



Discover Celery's Warm Side

Cooking this familiar vegetable brings out its sweet, subtle flavor and fragrance

BY ERICA DE MANE

To most Americans, celery equals crunch. Whether we chop it for tuna salad or stuff it with Roquefort, we almost always eat celery raw. But try cooking it, as Europeans have done for ages, and you'll open up a whole new perspective on those green stalks patiently waiting in your fridge.

Cooking celery brings out its sweet side, a quality absent in the grassy bite of raw celery. In Europe, celery is braised, sautéed, puréed, baked, and fried. You won't see it steamed or boiled, however, because these methods render it almost tasteless.

FROM SAUCES TO MAIN DISHES, CELERY IS SERVED HOT

Celery plays a supporting role in *mirepoix*, the aromatic vegetable base used in French sauces and stews (the Italian version is *soffritto*), but it also stars in many French and Italian dishes. Braising celery is the classic way to cook it. The French braise celery's inner ribs in butter and stock until tender. Celery braised in white wine and finished with lemon juice, a Provençal treatment, is wonderful with roasted chicken or baked fish. A northern Italian dish calls for coating the braised ribs with béchamel sauce, topping that with Parmesan, and baking until the cheese is hot and bubbling. Italians also enjoy the pure flavor of pasta



Sautéed celery brings an intense, aromatic flavor to this easy pasta dish.

Photos: Gentil & Hyers



Celery's peppery flavor adds punch to a potato purée. Though often served as a sauce on its own, puréed celery makes a great side dish when paired with potato.



Celery root multiplies the celery flavor of this simple, soothing soup.

dressed with sautéed celery and a little onion or garlic. They also use it in versions of *pasta e fagioli*, pasta and bean soup.

Cooked, puréed celery makes a lovely sauce for poached chicken or fish. To make celery purée, simmer chopped celery with a little chicken stock and a little butter until the celery is tender. Let it cool slightly and purée it in a food processor. (If the purée is thin and watery, return it to the heat and simmer until thickened.) Mixing celery purée with mashed potatoes gives it a more substantial texture, better suited for a delicious side dish.

CHOOSE THE BEST CELERY AND KEEP IT FRESH

No matter how you cook your celery, you want to start with a good, fresh bunch. At most supermarkets, your choice in celery variety is limited to the ubiquitous Pascal, grown mainly in California and Florida and available year-round. A cultivated form of wild celery, it is grown for its sturdy green stalks, or ribs. The other paler, more delicate varieties are a rare sight in the United States, though you may find them at gourmet or farmers' markets. Northern European varieties have a golden tinge and, say some chefs, are less watery than the celery here.

Avoid buying celery that's wrapped in plastic. There isn't necessarily anything wrong with it, but the plastic makes it difficult to feel and smell the celery. The ribs should be firm and bright green. Don't buy celery past its prime. If the ribs are rubbery, or the leaves are yellow or brown, the celery won't have much flavor.

Despite its sturdy appearance, celery doesn't keep very long, even when refrig-

Celery braised with white wine and lemon juice, a Provençal treatment, is wonderful with roasted chicken.

erated; it can become soft after just three or four days. To keep celery fresh, wrap it loosely in a plastic bag and keep it in the vegetable crisper.

PULL OFF TOUGH RIBS TO GET TO THE TENDER HEART

Most older recipes call for blanching celery with a little flour or baking soda added to the water to keep the vegetable

green. But this step isn't necessary unless you're more worried about how the celery looks than how it tastes; blanching lessens celery's flavor, and it won't keep it green indefinitely.

To prepare celery for cooking, pull away the outermost ribs. These are usually too tough to be made completely tender (use them to flavor soups or stocks). Once you get to the heart of the celery—the tender, inner ribs—you may still need to peel away some of the fibrous strings on the outer ribs of the heart, which is easily done with a vegetable peeler.

