The fruitful life

Celebrate nature's harvest with a bountiful, healthful and seasonal menu of plant-based dishes

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Enjoying more plants in your diet is one of the most powerful steps you can take to improve your health and lessen your impact on the environment. Every season, Mother Nature provides a plethora of fruit and vegetables bursting with colour and flavour. Whether you're growing your own or buying from local producers, it's never been easier to enjoy food grown and harvested close to home.

In Gill Meller's beautiful book, *Root, Stem, Leaf, Flower: How To Cook With Vegetables And Other Plants*, we are invited to 'slow down, stop for a moment, watch the seasons turn, listen to nature'. Meller shares his passion for seasonal eating with a collection of vegetarian recipes that takes us on a year-long journey of abundance. Simple and seasonal, from land to plate.

VEGETABLE STEW

A colourful dish brimming with goodness and taste. Fennel, lemon and herbs add freshness and you can adapt the ingredients as nature's pantry restocks for autumn.

SERVES 6

- 150g dried flageolet or haricot beans or 1 x 400g tin, drained and rinsed
- 1 large butternut squash, peeled, deseeded and cut into 3-4cm cubes
- 3 fennel bulbs, trimmed and cut into 6-8 wedges
- 4 tbsp extra virgin olive oil, plus extra to serve
- 750g large ripe tomatoes
- 2 onions, thinly sliced
- 4 garlic cloves, thinly sliced
- 2 tsp fennel seeds
- 1 tsp coriander seeds, bashed
- 4 celery sticks, cut into slices
- Pinch of chilli flakes
- 4 bay leaves
- 4 thyme sprigs
- Juice and pared zest of 1 lemon
- 250ml vegetable stock
- 1 large glass red wine
- 1 handful flat-leaf parsley, leaves picked and chopped
- 1 handful dill, chopped
- Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper

1 If you're using dried beans, soak them in a bowl of water for 6 hours or overnight. Then, drain and transfer to a pan. Cover with water and bring to the simmer. Cook for 35-40 minutes, or until almost tender. Drain and set aside. Heat the oven to gas mark 6, 200°C.

2 Place the squash and fennel in a roasting tin. Trickle over half the olive oil and season with salt and black pepper. Tumble everything together, cover loosely with baking parchment or foil and roast for 35-40 minutes, turning once or twice during cooking, until the vegetables are tender.

3 Meanwhile, prick the tomatoes with a knife, then place in large heatproof bowl. Pour over boiling water to cover and leave to stand for 3-4 minutes to loosen the skins.

4 Using a slotted spoon, remove the tomatoes from the water and, when they are cool enough to handle, peel away as much skin as you can. Roughly chop the tomatoes and set aside.

5 When the fennel and squash are ready, heat a large cast-iron casserole over a medium heat. Add the remaining olive oil and, when it's hot, add the onions, garlic, fennel seeds, coriander seeds, celery, chilli flakes, bay, thyme, pared strips of lemon zest and some salt and pepper.

6 Stir the vegetables for about 12-15 minutes as they soften, taking care not to burn them. When they are tender, add the chopped tomatoes and stir well.

7 Add the flageolet or haricot beans, the roasted fennel and squash, the stock and the red wine. Bring to the simmer and cook for 45 minutes, stirring gently, until you have a thick, rich sauce and the vegetables and beans are meltingly tender. Then, add the lemon juice and plenty of salt and pepper to taste.

8 When you're happy with the balance, remove the casserole from the stove and stir in the parsley and dill. Trickle over some olive oil and serve.

TOMATO, EGG, BREAD AND HERB SALAD

This tasty salad is best enjoyed with seasonal heritage tomatoes of varying shapes, colours and sizes, sweetened on the vine. Organic eggs and good sourdough bread make all the difference.

SERVES 6

- 6 eggs, at room temperature
- Approximately 1kg ripe tomatoes of different sizes and colours, thickly sliced
- 2 tbsp capers
- 1 red chilli, deseeded and thinly sliced (optional)
- 1 red onion, thinly sliced
- 1 handful tarragon, leaves picked and chopped
- 1 small handful basil, cut into thin ribbons
- 200g day-old sourdough, torn into bite-sized pieces

FOR THE DRESSING

- 4 tbsp extra virgin olive oil
- 2 tbsp sunflower oil
- 2 tbsp red wine vinegar
- 2 tsp Dijon mustard
- 2 tsp unrefined caster sugar
- 1 garlic clove, very finely grated, or crushed to a paste
- Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper

1 Whisk or shake together all the ingredients for the dressing, until thoroughly combined. Set aside.
2 Bring a pan of water to the boil and add the eggs. Bring back to the simmer and cook for 6½ minutes, then drain and cool in cold water to stop them cooking further. Peel the eggs and set aside.
3 Place the tomato slices in a large bowl with the capers, chilli, red onion, tarragon, basil and bread. Pour over half the dressing and carefully tumble everything together. Allow to stand for 20 minutes, then tumble it all again, being careful not to break up the tomatoes too much.
4 Transfer the salad onto a large platter. Halve the eggs and arrange them in and around the tomatoes. Trickle over the remaining dressing and season everything with a little more salt and pepper before serving.

CHARD WITH GARLIC QUINOA, TOMATOES AND PARSLEY

Chard is central to this warm quinoa salad and works particularly well with the sweet tomatoes, cumin and garlic. Rainbow chard is recommended for its thick, waxy and dark green, billowy leaves, cooked until tender as you would cabbage or kale.

SERVES 4

- 1 large bunch rainbow chard
- 500g ripe tomatoes, cut into bite-sized pieces
- 4 tbsp extra virgin olive oil
- 4 garlic cloves thinly sliced
- 2 tsp cumin seeds, crushed
- 2 tsp unrefined caster sugar
- 2 tbsp red wine vinegar
- 1 handful flat-leaf parsley, leaves picked and roughly chopped
- Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper

1 Put the quinoa in a large pan and cover with plenty of salted water – you'll need about three times as much water as quinoa. Place the pan over a medium-high heat and bring to the boil. Reduce the heat and simmer the quinoa for about 10-12 minutes, or until the grains are tender. Drain well and set aside to cool.
2 Rinse the chard, then strip the leaves from the stalks. Slice the stalks into 1cm pieces and chop the leaves.
3 Bring a large pan of salted water to the boil and add the sliced chard stalks. Cook for 1-2 minutes, then add the leaves and bring back to the simmer. Simmer for a further 2 minutes, until the stalks and leaves are tender, then drain and use the back of a spoon to press the excess water out of the leaves.
4 Place the tomatoes in a bowl. Heat the olive oil in a small pan and, when it's hot, add the garlic and cumin and allow to sizzle for 1-2 minutes. Just as the garlic is colouring, pour the fragrant oil over the tomatoes. Add the sugar, vinegar, parsley and plenty of salt and pepper.
5 Tumble the tomatoes through the dressing. Then add the cooled quinoa and all the chard and use your hands to combine it all together gently. Transfer the salad onto a plate and serve.

Nature's bounty

New cookbook *Root, Stem, Leaf, Flower: How To Cook With Vegetables And Other Plants* by Gill Meller (Quadrille, £27), contains 120 original and simple vegetarian recipes and is out now.