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A warm side for cold winter nights

By Susie Iventosch



Tomato-stuffed bell peppers Photo Susie Iventosch

Over the holidays, my nephew Brian gave me a beautiful kitchen towel along with a fun little tapas cookbook, "200 Tapas & Spanish Dishes," by Emma Lewis. This was the perfect gift for an auntie who loves to be in the kitchen, stirring up new recipes! In the book I found a fun idea for stuffing red bell peppers with tomato halves and decided to give it a try. I liked the idea of using orange bell peppers to set off the red tomatoes and adding panko-Parmesan on top to give it a nice crunchy topping. Snipped pieces of fresh basil added the perfect Mediterranean touch.

This made for a colorful vegetable to go alongside the steak we were serving that night, but it would also be a great vegetarian entree. You can use any color bell pepper except green. The red, yellow or orange peppers have a better flavor for this recipe. Although I haven't tried this yet, it would also be delicious to top the stuffed pepper with feta, gorgonzola or blue cheese and bake until bubbly and golden brown.

One half pepper per person is perfect as a side dish, but I'd suggest a whole stuffed pepper per person for a main dish. Also, if you would prefer to use these as pass around appetizers, try using the miniature tri-colored bell peppers stuffed with cherry tomatoes. The pear-shaped cherry tomatoes would fit in the bell pepper cavity just perfectly. If using the small peppers, reduce cooking time appropriately.

Cooking Term of the Week

Za'atar

Za'atar is a middle eastern spice mixture usually made from a combination of herbs and spices that can include: sumac, toasted sesame seeds, thyme, summer savory, marjoram, oregano and salt. Various regions have their own special blend of za'atar, and in fact, may add additional or different ingredients such as cumin or coriander. Za'atar can be used to season meats or vegetables before baking or grilling, or sprinkled into olive oil for dipping bread.

Tomato-stuffed Bell Peppers

(Serves 6 as a side, or 3 as a main)

INGREDIENTS

- 3 orange, red or yellow bell peppers, cut in half lengthwise, seeds and ribs removed
- 3 medium sized tomatoes, cut in half (can use plum or Campari)
- 1/4 cup extra virgin olive oil
- 1 clove garlic, crushed or 1/2 tsp. garlic powder
- 6 basil leaves, cut in thin strips (chiffonade)
- 1 tsp. each salt and pepper
- 3 Tbsp. balsamic vinegar
- 1/3 cup panko
- 1/3 cup grated Parmesan, or 1/3 cup crumbled feta, gorgonzola or blue cheese

DIRECTIONS

Cut peppers in half lengthwise, leaving stem intact on one half, if possible. Remove seeds and the white ribs. Remove stems from tomatoes and cut in half. Place a tomato half, cut side up, in the hollow of each pepper and place on baking tray, tomato side up. Drizzle olive oil over tomatoes and sprinkle with garlic, basil strips, salt and pepper. Drizzle balsamic evenly over each tomato. Mix grated Parmesan with panko and divide evenly over tomatoes. Bake at 400 F for approximately 20 to 25 minutes, until peppers are al dente and cheese is bubbly and browned. Serve hot.



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