

FOOD

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Seasonal Cook



JOHN LEE / Special to The Chronicle

Sturdy Tuscan kale is also known as dinosaur kale, cavolo nero and lacinato kale.

Chefs hail Tuscan kale

By Janet Fletcher
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Tuscany gets plenty of adoration for its camera-ready landscapes, its free-flowing Chianti, and its trove of Renaissance art. But now we Americans need to thank it for a vegetable, too.

In just the past decade or so, the lovable leafy green known as Tuscan kale has ridden the wave of interest in Italian cooking and rooted itself in Bay Area markets and gardens.

"It has really taken off," says grower Noah Barnes of Capay Organic, a farm in the Capay Valley (Yolo County) that supplies several local markets and restaurants with Tuscan kale.

Sales have climbed every year in the decade that the farm has been growing it, says Barnes, who watches customers eye the curious vegetable at winter farmers' markets. "People are attracted to it right away just by its appearance."

But this elongated kale with the crinkly blue-green leaves and pebbly texture remains a mystery to many. Its many pseudonyms suggest the difficulty that the produce world has had in fixing a name for it.

In a market in a Florence, a shopper would find it labeled as cavolo nero ("black cabbage"), although it never

► SEASONAL COOK: Page F6

Hearty Tuscan kale is a great green for the meat eater

► SEASONAL COOK
From Page F1

forms a cabbage-like head and it is merely dark, not black. Some marketers and chefs call it dinosaur kale — dino kale, for short — possibly because its roughness suggests the presumably leathery skin of those long-extinct creatures. And some call it lacinato — a word probably derived from an Italian botanical term — lacinato — that describes the crinkly leaves.

But by any name, it's remarkably flavorful—meatier than Swiss chard, sweeter than collards and more mellow than peppery mustard greens.

"It's a meat eater's kind of green," says Steven Levine, chef of Cosmopolitan Cafe in San Francisco. "I can't wait for it to come out every year. Spinach and Swiss chard are a little grassy to me, but this is hearty."

With pan-roasted chicken, Levine prepares Tuscan kale in the Catalan style: with anchovies, garlic, pine nuts and golden raisins. Last winter, he braised it with garlic and sausage and served it with creamy polenta with crumbled feta.

Braised Tuscan kale finished in the brick oven is "probably one of our top two small plates," says Kevin Best, owner of B Restaurant in Oakland. The kale is blanched first, then braised with olive oil, shallots, carrots and vegetable stock.

"At this time of year, the kale has a hearty, rich flavor, so we try to stay out of the way," says Best.

At Luka's Taproom & Lounge in Oakland, executive chef Jacob Alioto reheats blanched Tuscan kale with butter and garlic for an accompaniment to several of the restaurant's main courses, such as macaroni and cheese, and pot pie.

"It really tastes healthy," says the chef, "and it's really durable. It doesn't wilt like spinach, which you want to get right to the table."

If Hollywood put out a casting call for a dark, leafy green, the handsome Tuscan kale would get the part. And looks aside, it's a nutritional superstar.

Cheryl Forberg, a registered dietitian in Napa and consultant for the NBC show "The Biggest Loser," confirms that Tuscan kale de-



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Made for one another: Tuscan kale partners with golden raisins, garlic, red pepper, anchovies and pine nuts (see recipe at right).

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Cosmopolitan Cafe

livers plenty of vitamins A and C, beta carotene, calcium, folate and the phytochemicals that are thought to protect against some cancers.

The vegetable has a thin but tough central rib that should be cut away in all but the youngest

leaves (see "Trimming Tuscan kale").

Most recipes call for blanching the kale first, then reheating it in olive oil or braising it further with a little stock. You can also slice the raw leaves and braise them without blanching, but they will take longer to become tender and will have a stronger taste.

Tuscan kale loves Italian seasonings, such as pancetta, pine nuts and Parmigiano Reggiano. Mix it with other greens, such as turnip greens and collards, and simmer it in pork broth, or in water flavored with pork ribs or a ham hock. Substitute it for chard or cabbage in bean soups. Or stir chopped kale into polenta during the final few minutes of cooking for a wholesome merging of grain with greens.

Where to find kale dishes

Many Bay Area restaurants have kale on their menus at this time of year, most supermarkets carry it and many growers sell kale at farmers' markets. Here's the information about the places mentioned in the accompanying story.

Luka's Taproom and Lounge. 2221 Broadway, Oakland; (510) 451-4677.

B Restaurant & Bar. 499 Ninth St., Oakland; (510) 251-8770.

