

THE GROWING POPULARITY OF PRODUCE

Chefs show veggies fresh respect

By Jane Harvey
USA TODAY

Vegetables are sprouting up as hot items on menus at trendy restaurants.

And they're not just in familiar supporting roles but soloing — grilled, steamed and stuffed — as appetizers and entrees.

Empowering their new star status: health-conscious chefs and diners, and an ever-increasing array of veggies, many organically grown.

"People want healthy food that tastes good," says Kathy Means of the Produce Marketing Association. "Vegetables fit that. They're low-calorie, low-fat — except avocados — and low-cholesterol."

Americans are indeed eating more vegetables, an average of 150 pounds per person in 1989 (135 in '85), says the Department of Agriculture.

Canned or frozen vegetables are virtually non-existent at the mainstream restaurants in which star-billing veggies are showing up. Being fresh out of the garden is key.

But don't expect a lower tab if you skip the meat. Vegetable plates can run \$12 and up. You're paying for freshness and variety.

Still, diners are snapping them up. A sampling:

► **Topolobampo, Chicago.** Whole grilled cactus paddles and a stew of fava beans,

For a thrill: Grill

Want something different at home? Cookbook author Judith Olney suggests firing up your grill, which gives a "new meatlike dimension to vegetables."

While there's some worry that grilling produces cancer-causing substances, "there's more concern about grilling or smoking meat," says Michael Newman of the National Cancer Institute. His advice: Raise the grill or cover it with foil to minimize smoke getting back to food.

Olney, author of *The*

Farm Market Cookbook (Doubleday, \$25), describes a favored smoked vegetable dish.

Slice an eggplant ½-inch thick and parboil 10 minutes; slice two onions and two zucchini ½-inch thick and parboil 5 minutes; slice a whole head of garlic (leave papery skin on), parboil 10 minutes; add shiitake or portobello mushrooms and plum tomato halves. Place vegetables on rack; smoke 20-30 minutes.

Drizzle with olive oil and fresh herbs.

squash blossoms, new potatoes, young green beans, chayote (similar to squash) and roasted tomatoes, served with corn tortillas (\$14).

► **Nosmo King, New York.** A Napoleon of four layers of phyllo pastry separated by mushroom duxelle, sauteed seasonal greens and asparagus spears topped with a sauce of basmati rice, lentils, fresh peas and artichoke hearts (\$15).

► **L'Etoile, Madison, Wis.** Fresh pasta made with pulverized porcini mushrooms in the dough and topped with sauteed fiddleheads, morrells, aspara-

gus and ramps in butter sauce (\$19).

► **Le Gourmand, Seattle.** Among offerings for a vegetable meal: terrine of spinach, watercress and sorrell garnished with baby carrots; a main course of squash blossoms stuffed with oyster-mushrooms duxelle served with nasturtium-caper butter and crepes made of root vegetables (beets, turnips or Jerusalem artichokes); and a salad of mixed seasonal greens (\$26).

While fancy creations are available, simple preparation by steaming or grilling is the

most popular. Favorites such as green beans, corn and carrots are mostly being presented in their purest forms — with just a hint of herbs.

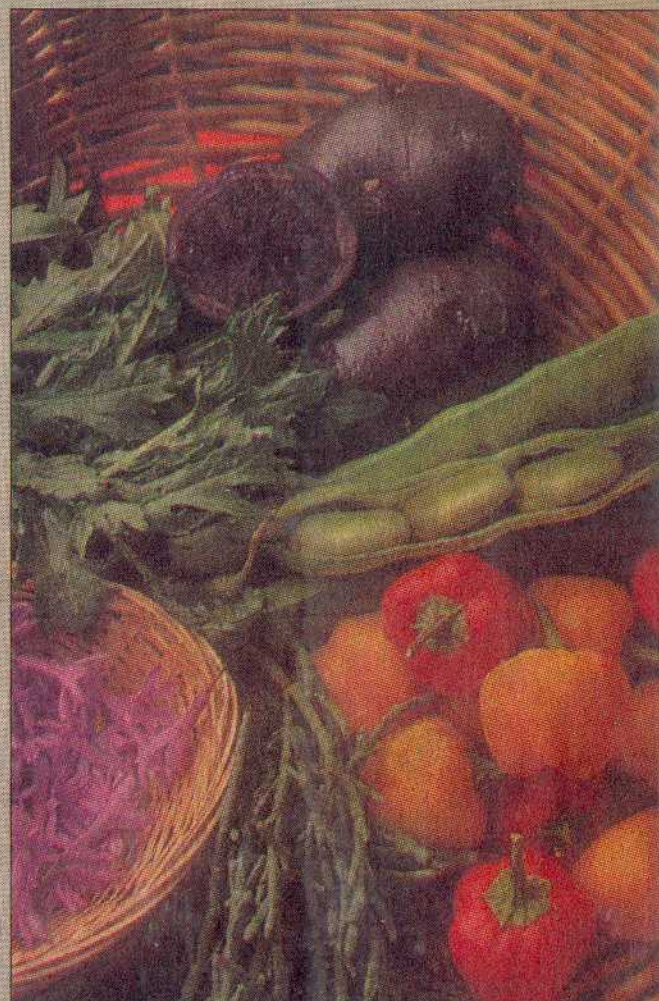
"We love vegetables," says Mary Sue Milliken, co-owner of City Restaurant in Los Angeles. And customers love them, too. Top-selling lunch and dinner entree is a daily \$18.75 platter with a variety of veggies — eggplant to baby bok choy — prepared several ways.

While cost is a concern, many chefs, like Susan Lindberg of the Morrison-Clark Inn, Washington, D.C., think part of their role is to "show consumers the possibilities of vegetables. Meat is meat year-round, but there's a tremendous variety of vegetables. It keeps us excited as cooks."

Some of her regular customers now request a sampling of the day's vegetables as entrees, she says. Such a selection might include a tomato and goat cheese tart or corn soufflé, assorted grilled vegetables (onions, baby artichokes, peas, turnips, carrots) and a starch such as a potato gratin, rice or couscous (\$15.75).

"It's amazing," Milliken says. "The other day, I see a couple of men in their 50s with three-piece suits — they look strictly steak types. But they're having vegetable platters. I know they're not vegetarians; they just enjoy vegetables."

What's special in t



By Nell Seiler, USA TODAY
A NEW CROP: Colorful specialty produce, from fava beans to purple potatoes, from Rock Garden Inc. of Arlington, Va.