



A Guide to Sweet, Tender Zucchini

Transform summer's most abundant vegetable into soup, side dishes, fritters—even noodles

BY LORETTA KELLER

My friends plant gardens every spring, and brown paper bags full of zucchini find their way to my doorstep every August. Since there's a tendency to look on zucchini as being big and bland—the dumb jock of the vegetable patch—I'm never sure if my neighbors have too many squash or not enough ideas. Either way, I'm happy to be the recipient: I think the fastest-growing vegetable in

the garden is also one of the most versatile in the kitchen.

Finger food fit for a king. Batter-frying zucchini and its blossoms coaxes out the sweet tenderness of both.

“Baby” zucchini are delicious just barely cooked or batter-fried; young zucchini are per-



Make way for tomatoes. Hold your knife parallel to the work surface to cut flat, even layers in the zucchini.



Slip tomato slices in between the layers to make "fans." If you have Japanese eggplant on hand, slide in slices of them, too.

fect for quick sautéés and for roasting whole; and those king-size squash are great for puréeing into soup or for grating into long, slender noodles. With so many ways to appreciate zucchini's delicate texture and sweet taste, homeless squash are always welcome guests at my house.

ZUCCHINI IS SWEET WITH ANY SEASONING

Zucchini's mild flavor works well with both intense and subtle seasonings. Its sweetness is a delicious backdrop for fresh herbs. This vegetable is made for basil, oregano, and tomatoes, and it loves the garlic and ginger of a stir-fry.

Good zucchini comes in small packages. Young zucchini is zucchini at its best. For most recipes, the ideal squash is one that's still slender and measures four to six inches long. These zucchini have thin skin, tiny undeveloped seeds, and sweet flesh that's tender but firm.

At the grocery store or in the garden, look for firm, medium-green zucchini that are just slightly pliable. Gently scrape the skin with a fingernail; it should wrinkle easily. Refrigerated in a loose plastic bag, zucchini will last about three or four days.

If a zucchini is between seven and ten inches long, it usually has darker, tougher skin and larger seeds. I recommend that you cut these older zucchini in half and scrape out the seeds with a spoon before you cook them.

The ideal zucchini is slender and four to six inches long, with thin skin, tiny seeds, and sweet flesh that's tender but firm.

Don't forget the flowers. The radiant yellow flowers that grow on the zucchini plant are also edible and have a delicate squash-like flavor of their own. Try them sautéed and folded into omelets. They also look lovely floating on top of a bowl of soup, but I like them best lightly battered and fried (see recipe, p. 45). Look for the flowers at farm stands or pluck them from your garden, but take only those that are closed and fresh looking. If you pick them from your vegetable patch, keep in mind that the female flowers (those with enlarged bases) are the ones that give birth to baby zucchini. Picking them means you'll limit your harvest of full-grown squash.

Some zucchini are only fit for the county fair. As for the gargantuan, one-foot-plus zucchini you sometimes see at the end of August, bigger isn't better. As zucchini grow, their sugar turns to starch, the seeds mature, and the flesh becomes tough and woody.

While unchecked zucchini can grow to truly impressive lengths and girths, these squash should only be on your table as centerpieces.

WELL-COOKED ZUCCHINI IS NEVER BLAND

A zucchini is mostly water, which is probably why it has a bad reputation for being bland and soggy. That's how it turns out when it isn't treated properly, but if you give zucchini the cooking it deserves, the results are delicious.



There's beauty in simplicity. The summer garden's simplest, most copious offerings make an elegant casserole.

Photos except where noted: Brian Hagiwara



thick and rounds sliced about 1/4 inch thick work well. These shapes are slender enough to cook fast, but sturdy enough to retain their texture.

◆ **Roasted.** Tiny zucchini can be tossed with olive oil and quickly roasted whole, and medium zucchini are wonderful halved and roasted with herbs and Parmesan. I also like to stuff zucchini by making several long, lengthwise slits, into which I slip slices of tomato. Then I bathe them with white wine and olive oil, sprinkle with salt, and bake these “stuffed” zucchini on a bed of sliced onions, garlic, and thyme (see recipe, p. 44). You can also hollow out zucchini and stuff it with cheese, rice, meat, savory bread-crumbs, or even its own grated flesh.

◆ **Grilled.** Thick slices of grilled zucchini are delicious eaten hot or at room temperature. Just cut the zucchini lengthwise into 1/2-inch slices, brush the slices with olive oil, sprinkle with salt and pepper, and lay them on a hot grill. Zucchini gets soggy if it stays on the heat too long, so be sure the grill is fairly hot and watch the vegetables carefully.