In Europe, braised celery is often presented with the hearts left attached to the root base, which you can trim back for a neater appearance. Clean the hearts well under running water to remove trapped dirt from the root ends. Dry the hearts by standing them on end on paper towels and letting the water drain out of the ribs. Cleaning celery is even easier if you separate the ribs; simply rinse the individual ribs under running water.

To chop or mince the ribs, cut them into manageable sections. Slice these sections lengthwise to the desired thinness. Use one hand to hold the strips of celery in line and the other to chop across the grain into the desired size.



Celery hearts looks elegant when served intact. You can trim the roots, but leave enough to keep the ribs attached.

The following recipes illustrate how the French and Italians like to cook celery. Try them, and you'll see that there's more to celery than crunch.

Braised Celery with Tomato & Pancetta

You can leave the celery hearts whole, which makes for a rather fancy presentation, or you can discard the roots, cut the ribs into short pieces, and braise them that way. *Serves four.*

- 4 bunches celery (about 1¾ lb. each)
- 1 Tbs. olive oil
- ¼ lb. pancetta, chopped fine
- 1 large onion, chopped fine
- 2 bay leaves
- 1 cup Italian plum tomatoes (about 6 chopped) and their juice
- 1 cup homemade or low-salt canned chicken stock
- ¼ tsp. salt
- 1¼ tsp. freshly ground black pepper

Pull off the tough outer celery ribs; reserve for another use. Trim the tops and bottoms of the remaining ribs, leaving the hearts about 6 inches long. Rinse the celery well and dry it. Reserve a handful of celery leaves for garnish. (Keep them fresh in a moist paper towel.)

Heat the olive oil in a large sauté pan over medium heat. Sauté the pancetta until it just starts to brown. Add the onion and sauté until soft, about 5 min. Add the celery hearts, bay leaves, tomatoes, and stock. Season with salt and pepper. Cover, reduce heat, and braise, turning the celery several times, until the hearts are tender (they should be easily pierced with a knife), about 45 to 50 min.



Washed celery drains easily with a little help from gravity. Even if your celery comes washed, give it a rinse to remove dirt trapped in the root end.

Remove the celery hearts from the pan, letting excess broth drip back into the pan, and transfer them to a serving platter. Simmer the braising liquid over medium heat until it thickens, about 10 min. Pour the reduced braising liquid over the celery and garnish with the reserved celery leaves.

Tubettini with Celery Sauce

Cut the celery the same size as the pasta to give the dish a uniform look. Tomato or red pepper makes a delicious addition, but the version here is pure celery. *Serves four to six.*

- 2 bunches celery (about 1¾ lb. each)
- ½ cup extra-virgin olive oil or to taste
- 4 scallions, white and green parts, sliced thin
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 lb. tubettini or other small pasta
- 3 Tbs. chopped flat-leaf parsley



Peel away the fibrous strings—they won't become tender with cooking. A vegetable peeler does the job nicely.

- ½ tsp. dried red pepper flakes or to taste
- ¾ tsp. salt
- ¼ tsp. freshly ground black pepper

Remove the tough outer celery ribs and reserve for another use. Rinse the hearts well and dry them. Chop the celery leaves and wrap them in a moist paper towel. Chop the inner ribs approximately the same size as the pasta (see photo on p. 38.) You should have about 3¾ cups chopped celery.

Heat the olive oil in a large frying pan over medium heat. Sauté the scallions and celery until tender but still firm, about 10 min. Stir in the garlic and cook until fragrant, 1 or 2 min. longer. Remove from the pan and keep warm.

In a large pot of boiling salted water, cook the pasta until *al dente*; drain but do not rinse. In a large serving bowl, combine the pasta, celery sauce, chopped celery leaves,

There's more to celery than just ribs—

While celery's ribs may be its biggest contribution to cooking, other parts of the plant are full of flavor, too.



