



Deck your plates *with produce*

BY SARA FURLONG

There's no question that weather impacts our appetite. On a hot summer day, fruits and veggies are a refreshing addition to anything you serve. But as autumn falls around us and a chill creeps into the air, customers tend to crave heartier dishes and savory flavors. But that doesn't mean your dishes have to focus heavily on meat.

Produce is the new center of plate and that's great news for restaurants. Reducing protein portions and filling out dishes with less expensive fruits and veggies is a great way to reduce food costs. Plus, with the rise in produce's popularity and increasing customer demand for fresh and unexpected flavors, highlighting the harvest pleases customers.

In this article, we've provided a few tips to help you impress guests with your masterful use of fall and winter produce. We've also compiled a great chart with information to ensure you keep it current when choosing produce and spices.

TIP #1 INCORPORATE PRODUCE.

There's a fine line between hearty and heavy. As the weather becomes colder, customers want heartier dishes that are more wholesome and substantial than the summer's grilled veggies and salads. But that doesn't mean they'll be happy with heavy meals that are laden with fat. Modern customers want their seasonal cravings satisfied in ways that are at least somewhat fresh and healthful. They also derive a sense of value from unexpected flavors and ingredients. Incorporating thoughtfully prepared produce helps you deliver the freshness and flavor customers desire.

TIP #2 GET CREATIVE WITH SPICES.

How do you make produce crave-worthy in the winter?



By infusing festive and savory flavors that evoke a sense of seasonal celebration. Spices make this happen. Nutmeg and fresh sage can transform winter squash from boring to brilliant. Orange zest brightens up traditional meals and puts a fresh spin on old-fashioned favorites. Spicy, aromatic ginger and cardamom are holiday appropriate and provide a hint of the ethnic flair that so many customers want. Be creative with holiday spices and you're sure to intrigue anyone who sits at your tables.

TIP #3 GUESTS LIKE LOCAL.



Incorporating local or regional produce into your dishes increases the perceived value of your food because customers see it as fresher and more sustainable.

Studies also show that customers prefer to frequent restaurants that serve local produce because they want to support their community and the environment. Maines Produce Express makes it easy to serve regional produce, because Maines sources fruits and vegetables from within a 100-mile radius of their upstate New York headquarters. In fact, you may already use regional or local produce from Maines. Why not call out the fact that it is local on your menu, and perhaps even increase price because of it?

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE →

A CUP OF GOOD CHEER



In this season of celebration, mixology is important. But wait – who are we kidding? A creative beverage menu is important all year long. According to the National Restaurant Association, culinary cocktails, bar chefs and mixology are some of this year's hottest beverage trends – and restaurant experts predict that trend won't be short-lived.

Here are some ideas to transform classic cocktails into holiday spirits by incorporating seasonal produce and festive flavors:

Shake up a **BLOOD ORANGE-SAGE MARTINI** out of fresh-squeezed juice and citrus vodka. Garnish with a sprig of sage.

Serve a **CRANBERRY GIN AND TONIC** with chilled gin, tonic water, simple syrup, and cranberry juice. Skewer fresh cranberries as a swizzle stick for garnish.

Mix up some old-fashioned **BUTTERED RUM**. Don't forget the cinnamon, cloves and nutmeg.

Pour a **PEAR AND SPARKLING CIDER COCKTAIL** with pear nectar, cider, bourbon, and seltzer. Garnish with a Bosch pear wedge.

Create a **CHOCOLATE MINT MARTINI**. Top with a fresh mint leaf.

Display **CINNAMON-APPLE SANGRIA** in a large glass jar to show off cinnamon sticks and apple slices – and entice customers.

Try an **UPDATED EGG NOG** by incorporating soy milk. Or, for a low-carb alternative to this highly loved favorite, use a sugar substitute. But, as in tradition, sprinkle with nutmeg.



YOUR GUIDE TO THE WINTER WONDERLAND OF PRODUCE

Highlighting produce can be challenging during the colder months. This handy chart takes the guesswork out of preparing thoughtful winter produce with fresh, unexpected flavors that will appeal to customers this season.