◆ **Batter-fried.** Fried zucchini, simply salted and served piping hot, is a real treat. Baby zucchini and zucchini flowers can be dipped in the batter whole; larger zucchini should be cut in 3-inch sticks. When you slip the battered vegetables into the hot oil, don't overcrowd the pot or the zucchini will be greasy.

◆ **Cut into “noodles.”** Zucchini noodles are probably my favorite use for zucchini that are overgrown but still less than 10 inches long. When you slowly push a long zucchini against the julienne blade of a mandoline, you get dozens of beautiful green and white “noodles.” To avoid the seeds, rotate the zucchini as you go. When you get close to the seedy core, throw it away and reach for another zucchini. Quickly blanch the noodles and toss them with a dressing—they're delicious cold or hot. You can even mix the zucchini noodles with cooked linguine.

(Recipes on the following pages)



A zucchini's size and shape determine the best way to cook it.

For most recipes, a slender squash is ideal.

There are several ways to help zucchini avoid a watery fate. When cooked quickly at high heat, this squash is crisp and sweet. Stuffed zucchini needs more cooking time, but if given enough space, its water evaporates in the oven and the results are melt-in-your-mouth tender. When you batter-fry or blanch zucchini, salt it before cooking. Salt forces water out of the vegetable, which means the zucchini stays crisper and cooks faster.

Here are some of my favorite ways to prepare zucchini:

◆ **Sliced and sautéed.** Quickly sautéed in olive oil with a pinch of sea salt and a few thyme leaves, zucchini is a fast and delicious side dish. To sauté zucchini, you need to slice it in shapes that cook well over fast, high heat. Two-inch sticks about 1/2 inch



Give zucchini time and space. When you bake them slowly with enough room in the pan, zucchini fans are meltingly tender.

Zucchini-Tomato Fans

This casserole makes a beautiful presentation. If you can find tender Japanese eggplant, insert slender slices of them along with the tomatoes. *Serves four as a side dish.*

1 large onion, halved and sliced thin
3 large cloves garlic, chopped fine
2 Tbs. extra-virgin olive oil
Salt and freshly ground black pepper
1 tsp. chopped fresh thyme (or ½ tsp. dried)
2 medium tomatoes (4 oz. each), sliced ¼ inch thick
2 medium zucchini (7 oz. each)
4 bay leaves
3 Tbs. white wine

Heat the oven to 350°F. Lightly oil a 9x13-inch baking dish.

In a small bowl, toss the onion and garlic with 1 Tbs. olive oil, ¼ tsp. salt, ¼ tsp. pepper, and the thyme. Spread the mixture in the baking dish and set aside.

Cut each tomato slice in half to form half-moons and sprinkle a pinch of salt on both sides of each tomato slice. Set aside.

Make the zucchini fans—Trim the stems of the zucchini to about ¼ inch. With a thin, sharp knife, slice the zucchini in half lengthwise. Lay the cut sides down on the work surface.

With your knife parallel to the work surface, make three slices, ¼ inch apart, in each zucchini half from the end to just below the stem without cutting all the way through. Gently lift these fan-like layers and sprinkle a pinch of salt between each layer. Slip two tomato slices in each slit and insert a bay leaf in the top section of each zucchini fan.

Carefully arrange the fans on top of the onions. Drizzle the vegetables with the remaining 1 Tbs. olive oil and the white wine; sprinkle with salt and pepper. Cover the dish with foil and bake for 30 min. Remove the foil and cook until the zucchini is tender, another 25 to 30 min.



Full of flavor and colored a brilliant chartreuse, Curried Zucchini Soup is finished with a swirl of crème fraîche.



Play that mandoline. Slow, smooth strokes result in long, slender zucchini noodles. Don't have a mandoline? You can also cut these noodles with a knife.

Curried Zucchini Soup

I like to garnish this soup with a swirl of *crème fraîche* or sour cream flavored with lime juice and zest. *Yields 8 cups; serves six to eight as a first course.*

6 Tbs. olive oil
5 zucchini (about 2 lb. total), trimmed and sliced into half-rounds
3 medium onions (about 1 lb. total), peeled and sliced thin
3 large apples (about 1½ lb. total), halved, cored, and sliced thin
1 medium carrot, peeled and sliced thin
3 cloves garlic, chopped fine
1 tsp. chopped fresh ginger
1 or 2 serrano chiles, seeded and chopped fine
About 10 cilantro stems
2 Tbs. mild curry paste (or 1½ tsp. curry powder)
5 to 6 cups chicken stock, homemade or low-salt canned
2 tsp. fresh lemon juice; more to taste
2 tsp. salt

In a large saucepan, heat the olive oil over medium heat. Add the zucchini, onions, apples, and carrot and cook without browning until the onion is soft and translucent, about 15 min. Add the garlic, ginger, chiles, cilantro stems, and curry paste. Continue cooking, stirring often, until all the ingredients are tender, about 20 min.

