Published on *Kitchen Gardeners International* (http://kgi.org)

Stuffed Grape Leaves: That's the Stuff!

Thu, 06/28/2012 - 11:06 -- Barbara Damrosch

A while back, I wrote about my adventures stuffing some huge nasturtium leaves. I had blanched them and filled them with the rice mixture normally used for dolmades, which are grape leaves stuffed the traditional Greek way. For comparison I stuffed grape leaves, too, but that late in summer they were disappointingly tough, even after blanching. ?You?re supposed to pick them when they first come out,? a friend said with withering scorn.

So this year I gathered them at the perfect moment and tried again. From our grape arbor, I chose leaves that had just reached the size of the palm of my hand but were still soft and pliable, like cloth. After cutting them off the vines with scissors, I snipped off the stems and made a stack of them in a pan. I poured in boiling water and let them sit for five minutes, which made them even softer. But if handled carefully they could still be spread out on a wooden cutting board to receive their filling.

This year?s stuffing mixture contained brown rice, pine nuts, raisins, grated onion, cumin, olive oil, pepper and salt. From browsing Greek cookbooks I knew that the rice should first be boiled just long enough to absorb water, but it should do its final tenderizing inside the wrappers. So I boiled, drained, combined, stirred and dropped a spoonful of stuffing onto the base of each leaf. Then I made my little cigars, folding over one side, then the bottom, then the other side, then the final roll upward. They looked just like the ones in the deli.

Because I had no idea how long to cook them when using brown rice (Greek recipes use white) I placed them seam-side-down in a pan, added water to submerge them and put them covered into the oven. This is my trick for cooking rice dishes when I don?t know how much water is needed and I?m afraid the rice might stick and burn.

Luck triumphed over ignorance. The packages had flattened slightly, but not as much as they would have if I?d remembered to weigh them down with a plate, as advised, to keep them from falling apart. They held together fine. When cool, I chilled them in the fridge and served them with lettuce, olive oil and lemon wedges.

Next time I?ll add garlic and swap out the raisins for capers and chopped olives. But otherwise they were just right, and what made them taste so good were the fresh-harvested leaves. Traditionally, if you want to stuff grape leaves out of season, you use ones that are pickled in brine. Freezing for several months is also said to preserve and tenderize them. But most of the leaves employed today are packed in jars with preservatives and are slightly tough, with a chemical taste. My fresh ones had none of that.

If you have a grapevine, check the leaves now for tenderness. If they?ve stiffened, promise yourself a treat from next year?s crop. Then go see how your nasturtiums are doing.

Image (optional):

Image credit (optional):
source [1]
Crops:
grape leaves [2]
Season:
summer [3]
Topics:
cooking [4]
Group content visibility:
Use group defaults
Promoted text:
Greek-style Dolmas: That's the Stuff!

Source URL: http://kgi.org/blog/barbara-damrosch/stuffed-grape-leaves-thats-stuff

Links:
[1] http://www.flickr.com/photos/rantingfan/160658398/
[2] http://kgi.org/crops/grape-leaves
[3] http://kgi.org/season/summer
[4] http://kgi.org/topics/cooking