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Deck the table with Swiss chard

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For the Star-Ledger

Swiss chard, at its best, is the hearty vegetable that looks fresh and perky enough to serve as part of the Christmas décor. At its worst, it can resemble last year's crumpled gift wrap.

Those who grew up with this mainstay of the Mediterranean table know Swiss chard primarily as a leafy green atop a white stalk. But chard bearing red-veined, deep green leaves and red stalks, sometimes referred to as rhubarb chard, is becoming increasingly popular. Where green chard was once overwhelmingly preferred, "now it looks like it's getting close. It's probably 60-40," said Bob Flaim of Flaim Farms in Vineland, one of the state's leading growers of the vegetable.

At the Kings Super Markets, the red chard actually outsells the green two to one, noted Joe Granata of RLB Distributors in Caldwell, which supplies the chain with fresh produce. "I'm not sure why; maybe because it's colorful. Customers also expect it to be healthy," he said.

A type of beet whose stalks and leaves have developed instead of its root, chard does indeed have a stellar nutritional profile. It is an excellent source of vitamins K, A, C and E, magnesium, manganese, potassium, iron and dietary fiber; a very good source of copper, calcium, tryptophan, protein and vitamins B2 and B6; and a good source of phosphorus, zinc, folate and vitamins B1, B3 and B5.

"People have been rediscovering Swiss chard because of their health-consciousness," said Ron Binaghi, Jr., of Stokes Farm in Old Tappan. "We grew it for years, then it kind of fell out of favor and we quit it. Now we're growing it again."

But the vegetable has yet to attract a big following among restaurant customers. "We serve it all year round, but it's definitely not as popular as the other side dishes like spinach or asparagus," said Joe Cetrulo, who owns Adagio Taverna e Ristorante in Summit and La Campagna in Morristown. "Even broccoli rabe is more popular than Swiss chard. I think it's just not as well known. That's why we like to use it in a few different dishes, so that people will try it." Besides offering Swiss chard sautéed in olive oil with garlic as a side dish at Adagio, Cetrulo combines it with leeks to make a sauce for cod. The vegetable is also paired with faro, raisins and apple for an accompaniment to grilled ostrich.

Back in the supermarket, those who already are familiar with the sweet, earthy taste and meaty texture of Swiss chard tend to favor the green and white or red and green types. Those new to the vegetable seem to be more attracted to the multicolored look of Bright Lights, a Swiss chard whose stems can be yellow, orange, lavender or red, noted Granata. But Binaghi, who sold Bright Lights alongside the green and white type this season, said, "That's not the seller that I thought it would be. People see the yellow and think there's something wrong with it. The caterers like it, but the general public likes the green one."

Local production of Swiss chard, which can extend into December when the weather cooperates, was quashed by the cold snap that preceded Thanksgiving this year. "We're just about cleaned up. There's not much, if any, from New Jersey," said Wes Kline, a vegetable specialist with the Rutgers Cooperative Extension of Cumberland County. But there should be plenty of Swiss chard available from points west until the local crop sprouts again in spring. Ideally, the leaves should be shiny and bright; the stems, firm and crisp.

With a taste resembling that of spinach, Swiss chard can be similarly prepared. When most fresh and tender, it can also be used raw in salad. Many recipes call for stripping the leaves off their stems and either cooking the stems separately, or chopping them up so that they'll cook evenly with the greens. Very broad stems can be breaded and fried or baked.

Before using, rinse the chard repeatedly in water until there is no sign of sand or other residue. Highly perishable, Swiss chard should be refrigerated unwashed. To avoid wilting, store it away from such fruits as apples, pears, plums and most tropical fruits, which give off ethylene gas. That way, you'll keep it looking its holiday best until you're ready to bring it to the table.

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