



*Many vegetables respond deliciously to roasting, especially roots. Just toss the trimmed vegetables with oil, season, and roast until tender and caramelized.*

# Slow-Roasting Vegetables

Oven-cooking coaxes out the sweet flavor  
of winter vegetables

BY LUCIA WATSON

**C**ome January, I long for the sweet young peas, tender asparagus, and ripe red tomatoes that were so abundant at the farmers' market last summer. But I can't have them. So during these cold months in Minneapolis, I take heart in the fact that winter is the perfect season for roasting vegetables: the hot oven heats my kitchen, the toasty aroma fills my home, and the taste of sweetly caramelized vegetables pleases my palate.

The dry heat and long cooking time of roasting concentrates and intensifies the flavor of many vegetables. Though spring and summer standouts such as asparagus, zucchini, and corn taste great when roasted, such wintertime staples as potatoes, carrots, winter squash, and parsnips seem especially well suited to this treatment. As these vegetables roast, their fibrous insides turn meltingly tender and their sugars come to the surface, where they caramelize into a sweet, golden coating.

Roasting also transforms garlic, shallots, and onions, making them gentle and sweet. It coaxes the dusky, woody nature out of mushrooms and gives anemic winter tomatoes, as well as other out-of-season produce, more flavor.

Some vegetables don't take well to roasting. Members of the cabbage family, including broccoli, Brussels sprouts, and cauliflower, become bitter and pungent in dry heat. Leafy greens will simply wilt.

You can roast vegetables singly or paired with another vegetable. Roasted beets, for example, can make a dramatic side dish, while asparagus roasted with mushrooms and tarragon vinegar draws raves from my restaurant's customers. You can also roast a variety of other vegetables for a dish of contrasting taste, color, and texture.

## ROASTING IS AN EASY AND FORGIVING METHOD

Although some vegetables may take an hour or longer to roast, the preparation is straightforward:

◆ **Wash the vegetables and peel those with a tough outer skin.** Leave the peel on potatoes, if you like. If you're roasting a whole head of garlic, pull off any of the loose paper, but don't peel the cloves themselves.



*If the skin is thick, peel it. Vegetables like sweet potatoes and winter squash need peeling before roasting. Those with thinner skins, such as peppers, new potatoes, and eggplant, roast well unpeeled.*

*Even pieces for even cooking. Cut all vegetables into uniform chunks so the pieces cook at the same rate and the dish looks neat.*

◆ **Cut or slice the vegetables into even-sized pieces,** usually about one- to two-inch chunks. Smaller pieces cook more quickly, but if the vegetables are cut too small, they may break down to mush.

◆ **Toss the vegetables with oil.** Like roasted meats, roasted vegetables will dry out without fat; coating them with a bit of oil keeps them moist while roasting and helps to create a golden-brown surface.

◆ **Add seasonings.** Toss the uncooked vegetables with good amount of coarse salt and hardy fresh herbs, such as rosemary, sage, and oregano, which can stand the heat. More delicate herbs, such as basil, parsley, and chives, are best added after the vegetables are roasted. Avoid using dried herbs when roasting because they can become bitter. Flavored oils and vinegars, such as walnut oil or raspberry vinegar, add yet another dimension to the vegetable's flavor. As with herbs, I add those with strong flavors (balsamic vinegar, for example) before roasting. More delicately flavored oils and vinegars (tarragon vinegar, for example) I add afterwards.

◆ **Spread the vegetables out in a baking pan.** After seasoning the vegetables,



I arrange them in a single layer for even roasting.

◆ **Roast in a 450°F oven.** Once I've put the vegetables in the oven, I walk away. I come back to shake the pan once or twice during cooking to keep the vegetables from sticking to the pan and to help them cook evenly.

## THE GOAL IS FORK TENDER AND WELL BROWNED

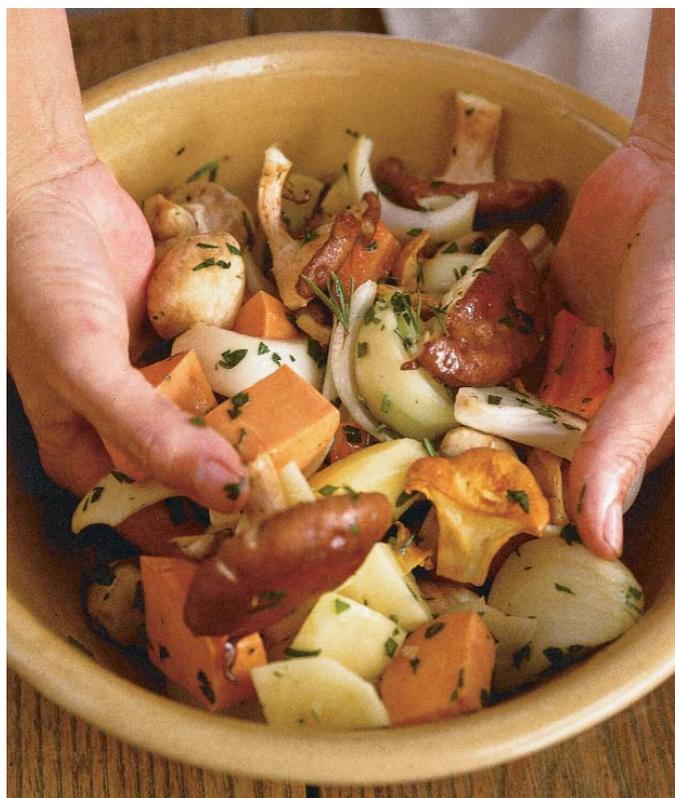
Some vegetables need only 10 or 15 minutes in the oven; others may take as long as an hour. When roasting a variety of vegetables, start with those that cook

longest. Sturdy carrots, parsnips, potatoes, winter squash, and mushrooms lead the pack; add tomatoes, fennel, and peppers next. Tender peas, corn, lima beans, and other delicate vegetables need little time in the oven and should be added toward the end of cooking. I've given some suggested cooking times (see the sidebar below), which come in handy when cooking a medley of vegetables, but the times listed are just suggestions. Take the vegetables out of the oven when they're done to your liking. If you like your onions darkly caramelized, keep them in the oven longer; if you like your asparagus on the firm side, take it out earlier. I like my roasted vegetables "overcooked" just a little, with an irresistible dark crust and sweet, tender center.

