

High Heat Adds Zip to Cauliflower

I love cauliflower. Its subtle nature presents a world of possibilities to the creative cook. But it has to be cooked correctly and combined with the right flavors.

For inspiration, I tend to look to the Mediterranean, where this vegetable originated (cauliflower later became a staple in northern Europe, where it thrives as a cold-weather, frost-resistant crop). This may come as a surprise to those who know cauliflower only through cheese-laden casseroles or bland puréed soups. But I find that the bold, vibrant flavors of Mediterranean cuisine are the perfect counterpoint to cauliflower's mild manners.

Keep it out of hot water

For the most part, I prefer roasting cauliflower to boiling or steaming because the high, dry heat concentrates the flavor, adds nuttiness, and encourages caramelization, which increases the complexity of the flavor. Sautéing is another favorite method; it delivers similar results to roasting. I often roast more than I plan to eat, saving the leftovers to toss with a quick vinaigrette the next day. (For easy roasting instructions and ideas for adding great flavor, see the sidebar on p. 52.)

Boiling or steaming tends to bring out the one-dimensional, cabbagey side of cauliflower, and it *doesn't help to eliminate the water that cauliflower is so full of*. If you do find that you need very simply cooked cauliflower for part of a recipe, I suggest steaming rather than boiling, because at least the cauliflower won't absorb more water.

For many cooks, cauliflower's awkward shape can pose a challenge. This, too, has a solution. After trimming back the leaves, I use the tip of my small chef's knife (a sturdy, sharp paring knife will also do) to cut around the main stem and free as many large branches as possible. I then follow the growth pattern along the stem of each floret, severing smaller branches as opposed to just slicing through the floret. In fact, I never cut directly through the "flower." I like to preserve the natural, curving form of the florets by cutting through the stem part of the buds

Bring out the best in this surprisingly versatile vegetable by roasting and sautéing

BY PETER HOFFMAN





Author Peter Hoffman selects cauliflower at the Union Square Greenmarket in New York City.

At the market

When shopping for a head of cauliflower, don't walk away if you can't find one that's perfectly white and blemish-free. Yellow spots on the florets only mean that the vegetable got a little "sunburn"—the cauliflower's leaves didn't fully wrap themselves over the florets during growth. Sometimes cauliflower will have brown or grayish spots on the florets as well. That's a small mold that's just fine to slice away, according to the University of California at Davis Vegetable Research and Information Center. Most important, look for heads of cauliflower that are firm and not limp.



Photos: top, Sarah Jarr, all others, Scott Phillips

Trim through the trunk. Preserve the shape of the florets by wedging a knife between the smaller stems (not cutting through the buds) and then snapping them apart.

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Once you cut into a head of cauliflower, you don't need to cook it all. One of its great features is that, uncooked, it seems to keep forever. Even for my family of four, one head of cauliflower goes a long way and, invariably, part of it ends up in the crisper, sometimes to linger for days. At a moment's notice, I can trim off a few florets for a salad or pasta recipe. So don't feel guilty about that half a cauliflower kicking around your fridge. Just cut off a bit when the urge arises.

RECIPES

Gratin of Sautéed Cauliflower, Tomato, Pine Nuts & Saffron

Inspired by the flavors of Sicily, this side dish is my answer to the usual smothered-in-cheese gratin. I like to serve this with braised lamb and a simple, hearty salad. *Serves five.*

- ¼ cup pine nuts
- 4 slices firm white sandwich bread, toasted and crusts trimmed
- 6 Tbs. olive oil
- 2 Tbs. chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley
- 1 small head cauliflower (about 2 lb.), cut into medium florets (about ¾ inch at the widest point)
- Coarse salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste
- 1 medium onion, chopped
- 1 large pinch saffron (about 25 threads)
- 1 cup canned crushed tomatoes
- ¼ cup dried currants

In a small, dry skillet, toast the pine nuts over medium-low heat, shaking the pan frequently, until fragrant and lightly toasted, about 2 min. Transfer to a small bowl.

Tear the toasted bread slices into bite-size pieces and put them in a food processor. Process until you have coarse crumbs, about 30 seconds. Transfer to a small bowl, drizzle with 3 Tbs. of the olive oil, mix well, and toss with 1 Tbs. of the chopped parsley.

Heat the oven to 375°F. In a 12-inch skillet (preferably ovenproof), heat 2 Tbs. of the olive oil over medium heat. Add the cauliflower and sauté until it begins to soften, about 5 min. Season with salt and pepper and continue sautéing until the cauliflower is deep golden brown and tender but still firm, another 7 to 10 min. Transfer the cauliflower to a small bowl.