PRODUCE	COMPLIMENTARY SPICES	PREPARATION SUGGESTIONS	NOTES OF INTEREST
Artichokes	Turmeric. Roasted garlic. Black and white peppercorns.	Sauté artichokes with onions, turmeric, cumin, paprika, salt and pepper. Serve with lemon wedges and fresh cilantro. Or, never underestimate the guest-pleasing power of the classic spinach-artichoke-roasted garlic flavor combination.	Called “winter-kissed” artichokes due to their bronze tips, fall/winter artichokes are the most tender and intense in flavor.
Beets	Orange zest. Cloves. Allspice. Cinnamon.	Roast beets with shallots, roasted garlic, pecans and cloves and top with gorgonzola cheese. Or toss canned beets in an orange vinaigrette for a bright, delicious side dish.	Roasted beets are gorgeous and easy to prepare. Their color adds visual interest to any dish – and makes them perfectly festive! Canned or pickled beets are another simple addition for a unique salad.
Brussels Sprouts	Turmeric. Cloves. Cardamom. Black and white pepper.	Make an unforgettable side by sautéing brussels sprouts with olive oil, turmeric or red chili powder for festive flavor with an ethnic or Indian flair.	Brussels sprouts are now rising in popularity, so restaurateurs have an opportunity to show the public what they’ve been missing.
Cabbage	Allspice. Mace. Nutmeg. Cloves.	Stuff cabbage with brown rice, mushrooms, veal and allspice. Or serve steamed cabbage with nutmeg and freshly ground white pepper as a side dish.	Hearty and delicious, cabbage is packed with vitamins and red cabbage offers loads of antioxidants. Best of all, cabbage is inexpensive year-round.
Carrots	Ginger. Allspice. Mace. Nutmeg. Cardamom. Anise. Orange zest. Turmeric.	Serve carrots and beef in an orange-ginger glaze over white rice. Or combine shredded carrots with raisins, cubed pineapple, orange zest, honey, and turmeric for a tasty and unexpected side.	Carrots originated in Afghanistan and, back then, they were purple, white, red and yellow – but never orange. In the 16th century the Dutch created the orange carrot by cross-breeding red and yellow carrots.
Cranberries	Orange zest. Sage. Thyme. Cinnamon.	Stuff poultry with dressing that combines whole wheat bread, apples, cranberries, sage, thyme and sausage.	Tart, sweet and beautiful, cranberries are a seasonal favorite. Add cranberries to almost anything and you can make it instantly festive.
Eggplant	Black and white peppercorns. Sage. Orange zest.	Serve eggplant rollettes with a citrus-sage tomato sauce (or saffron-citrus, as seen in last month’s <i>Essence</i>).	Eggplant is already seen as a vegetable with the potential to act as the star of the meal. Before cooking, be sure to draw out the eggplant’s bitter liquid with salt.

PRODUCE	COMPLIMENTARY SPICES	PREPARATION SUGGESTIONS	NOTES OF INTEREST
Fennel 	Star anise. Cardamom. Sage. Orange zest.	Your guests will devour a simple fennel and cardamom soup served in a shallow bowl with a hearty spoonful of crab meat on top.	Fennel is a hardy perennial with yellow flowers and feathery leaves. It is highly aromatic and flavorful and resembles anise.
Figs	Sage. Cinnamon. Cloves. All spice. Thyme.	Roast figs with cinnamon, thyme and honey or stuff them with goat cheese, sage and pancetta.	Figs are thought to be the sweetest of fruits and they're also one of the oldest fruits recognized by human beings.
Parsnips	Star anise. Cumin. Thyme. Cardamom. Coriander.	Sauté parsnips with olive oil until golden brown. Then glaze with honey, cumin, thyme and star anise.	Parsnips may very well be the new carrot. Paler and sweeter than carrots, parsnips have a buttery, slightly spicy flavor that blends well with the spices of autumn and winter.
Pears 	Vanilla bean. Cinnamon. Cloves. Nutmeg.	Try serving a pear sauce, spiced with fresh-ground vanilla bean with roast pork. Pear tartlets are another treat that are sure to excite your guests.	Succulent and gritty, pears can be used in desserts and sides but are also great in chutneys to complement poultry.
Persimmons	Ginger. Star anise. Orange zest. Cardamom.	During the holidays, you can't go wrong by serving a side of persimmon bread. Or, make a vegetarian kimchi side dish that features persimmon, fresh ginger, garlic and cabbage.	These beautiful red-orange fruits have a delicate, sweet flavor that makes them great in anything, but persimmon enthusiasts often claim they are best sliced raw.
Pumpkins 	All-spice. Cardamom. Cinnamon. Cloves. Ginger. Nutmeg.	Feature a velvety chai-spiced pumpkin soup seasoned with all-spice, cloves, cinnamon, ginger, cardamom, and nutmeg.	Whether you use fresh or canned pumpkin, a dish can't avoid being festive and seasonally appropriate if it incorporates pumpkin.
Quinces	Star anise. Hazelnut. Vanilla bean. Orange zest. Cinnamon.	Roast pears and quinces with orange zest as an unexpected side for poultry. Or make a fresh quince and hazelnut tart with homemade vanilla bean ice cream.	Sweet, aromatic quince has been popular since medieval times. The fruit is tart when raw, but cooking it brings out its sweet flavor.
Sweet Potatoes	All spice. Cinnamon. Cloves. Nutmeg. Ginger.	Create a sweet potato, red onion and fontina tart sprinkled with nutmeg as a vegetarian main course.	What's not to love about sweet potatoes? Sweet potatoes are a seasonal favorite that can be used as a key ingredient in any course – even dessert!
Squash	Nutmeg. Cinnamon. Cloves. Sage. Black and white peppercorns. All spice.	Halve and roast acorn squash, stuff with tortellini tossed in olive oil and pecorino Romano. Sprinkle with nutmeg and fresh ground pepper. Garnish with a sage leaf.	Squash comes into season in early fall and stays good well into winter. Its heartiness makes it a great candidate to take center stage in any course.