

COOKING VEGETABLES EVERY DAY
(sometimes with Tempeh)
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By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

We have been vegetarian ON and OFF for some 45 years, mostly on, so it was not too hard to keep the vegetarian switch turned to on when His Holiness 17th Gyalwa Karmapa suggested that we might all want to consider not taking animal life. And that means cooking vegetables. If we are thinking of doing the same or have already taking that path, then we better know something about vegetables and how to cook them.

Luckily my wife and I had been trained in Macrobiotics back in the early 1970s, and that helped a lot. In fact, I designed the logo for one of the oldest and finest organic food companies, Eden Foods. We learned macrobiotics from folks like Michio Kushi and Mr. Muromoto way back when.

Macrobiotics, which is often wrongly tagged as a brown-rice diet, is in reality just learning to balance your foods. If it is hot, you might be better off eating yin foods like watermelon, fruits, and even some sweets, while in winter you want to stick with more yang foods, like root vegetables, tempeh, and so on.

Neither my wife nor I are what I would call 'naturally' great cooks, much less chefs (I wish we were). We cook to live, not live to cook. And along with being vegetarian, we are also into eating as healthily as possible, which means buying organic when we can. Our meals consist of various vegetables of some sort and some kind of protein, often beans or Tempeh. So cooking vegetables is something we do every day. With that in mind, here are some tips we have discovered that might be useful to others as well.

What about Steamed Vegetables?

Steaming vegetables in a steamer over boiled water never does it for me. Steamed veggies are just a little too bland for me to love seeing them on the table day after day. Not my idea of what I want to eat. Here is what we found works better for us.

We chop our vegetables into some form that makes it easy to cook them relatively fast. It does not really matter what shape, but a smaller size helps. Next, we take a large flat-bottomed sauté pan with a lid. Into the sauté pan we put a small amount of oil, usually sesame oil, but sometimes olive oil if we are not going to cook too hot. We let the oil heat. And here is a secret.

When the oil is hot, I sprinkle a very, very small amount of Cayenne Pepper, just enough to barely see it, but of course you could put in as much as you want if you like that. My wife tells me when I have put in too much! My use of it is only to give the veggies a sense of heat. You would never know it is there if I did not tell you.

Into that I throw the cut vegetables and proceed to braise them. And I mean braise, like hot for a short time, just like you would braise or brown meat. You actually singe them and try for some color on them as well without actually burning them. I push the braising as far as I can dare to.

When it is getting just too hot and too scorching, I throw into the pan something like half a cup of hot water and cover immediately. Careful of the sudden steam! At this point I am going to steam

them, but the cayenne pepper and braising has given them some real flavor. Keep stirring them from time to time.

And lastly: I don't overcook, but pull them off the flame when they are still a teeny bit firm. And I leave the cover of the sauté pan off. If you leave it on, your veggies will turn a not-so-lovely olive drab. And I serve them at once. This turns out to be (for us) the best and most palatable way to cook vegetables. On the cooked veggies some Tamari or soy sauce is great.

How to Cook Tempeh So That it is Wonderful

Now Tempeh tends to get a bad rap (no pun intended), but it is really high-quality protein in a digestible form. The problem is how to cook it so that it does not taste terrible. Tofu used to be the king of protein, but in recent years more and more of us old timers are finding that it is not so digestible and there are other drawbacks which I won't dwell on here. You can Google for that. We use very little tofu anymore.

Back in the early 1970s there was no tofu for sale in grocery stores, so we had to make our own, which we did. Making tofu is a time-consuming and somewhat messy/difficult process. I remember well. Those were the years that we also had wooden kegs of miso, Tamari, and umeboshi plums in the basement. Anyway, back to tempeh.

Tempeh, like miso, is a fermented soybean product, and like miso, tempeh is very much more digestible than either the whole cooked soy beans or the processed tofu. Unfortunately, you have to know how to cook tempeh to keep your guests from trying to escape from your dinner table. It can taste pretty bad. Here is how we frequently cook tempeh and love it.

Cooking Tempeh

I usually cook two of those 8-ounce store-bought rectangular packages at once. No use making just a wee bit of tempeh, because if you make it right, it all gets eaten up, usually before the leftovers hit the fridge.

I first carefully slice the tempeh bars into short slices, so that each slice is perhaps 1/8th of an inch thick, by 3/4 inch high and 3 inches long. As mentioned I cut up two packages this way and place the slices (still tight against each other) in a glass-bottomed baking dish. Then I briefly marinate the tofu by pouring (sparingly) on the slices some or all of the following ingredients: Tamari (soy sauce), Umeboshi Plum Vinegar, Mirin (rice wine) or some rice vinegar, red oil (sesame oil with hot pepper), and sometimes roasted-dark sesame oil.

I don't always use all of the above, just whatever we have on hand or what strikes my fancy. And I don't soak the tempeh with any of them, but kind of sprinkle each of them on in splotches. By the time I sprinkle several of the above condiments, I have usually gotten something on all parts of the tempeh, and it is soaking in between the slices. At this point you can let it sit, flip the tempeh over to let the condiments flow the other way, or whatever. I tend not to wait and I find little gained by waiting and I will tell you why below.

I cook the tempeh in a wide flat sauté pan and start by heating up some reasonable amount of sesame oil into which I place the tempeh and proceed to braise the slices, turning them over every which way. I try for some visible signs of browning on the tempeh before taking my next and most secret step.

Into the now hot and braised tempeh I pour about a half a cup of hot water and immediately put the cover of the sauté pan on tight. What this does is raise a cloud of steam in the pan and the steam gets all through the tempeh, but most of all it liquefies all the condiments causing them to be evenly spread over all the tempeh slices making each slice very flavorful and without the sometimes shock of 'tempeh with no flavor'.

I let this steaming happen for a couple of minutes, perhaps turning over the tempeh once or mixing it around, and then I take the cover off and go back to braising. Basically at this point I want to boil off the water I just added, dry out the tempeh, and proceed to further browning (and almost scorching) the stuff.

Next, I do the water thing all over again, tossing in a half cup of hot water and covering the pan once more, waiting a few minutes, removing the cover, and browning up the tempeh. In this final browning process I tend to push the browning to the limit. I dry those suckers out. And that's it.

Combine the tempeh with some cooked vegetables and brown rice and you have one delicious dinner.

As for the photo of the red peppers roasting, I just like the image, which I took at the recent Harvest Gathering. You could sprinkle some on your rice, tempeh, and vegetables!

