

On your side

Don't miss your best chance for variety and balance in your dinner

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Does this look like you when you're making dinner?

You come up with a main course, usually a meat. You pick a starch - potatoes, rice, pasta.

At the last minute, you realize you need a side dish. So you dump frozen peas or broccoli in boiling water, or you toss bagged salad in a bowl. Again.

If your aim is healthful, balanced and affordable, you may have missed a big chance. Again.

Dietitians see you do it. When they have clients keep food logs, they often see no fruits or vegetables during the day. And all that missed nutrition isn't being made up at night, either.

"We tend to think in food groups," says Elisabetta Politi, the nutrition director at the Duke Diet and Fitness Center in Durham. "'Tonight, I'm going to have chicken, I'm going to have pasta.' It shows people don't think too much in terms of balance."

Melissa Herrmann Dierks, a registered dietitian and diabetes educator in Huntersville, tells clients to generally aim for 2 1/2 cups of vegetables and at least one piece of fruit a day, with a cup being about the size of a light bulb. Politi suggests more, 2 1/2 cups of vegetables for adult women and 3 cups for men, plus 2 cups of fruit a day.

That doesn't sound too hard, does it? Brace yourself: The Centers for Disease Control released a report Sept. 10 that looked at fruit and vegetable consumption by state. Not one state did well in meeting the goal of eating vegetables three times a day and fruit twice a day.

In the Carolinas, we not only didn't meet it, we're falling farther behind. Only 25 percent of people in North Carolina ate two or more servings of fruit in 2009, down from 28 percent in 2000. For vegetables, only 27.5 percent ate vegetables three or more times, down from 32 percent in 2000.

In South Carolina, 23 percent of the people ate fruit twice a day and vegetables three times.

"A lot of people skip breakfast or get a sausage biscuit," says Dierks. "At lunch, it's fast food or Chinese or a pizza." By the time we get to dinner, it's our last chance.

Doing bagged salad or frozen broccoli every night is a start, but you're still missing something else important: Variety.

"The bigger variety that you eat, the bigger variety of vitamins and minerals you're going to get," says Dierks.

Yes, it can be expensive to keep fresh fruits and vegetables around.

"Aiming for a variety is great, but we want to be watchful of waste," says Politi. "People stop buying if they think they're throwing away."

But there are ways to keep it affordable and even fast. Both Dierks and Politi push the importance of meal-planning - including side dishes.

"Emphasizing side dishes can help you plan what to buy at the grocery store," says Politi. Fresh is great, but there's nothing wrong with stocking up on frozen and canned fruits and vegetables. They last longer, they're on hand when you need them, and if you plan, you can stock up on sales.

With an eye toward affordability, variety and speed, we dug into our own files of great side dishes, the ones we rely on to fill out the plate. All of them use things that are easy to add to your grocery list.

"People who spend at least 20 minutes planning the grocery list eat healthier," says Dierks. "Get those foods in the house, otherwise, you're not going to eat them."

More easy side dish ideas

Quick-cooking brown rice Dietitian Melissa Herrmann Dierks keeps Success brand on hand. It cooks in a minute in the microwave, and then you can add leftover grilled or roasted vegetables.

Canned fruit Get the kind that's packed in its own juice or in a light syrup. Nutritionist Elisabetta Politi likes the idea of having some kind of fruit – fresh, canned or dried – instead of dessert at the end of every meal.

Roasted red peppers Getting plenty of color on your plate is a sign you're getting variety. Many recipes call for expensive red bell peppers, but you can add a cheaper pop of red to a dish by using roasted peppers. Keep a jar in the refrigerator.

Frozen and canned vegetables For frozen, look for individually quick-frozen vegetables, without butter or cheese sauces. For canned, look for low-sodium or rinse them to remove as much as 40 percent of the salt.

Canned beans They're great ways to add fiber. Just make sure you rinse them to remove sodium.

Oven-Roasted Green Beans

Adapted from "Desperation Entertaining," by Beverly Mills and Alicia Ross (Workman, 2002).

2 pounds fresh green beans (see note)

1 large onion (see note)

8 cloves garlic (see note)

2 tablespoons olive oil

About 1 teaspoon salt (crispy sea salt is great; table salt is fine, too)

2 tablespoons balsamic vinegar

PREHEAT oven to 400 degrees. Rinse and drain the green beans. Trim off the stem ends, leaving the green beans whole.

