

In Praise of Parsley

by MONIQUE TRUONG • DEC. 19, 2011



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I'm partial to parsley, flat leaf and curly.

I wouldn't go so far as to say that I'm passionate about parsley. Passion requires some searching out, a limited season of availability or perhaps even an acquired taste. Parsley has none of these things, but it's an herb with surprising depth.

Parsley is often described as having a "fresh" taste, which is as lazy as food writing can get. It's like describing Meryl Streep as "blond." The flavor of parsley, especially the flat-leaf variety, begins in the nose — the moment you bite down on those sturdy leaves they release apiol, an aromatic oil. Think of the scent of toasting coriander seeds mingled with the pleasant wood note of a just-snapped twig. Then begins the wave of grassy flavor that the verdant leaves promise, and finally a slight tingling on the tongue (also courtesy of apiol).

Knee-deep now in the season of decorative greenery, I've been thinking about how unfortunate it is that sprigs of holly and sprigs of parsley are used with similar intent and purpose. Both are sturdy, slow to

wilt and certainly not there to be eaten. Their bright green hues signify an elusive freshness and, thus, a note of festivity. The sprigs are traditional, decorative and could be replaced by a plastic stand-in. (In the case of parsley, the stand-in is increasingly a raw piece of curly kale, as close to plastic as plant life can get.)

I was born into a culinary tradition that venerates fresh herbs. A Vietnamese dish, especially from the southern region of the country, is often accompanied by a minimum of four or five fresh herbs, carefully presented on a platter. All are meant to lend their specific tart, fruit or peppery flavors to the meal. So when I first encountered the lone curly parsley sprig perched on an American plate of food, I was perplexed. But I ate it, which made me even more perplexed.

The parsley had the nontaste and rubbery texture that came with sitting in the fridge for too long. Clearly there was no reason to eat this jaunty-seeming leaf. I didn't think of parsley as an actual herb then, even after I encountered its other common use: chopped and glommed fungus-like on top of a baked potato or a piece of grilled white fish.

Is it clear from these food items that my first encounter with parsley was in the era of flared polyester slacks, all-you-can-eat salad bars and Jimmy Carter's presidency?

I hardly gave parsley another thought until the early 1980s, when I saw a recipe for a roasted tomato sauce for spaghetti (what middle-Americans ate before we knew it was "pasta") that called for an outrageous two cupfuls of flat leaf parsley, a.k.a. Italian. What is this exotic variety and why had I never seen it in the supermarket? Before you judge me for my lack of culinary worldliness, I was 13 years old at the time and growing up in an America not yet baptized with E.V.O.O. by the Food Network. Parsley was curly. Oil came from corn. These were dark times.

My mother thought that we would find flat leaf parsley (and the extra virgin olive oil that the recipe called for) in a market in the part of town where the art museums were and where the houses looked like art museums too. She was right. Apparently, wealth allows you access to the future.

In addition to redeeming a humble herb, this sauce has the added benefit of transforming tasteless supermarket tomatoes into something quite respectable, even worthy of serving to company.

Roasted Tomato Sauce with Parsley

1½ to 2 pounds of fresh tomatoes

1/3 to 1/2 cup extra virgin olive oil

3 ounces anchovy fillets

2 cups coarsely chopped flat leaf parsley (curly is fine too, but the taste will be milder)

Fleur de sel or sea salt

Freshly ground black pepper

Dried red pepper flakes

1 pound of spaghetti, cooked al dente.

1. Preheat oven to 400 degrees.
2. Slice the tomatoes into very thick slabs and remove the hard core, if needed.
3. In a soufflé dish or similar baking dish with high sides, place a layer of tomato slices. Top with some anchovy fillets, a grind of black pepper, a sprinkling of red pepper flakes and a pinch or two of fleur de sel. (The fillets are salty, but the additional salt is necessary to achieve the right balance of flavors.)
4. Continue building the layers. You'll end up with three or four in total. For the top layer, do not use any anchovy fillets. You want them to melt into the sauce, not to get crispy or charred.
5. Pour the extra virgin olive oil over the layers.
6. Bake for an hour or an hour and fifteen minutes until the oil and the juices given off by the tomatoes are bubbling, and the top layer takes on an appealing roasted appearance.
7. Place the spaghetti in a large bowl and carefully pour or ladle the piping sauce over it. Toss until coated. Right before serving, add all the chopped parsley and toss again. Check to see whether more salt or red pepper is needed.

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