Root vegetables seldom inspire love at first sight. Rough-skinned, gnarled and knotty, they wear an ugly outer cloak that belies the wealth of earthy flavors and nutrients within.

Long thought of as peasant fare, root vegetables are actually excellent sources of fiber, minerals and vitamins. They are the part of the plant that grows underground. In the darkness of the soil, they absorb and store water and minerals and conduct them upward to the plant's stem and leaves. And so they hold nutrients for us too. But they may also contain residual chemicals and pesticides that inhabit the soil, so search out those grown on organic farms.

This time of year, produce bins are piled high with a wide variety of roots. Red and yellow beets, celery root, fennel and leeks are at their juiciest (and cheapest) right now. You'll also find crunchy jicama (HEE-kah-mah), sweet rutabagas and nutty-flavored Jerusalem artichokes. Newer on the scene, but becoming more and more common in supermarkets, are the tropical roots like taro and yuca.

We're in the winter cycle—green beans and tomatoes can wait. So pull out your vegetable peeler and best chef's knife and see what delicious flavors await you beneath those gnarly peels.

Food Photography by Mark Thomas • Food Styling by William Smith • Prop Styling by Nancy Micklen
Dilled Beets with Cucumber Salsa

4 SERVINGS

For an attractive presentation, use a combination of red and yellow beets in this dish. Choose beets that are smooth and firm; small ones are generally sweeter. If greens are still attached, they should look fresh, not wilted. Cut green tops off one inch above the root. Rinse and dry the greens well and enjoy them steamed or raw in salads. Store beets up to one month in the refrigerator.

1 medium cucumber, peeled and chopped
2 Tbs. chopped fresh dill
1 Tbs. chopped red onion
2 Tbs. plain low-fat yogurt
1 Tbs. red wine vinegar
3 medium fresh beets (1½ lbs.)
Lettuce leaves

1. In medium bowl, combine cucumber, dill, onion, yogurt and vinegar; mix well. Cover and chill until ready to use.
2. Leave root and 1 inch of stem on beets; scrub with brush. Place in medium saucepan and cover with water. Bring to a boil, cover, reduce heat and simmer until tender, about 45 minutes. Drain and rinse with cold water. Drain again and let cool. Trim off roots and rub off skins. Cut beets into ¼-inch slices.
3. Arrange beets evenly on each of 4 lettuce-lined plates. Top each serving with ¼ cup cucumber mixture.

PER SERVING: 80 CAL; 4G PRO; 1G TOTAL FAT (0 SAT. FAT); 20G CARB; 1MG chol; 35MG SOD; 4G FIBER

Celery Root and Onion Gratin

4 SERVINGS

This gratin is rich with aroma and flavor. It's great for dinner served with a mixed greens salad topped with roasted red peppers and olives.

3 medium red potatoes (1 lb.)
1 large celery root (about 12 oz.)
1 to 3 Tbs. olive oil
1 medium red onion, quartered and sliced (1½ cups)
2 cloves garlic, minced
2 small stalks celery, chopped (1 cup)
1 Tbs. chopped fresh basil or 1 tsp. dried
1 cup dry white wine or vegetable broth
15-oz. can whole tomatoes, chopped, juices reserved
1. Preheat oven to 425°F. Trim tough outer leaves from fennel; remove and discard stalks. Cut fennel bulb into quarters lengthwise; discard core. Then cut bulb into 1-inch pieces (you should have 4 cups).

2. In large bowl, combine fennel, potatoes, bell pepper, onion, oil, basil and marjoram. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Arrange mixture in a single layer on a jelly-roll pan. Roast until vegetables are tender, about 45 minutes, stirring once. Serve hot.

**PER SERVING:** 125 CAL.; 3G PROT.; 4G TOTAL FAT (0 SAT. FAT); 22G CARB.; 0 CHOL.; 64MG SOD.; 6G FIBER

### Tomato, Fennel and Potato Stew

**4 SERVINGS EGG- & DAIRY-FREE**

Make this stew just before dinner or hours ahead. The longer it sits, the more flavorful it becomes.