Add the remaining 1 Tbs. olive oil to the skillet, still over medium heat. Add the onion and sauté until golden brown, 5 to 8 min. Add the saffron and stir to combine. Add the tomatoes and currants and simmer over medium-low heat until the sauce thickens and the currants plump, about 5 min. Remove from the heat and fold in the cauliflower, pine nuts, and remaining 1 Tbs. parsley. If the skillet isn't ovenproof,

transfer the mixture to a 9x9-inch shallow baking dish or a medium gratin dish.

Sprinkle the cauliflower with the breadcrumbs. Bake to heat through and meld flavors, 15 to 20 min. Serve hot.

Roasted Cauliflower Salad with Green Peppercorn Vinaigrette

The piquant green peppercorns in the vinaigrette are a zippy counterpoint to the cool and neutral cauliflower. Look for brined green peppercorns in the condiment section of your supermarket near the olives. *Serves six.*

- 1 small head cauliflower (about 2 lb.), cut into medium florets (about ¾ inch at the widest point)
- ½ cup plus 2 Tbs. extra-virgin olive oil
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste
- 1 tsp. minced shallot
- ¼ cup dry white wine
- ⅓ cup white-wine vinegar
- 4 tsp. brined green peppercorns
- 1 tsp. Dijon mustard
- 1 Tbs. chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley
- 1 cup thinly sliced radicchio (the slices should look like shredded paper)
- 2 cups frisée, leaves separated and torn into bite-size pieces

Roast the cauliflower—Heat the oven to 400°F. On a jellyroll pan or rimmed baking sheet, toss the cauliflower, 2 Tbs. of the olive oil, salt, and pepper. Roast on the lowest rack, turning with a spatula every 10 min., until the cauliflower is tender and golden brown, 25 to 35 min. Let cool.

Make the salad—Put the shallots, wine, 3 Tbs. of the vinegar, and 2 tsp. of the green peppercorns in a small pan. Over medium heat, boil the liquid until it

reduces to 2 Tbs. Pour into a food processor. Add the mustard and remaining 2 Tbs. plus 1 tsp. vinegar, and then process until the shallot is puréed and the peppercorns are in small bits. With the processor on, slowly add the remaining ½ cup oil. Transfer the mixture to a bowl and stir in the parsley and the remaining 2 tsp. peppercorns by hand. Season to taste with salt.

In a large bowl or on a serving platter, toss the cauliflower, radicchio, and frisée with enough vinaigrette to lightly coat. Season with salt and pepper and drizzle on more dressing to taste.

Creamy Roasted Garlic Soup with Sautéed Cauliflower & Fresh Herbs

I often serve this thick and intense soup with a swirl of herb butter along with the fresh herb garnish. To make this, mix equal parts softened butter and chopped sorrel leaves, a small amount of finely chopped chives, and salt to taste. It brings a fresh note to the soup. *Serves four.*

FOR THE SOUP:

- 4 heads garlic, loose, papery skins removed and ¼ inch of the tops cut off to expose cloves
- 5 Tbs. extra-virgin olive oil
- ½ tsp. coarse salt; more to taste
- ½ cup chopped onion
- 1 leek (white and light green parts only), chopped and well rinsed
- 2 large boiling potatoes, peeled and chopped
- 1 Tbs. fresh thyme, chopped
- ½ cup dry white wine
- 4 cups homemade or low-salt canned chicken or vegetable broth
- Freshly ground black pepper to taste
- ¼ cup chopped fresh sorrel leaves or chives, or a combination

excellent

Roast cauliflower for the best flavor

Roasting is an ideal way to prepare cauliflower. It's simple and quick, requiring little attention and cooking in about 30 minutes. And the high, dry heat of the oven yields golden-brown, crisp-tender florets with an accent on the sweet, nutty essence of this vegetable—not its sulfurous, cabbagey traits. Roasted cauliflower, seasoned with a little salt and pepper, makes a great vegetable side dish as is. But tossed with just a few basic ingredients, a simple dish becomes exceptional. Try some of the ingredient combinations at right.

To roast cauliflower, cut a small head into florets that are about the



same size and toss with 2 tablespoons olive oil, salt, and pepper; spread on a rimmed baking sheet. Roast in a 400°F oven on the lowest rack, turning every 10 minutes, until golden brown and crisp-tender, 25 to 35 minutes.

After roasting, toss with delicious accents

- ◆ Fresh lemon juice, minced fresh rosemary, and chopped capers.
- ◆ Orange zest, minced fresh parsley, and sun-dried tomatoes (oil-packed, drained, and chopped).
- ◆ Pitted, chopped kalamata olives, dried red chile flakes, and bitter greens, such as endive, radicchio, or broccoli raab (chopped into bite-size pieces and tossed with the roasted cauliflower in the pan while still hot).
- ◆ Mustard vinaigrette (Dijon mustard, white-wine vinegar, and extra-virgin olive) and minced fresh thyme.
- ◆ Crumbled blue cheese and caraway seeds.
- ◆ Minced shallots, minced fresh tarragon, and grated lemon zest.



