

Beguiling Your Babe with Beatific Beets

by Karen Fulcher

Has the cold has kept you indoors and do all the office chocolate, eating out and cocktail parties have you feeling full, sluggish and maybe not so healthy? The holiday season can be a little rough on our bodies. The liver, gall bladder, kidneys and digestive system have been overworked affecting our energy levels, clarity of skin and more. Still, it's the holiday season and who wants to launch into a cleansing smoothie based diet now? Thinking about consuming healthy meals during festivities can conjure up brown rice and *boriing!*

Not so! I set out to get a local chef to teach me how to make a sexy, seductive menu for an evening set to impress—the caveat: it had to be healthy, vegetarian, easy to make and, as much as possible, local. Executive Chef of Fabarnak Restaurant, Eric Wood, relished the challenge. (Fabarnak, 519 Church Street, open Monday to Friday 8:30am to 8:30pm, Saturday 9am to 4:30pm).

When I asked him whether it would be difficult, since he normally creates dishes with meat, he explained, “I don't think of food as vegetarian. I love everything that comes from the ground and I think people eat too much meat. There's a lot of unconsciousness when it comes to eating. There's also hypocrisy with vegetarians relating to seasonal foods and sustainability.”

“If you are going to eat locally, there's nothing wrong with using your freezer. Canning, pickling, drying, preserving, salting, curing—all that stuff, that's what Fabarnak is all about. A lot of people think about sustainability as burlap and granola and really hardcore, but it isn't. It's about getting back to where we began. There's this whole movement—people are reclaiming



skills. Why is everyone obsessed with cupcakes right now? People want comfort. And times are tougher. [Sustainability is about] being able make things stretch that so when you can buy 30 cents a pound tomatoes in the summer and spend an afternoon canning, do it. It's not just this hipster elitist thing to can!”

“A favourite chef of mine, Peruvian chef Javier Wong said food is both precise and violent. For me, food's all about sexuality and violence. It about things colliding and at that collision point is when things are really the best,” Wood told me, explaining his cooking philosophy.

This is a perfect place to start. Cooking as an act of passion (no matter what you are creating) will come across in your meal. Wood chuckled and added, “I wanted to use [my skill] as a tool to meet people—well, particularly, to meet girls... When you paint, you appeal to one sense, music is another. With food you get to play



For plating the tartar:

- Hot pepper (or parsley) infused oil
- A few sprigs of spring mix greens

For the pasta:

- Fresh pasta (if you can't find fresh semolina pappardelle, get fresh lasagna sheets and slice them into long, thick strips)
- 2 roasted pears (Anjou or Bartlett)
- 1 cup julienned roasted beets
- 1 1/2 cup edamame beans (shelled, frozen, Ontario-grown)
- 2 tbsp fresh sage leaves
- 2 chopped shallots
- 1 1/2 cup reconstituted mushrooms (dried chanterelle, shiitake or substitute) plus 1 cup broth from reconstituted mushrooms
- 1/3 cup chopped walnuts
- 1/2 cup smoked blue cheese (optional)

For finishing pasta:

- 1 tbsp butter
- 1 squeeze of lemon
- A few drops of truffle oil

For cooking:

- Kosher salt (enough for roasting beets, onion and pears)
- 1/2 cup cheap red cooking wine
- Canola oil



with all five senses at the same time including fantasy and nostalgia. You're invoking memories. Food makes you think of something you want or someone you were."

Wood invited me into the bright, colourful and loud Fabarnak kitchen. He stationed me in front of the centre prep area and displayed the *mise en place* (having everything prepared and ready for assembly in small containers). Wood created a super-simple and healthy, three course meal themed with beets! He explained, "You can prep everything in advance and [you'll be seen as] clever because you've done the whole dinner around the beets."

Wood's menu (a dinner for two): Savoury Beet Tartar; Woodsy Mushroom, Sage, Salt-Roasted Beet and Pear Pasta; and Beetroot Red Velvet Cupcake topped with Vanilla Ice Cream, Caramel Beet Drizzle and Rosemary. (Or EdgyVeg's alternative dessert, Candice's Chocolate Coconut Cake).

