

Flavors of the World: Basil

Presented 7/17/2018 by Kay Bastian

Basil, a member of the mint family, is one of the great culinary herbs. While we associate basil with Italian cuisine, the plant originated thousands of years ago in India. There are many varieties, including the most-common sweet basil, also known as Genovese basil. Asian cuisine makes use of Thai basil, holy basil and lemon basil.



Fresh basil is volatile and spoils easily. Thekitchn.com suggests three ways to preserve fresh basil:

1. Freeze the leaves whole: Remove the basil leaves from the stem and blanch the leaves in boiling water for 2 seconds. Transfer quickly to an ice bath. Dry completely and store in a freezer-safe container, separating the layers with wax or parchment paper.
2. Puree and freeze: Remove the basil leaves from the stem, then wash and dry completely. Use a food processor to puree the fresh basil leaves with olive oil, using 1 Tablespoon of olive oil per 1 cup of basil. Freeze the pureed basil in an ice cube tray, then store the cubes in a large resealable plastic bag or freezer-safe container.
3. Dry it: Remove the basil leaves from the stem, then wash and dry completely. Set your oven to the lowest temperature. Place the basil leaves on a parchment-lined baking sheet, then place it on the upper rack of the oven. Bake for 2-4 hours, until the leaves are crumbly. Remove from the oven and cool. Crumble the basil leaves and store in airtight containers.

Creamy Avocado Basil Pesto

A lightened up pesto without any added oil. The secret: avocado for a creamy texture. Source: ambitiouskitchen.com.

Ingredients

1 cup packed fresh basil leaves
½ large ripe avocado
2 cloves garlic
2 Tablespoons pine nuts
1 Tablespoon fresh lemon juice
3 Tablespoons water, plus more if necessary
¼ cup grated parmesan cheese
Sea salt, to taste

Directions

1. Add basil, avocado, garlic, pine nuts and lemon juice to a food processor and pulse for 20 seconds or until pesto is chopped.
2. Add water, and process again until completely smooth. You may need to add more water to get it to your desired consistency.
3. Transfer to a bowl and stir in the cheese.
4. Store in an airtight container or sealed Mason jar and refrigerate. Pesto is best if used within a few days, otherwise you can freeze it for several months.

Ricotta Toasts with Strawberries, Basil & Honey

Yields 8 toasts for 3-4 servings. Source: alaskafromscratch.com.

Ingredients

8 slices crusty white bread, like French or Italian, toasted
½ cup ricotta cheese
1 teaspoon lemon zest
Sea salt and freshly cracked black pepper
8 ripe strawberries, hulled and sliced
Several small basil leaves (or larger basil leaves, thinly sliced)
Honey



Directions

1. In a small bowl, stir together the ricotta, lemon zest and salt and pepper to taste.
2. Spread each slice of toasted bread with a generous smear of the ricotta mixture.
3. Layer strawberry slices over the ricotta spread, followed by basil leaves. Season with salt and pepper, then drizzle with honey. Serve.

Summer Italian Zucchini Noodle Salad

A perfect side for BBQs and summer entertaining. Source: nospoonnecessary.com

Ingredients

3 zucchini, spiralized (see note, below)
2 fresh ears of corn, husks and silks removed
1 cup cherry tomatoes, halved
½ red onion, thinly sliced
½ cup fresh basil, roughly chopped
8 ounces burrata cheese, torn (see note, below)
Italian dressing (recipe below)
Salt and pepper, to taste
Optional garnishes: micro greens, crushed red pepper flakes, pine nuts

Directions

1. Grill corn: Preheat grill to medium. Spray corn all over with cooking oil and generously season with salt and pepper. Place corn on the grill and cook, rotating every 2-3 minutes, until corn is charred all over, about 10-12 minutes total.
2. Remove corn to a clean work surface and set aside until cool enough to handle. Once cool, use a serrated knife to cut kernels of corn from the cob.
3. To serve: In a large bowl, gently toss the zucchini with cherry tomatoes, corn, red onion and Italian dressing to taste. Transfer to a serving platter or individual plates. Sprinkle with basil, top with burrata. Finish with desired garnishes if using.

Italian Dressing

Ingredients

¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil
3 Tablespoons white wine vinegar
2 teaspoons lemon juice
1-2 teaspoons granulated sugar
1 teaspoon coarse sea salt
1 teaspoon dried oregano
1 teaspoon dried basil
2 Tablespoons grated Parmesan cheese
1 clove garlic

Directions

1. Combine all the ingredients in a blender or food processor and process until smooth and creamy. Or mince the garlic and add all the ingredients to a jar with a tight-fitting lid. Shake jar vigorously until everything is well-combined.
2. Taste and adjust sweetness with sugar, and season with salt and pepper.

Notes

1. If you don't have a spiralizer, use a vegetable peeler to create long strands of zucchini, or use a sharp knife to thinly slice the zucchini lengthwise.
2. If raw vegetable noodles are not appealing, sauté the zucchini with salt and pepper for a couple of minutes in a large pan.
3. You can add any fresh summer produce you have on hand. You can substitute summer squash for the zucchini or use a combination of both.
4. While burrata is recommended, you can substitute fresh mozzarella, ricotta or a combination of both. Burrata is a handcrafted ball of mozzarella filled with creamy straciatella (mozzarella soaked in heavy cream). Burrata can be found in the specialty cheese section of your grocer in a tub-like packaging.