More than a garnish. Sautéed cauliflower florets add a delicate, nutty flavor that plays off this creamy, robust roasted garlic soup.

FOR THE CAULIFLOWER:

2 Tbs. olive oil

1 small head cauliflower (2 lb.), cut into small florets (about ½ inch at the widest point)

Make the soup—Heat the oven to 375°F. Put the garlic heads in a small baking pan. Drizzle on 2 Tbs. of the olive oil and sprinkle on the salt. Add 2 Tbs. water to the pan, cover with foil, and roast until a squeezed clove yields a soft purée, 30 to 45 min. When cool, squeeze the pulp from each clove.

In a soup pot over low heat, sweat the onion and leek in 1 Tbs. of olive oil until very soft but not brown, about 10 min. Add the potatoes and thyme and cook another 1 min. Turn the heat to medium high, add the wine, and let it reduce to just a few teaspoons, about 4 min. Add the broth; bring to a boil. Reduce the heat and simmer for 10 min. Add the garlic pulp and simmer until the potatoes are very soft, another 15 to 20 min.

Strain the soup, saving both the liquid and solids. In a blender or food processor, purée the solids in batches, using some liquid to help it blend, and pour the puréed solids back in the pot. When all the solids are puréed, add as much of the remaining liquid as necessary to get a consistency like heavy cream. Season to taste with salt and pepper.

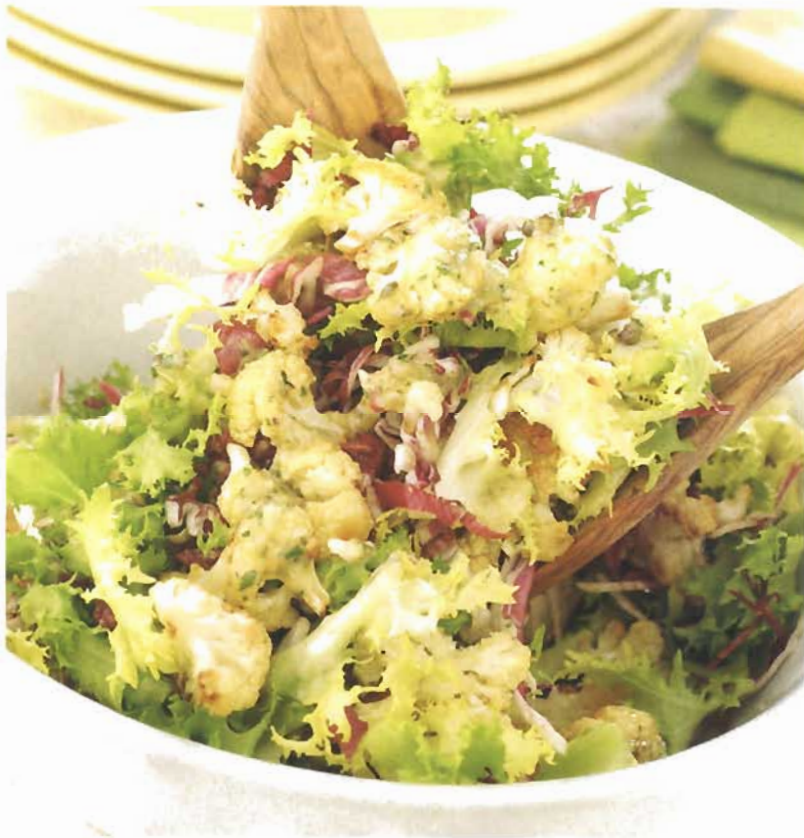
Sauté the cauliflower—Heat 2 Tbs. oil in a large sauté pan over medium heat. Add the cauliflower florets and sauté. Once they begin to soften, after about 5 min., season with salt and pepper. Continue to sauté until the cauliflower is deep golden brown and tender but still firm, another 7 to 10 min.

To serve—Reheat the soup. Ladle it into individual bowls, add the cauliflower, and garnish with the sorrel or chives.

Peter Hoffman is the chef-owner of Savoy in New York City. ♦



Oven-crisped breadcrumbs create a crunchy layer. Underneath, sautéed cauliflower bakes with tomatoes and pine nuts in a Mediterranean gratin.



Roasted cauliflower adds body to this light, fresh salad. Try serving it instead of potatoes with a seared steak or roasted chicken.