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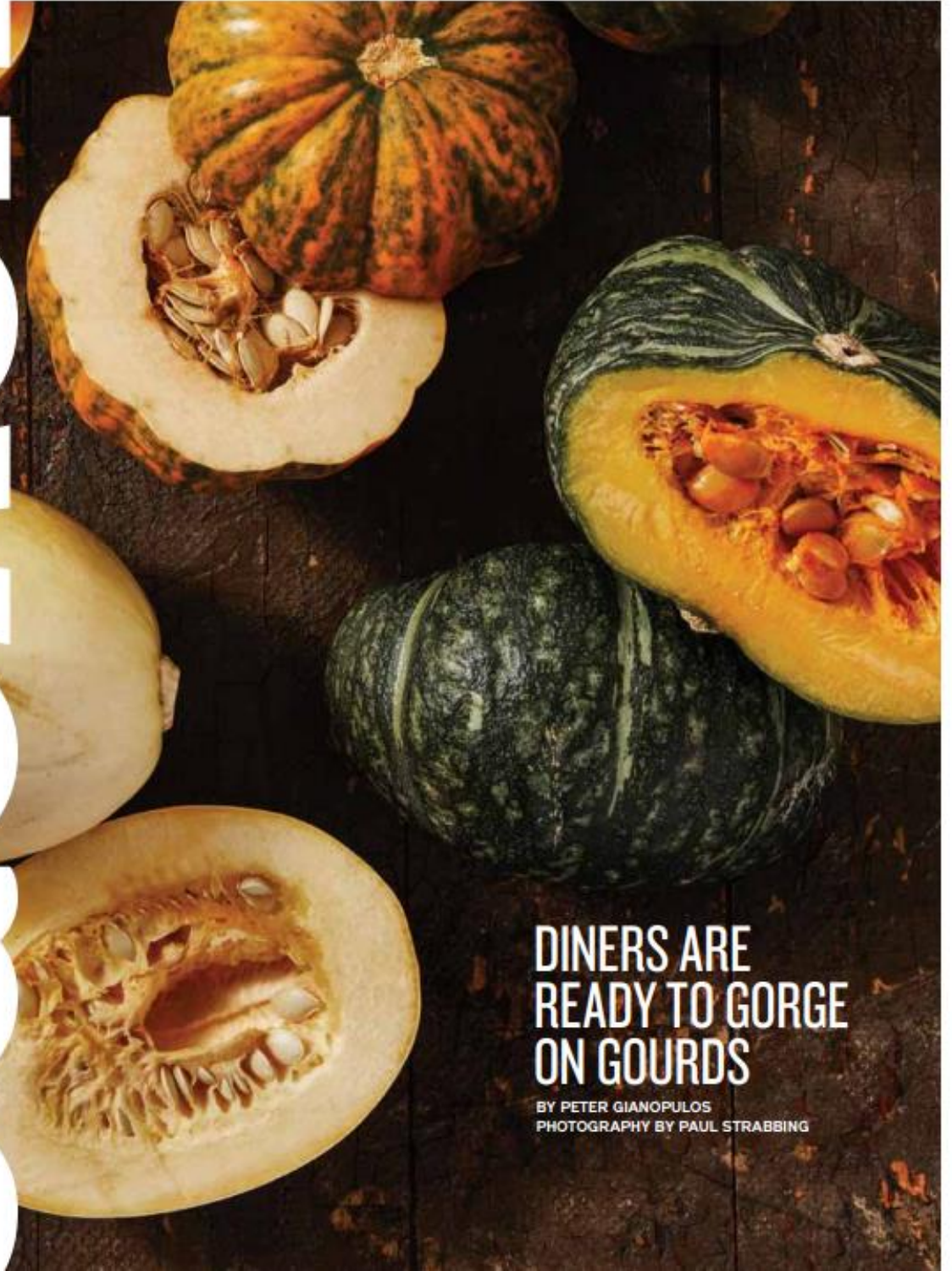
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# FALL SQUASHES



**DINERS ARE  
READY TO GORGE  
ON GOURDS**

BY PETER GIANOPULOS  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY PAUL STRABING

## THE CHANGING TINT OF LEAVES MEANS FALL HAS ARRIVED, WHEN DINERS WANT HEARTY DISHES BURSTING WITH COLORS

that mimic the cornucopia of the season. To satisfy their hunger without killing your budget on proteins, look no further than the rainbow of local squash.

"Squash psychologically triggers thoughts of fall, winter, Thanksgiving, family and happiness," says Chef Vishwatej Nath of the Urban Farmer in Cleveland. "In terms of flavor, they can be delicate, nutty or sweet, and at times, a blank canvas."

