

Joanne's Story – Eating Out of the Box

I just don't like non-dairy "creamers", hamburgers made from sunflower seeds or – my real nemesis – margarine. I personally can believe it's not butter; are they kidding? I don't like healthier versions of anything. So for me changing eating habits is easier if I go way out of the box and try out new ethnic cuisines. If I try completely new food, I'm not biased by some old frame of reference. I choose recipes within the Suppers guidelines rather than adjusting familiar ones, which would just set me up to mourn the missing something that's not good for me. Taking a cue from a recently posted Suppers story, I went to the nearby Asian market with a plan. I was going to buy and eat something I couldn't identify -- or at least something I'd never eaten before. I'd gone to this store countless times only to leave empty handed and overwhelmed. Too many intriguing yet dauntingly odd shapes and colors to behold in the produce section.

Yet there I was again in the store of mystery where most labels weren't even in English. I wandered up the greens aisle. Tiny clear bags with neatly packaged plant stems--some of the plants I may have heard of, some not. But even the plants I had heard of, I'd never thought to eat, like the ones I regularly weeded out of my garden. There were so many! I began to sweat. I wanted to bolt but stayed rooted to my task. My eyes settled on a label -- 'sweet potato tips'. Hmmm. The young sweet potato plants. I'd often eaten the young sweet pea greens and beet greens freshly snipped from the garden. I knew sweet potatoes well enough (especially slathered in butter). The prices were amazingly inexpensive--what could I lose? I picked up the bag and headed for the checkout, snatching an odd looking purple Asian yam on the way out.

I came home and set out immediately to make my lunch. (I threw the purple yam into the oven -- a good slow bake should make it perfect for dinner.) Then came the greens. I pondered the bag before me, ripped it open, pinched a leaf and placed it on my tongue. Not impressed--it reminded me of my lawn. I went to the computer and googled 'sweet potato tips'. Well, you can imagine what I found -- tips on cooking sweet potatoes! I retried 'sweet potato shoots' and immediately fell upon a lovely website of delicious Asian food that gave me a very simple recipe using ingredients I already had on hand. (The miso in my refrigerator was a new addition after a Suppers meeting, and who doesn't have garlic?)

A quick blanching of the greens in one pot. A quick browning of the garlic slices in a pan. I added the drained greens, turned off the heat and stirred the miso into the mix. I was soon sitting down to a triumphant light lunch and taking my first adventurous bite.

Oh My God. The greens were velvety soft in my mouth. I detected just a hint of sweet potato with the earthy toasted crunch of the fried garlic, and the complex saltiness of the miso thickened the broth in the bowl. The lunch was all I could have hoped for, and my body was really happy. This is definitely a dish I'll do again. More important, it was a discovery process I could do again! Now that I know where to get the greens, I think I'll try that recipe I saw for sweet potato shoots with fermented bean curd and dried prawns!

I've heard several people at Suppers say addition is a lot easier than subtraction. And most seem quite happy with substitutions too. Not me. I like the clarity of subtractions as well as additions to my diet and have no tolerance for substitutions. The thought of scrambling for substitutions for my favorite ingredients is deflating, whereas the thought of making additions feels adventurous. My new motto: I can leave it; it's not butter.

See Miso and Sweet Potato Shoots