Cosmopolitan Cafe. 121 Spear St., San Francisco; (415) 543-4001.

Capay Organic Fruit and Vegetables. Ferry Building Marketplace Shop 21, San Francisco; (415) 391-2223 or www.farmfresh2you.com. Also at Alemany Farmers' Market and Noe Valley Farmers' Market on Saturdays, and Marin Civic Center Market on Sundays.

Trimming Tuscan kale

To remove the center rib from a leaf of Tuscan kale, fill a sink or bowl with cold water and hold the leaf upside down over the water. With a sharp knife, slice down alongside the rib on both sides so that the leafy part falls into the water and you are left holding the rib. Discard the rib, and rinse the leaves well; aphids like to nestle in their crevices, although aphids are rarely a problem in winter.

And when life rewards you with a trip to Tuscany, you can taste Tuscan kale on its home ground in ribollita, the "reboiled" soup made with leftover minestrone layered with bread — peasant food fit for a king.

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Creamy Polenta with Tuscan Kale

Serves 2 as a main course, 4 as a side dish

Enjoy as a meatless main course, with a salad, or serve as a side dish with grilled sausage or pork chops.

- 1 bunch (14 to 16 ounces) Tuscan kale, ribs removed (see "Trimming Tuscan kale")
- 1 cup polenta
- Kosher or sea salt
- 2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 2 cloves garlic, finely minced
- Freshly grated pecorino or Parmesan cheese

Instructions: Bring 2½ quarts of salted water to a boil in a saucepan over high heat. Add the kale and boil until it is just tender, 5-6 minutes. With tongs or a wire-mesh scoop, lift the kale out of the boiling water and into a sieve or colander. Shock the kale under cold running water to stop the cooking. Drain and squeeze dry. Chop medium fine.

Measure 4-5 cups of the cooking liquid into a clean saucepan. (Use 4 cups if you like thick polenta, 5 cups if you like it more creamy.) Bring to a boil over high heat. Add the polenta gradually,

whisking constantly. Lower the heat to medium and cook, whisking often, until the mixture thickens, about 5 minutes, then switch to a wooden spoon. Adjust heat to maintain a steady bubble and cook, stirring often, until polenta is smooth and no longer grainy, about 45 minutes. Add chopped kale during the final 10 minutes. Season to taste with salt.

Heat olive oil in a small skillet over moderately low heat. Add garlic and saute until it is fragrant, about 1 minute. Stir garlic and oil into polenta and cook for about 2 minutes to diffuse the flavor.

Pour the polenta onto a wooden board or a large shallow platter. Let cool for 5-10 minutes to allow the polenta to set up. Sprinkle with grated cheese to taste.

Per main-dish serving: 410 calories, 9 g protein, 60 g carbohydrate, 17 g fat (2 g saturated), 0 cholesterol, 70 mg sodium, 9 g fiber.

Tuscan Kale with Anchovies, Golden Raisins & Pine Nuts

Serves 4

Adapted from a recipe from Cosmopolitan Cafe chef Steven Levine. Serve this side dish with chicken, pork or duck.

- 2 tablespoons golden raisins
- 2 bunches (14 to 16 ounces each) Tuscan kale, ribs removed (see "Trimming Tuscan Kale," left)
- 1½ tablespoons pine nuts
- 3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 2 large cloves garlic, minced
- Pinch of hot red chile flakes
- 4 anchovy fillets, minced
- Kosher or sea salt

Instructions: Put the raisins in a small bowl and cover with warm water. Set aside to plump for 30 minutes, then drain.

Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil over high heat. Add the kale and boil until it just tender, 5-6 minutes. Drain and rinse under cold running water to stop the cooking. Drain again and squeeze dry. Chop coarsely.

Preheat oven to 325°F. Toast the pine nuts on a small baking sheet until golden, about 10 minutes. Let cool.

Heat the olive oil in a large skillet over moderately low heat. Add the garlic and chile flakes saute until the garlic is fragrant, about 1 minute. Remove the skillet from the heat, let it cool for a minute, then add the anchovies. Stir until they dissolve in the warmth of the skillet. Return the skillet to moderately low heat and add the kale, drained raisins, toasted pine nuts and salt to taste. Cook, stirring, until all the ingredients are well distributed and the greens are hot throughout. Serve immediately.

Per serving: 165 calories, 5 g protein, 11 g carbohydrate, 13 g fat (2 g saturated), 3 mg cholesterol, 172 mg sodium, 2 g fiber.