Not only do squashes offer solid yields and a long shelf life, they're inherently versatile. Varying flavors and textures lend to the creation of complex dishes that naturally attract more than vegetarians. Over the last four years, squash has increased by 31 percent, now appearing on 22 percent of all U.S. menus, according to foodservice research firm Datassential.

### Hail to the Yield

At Local Provisions in Asheville, North Carolina, Chef Justin Burdett offers a super-sized squash feast for two, complete with a roasted tromboncino squash "steak" and tempura squash shoots topped with a thin layer of shaved squash.

The unique growing season of tromboncino—a zucchini-shaped squash with an almost nutty flavor—allows Burdett to make the most of the squash. It's a fall variety that can be harvested in the summer. Even late in the year, Burdett can pick sprouts, shave some of the raw flesh and then roast its meaty core. Because tromboncinos don't retain a lot of water, they hold on to their density in ways that can mimic meat.

"There's not a lot of waste with squash," he says. "You get a good yield from them."

Even better, squash can cost one-tenth the amount of some upper echelon proteins, says Scott Blackerby, chef at Maritana Grille in St. Pete Beach, Florida. He likes working with hubbard squash, a sweet yellow-fleshed variety, to make his popular vegetarian terrine.

Maximizing the yield, he says, is all about layering the terrine correctly, using a little gelatin to bind the leeks to the squash. He cuts 1 1/4-inch slices to showcase color, then adds goat cheese before plating with quinoa and romesco sauce.

"Our servers sometimes describe it as a thinly sliced lasagna made with fresh vegetables," he says. "More hesitant diners tend to respond to dishes that they already know."



## SWEET AS SQUASH

Squash-based desserts and drinks are aiming to be the next big thing.

**CUSTARD:** At *Vicia* in St. Louis, the rind of honey nut squash is used as the "cup" for a caramelized custard topped with cinnamon and nutmeg.

**MILKSHAKE:** Seasonal roasted squash, such as acorn, buttercup and kabocha, headline a milkshake with maple, rum and cloves at *Gristmill* in Brooklyn, New York.

**AGUA FRESCA:** Beverages at *Agave Mexican Restaurant* in Healdsburg, California, include agua de chilacayota with cooked chilacayote squash, water, Mexican sugar, lime and cinnamon sticks.

### Build on Beauty

Leveraging the unique sweet-savory flavors and organic shape of squashes can lead to signature pairings and stunning plating options.

Mike Wiley of Hugo's in Portland, Maine, builds main dishes with vegetables like squash and uses proteins as accent flavors. His delicate squash brulee with duck liver mousse, for example, is a play on pate en croute, using the outer layer of squash instead of puff pastry.

Wiley leverages the pipe-like shape of delicata to carve a cylindrical-shaped tube of flesh that is packed tight with a Calvados-spiked duck mousse, wrapped in plastic and then sous vide. Sprinkling turbinado sugar and flambeing transforms the dish into a unique take on classic sweet-salty foie gras flavors, finished with pickled apple and crispy quinoa.

"The great thing about squash is that it's forgiving," he says. "You can spice the bejesus out of it or go for more subtle results."

With its dry fleshy texture, intense color and pumpkin-like flavor, kabocha is an increasingly popular Japanese varietal making the rounds on menus across the country. At *Quality Eats* in New York, Chef Craig Koketsu uses it as a substitute for chickpeas in his hummus. Along with producing bold and creamy purees, this squash is ideal for absorbing surrounding flavors, like tahini and garlic, before being topped with a bright purple mop of beet tabbouleh.

"People tend to feel satisfied after they eat it, so it appeals not only to vegetarians but diners who aren't interested in eating a lot of animal proteins," Koketsu says.

### Tell a Story

Slipping lesser-known varieties or sourcing stories can spark a dialogue between guests and servers to help generate sales.

## TREND TRACKER

### LAST SEEN

Kabocha, delicata or buttercup are the star attractions in a roasted squash salad with red quinoa, spiced pecans, stracciatella, arugula and warm spice vinaigrette, \$13, at *Cindy's*, the rooftop restaurant at the Chicago Athletic Association Hotel in Chicago.



