



Valentine Warner's Cabbage Stuffed with Mushrooms, Leeks, Stilton and Walnuts



Although you have to use your imagination, what I love about this is the idea of deconstructing something in order to rebuild it back into its likeness. At this time of year, I fill the cabbage with autumn treasures, all time-honoured old friends. Brought to the table, it's a crowd-pleaser, especially for vegetarians (although I rarely have a crowd of vegetarians in my house). For this recipe you will need a 1.5-litre pudding basin and a large lidded pot to accommodate it. You will also need two discs of cardboard cut to fit the inside top of the bowl, wrapped together with foil.

What you need

Serves 4-6

1 large Savoy cabbage
butter

Mushroom filling

- 500g collected field mushrooms, blewits and/or grolles (or chestnut mushrooms)
- 30g butter
- 2 medium leeks
- 100g shelled walnuts
- 200g mild Stilton cheese
- 3 Medjool dates
- large-flaked sea salt and black pepper
- 1/2 teaspoon freshly grated nutmeg

Directions

- Choose a handsome large cabbage. Take the dark green outer leaves off carefully, throwing away as few damaged leaves as possible. Be kind; a little leaf distress is no matter. Keeping as close to the stalk as you can, cut only the thickest part of it from each leaf, as they need to be kept whole. You will want to go two layers into the cabbage and you'll need eight or nine leaves.
- Bring water to the boil in the pot in which you will be steaming the stuffed cabbage. Dip the leaves in for 30 seconds to make them pliable (not to cook them). Remove the leaves from the water with a slotted spoon, avoiding ripping them, and rinse under cold water. Shake the leaves before laying them on a tray lined with kitchen paper. Layer more paper between the leaves.
- Start the mushroom filling. Wipe the mushrooms clean and finely slice them, stalks and all. (Do not use Portobello, as they turn the whole filling an unappetizing colour.) Melt the butter over a medium heat in a frying pan and, when foaming, throw in the mushrooms. Add a good pinch of salt, the nutmeg and a bombardment of black pepper. When you think that's enough, add two grinds more. Fry the mushrooms until all the water has evaporated and they begin to catch and take on a rusty brown colour. Take time to do this, as swimming in a pool of water they are not ready for the stuffing.
- While the mushrooms are cooking, remove two outer layers of the leeks' skin and trim off any ragged tops. Split the leeks lengthways and wash under the cold tap. Make sure they are clean, as mud, sand and grit will ruin a good thing. Dry on kitchen paper, split lengthways and chop finely, about 5mm thick. Add the leeks to the mushrooms only when they have achieved the colour and dryness explained above. Mix together and keep on the heat until the leeks are cooked and their moisture has been banished



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skywards. When they start to catch, they are done. Excess water will spoil the consistency of the filling. Preheat the oven to 200°C/400°F/Gas 6.

- Chop the walnuts into small pieces (but not in a blender, or they will turn to dust). Put them on a tray and pop into the oven. Don't forget them. Having incinerated a fortune in nuts, I advise you to set a timer! When they are golden and smell toasted, they are done; 5 minutes, let's say. Rub the walnuts lightly in your hands to shed as much of the skin as possible.
- Cut the cheese from the rind and crumble it into the cooking leeks and mushrooms. When the cheese is distributed and fully melted, turn off the heat and add the nuts. Stone and chop the dates, add them to the mix and stir in with the nuts. Leave to one side in the pan. Make sure the dates are well mixed in, as they can tend to clump together.
- Prepare the cabbage. Lightly butter your 1.5-litre basin. This does nothing for the cooking of the cabbage, but helps the clingfilm to stick when you are lining the bowl. Leaving plenty of overhang, drape four lengths of clingfilm in a criss-cross fashion so that the whole bowl is covered, the layers of clingfilm overlapping to create a strong skin. Taking one leaf of cabbage, place the bowl on top of it and cut around its base to fashion a circle to fit inside the bottom of the bowl. Put to one side. Take the remaining leaves, remembering that the outside of the leaves should face the inside of the bowl. Not willy-nilly, but trying to make a similar pattern to that of a naturally grown cabbage, distribute the leaves around the inside of the basin, overlapping. Insert your cabbage circle in the bottom. (There should still be a couple of leaves left to cover the open top of the bowl.)
- Pack the stuffing into the cabbage casing, really patting it down and filling it up, but leaving 3cm exposed around the top edges. With your remaining leaves, cover the top. Picking up the clingfilm edges and, working round slowly, pull in the clingfilm, which in turn will fold the sides of the cabbage in on its lid. Twist all the clingfilm into a tight knot; it must be sealed.
- Bring the pot of water back to a simmer; it should be a third full of water. Place your foiled cardboard disc on the cabbage and put weights on top (cleaned stones from the garden would do). Put the basin in the pot, add the lid and steam for 20-30 minutes. Adjust the heat so the water is still simmering even with the lid on. To turn out, open up the clingfilm and pull it to the outside of the basin. Place an upside-down plate over the top and, wearing oven-gloves, invert the basin on to the plate. Lift off the clingfilm and basin. A little water will run on to the plate; mop it up with kitchen paper. Take the cabbage to the table, where everyone will look the picture of happy surprise you might find on a board-game box. This dish looks pretty when the green cabbage is surrounded by slices of pink ham.

Recipe taken from *What to Eat Now* by Valentine Warner published by Mitchell Beazley (see octopus-books.com)

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