

The Beet Goes On

Like people, beets can look a lot of different ways. At farmers' markets, you'll find the widest range in color, size and shape: taut and round, slim and tapered, fat and irregular in a dazzling array from whites and golds to pinks, reds and deep purples.

I admire the cute little designer beets for their symmetrical form and smooth, shiny surface. But almost always I go for the big red and purple ones: oversized and asymmetrical, with tendrils that sprout from their root ends and a thick, mottled skin that has been dulled by long weeks underground. They may not be pert or pretty, but for that robust real beet flavor, they're the ones.

I'm convinced this beet's rough appearance is the reason that even those who order beet dishes when dining out choose not to tackle cooking with them at home. That's a shame, because beets are really easy to work with. They require no skill and no special handling, just enough time and heat for the tough outer layer to release its hold on the sweet, earthy jewel inside.

You can provide that heat either by boiling or roasting. If you plan to use the beets in a borscht or stew, or if you envision even, glistening rounds overlapping in a salad, then boiling is a good choice. It also gives you a lighter taste and texture.

But if big flavor is what you're after, then do what I do: Roast them in the oven. Roasting intensifies the sweet, earthiness of the beets and leaves them with a firmer, denser texture. Either way, once the beets have cooled, you can easily remove the skin with your fingers or a paper towel.

To be sure, beets have their detractors. While few can deny their sweetness—they have the highest sugar content of any vegetable—one diner's "earthy" can be another's "tastes like dirt." Whether earthy or dirty, that flavor comes not from the soil, but from an organic compound—geosmin—produced by microbes within it. A moot point, I suppose. But it makes for a nice comeback when beets are under attack.

Early in his presidency, Barack Obama acknowledged he "always avoids" beets. And so, it turns out, does his wife, Michelle. Much to the dismay of the nation's growers, the former First Lady chose to exclude beets from her White House garden. As she explained it: "We believe there's a beet gene." And neither she nor the former President has it.

I would like to have invited the Obamas over for dinner. Without letting them know in advance, I'd have served a roasted beet salad topped with fresh goat cheese, thin slices of red onion, chopped walnuts and a Jackson Pollock squiggle of balsamic reduction. On this one issue, I'd like to think I could have changed their minds.

words *Carolyn Swartz*