## Pumpkin Pork Stew

Chef-owner Desmond Tan  
Burma Superstar,  
San Francisco

2 tablespoons canola oil,  
plus  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup, divided use  
5 tablespoons ginger,  
minced, divided use  
4 tablespoons minced  
garlic, divided use  
 $1\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoons turmeric,  
divided use  
1 pound kabocha squash,  
peeled and seeded  
 $2\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoons salt,  
divided use  
2 pounds boneless  
pork shoulder  
3 cups onions, finely diced  
2 to 3 Thai chilies, thinly  
sliced (optional)  
1 teaspoon curry powder  
 $1\frac{1}{2}$  tablespoons fish sauce  
(optional)  
 $\frac{1}{2}$  cup mint leaves  
for garnish  
 $\frac{1}{2}$  cup cilantro sprigs  
for garnish  
1 lime or lemon, cut  
into wedges

Heat 2 tablespoons oil in  
a large pot and sauté 2  
tablespoons each of ginger  
and garlic, about 1 minute.  
Add  $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon turmeric  
and remove from heat. Slice  
squash into wedges about  
1-inch thick, nestle in the  
pot and add enough water  
to cover. Add  $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon  
salt and simmer 10 to 15  
minutes until tender. Cool in  
liquid; reserve.

Portion the pork into  $\frac{1}{2}$ -to  
1-inch pieces. Toss with  
remaining 2 teaspoons salt  
and remaining 1 teaspoon  
turmeric. Marinate at room  
temperature for an hour.

Heat remaining  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup  
oil in a 6-quart pot. Add  
onions, cook and stir for 4  
minutes, and add remaining  
3 tablespoons minced  
ginger and 2 tablespoons  
minced garlic and cook until  
glossy. Add pork and chilies  
if desired and stir to coat.  
Ladle in 3 cups of pumpkin

cooking water, bring to a boil  
and gently simmer until meat  
is tender, about  $1\frac{1}{2}$  hours.

Add curry powder, fish  
sauce, pumpkin and  $\frac{1}{2}$   
cup pumpkin water. Gently  
simmer, about 10 minutes.  
Serve with bowls of mint,  
cilantro and lime wedges  
on the side. Makes 4 to  
6 servings.

Adapted from "Burma  
Superstar," by Desmond  
Tan and Kate Leahy,  
(Ten Speed Press, 2017).





## Spaghetti Squash with Smoked Labneh & Shishito peppers

Executive Chef Charlie Foster  
Woods Hill Table,  
Concord, Massachusetts

3 pounds butternut squash, peeled and juiced  
½ pint organic ketchup  
¼ pint organic molasses  
¼ pint Dijon mustard  
¼ pint raw apple cider vinegar  
1 tablespoon organic garlic powder  
1 tablespoon organic onion powder  
1 tablespoon paprika  
1 tablespoon smoked Spanish paprika  
1 tablespoon coriander  
1 tablespoon black peppercorns  
2 star anise pods  
1 tablespoon fennel seed  
1 teaspoon chili flakes  
1 teaspoon allspice  
2 bay leaves  
4 cloves  
Kosher salt, as needed  
2 large spaghetti squashes, roasted  
1 pint smoked labneh  
Toasted pumpkin seeds, as needed  
Shishito peppers, as needed

Combine all ingredients except spaghetti squashes, labneh, pumpkin seeds and shishito peppers, and cook on medium-low heat until juice naturally thickens. Strain, adjust seasonings with salt. Toss with spaghetti squash.

**To plate,** spread smoked labneh on bottom of bowl, top with spaghetti squash and garnish with toasted pumpkin seeds and thinly sliced shishito peppers. Makes 10 to 12 servings.

Chef Bill Wallender's love affair with *tetsukabuto*, a fleshy, green-skinned Japanese gourd that's slightly sweeter than butternut squash, happened by accident.

"It just kind of fell into our lap," he says. "One of our farmers was out of delicata and butternut and introduced us to it. We've been using it ever since."

The name, which translates to "steel helmet," gets people's attention at his Portland, Oregon, restaurant, Quaintrelle, allowing the waitstaff to discuss the importance of supporting local farmers.

Because *tetsukabuto* holds its shape well under high, direct heat, Wallender puts them under the broiler, allowing the sugars to char over and create deep roasted notes. After coating the squash with a dressing made from Aleppo peppers and agrodolce zinfandel vinegar, he combines the mixture with goat cheese and sets atop sourdough or levain for a

new spin on Middle Eastern bruschetta.

Starchy butternut squash is good for a viscous bisque-like puree that acts as the foundation for an autumn-flavored barbecue sauce teeming with paprika, chili and bay leaves at Woods Hills Table in Concord, Massachusetts. Although the sauce can be used to spice up proteins, Chef Charlie Foster says it works particularly well with thick strands of spaghetti squash, which he bakes until al dente. An extra dollop of smoked labneh cuts through the sugar and spice, delivering a dish both exotic and familiar.

Diners love it for the flavor, but for Foster, it's a way to support local farmers through the leanest months of the year.

"Once you tell that story, more people will be inclined to try something seasonal, like squashes," he says. ■