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Cabbage crunch

by Mary Ann Castronovo Fusco/For The Star-Ledger

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When hunger strikes at work, some people might munch on candy; others, on crackers or even carrots. These days, Henry Dreyer of Dreyer Farms in Cranford is just as likely to be found snacking on cabbage.

"I just cut a head and chew it like an apple. When it's in the morning and it's cold and moist -- boy, it's good," he said.

In the more than 100 years the farm has been in his family, cabbage has been a mainstay crop. But over the course of his own 65 years, Dreyer has seen the vegetable's popularity dwindle.

"We used to have 30, 40 acres of cabbage," said Dreyer. Now he plants only about a quarter of an acre of it for sale at his farm market and to some area restaurants. Almost all of it is round green cabbage, though he does grow some red and Savoy cabbage as well. According to Rick Van Vranken, an agricultural agent with the Rutgers Cooperative Extension of Atlantic County, round green cabbage accounts for at least 80 percent of the state's production, with red cabbage a distant second and Savoy making up only a very small percentage. "Most people don't know what Savoy cabbage is," said Dreyer.

"I think people tend to think of Savoy as part of Asian cooking," noted Andrea Carbine, chef and co-owner of *À la Tote Heure*, a Cranford bistro. Although the Savoy's crinkled leaves evoke those of the Chinese Napa cabbage, the loose-headed Savoy, like the tight round red and green types, is a European cabbage.

One of the world's oldest cultivated vegetables, cabbage heads the family of crucifers, which get their name from their cross-shaped flowers (crux or crucis is Latin for "cross"). These vegetables include such cabbage descendants as broccoli, cauliflower, collards, kale, Brussels sprouts, and kohlrabi. All draw their aroma and flavor from sulfur compounds.

Historically viewed as sustenance for the poor, cabbage attracts a loyal



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people choose a lot," said Carbine. Versatile enough to adapt to multi-ethnic treatment, "it's one of those last greens you can hold onto before the root vegetables come in," she added.

She and her chef de cuisine, Kara Decker, are currently serving brisket with a slaw made from shredded cabbage, carrot, and fennel tossed in a sweet-and-sour vinaigrette. They also like to use cabbage leaves to wrap potatoes and bacon lardons, braise red cabbage in red wine, and treat Savoy cabbage as a salad green. "As long as you keep it really thin, the flavor tends to be delicate," said Carbine.

In addition to sourcing cabbage from Dreyer Farms, Carbine grows two types of green Polish cabbage and a Savoy in her home garden for use at her restaurant. Though she appreciates the nuances in flavor of both red and Savoy types, she agrees that when it comes to pleasing customers, "the green is the safest thing. People have seen it and are most comfortable with it."

At market, a vibrant green color is a sure sign of a fresh head of cabbage. The longer it's held in storage, the paler its leaves become. In addition, as it ages its exterior leaves deteriorate, and grocers tend to strip those off, revealing the pale interior.

Red cabbage heads, which may appear purplish and even blue when grown in alkaline soil, have a tendency to turn a drab shade of green or blue-gray if cooked in alkaline water. The addition of an acidic ingredient, such as vinegar, lemon juice, or red wine, can help prevent such discoloration.

Color aside, less is more in consumers' eyes when it comes to cabbage these days. "In the 50s, you couldn't get a head of cabbage smaller than a volleyball. Today people want a cabbage softball-size," said Dreyer. Firmness of the cabbage head is just as important now as it was back then, however. "If it's too loose, it's not ready to pick," he said. Or to munch on.

Nutrition Notes: Cabbage is rich in isothiocyanates, cancer-preventing compounds. Red cabbage has almost twice as much vitamin C as green cabbage and also contains anthocyanins, phytochemicals that help a body fight cancer. Red cabbage has half the folate of green cabbage, however.

Cooking Tip: To temper the strong odor of simmering cabbage, avoid overcooking. When cabbage is cut into thin strips and stir-fried, the hot oil that coats it will help keep the aroma from escaping.

Local Scene: New Jersey has about 500 acres worth of cabbage. Locally grown red, green and Savoy heads will be readily available at farm stands and tailgate markets through Thanksgiving.

Fun Facts: The ancient Greeks believed that the first cabbages sprang from the sweat of Zeus, king of the gods. The nickname for the night before Halloween, Cabbage Night, is said to come from a New England tradition in which pranksters smeared windows with cabbage stumps.

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