For the tartar:

- 1 cup chopped roasted beets
- 2 tbsp chopped fresh rosemary
- 4 tbsp chopped capers
- 2 tbsp chopped jalapeno
- 1/2 cup chopped pickle
- 4 tbsp chopped roasted red onion
- 2 tbsp grainy mustard
- 3 tbsp crushed garlic
- 1/2 cup Filipino banana ketchup*
- 2 quail eggs* (or substitute: mashed avocado)

**Both the ketchup and quail eggs can be found at Asian grocery stores*



For cupcake:

- Simple white cupcake mix
- 1/3 cup of puréed roasted beets
- 1 tsp pumpkin spice (cardamom, cinnamon, clove)
- Vanilla ice cream
- Caramels (about 10)
- Whipping cream



Salt-roasting Magic

Prior to your special meal, spend some time prepping. Wood suggests using Kosher salts. "Roasting with salt doesn't make your food salty. It wicks away outside moisture and the food retains the juices inside. Use [this technique] with thicker skinned foods." And you can reuse the salts!

Preheat your oven to 350°F. Wash beets, remove the stems and roots. Peel outer skin from onion, leave whole. Pour Kosher salt to completely cover the bottom of an oven-safe dish large enough to distribute beets and onion. Cover the vessel with tin foil and roast vegetables between 1 to 1 1/2 hours depending on how large the beets are.

While the beets are in the oven, wash two Anjou or Bartlett pears and arrange in another smaller dish covered with Kosher salts. At the 45-minute mark, add

your pears to join the beets and roast until tender.

Strike while the oven is hot! Follow the directions on the cupcake box but add a small amount of shredded beets and 1 tsp pumpkin spice. To save energy, pop the cupcakes into the oven timing it to coordinate with the veggies and pears.

Creating Your Mise en Place

Remove beets, onion and pears from the oven. Allow to cool and using clean, cotton gloves, or a towel (to prevent stains on your hands), rub off the skin from the beets. Get containers with lids to store the differently sliced beets. Finely chop the beets into cubes about 1mm in size for the tartar; julienned strips for the pasta; the rosemary, capers, jalapeno, pickle, roasted red onion, crushed garlic, shallots can all go into a dish together. For the pasta, remove leaves of sage, the core and stem of the pears and cut pears length-wise into thin slices. Boil water and soak mushrooms until soft, then slice into thin strips. Retain broth for later. Seal the containers and refrigerate.

The Vegan Voice

I spoke with Food Coach, "EdgyVeg" Candice Hutchings (candicehutchings.com), to get her take on the menu. She was pleased. "Beet tartar is a perfect dish from a nutritional standpoint. Beets are a super-food. Any food with that kind of colour is packed with antioxidants." If you are serving garlic and don't want it to sour your romantic meal, Hutchings suggests you, "remove the little root in the middle of the clove. That's what causes the lingering bad breath—a little Italian trick!"

Depending on how well you know your guest, Hutchings recommended to, "Avoid legumes and beans. Edamame may cause some discomfort if [your guest] has sensitivities or allergies to soy. Avoid canned beans altogether, but soaking dry beans and lentils help increase the nutrition and reduce the gas-causing effects."

Being a raw foodist and vegan, Hutchings eschews dairy "because it makes you feel heavy and it's hard to digest at the end of a meal." Hutchings offered to share a raw, seductive substitute for the dairy dessert that can be made in advance and refrigerated. "I've made this cake for my colleagues and they just don't believe that it is completely vegan and raw!" Here's Hutchings' recipe which you can make in advance as well.



Candice's Chocolate Coconut Cake

Flourless Cake:

- 3 cups walnuts
- 1/4 tsp sea salt
- 1 cup pitted dates
- 1 tbsp vanilla extract

In a food processor, break nuts down. Add dates and vanilla and process until nuts bind together to form a cake batter. Squeeze batter together. If not sticky enough, add more dates or a tbsp agave.

Cashew Whipped Cream:

- 1 cup cashews
- 1/2 cup coconut oil
- 1 tbsp vanilla extract
- 1/2 cup water

In a food processor, blend all ingredients until smooth.

Hazelnut Sauce:

- 1 cup hazelnuts
- 2 tbsp agave syrup
- 2 tbsp coconut oil, warmed at room temperature
- 1tbsp cacao powder
- 3 tbsp water, as needed

In a food processor, blend nuts until they have formed a butter. Add coconut oil and agave and blend until mixed. Add cacao and as much water as needed to desired consistency.

Toppings:

- 1 cup chopped almonds
- 1/2 cup shredded coconut (unsweetened)

Divide cake mix into two parts. Form two cake rounds by lining a cake pan with saran wrap and pressing dough down with hands. Flip pan and removed saran wrap. Mix whipped cream with vanilla. Top first cake round with hazelnut sauce, then half of the cashew cream, followed by chopped almonds. Top with second cake round, remaining cream and coconut and refrigerate.

Setting the Tone

Now that you've got your dishes safely prepped and stored, turn your attention to creating a dramatic and seductive environment. Dim lights, light candles (stick with unscented; no competition with your meal), arrange pillows to encourage a relaxed environment and put something sexy on the stereo.

