

Mangia YOUR VEGGIES

MEDITERRANEAN SIDE DISHES
TAKE CENTER STAGE

by Dani Friedland

With the colors, textures and flavors of whole-roasted fish, bowls of shellfish and peppery sauces, it's no wonder the Mediterranean main dishes get all the love. But their sidekick counterparts don't have to be confined to simple classics like roasted potatoes, sautéed spinach or escarole with garlic, as proven by chefs who are stepping up sides with new techniques and ingredients.

In some coastal cuisines, side dishes are peppered with protein. "Pairing pork with a vegetable is very Catalan," says Chef de Cuisine Michael Fiorello of Chicago's Mercat a la Planxa, and sure enough, his warm *coles de Bruselas* salad (\$9, recipe, p. 82) includes bacon.

"These are not your mother's boiled Brussels sprouts with butter," he explains. Instead, he peels them, slices them in half, and grills them on the *planxa*. "They sweeten up when you char them." After their turn on the grill, the sprouts are tossed with a warm sherry and orange

vinaigrette, French feta, garbanzo beans, and shaved raw red onion. Garbanzos and sherry up the Catalan factor, too, Fiorello says, though he first conceived the orange-charred Brussels sprout combination while cooking at home.

Fiorello gives other dishes a more vegetarian-friendly guise. The spinach he and Executive Chef Jose Garces tasted in Barcelona is traditionally served with ham,

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Coles de Bruselas salad
(warm Brussels sprouts salad with bacon, chickpeas, French feta and orange sherry vinaigrette), \$9, Chef de Cuisine Michael Fiorello, Mercat a la Planxa, Chicago. RECIPE, p. 82.

but their take on *espinacas à la Catalana* is vegetarian (\$8, recipe, plateonline.com). It still has a lot going on—a little sherry wine reduction added at the end adds acidity, and both cooked and shaved apples add texture (not to mention raisins and pine nuts).

"It takes sautéed spinach to a new realm—like a textural *melée*," says Fiorello.

"It's garlicky; it's got sweetness from the sherry reduction, and the crunchiness and a bit of sourness from the Granny Smith apple. It's very well-balanced."

Balance was also on David Leite's mind when he created his fava bean and fennel salad (recipe, plateonline.com) for his book, *The New Portuguese Table* (Clarkson Potter, 2009). The dish is the result of combining two traditional Portuguese dishes: a

warm fava bean and *chouriço* (Portuguese sausage) dish, and a chilled blend of fava bean and fennel.

Leite calls the salad a "pan-Portuguese dish with a bit of the island"—specifically, the island of Madeira. Legend says the capital, Funchal, was named for the abundant fennel bulbs (*funcho* in Portuguese) found growing there.

Zesty potatoes are the star vegetable side

dish at Bar Bambino in San Francisco. Executive Chef Elizabeth Binder was inspired by the potatoes with a salsa of onions, green olives and parsley she spotted in a cookbook by Giuliano Bugialli. "I just kicked it up a little," she says of her vinegar-tossed potatoes (\$5, recipe, plateonline.com). Binder says any firm potato that can hold the sauce but also absorb the flavors will do, but she's partial to German Butterballs or Yukon Golds. The sauce starts with red onions sweated down in "lovely olive oil—and lots of it!" she says. After blanching the potatoes, she folds them into a dressing of parsley, capers, Nocellara olives and garlic, then leaves them in a warm place for a few minutes to "absorb all that gorgeous deliciousness," before being served warm. "I actually did this recipe for a dinner we did," she explains. "It was paired with a [Sicilian] wine, so we needed something a little green, a little grassy, and this was the perfect profile."

Dani Friedland's favorite Mediterranean side dish is spinach sautéed with garlic and Parmesan. ✨ For recipes from this article and more visit, plateonline.com.