Celery seeds

The tiny, aromatic seeds of celery pack the vegetable's strong, distinctive taste. They lend celery's flavor to all kinds of dishes, including breads, crackers, soups, stews, and salads. Celery seasoning, often rubbed on meats and poultry before roasting or grilling, is made by grinding salt with celery seeds. For both the seed and the seasoning, a little goes a long way.

parsley, red pepper flakes, salt, and pepper. Toss well and serve immediately.

Celery & Potato Purée

Celery purée alone makes a lovely sauce for poached chicken or fish. Mixing it with potatoes gives it a more substantial texture better suited for a side dish. Use milk instead of cream for a lighter version. *Serves four to six.*

2 bunches celery (about 1¾ lb. each)

About ½ cup homemade or low-salt canned chicken stock or water

5 Tbs. unsalted butter

5 baking potatoes (8 oz. each), peeled and cut into large chunks

½ cup heavy cream

½ tsp. salt

¼ tsp. freshly ground black pepper

Pinch freshly grated nutmeg

Remove the tough outer celery ribs; reserve for another use. Rinse the hearts well and dry them. Cut off the root and ½ inch off the top; chop the rest of the celery into approximately 1-inch pieces, including all the leaves. (You should have about 4 cups.)

In a large frying pan, combine the celery, stock, and 1 Tbs. of the butter. Cover and simmer over low heat until the celery is tender, about 30 min. Uncover and cook about 5 min. longer to evaporate the liquid. Remove from the heat and let cool slightly.

Meanwhile, in a large saucepan, cook the potatoes in boiling salted water until tender, about 20 min. Drain.

In a food processor, pulse the celery until smooth. If the purée is thin and watery, return it to the heat and reduce until thickened. (You should have about 1 cup celery purée.)

In a large mixing bowl, combine the potatoes, 4 Tbs. butter, the cream, salt, pepper, and nutmeg. With a potato masher or whisk, mash the potatoes until fairly smooth. Stir in the celery purée. Taste for seasoning and add salt and pepper as needed.



A slow braise for a sweet celery and tomato dish. Pancetta joins this classic vegetable pairing to add a fuller, deeper flavor.

Two-Celery Soup

This simple, soothing soup benefits greatly from a good homemade stock. *Serves eight to ten.*

1 large bunch celery (about 1¾ lb.)

3 Tbs. olive oil

1 medium celery root (about 1¼ lb.), peeled and cut into small dice

2 large leeks, well rinsed, white and some green cut into small dice

1 large starchy potato, peeled and cut into small dice

2 qt. homemade or low-salt canned chicken stock

Juice of ½ lemon

Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

3 Tbs. chopped flat-leaf parsley

½ cup freshly grated Parmesan cheese

Cut off the root and top of the celery. Rinse the celery well and dry. Reserve the leaves

and wrap them in a moist paper towel. Peel the tough fibers from the outer ribs. Chop the ribs into small dice. (You should have about 4 cups.)

Heat the olive oil in a large pot over medium-high heat. Add the celery, celery root, leeks, and potato. Sauté a few minutes until a strong celery aroma is released. Pour in the chicken stock, bring to a boil, and simmer until all the vegetables are tender, 40 to 50 min. Add the lemon juice, salt, pepper, parsley, and reserved celery leaves. Sprinkle each serving with Parmesan cheese. Serve hot.

Erica De Mane is a chef, food writer, and cooking teacher who specializes in southern Italian cooking. She lives in New York City. ♦

try the seeds, leaves, and root



Celery leaves

Celery leaves add a more subtle celery flavor to dishes. In Europe and in Asia, celery leaves are used as an herb, similar to the way we use parsley. Thin-ribbed Chinese celery, which you can find in Asian markets, is cultivated for its big leaves. Next time you buy celery, look for a bunch with fresh, leafy tops.



Celery root or celeriac

Celery root is a separate strain of celery. Its beige, gnarled bulb looks impenetrable, but once peeled, the bulb is quite soft and easy to cut. Raw celery root is classically used in French *céleri rémoulade*, a grated celery root salad that's a standard on crudité platters. Cooked celery root is delicious when mashed with potatoes.