

June 18, 2008

A GOOD APPETITE; A Garlic Festival Without a Single Clove

By MELISSA CLARK

"I'd rather have an ounce of garlic than a pound of truffles," my father often said, setting the tone for garlic worship in our family.

When I was growing up, no meal was complete without several of the odoriferous cloves: from the omelets at breakfast to the garlic butter popcorn as a snack before bedtime. And if my dad never did get around to making garlic ice cream, it was only because he was perfecting his garlic-laced gazpacho sorbet.

Given this history, it was no surprise that the first time I came upon a cascading pile of vivid green, curling garlic scapes at the farmers' market, I had to buy some, even though I had no idea of what to do with them. Their graceful form gives few clues about their function. Garlic scapes are pencil thin and exuberantly loopy, and emanate a clean and mildly garlicky scent. At the top of each is a tightly closed but bulging bud. I contemplated sticking them in a vase with the peonies, but ultimately realized I'd rather eat them. Since my cookbook indexes came up empty in a search for scapes, I called my dad for advice. "Garlic scapes?" he said. "Do you mean green garlic?"

He was referring to the tender crop of garlic that also appears in the market in spring, bulbs still attached to their green floppy tops. Having become addicted to their juiciness and musky sweetness, I always make a point to buy plenty when I see them.

But no, I told him, scapes look like curlicue tulip stems.

At the time he didn't know how to cook them either, so I decided to wing it.

Since the scapes reminded me of extra-long green beans, I treated them as such, cutting them into two-inch lengths, blanching them and tossing them with a lemony vinaigrette.

They had a gently spicy undertone and an exquisitely fresh green, mellow taste. Unlike regular garlic, which needs some kind of vehicle to carry its intense flavor to the mouth, scapes are self-sufficient; vegetable and aromatic all in one. Ever since that first batch, I gleefully buy scapes whenever I can, using them in salads, soups and pesto.

I use green garlic in dressings, dips and sautés. Even a breakfast of toasted baguette with butter is infinitely improved by a topping of thinly sliced raw green garlic sprinkled with crunchy sea salt and fresh thyme leaves. Much milder and more succulent than regular garlic, green garlic won't cause your fellow subway riders to inch away from you.

Another bonus of green garlic: Because it's uncured (not dried), there's no papery skin. After trimming the roots and tops, all you need to do is peel off the outermost layer of the bulb.

It occurred to me, as I reveled in my alliums one evening last June, that this crop deserved a celebration, a party where I could serve a vampire-repelling repast showcasing garlic in its many incarnations. So a few weeks later I trotted back to the farmers' market to stock up. But I was too late. "All gone," a farmer told me. "Come back next year."

Next spring, I promised myself, I'd throw one garlic-palooza of a party. Meanwhile, I had loads of time for planning and research. Scapes, I learned, are the flower shoots of the garlic bulb. Farmers cut them off to encourage the bulbs to grow plumper. When the garlic is harvested before individual cloves are formed, it is called green garlic.

By May my appetite was primed. I started bothering the farmers at the Greenmarket, asking when the harvest would be in. My urgency amused Bill Maxwell, of Maxwell Farms in Changewater, N.J., who, after telling me to cool my heels until mid-June, offered a pearl of scapes insight.

Although they've been gaining a following over the last few years, he said, scapes came to market "when someone figured out they could make money from something they were cutting off the garlic plant and getting rid of."

Peter Hoffman, the chef at Savoy, added, "At some point someone realized the scapes were tender and delicious." He suggested that I sauté them with other vegetables or soft-shell crabs, or even grill them whole to show off their curves.

Finally, the market bloomed with baskets of scapes that looked like twisted garden snakes and bunches of green garlic with their leek-like stems still attached.

As I scooped armloads into my bag, I daydreamed about my party. I came up with a menu to showcase the alliums in several manifestations: raw, quickly sautéed and slowly confited.

It was not an occasion for the faint of heart. I planned to ease my guests into the piquant depths slowly with a docile creamy soup of green garlic and scapes sautéed in butter, then puréed. But while it bubbled away on the stove, and green garlic bulbs, slick with oil, roasted in the oven, I realized everyone would need a snack. So I decided to whip up a dip.

The pantry offered canned white beans and chickpeas. I considered hummus but decided to go for the paler legume to flaunt the scapes' verdant hue.

I ground beans and scapes in the food processor with a little lemon, and less olive oil than I would have used behind closed doors. The dip was billowing and fluffy, with the color of sugar snap peas. It had a velvety texture that wrapped itself around an assertive, racy wallop so intense that I worried I'd scare even my garlic-loving parents out of the house.

Instead, my guests closed in on the bowl like house cats to cream cheese. The soup, more delicate and earthy than the dip, met a similar fate.

And so did a puffy soufflé filled with chopped green garlic, chives and plenty of Gruyère cheese. This dish really threw my guests off guard.