SPREAD the green beans in a mostly single layer in a wide, shallow pan, such as a roasting pan or a jelly roll pan. Peel the onion and cut in thin slices. Separate the rings and scatter over the green beans. Peel the garlic cloves. Cut each clove in half and scatter over the green beans.

DRIZZLE olive oil over all. Salt, then shake the pan a little to distribute everything. Place in oven, uncovered, and roast for 10 minutes. Use tongs to stir it all around. Roast for 10 minutes longer.

REMOVE from oven. Immediately pour balsamic vinegar over everything. Serve immediately, or cover the pan with foil and let stand up to 1 hour before serving.

NOTES: You can halve or increase the amount of green beans. For the onion, I've used shallot, red onion, sweet onion or yellow onion. I've also used fresh shiitake mushrooms instead of garlic.

Yield:

8 servings (4 if you use 1 pound green beans)

Freezer Edamame Succotash

2 cups frozen shelled edamame

2 cups frozen yellow corn

1 cup frozen cut green beans

2 tablespoons butter

1/4 cup diced yellow onion, red onion or green onion

Salt and freshly ground pepper to taste

1 teaspoon garlic powder (optional)

1/2 cup half-and-half

RINSE the edamame, corn and green beans with cold water in a colander to slightly thaw them.

MELT the butter in a large skillet over medium heat. Add the onion and cook, stirring occasionally, for about 3 minutes.

ADD the vegetables. Raise heat to medium-high and cook about 5 minutes, stirring frequently. Add salt, pepper and garlic powder.

ADD half-and-half and bring to a simmer, cooking until most of the liquid has cooked away but everything is still moist. Serve hot.

Yield:

6 servings.

Black Bean and Corn Salad

Adapted from allrecipes.com. It doesn't have to be a Southwestern meal. This adds color and variety to any plate.

2 (15.5-ounce) cans black beans

2 cups frozen yellow corn

1/4 cup fresh lime juice (about 1 lime)

1/3 cup olive oil

1 teaspoon salt

1 teaspoon minced garlic

2 teaspoons ground cumin

1 teaspoon chili powder

1 tomato, cored and diced, or 1/4 cup roasted red pepper, diced

1/4 diced green onion, or 1/2 cup diced red, yellow or sweet onion

PLACE black beans in a colander and rinse. Add corn and rinse again to begin thawing.

WHISK together lime juice, olive oil, salt, garlic, cumin and chili powder in a large serving bowl.

ADD black beans and corn to serving bowl. Add tomato or roasted red pepper and onion. Stir gently with a rubber spatula to mix well and coat everything with the dressing. Serve cold or at room temperature.

Yield:

6 (1-cup) servings.

Wilted Spinach

Adapted from “High Flavor Low Labor: Reinvent Weeknight Cooking,” by J.M. Hirsch (Ballantine Books, 2010). This would be even better sprinkled with crumbled blue cheese.

2 tablespoons olive oil

2 cloves minced garlic

About 1/4 cup roasted red pepper, drained and sliced (optional)

10 ounces baby spinach

Juice of 1 lemon

1/2 teaspoon salt

HEAT olive oil in a nonstick skillet. Add garlic and cook about 1 minute. Add roasted red pepper, if using.

ADD spinach and stir around to coat with oil. Cook 1 to 2 minutes, just until the leaves are wilted. Add lemon juice and salt and cook briefly. Serve immediately.

Seared Red Cabbage Wedges

Adapted from “The Very Best Recipes for Health,” by Martha Rose Shulman (Rodale, 2010).

1 small head red cabbage

2 to 3 tablespoons olive

Salt and pepper

Juice of 1/2 orange

2 to 3 tablespoons toasted chopped walnuts

REMOVE any outer leaves of cabbage with brown spots. Cut the head in half from the top through the core. Leaving the core in place to hold the slices together, cut into wedges about 1 inch wide (the size of the first digit of your index finger).

HEAT the oil in a heavy skillet over medium-high heat. Add as many wedges as will fit in a single layer. Cook about 3 minutes. Using a flat spatula, turn each wedge over and sprinkle with salt and pepper. Cook 5 minutes. (The wedges may fall apart a little.)

REMOVE from the skillet to a serving plate. Squeeze the orange half over them and sprinkle with toasted walnuts. (If you want, add the walnuts to the hot skillet and cook them briefly, but don't let them burn.)



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