Add the chicken stock and bring to a boil over high heat. Reduce to a simmer and cook uncovered until the vegetables and the apples begin to fall apart, about 20 min. Add the lemon juice and salt.

Remove the soup from the heat to cool slightly and then purée in a blender or food processor—in batches if necessary—until very smooth. Reheat the soup just before serving. Taste and add salt and pepper if needed.



Blanched for just a minute and tossed with pesto, zucchini noodles are transformed to a pasta-like dish.



Zucchini "Noodles"

Toss these slender zucchini noodles, hot or cold, with a pesto (see the Mint & Basil Pesto recipe, right) or a vinaigrette and serve them as a side dish or salad. Or combine them with cooked linguine for a delicious summer supper. *Yields 4 cups cooked noodles; serves four as a side dish.*

4 large zucchini (about 10 oz. each)
1 tsp. salt

To slice by hand—Trim the ends of the zucchini and cut them lengthwise into ¼-inch slices. Stack the slices and slice lengthwise again into ¼-inch strips to make noodles. Work your way around the pulpy, seedy center of the zucchini, which should be discarded.

Slicing with a mandoline—Adjust the mandoline for the julienne blade. Slice the zucchini on the mandoline in slow, smooth strokes to form long, slender noodles. Rotate the zucchini after every two or three passes to avoid the seedy core. When you've sliced the zucchini on all sides, throw the core away.

Pile the zucchini in a colander and carefully toss it with the salt. Set the colander in the sink and let the zucchini drain for 30 min.

Bring a large pot of water to a rolling boil. Add the zucchini and blanch until just tender, about 1 min. Drain the zucchini thoroughly.

To serve hot—Toss the zucchini with the dressing and serve immediately.

To serve cold—Rinse the zucchini under cold water and drain very thoroughly before tossing it with the dressing.

Mint & Basil Pesto

This pesto is delicious tossed with hot or cold noodles, zucchini or otherwise. *Yields 1 cup.*

3 Tbs. extra-virgin olive oil
1 large clove garlic
Salt
½ cup tightly packed fresh basil leaves
½ cup tightly packed fresh mint leaves
2 Tbs. toasted pistachio nuts
½ cup grated Parmesan cheese
¼ tsp. brown sugar
4 tsp. balsamic vinegar
¼ tsp. freshly ground black pepper

In a food processor, blend the olive oil, garlic, and a pinch of salt almost smooth. Add the basil, mint, pistachios, and cheese; blend until the herbs are chopped fine but not puréed. Dissolve the brown sugar in the vinegar; add it to the pesto. Season to taste with salt and pepper.

Batter-Fried Zucchini & Their Blossoms

This batter creates a coating that's both tender and crisp. *Serves six to eight as an appetizer.*

2 eggs
1 bottle (1¼ cups) good-quality beer or ale
1 cup all-purpose flour; more for dredging
1 cup cornstarch
1 tsp. balsamic vinegar
1 tsp. salt
Pinch cayenne
Peanut oil for deep-frying
24 baby zucchini or 3 medium zucchini
24 zucchini blossoms

For the batter—Beat the eggs and beer together. Whisk in the flour and cornstarch; the mixture should have the consistency of pancake batter. Add the vinegar, salt, and cayenne. Set aside.

In a tall pot, heat 3 inches of peanut oil to 375°F.

Leave baby zucchini whole; cut medium zucchini into sticks about 3 inches long and ½ inch square. Dredge the zucchini in flour. Trim the flowers from their stems and remove the thistle-like protrusions at the base of each blossom.

Plunge the baby zucchini or zucchini sticks into the batter and use a slotted spoon or coarse strainer to remove them. Immediately drop the zucchini into the hot oil in batches. As soon as they surface, quickly batter the blossoms and add them to the oil. Don't overcrowd the pot or the oil temperature will drop. Gently move the squash in the oil so that they cook evenly and don't stick together. When they're crisp and golden brown (after 3 to 5 min.), remove the zucchini and blossoms. Drain them on a cooling rack set over paper towels. Sprinkle with salt and serve immediately.

Loretta Keller is the chef/owner of Bizou in San Francisco. ♦



Zucchini is fast and flexible. "The fastest-growing vegetable in the garden is also one of the most versatile," says author Loretta Keller.