"You think of soufflé as being all airy and light and a little bland," a friend said, "then wham! The garlic smacks you in the face -- you know, in a good way."

For the next course I yielded to garlic's subtler state, which it takes on while slowly confiting. To balance the sweetness, I sautéed the caramelized garlic with salty pancetta, fiery chili flakes, a squeeze of lemon for brightness and some chopped peppery arugula, then tossed it with penne. It was bracing and honeyed, with the lemon and chili preventing the garlic from being too cloying.

I pressed on to one more course, grilled chai-spiced chicken wings with green garlic aioli. The inspiration came from a baroque-sounding recipe on the Gilroy Garlic Festival Web site that included a marinade of green tea, lemon grass and curry paste. I decided to pare it down, seasoning the chicken with whole chai spices and making an aioli with just egg and oil -- and loads of garlic.

The aioli was the most potent dish of the night, and everyone quadruple-dipped their wings into the bowl. When the last of it was licked clean, I mentioned dessert. My father leaned forward, perhaps thrilled that I might fulfill his garlic ice cream fantasy.

But no, he was just reaching for the wine, and was visibly relieved when I brought out fresh strawberries. "You know why I never made garlic ice cream?" he asked.

"Because it's a terrible idea?" I answered.

"Exactly."

Recipe: Reinvented Garlic Bread Time: 5 minutes

1/2 fat bulb green garlic, root and green parts trimmed, outer layer removed

1 6-inch-long piece of baguette, halved lengthwise

2 tablespoons good-quality butter, softened

Coarse sea salt like Maldon

Thyme leaves, for garnish, optional.

1. Cut garlic in half. Toast bread, then rub cut sides of garlic all over toasted surface. Slice garlic as thinly as possible.

2. Spread bread with butter and sprinkle with salt. Top with sliced garlic. Garnish with thyme, if desired.

Yield: 1 to 2 servings.

Recipe: Double Garlic Soup Time: 45 minutes

3 fat bulbs green garlic, root and green parts trimmed, outer layer removed

3 tablespoons unsalted butter

3 cups sliced garlic scapes (about 3/4 pound)

1 1/2 teaspoons fresh thyme leaves, more for garnish

3/4 teaspoon kosher salt, more to taste

Ground black pepper to taste

1 large Yukon Gold potato, peeled and diced

1 quart chicken or vegetable broth

1 cup half-and-half or whole milk

2 teaspoons freshly squeezed lemon juice, or to taste

Freshly grated nutmeg.

1. Chop green garlic. In a soup pot, melt butter over medium-high heat. Add green garlic and sauté until translucent, about 3 minutes. Add scapes, thyme, salt and pepper, and sauté for 5 minutes.

2. Stir in potato and broth, reduce heat to medium, and simmer until scapes and potatoes are tender, about 20 minutes. Add half-and-half, and purée soup with an immersion blender or pour into a regular blender. Stir in the lemon juice and season with more salt and pepper. Garnish with nutmeg and thyme leaves, and serve hot.

Yield: 4 servings.

Recipe: Chai-Spiced Chicken Wings With Green Garlic Aioli Time: 30 minutes, plus 6 hours' marinating

FOR THE CHICKEN:

1/2 fat bulb green garlic, root and green parts trimmed, outer layer removed, or 4 regular garlic cloves, peeled

2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil

2 tablespoons soy sauce

1 teaspoon freshly squeezed lemon juice

1 teaspoon ground ginger

1 teaspoon cardamom pods (about 16)

1 teaspoon finely grated orange zest

1 star anise

1/2 teaspoon ground cinnamon

1/2 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

1 pinch ground cloves
2 1/2 pounds chicken wings

FOR THE AIOLI:

1/2 fat bulb green garlic, green parts trimmed, outer layer removed

1/2 teaspoon coarse sea salt

1 egg yolk

1 cup extra virgin olive oil

Freshly squeezed lemon juice, to taste.

1. Coarsely chop garlic and place in blender with olive oil, soy sauce, lemon juice, ginger, cardamom, orange zest, star anise, cinnamon, pepper and cloves. Blend mixture to a rough purée. In a bowl, toss marinade with chicken wings and cover. Refrigerate for at least 6 hours or, preferably, overnight.

2. Preheat broiler to high. Use a paper towel to brush off most solids from marinade clinging to chicken, then arrange wings on a baking sheet. Broil until wings are golden brown and cooked through, about 5 minutes a side.

3. To prepare aioli, finely chop garlic. Using a mortar and pestle, pound green garlic with salt until a paste forms. Add egg yolk and continue to pound paste until incorporated, then add oil drop by drop until a thick, shiny aioli is achieved. Stir in a few drops of lemon juice. Aioli can be prepared a day ahead; store it in refrigerator. Serve wings with aioli for dipping.

Yield: 2 to 4 servings.

