

Bring out the Brussels sprouts! (and live to tell the tale)

By Deborah Pankey | Daily Herald Staff

Published: 11/23/2009 12:04 AM

I brought Brussels sprouts to a Thanksgiving feast at a friend's house and have lived to tell about it.

I envisioned the usually well-mannered crowd at this holiday potluck pushing me and my crock full of mustard-sauced Brussels sprouts out the door, but instead the hostess beamed that she loved Brussels sprouts and led me to the buffet table. I didn't think anyone loved Brussels sprouts. I sure don't.

Or rather I didn't until I learned the right way to buy and cook them.

As is the case with other vegetables, the fresher the better. Brussels sprouts grow in spiraling rows on a single stalk and this is the best way to buy them. You can find them on the stalks at winter farmers markets and some produce shops and I've also seen them this way at Whole Foods Markets and Trader Joe's.

The sprouts at the bottom of the stalk will be bigger than the ones near the top. Just break the green heads off with your fingers, but not until you're ready to cook them. Those small ones at the top are the most tender so don't leave these runts on the stalk.

If you buy Brussels sprouts already cut from the stalk look for sprouts 1- to 1½-inches in diameter that have tight leaves free of brown or yellowed spots. Once home, refrigerate in an airtight plastic bag, but not for more than three days; kept longer than that the sprouts will develop a strong flavor.

Brussels sprouts, like their cousin broccoli, are a good source of vitamins A, C and K and contain a fair amount of iron, but it's not just the health benefits that appeal to **Naperville dietitian Christine Palumbo**. She loves the texture and taste, especially when they're cooked with a little bacon.

"Brussels sprouts definitely need a little bit of help," says Palumbo, a consultant for Dominick's Finer Foods. "I used to, like many other cooks, just steam them in on the stove top or in the microwave. That does not do them justice."

Try them with a balsamic glaze or mustard sauce; the tang mutes the earthy flavor. Nuts, too, whether pistachios, chestnuts or pine nuts, add another layer of flavor.

The sprouts also benefit from high-heat cooking techniques, such as roasting or sauteing, that bring out the vegetable's natural sugars, she says.

"I've started roasting them; trim and slice them in half and dot them with real butter... some salt, maybe a dash of cinnamon and nutmeg. You have to cook them long enough in the oven for them to caramelize; get the outer leaves crispy." When testing recipes for this story I learned to parboil the Brussels sprouts (add larger ones to the boiling water a few minutes ahead of the smaller ones) then dunk them in ice water to stop the cooking and preserve the vibrant green hue.

Then, if you're going to roast or sauté them, cut the big ones in half from the stem end and leave the smaller ones whole so they cook evenly.

After preparing them this way, you'll want to eat up the whole batch. I certainly couldn't stop eating 'em; especially Brussels sprouts with chorizo.