

Techniques for Adding Bold Flavors to Your Cuisine

by

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Searing– Searing is a great way to quickly brown an ingredient, make it crispy, and keep it juicy. Despite the myth that searing locks in juices, searing an ingredient will tend to keep it juicier and fresher because it cooks the ingredient quickly and does not give it enough time to sweat much. To sear an ingredient, turn the heat in your pan up to high and add a very small amount of oil (just enough to lightly coat the food.) Once the pan is heated, add the ingredient and keep stirring it. This can take thirty seconds to two minutes, depending on how hard the ingredient is. Oyster mushrooms will sear very quickly while thick carrots will take much longer. High starch ingredients like potatoes tend to not sear as well as an ingredient like zucchini as the starch will stick to the pan and burn instead of sear.

Roasting– Roasting veggies adds depth to an ingredients texture and flavor. Flavor wise, the sugars in the food will caramelize if you have the heat high enough (typically 400 F or higher.) Texture wise, the ingredient tends to tighten and, if left uncovered in the oven, will become crispy. If you want to add flavor to an ingredient, roasting is a great way to go as it gives the ingredient enough time to absorb surrounding flavors. This is a great method for starchy ingredients, which tend to be rather porous and therefore absorb other flavors quite well. Potatoes are the obvious choice, but even roasted rice, when roasted with a sauce, is delicious. You will need to pay attention to three issues when roasting. First, you will have to get the temperature correct. Typically, that is anywhere from 400 F to 500 F. Roasting on a lower temperature can be done, but it does take a long time to do. Despite that, there is an advantage in it as the ingredient has a longer time to absorb surrounding flavors. Most of the time, though, I simply don't have the patience for it. Second, you will need to figure out how to keep your ingredient moist. One way is to cover it with foil. The second way is to roast it in some sort of liquid. Oil is the most common one. Finally, you will need to choose your surrounding flavors. Deeply flavored herbs like rosemary, pepper, and chili powders are perfect for doing this. Great ingredients to roast include potatoes, mushrooms, garlic, carrots, and squash.

Caramelizing– In short, caramelizing an ingredient means darkening its sugars. Thus, it is best to choose high sugar ingredients like onions, carrots, and garlic. This is also commonly called browning. The best way to accomplish this is to heat your pan to a medium high heat. Too high, and the ingredient sears, becoming cooked too fast for its sugars to develop. Too low, and the veggie takes an inordinately long time to caramelize as it releases its juices which must

then evaporate for the ingredient to develop properly. Be patient and do not overly stir the ingredient. The application of a direct heat onto the ingredient is what develops its sugars and stirring too much inhibits its contact with the direct heat of the pan. Caramelizing can be done with a thin layer of oil or with water. If you choose to omit the oil and do it with water, turn the pan up to a high heat and allow the ingredient to brown a bit in the pan before turning the heat back down to medium high and adding in the liquid. When adding the liquid, you will only want enough to create about a 1/8" layer in the pan. This will evaporate quickly, so you will need to frequently add it. If you add too much, the ingredient boils instead of caramelizes. Good ingredients to caramelize include onions, garlic, carrots, parsnips, sundried tomatoes, and peppers.

Grilling – Grilling can be tricky. If the grill is too hot, the outside of the ingredient cooks before the center is done. If it is too low, it takes a long, long time to cook and the browning effect of the grill is lost. If you get it right, however, grilling is a wonderful way of adding boldness to your ingredient. It will brown the food, caramelizing the sugars in them. It will tighten the food like roasting, and it will create nice crispy parts on the outside of the ingredient. If you use a wood fire grill, it's a great way to add other flavors to the ingredient like mesquite, apple wood, cherry wood, and even herbal flavors. If you want to add herbs to the grill, soak the herbs first so that they smolder instead of outright burn. That smoldering will create flavored smoke which the ingredient will absorb. When choosing the temperature of your grill, keep in mind the hardness and thickness of the ingredient you are grilling. The harder and/or thicker it is, the hotter the grill will need to be or the longer you will need to cook it. Generally, the center of the grill tends to be the hottest part, so if you have several different ingredients, you can put the softer ones on the outside of the grill and the harder ones towards the center. One trick you can do to add extra flavor to the food, if you are willing to take the time, is to grill harder ingredients on a low heat. This means they will pick up more smokiness, will become very tight and dense over time, and will caramelize extensively. This can, however, take over an hour to do and, in fact, is how BBQ is traditionally done.