

# LET US NOW PRAISE THE CABBAGE

BY TONI K. THAYER

If you're like me, you don't have an innate appreciation for the lowly cabbage. Maybe it reminds you of smelly apartment buildings or medieval peasants. It's the most humble of vegetables, less elegant even than its frequent companion, the potato, which can at least be fatted and whipped and piped into a fancy *duchesse*.

A head of plain green cabbage is solid, heavy, and oddly blank. If you're really lucky, you get it nestled inside a garland of darker leaves for some visual punch. (Those tough leaves are excellent for steaming, by the way, stuffed in the traditional way or wrapped around things in the manner of grape leaves or even tamales.)

I should acknowledge that I am writing this in Cleveland, a city with a history fed by ethnic cuisines that honor the cabbage—Irish, Polish, Czech, Slovenian, Ukrainian, African-American, and probably others I'm leaving out. So some readers may have a deeper emotional relationship to cabbage. I am willing to bet, though, that your cabbage vocabulary is still pretty limited.

When I was growing up, cabbage meant coleslaw, and the occasional labor-intensive, stuffed-cabbage-leaf variation. By the time I was cooking for myself, it never even occurred to me to buy cabbage. Don't get me wrong, my mother makes very good coleslaw (we're in the celery seed camp), but one dish isn't enough to justify an entire crop.

Perhaps it's supermarket culture. When you can get everything from everywhere any time of year, why turn to the stolid cabbage? It wasn't until I became a regular CSA (community supported agriculture) volunteer that I finally paid attention to the seasons. Sure, it's marvelous to know the exact two weeks when strawberries are at their peak, but getting in touch with the local growing season also means appreciating that which is harvested late and stores well. Potatoes, apples, and squash, oh my! And cabbage, too. So much cabbage. Cabbage on top of cabbage, some seasons. What to do with all the cabbage?

My family was reluctant. My husband recalls one sad dish, prepared during the depths of recession-era belt tightening—a casserole of cabbage and cheese, cribbed from a recipe-sharing site so woefully uninteresting, it nearly cast him into despair. And my son would for a long time eat only what I called “candy cabbage,” an impromptu sweet-and-sour sautéed with butter, a sprinkle of brown sugar, and a splash of cider vinegar.

There are three main things that finally seduced us all: cabbage is versatile, it is fresh in the depths of winter, and it doesn't need to be used all at once.

No wonder just about every food culture includes cabbage—sautéed, steamed, stewed, roasted, and raw; cabbage with potatoes, with beans, with noodles, and rice; cabbage with caraway, with curry, with cardamom, coriander, and chilies; cabbage with dill, with paprika, with cloves, and mace.

Start looking, and you'll find Ethiopian cabbage braised with carrots, garlic, and turmeric; Indonesian *mee goreng*—noodles fried with cabbage, meat, and spicy red chili sambal; and solid standbys like Irish *colcannon* (buttery mashed potatoes with strands of cabbage) and Eastern European *haluski* (egg noodles with cabbage, onions, and sometimes caraway) or heartwarming Italian cabbage and white bean soup (with or without sausage), great when autumn turns toward winter.

But those are cabbages cooked long, in the comfort-food vein. One of the best things about cabbage in midwinter is the way it can make things seem fresh and summery. Raw cabbage chopped fine can add brightness and crunch to tacos or a bowl of Asian noodles. It can be quick “pickled” with vinegar and salt and a dash of cloves to brighten up roasted meats. With a citrus dressing, cabbage salad in January can seem glitteringly luxurious.

And cabbage keeps well, even cut. Just lop a hunk off, wrap the rest in a plastic bag, and store it in your crisper drawer. It'll stay fresh for days (though you'll want to trim the cut surface). You're liberated to use it without making a meal centered on it. Throw a bit in a salad one night, toss some with noodles the next, and on the third night grate some to add into a sauce or a stew along with the onion and celery and other aromatics. That is my greatest discovery of all. Cabbage adds richness and depth to anything simmered or braised—spaghetti sauce (in my house we call it “veggie-might” sauce), chili, stew, and so on. When you start the recipe, grate cabbage in a quantity equal to the onion and cook them together until the cabbage is soft and beginning to caramelize, then proceed as usual. I guarantee, it'll take your recipe to new heights, and no one will ever guess your secret ingredient.

Winter is upon us. Rejoice with me and let the cabbage heads roll! 🥕