Recipe: White Bean and Garlic Scapes Dip Time: 15 minutes

1/3 cup sliced garlic scapes (3 to 4)

1 tablespoon freshly squeezed lemon juice, more to taste

1/2 teaspoon coarse sea salt, more to taste

Ground black pepper to taste

1 can (15 ounces) cannellini beans, rinsed and drained

1/4 cup extra virgin olive oil, more for drizzling.

1. In a food processor, process garlic scapes with lemon juice, salt and pepper until finely chopped. Add cannellini beans and process to a rough purée.

2. With motor running, slowly drizzle olive oil through feed tube and process until fairly smooth. Pulse in 2 or 3 tablespoons water, or more, until mixture is the consistency of a dip. Add more salt, pepper and/or lemon juice, if desired.

3. Spread out dip on a plate, drizzle with olive oil, and sprinkle with more salt.

Yield: 1 1/2 cups.

Recipe: Penne With Roasted Garlic, Pancetta and Arugula Time: 2 hours

6 fat bulbs green garlic or 4 heads regular garlic

3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil, more for drizzling

Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper

1 pound penne rigate

1/2 pound pancetta, chopped

1 large pinch crushed red pepper flakes

1 teaspoon freshly squeezed lemon juice, or to taste

2 large bunches arugula, roughly chopped (about 5 cups)

Grated Parmesan cheese, for serving.

1. Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Trim hairy root and green stem from green garlic, or trim 1/4-inch off top of regular garlic, making sure to expose all cloves. Place garlic in a small, shallow baking dish, root side down, and drizzle each with a little olive oil. Cover dish with foil. Roast until cloves or bulbs are golden brown, about 40 minutes to 1 hour (green garlic will cook faster than regular garlic). If bottom of dish starts to burn before garlic is roasted, add one tablespoon water. Transfer to a rack to cool. Garlic can be roasted up to one day ahead; wrap well and store in refrigerator.

2. Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil. Add pasta and cook according to package directions until al dente.
3. While pasta cooks, heat 3 tablespoons olive oil in a large skillet on medium-high heat. Add pancetta and red pepper flakes. Sauté until pancetta is golden and crisp around edges, about 5 minutes.
4. Peel outside layer of green garlic, or if using regular garlic, squeeze cloves from their papery skins. Chop roasted garlic, and add to skillet with lemon juice and a large pinch of salt and pepper. Sauté for 2 minutes.
5. Drain pasta, reserving 1/2 cup cooking water. Add drained pasta and arugula to skillet, place over low heat, and toss until arugula wilts. Add just enough cooking water to scrape up brown bits in pan (do this 1 tablespoon at a time). Taste and adjust seasoning, then serve with Parmesan.

Yield: 4 servings.

Recipe: Green Garlic and Chive Soufflé With Gruyère Time: 50 minutes

- 5 tablespoons butter, more for pan
- 1 tablespoon grated Parmesan
- 2 fat bulbs green garlic, root and green parts trimmed, outer layer removed
- 1/4 cup flour
- 2 cups milk
- 2 sprigs thyme
- 3/4 teaspoon kosher salt plus a pinch
- 1/4 teaspoon ground black pepper
- 1/8 teaspoon grated nutmeg
- 4 egg yolks and 6 egg whites
- 2/3 cup grated Gruyère cheese
- 1/4 cup chopped chives.

1. Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Butter a 2-quart gratin dish and sprinkle bottom and sides with Parmesan. Using a sharp knife or food processor, mince garlic.
2. Melt butter in a saucepan and let cook for 1 minute. Add flour and cook, whisking, until mixture is pale golden, about 5 minutes. Whisk in the milk and thyme sprigs, and continue to cook, whisking constantly, until mixture is thick and smooth, about 2 minutes longer.
3. Turn off heat and whisk in salt, pepper and nutmeg. Transfer to a large bowl and whisk in egg yolks, one at a time. Whisk in minced garlic, cheese and chives.
4. In a mixer, whip egg whites with a pinch of salt until they hold soft peaks. Using a spatula, fold a third of the whites into yolk mixture to lighten it, then fold in remaining whites, taking care not to overmix. As you fold, pluck out and discard thyme sprigs.
5. Spread mixture in prepared pan and smooth top. Bake until golden brown and puffed, 20 to 25 minutes.

Yield: 6 servings.

Recipe: Reinvented Garlic Bread Time: 5 minutes

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- 2 tablespoons good-quality butter, softened
- Coarse sea salt like Maldon
- Thyme leaves, for garnish, optional.

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3/4 teaspoon kosher salt, more to taste

Ground black pepper to taste

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1 quart chicken or vegetable broth

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1 teaspoon ground ginger

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1 pinch ground cloves

2 1/2 pounds chicken wings

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2. Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil. Add pasta and cook according to package directions until al dente.

3. While pasta cooks, heat 3 tablespoons olive oil in a large skillet on medium-high heat. Add pancetta and red pepper flakes. Sauté until pancetta is golden and crisp around edges, about 5 minutes.

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