### ROASTED VEGETABLES ADD RICH FLAVOR TO A VARIETY OF DISHES

You can serve roasted vegetables alone as a side dish, as a first course, or as a warm salad drizzled with some vinaigrette. They taste just as good—some say better—at room temperature, making them a great choice for the holiday buffet table. You can cook them along with roasted meat, poultry, or fish, or you can toss them with pasta and a little cheese to make them the focus of the meal. Here are some ways I like to feature roasted vegetables:

◆ **To make a soup**—Create a satisfying winter soup by simmering roasted red



*A coating of oil keeps vegetables moist. Use your hands to toss the vegetables if you like. Add salt and other seasonings now to distribute evenly.*



peppers and roasted Roma tomatoes in chicken stock to cover, with a few sprigs of thyme or marjoram. Purée the soup in a blender and serve with a dollop of sour cream or plain yogurt. You can make any number of soups using different roasted vegetables.

◆ **To top pizza**—Try roasted vegetables on top of pizza or focaccia dough. Sprinkle with grated Asiago cheese and bake until the cheese is bubbly and golden.

◆ **To bake in a casserole**—Create a simple, one-dish supper of a roasted

## Cooking time depends on the vegetable

This range of cooking times is based on roasting the vegetables in a 450°F oven. Actual cooking times vary according to your oven's temperature, the ripeness of the vegetable, and—most importantly—your own preference.



**Long-cooking vegetables** (30 minutes to an hour): Beets, carrots, whole heads of garlic, mushrooms, onions, parsnips, potatoes, rutabagas, sweet potatoes, turnips, winter squash.



**Medium-cooking vegetables** (15 to 30 minutes): Eggplant, fennel, garlic cloves, okra, bell peppers, chiles, summer squash, tomatoes, zucchini.



**Quick-cooking vegetables** (10 to 15 minutes): Asparagus, corn, lima beans, peas, string beans.



*Roasted vegetables taste great at room temperature as well as hot out of the oven, which means they work well on the holiday buffet table.*

vegetable casserole by spooning vegetables roasted with oregano and thyme into a buttered casserole dish. Top with feta cheese and toasted breadcrumbs and bake until the cheese is soft and the crumbs golden.

◆ **To mash into dip**—Roasted eggplant makes a great dip for pita bread. Scrape the flesh of the roasted eggplant into a food processor or blender (discard the skin) and purée with a tablespoon of olive oil, a teaspoon of lemon juice, some mashed roasted garlic, and salt and pepper to taste.

No matter how you use your roasted vegetables, their homey goodness makes them a sure bet for gracing winter meals.

### Roasted Winter Vegetables

Rosemary's piny flavor complements the natural sweetness of sweet potatoes and parsnips. *Serves four.*

**2 medium carrots (about 8 oz.), peeled and cut into ¾-inch chunks**  
**1 medium onion, cut into 1-inch pieces**  
**1 medium sweet potato (about 8 oz.), peeled and cut into 1-inch cubes**

**8 oz. mixed mushrooms, cut (if necessary) into 1-inch pieces**  
**2 medium parsnips (about 8 oz.), peeled and cut into 1-inch cubes**  
**10 garlic cloves, peeled**  
**3 Tbs. extra-virgin olive oil**  
**1 Tbs. balsamic vinegar**  
**2 tsp. coarse salt**  
**1 Tbs. chopped fresh rosemary**  
**Chopped fresh parsley for garnish**

Heat the oven to 450°F. In a large bowl, toss the carrots, onion, sweet potato, mushrooms, parsnips, and garlic with the olive oil, balsamic vinegar, salt, and rosemary.

Spread the vegetables out in a baking pan just large enough to hold them in one layer. (If the pan is too big, the vegetables may dry out too much and burn.) Roast in the hot oven, shaking the pan once or twice, about 50 min. The vegetables are done when they turn a toasty caramel color and are fork tender. Garnish with chopped fresh parsley and serve hot or at room temperature.

*Lucia Watson keeps warm cooking at her Minneapolis restaurant, Lucia's. She was assisted in writing this article by Beth Dooley. Together they wrote Savoring the Seasons of the Northern Heartland (Knopf, 1994). ◆*

## Create your own combinations



*Earthy mushrooms and sweet asparagus pair well when roasted and tossed with a little walnut oil and tarragon vinegar.*

The fun of roasting vegetables is coming up with your own combinations of vegetables, herbs, oils, and vinegars. Here are some possibilities to get you thinking.

- ◆ butternut squash with hazelnut oil
- ◆ asparagus and mushrooms with walnut oil and tarragon vinegar
- ◆ potatoes and garlic with olive oil and rosemary
- ◆ beets and shallots with raspberry vinegar
- ◆ corn and peas with olive oil, basil, and mint
- ◆ wild mushrooms with olive oil, balsamic vinegar, sage, and thyme
- ◆ red onions with olive oil and sherry vinegar
- ◆ eggplant and garlic with toasted sesame seed oil and rice vinegar
- ◆ zucchini, fennel, and tomatoes with olive oil and parsley