Think about the table. Go with cloth napkins and plan which dishes to use. Wood suggests using large plates and prefers white, saying they are like "a blank canvas for the colours of the food."

Preparing in advance will help you appear relaxed and more able to entertain your guest. When your guest arrives, serve a cocktail! If you want to stay local, Wood recommends serving an Ontario bubbly (such as Chateau Des Charmes Brut) but a sparkling Spanish Cava is a traditionally good pairing with the beet tartar. You can increase its appeal by adding a colourful berry like pomegranate seeds or fresh raspberries and serve it in a champagne flute.

Hutchings offered up a nonalcoholic option. "Bubbly water is European sexy! Experiment by adding unusual ingredients like fresh thyme and citrus. Or rim a glass with grenadine and cane sugar and mix a fruit nectar with Perrier."

Ready, Set, Go!

Once your guest is comfortable and sipping on your welcome drink, it's time for you to assemble!

Get your tartar plates out first. Wood used a ring mold approximately 7cm in diameter for the tartar but if you don't have one, you can use a small can with the top and bottom removed. Mix all the ingredients together. Use the banana ketchup as a binder. If the beet mixture isn't holding together, add a little more ketchup.

Drizzle a bit of the pepper oil on two plates. Wood advised, "Leave [the oil] where it lays, just go for it and don't fuss." Place your ring mold in the centre of each plate and gently pack the beet mixture into the molds to about 4-5 cm in height. Let set for a few minutes while you fry the quail eggs.

Wood used a really hot pan and a little canola oil. Carefully, crack the quail eggs. You may need to use a serrated knife to create an opening in the shell so that



you can quickly pour the contents into the pan. Cooking the eggs is quick—you want the yolks to be soft. Remove from the heat, add a pinch of salt and pepper and place a lid on the pan for 10 seconds just to set the tops.

Gently remove the mold from the beet tartar and slide the egg on top of each portion. If you are using avocado instead, mash a small amount and use in place of the eggs. Add a few leaves of spring mix to make the plate pop and serve!



The Main Event

Begin by adding what Wood calls the holy trinity: garlic, shallots, and mushrooms to a hot pan. "I don't recommend using a nonstick. You want that *Maillard* factor to happen." When sugars and protein/amino acid turn brown and create flavour in response to heat. Wood chose the ingredients for a reason. "Sensuality in flavour comes from 'umami' that fifth flavour and that comes from glutamates. Mostly meats have it but mushrooms and quinoa also have natural glutamates. It gives a dish that richness."

Cook the mushrooms, shallots and garlic and hit it with a little red cooking wine. Start with a small amount and add more if needed. You want to reduce the wine into a caramel-like consistency called *au sec* (nearly dry). Toss in the pears, edamame and sage.

After heating these items in the pan, add the beets. "Don't add your beets too soon or they will off colour your dish," cautioned Wood. Add about half of the mushroom broth and more if necessary to create a glaze for the pasta. Finish by folding in some butter for sheen and added richness and a quick squeeze of lemon to accentuate the umami.

Wood suggests everyone have a slatted or mesh dipper to cook pasta in because when it is done, you simply lift it out of the boiling water. "Don't overcook or handle your pasta too much," he told me. Toss the pasta with the hot ingredients and once everything is coated, use tongs to aim for the centre of the plates and pile the pasta high.

Drizzle a few drops of truffle oil (don't overdo it—less is more), crumble a small amount of smoked blue cheese and sprinkle the top with a few walnuts and some fresh sage leaves. Voila! Wood recommends pairing the pasta with Ontario wine, like Angel's Gate Chardonnay.

The Finale

Candice's cake can simply be sliced and served as is. You can add some colour with a mint leaf or two and drizzling the plate with beet juice!

For the cupcakes, melt the caramels in a pan on low, slowly add puréed roasted beets and whipping cream to the melted caramels until it becomes a thick sauce. Warm two cupcakes then top them with ice cream and top that with the caramel beet sauce. To finish, sprinkle with fresh rosemary. Wood explained why his dessert is best matched for an intimate evening. "The dessert isn't too sweet and the rosemary has astringent properties so your mouth doesn't feel coated and thick. You won't even need to brush your teeth." (wink)

Veggies can be luxurious and sexy because they help your body feel loved, pampered and cared for. Of course, you could skip all this work and take your date to Fabarnak or hire Hutchings to give you and your guest a cooking lesson for lovers, but I do recommend the effort!

Karen Fulcher is more Dionysus than Diana when it comes to food and indulgence but plans to balance that in the New Year.