- 5 medium red potatoes, peeled and cut into quarters (1½ lbs.)
- 2 Tbs. olive oil
- 1 large leek (white and light green parts), well rinsed and finely chopped
- 1 large onion, cut into wedges ½-inch-thick
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 tsp. herbes de Provence (see glossary, p. 95)
- 2 to 3 pinches saffron threads
- 1 strip orange peel
- 2 bay leaves
- 1 cup dry white wine
- 2 cups canned whole tomatoes, chopped

**Creamy Fennel and Potato Soup**

**8 SERVINGS EGG- & DAIRY-FREE**

Fennel is featured three ways in this pureed soup: sautéed fresh bulbs, toasted seeds and a garnish of feathery fronds. Buy fennel bulbs that are smooth and whitish-green without any cracks or discoloration. The leaves

**what's up, doc?**

It's no secret that carrots are a rich source of beta-carotene, a member of the carotenoid family that's vital for eye health. But did you know that the group of nutrients get their name because they were first identified in carrots? In addition to helping maintain vision, carrots may also play a role in lowering cholesterol due to their high content of the soluble fiber calcium pectate. One thing to note, though: If you indulge in an excessive amount of the vegetable you may notice a yellowish hue in your skin color. Not to worry, the condition is harmless and will go away once you cut back. —C.M.

Roasting is a simple technique that brings out the sweet, rich flavors of vegetables. In this recipe, the combination of fennel, potatoes, red bell peppers and onions is heavenly.

- 2 medium fennel bulbs
- 2 medium red potatoes, cubed (2 cups)
- 1 medium red bell pepper, cut into strips (1 cup)
- 1 small red onion, cut into 8 wedges
- 1 Tbs. olive oil
- ½ tsp. dried basil
- ½ tsp. dried marjoram

**PER SERVING:** 296 CAL.; 7G PROT.; 4G TOTAL FAT (1G SAT. FAT); 41G CARB.; 0 CHOL.; 235MG SOD.; 7G FIBER
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Taking Care of Everybody

should look fresh and lively. Keep fennel in a plastic bag in the refrigerator up to 3 days. Fennel seeds have a licorice-like flavor and can be found in the spice section of most supermarkets.

1 Tbs. fennel seeds
1 Tbs. olive oil
2 medium fennel bulbs, quartered, cored and coarsely chopped, feathery fronds from 1 bulb reserved
2 stalks celery, coarsely chopped
1 medium onion, coarsely chopped
½ cup dry white wine
5 cups vegetable broth or canned low-sodium vegetable broth
1 medium celery root, peeled and coarsely chopped (1 cup)
1 medium potato, peeled and coarsely chopped (1 cup)
6 cloves garlic, peeled
Bouquet garni made by tying together
5 fresh flat-leaf parsley stems,
2 fresh thyme sprigs
and 1 bay leaf

1. In small skillet, toast fennel seeds over medium high heat, tossing frequently, until fragrant, about 1 minute. Let cool, then transfer to spice grinder (a coffee grinder works fine) or mortar and pestle and finely grind.

2. In large pot, heat oil over medium heat. Add chopped fennel bulb, celery and onion and cook, stirring often, until vegetables soften, about 7 minutes. Add wine, increase heat to high and boil until almost all liquid has evaporated, about 5 minutes.

3. Add broth, celery root, potato and garlic and bring to a gentle simmer over medium heat. Add bouquet garni and ground fennel seeds, reduce heat to medium low and simmer until vegetables are very soft, about 45 minutes. Discard bouquet garni.

4. Working in batches, puree soup in food processor or blender and return to pot; warm if necessary. Season to taste with salt and pepper.

5. Pour soup into tureen or warmed shallow serving bowls. Sprinkle with chopped fronds and serve hot.

PER 1-CUP SERVING: 131 CAL.; 3G PROT.; 2G TOTAL FAT (0 SAT. FAT); 13G CARB.; 0 CHOL.; 172MG SOD.; 4G FIBER

Kathy Farrelli-Kingsley is food editor of Vegetarian Times.