aisles brightening with fresh, local vegetables, I'm challenging myself and springing into action. I'm ready to cook with nettles, ramps, sorrel and anything else the local farmers are intrigued to grow. I'll just ask a lot of questions, and enjoy the conversation.