

Diane Forley

STUFFED cabbage is a dish you encounter all over the world, in different forms. It doesn't have any one ethnic origin or base; every country or region adds its own spices and somehow makes the dish its own. In the Middle East, you find cabbage stuffed with rice and lamb, and seasoned with cumin and coriander. In Hungary, it's spiced with paprika and dill. It's a humble dish, but satisfying.

Almost always, meat is used to hold the stuffing together, but I wanted to make a vegetarian version. The trick was to come up with a meat-like consistency. I hit on the idea of using ground barley as a paste to hold together a filling made of barley grains and sautéed cabbage. The filling is substantial. Barley is a full-flavored grain, highly nutritious, with a chewy texture. Toasting gives it a very nutty flavor, but the dish

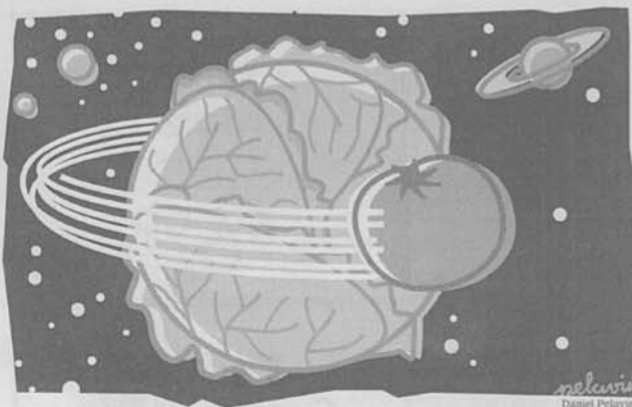
This is the sixth of eight columns by Diane Forley, the chef and owner of the Manhattan restaurant Verbena. Her collaborator on these columns is William Grimes.

My vegetarian version of stuffed cabbage.

requires a piquant sauce to bring it to life.

There are a few things that can make cabbage taste good. One is a nice caramelization, which we have in this dish. The sliced cabbage filling is sautéed with onions until it browns well and brings out the natural sweetness in the vegetable. You can also use condiments, like onion, caraway seed, mustard or spices. Anything pickled works well, too, which is why I decided on a tangy sweet-and-sour sauce of tomatoes, orange, honey and vinegar.

When you make the filling, you can play around, adding mushrooms, carrots, celery, squash or chopped green beans. This dish can be served as an entree or, in smaller portions, as a side dish with chicken or fish.



BARLEY-FILLED CABBAGE IN PICKLED TOMATO SAUCE

Time: 2 hours

- 7 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 large onion, diced
- 42 ounces canned crushed tomatoes
- 1 orange, peeled and chopped
- 1 cup honey
- ½ cup apple cider
- ½ cup cider vinegar
- 1½ cups raw barley
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 1 extra-large cabbage head
- 1 onion, thinly sliced
- 1½ teaspoons mustard seed
- 2 teaspoons Dijon mustard
- ¼ cup champagne vinegar or cider vinegar
- 2 cups chicken or vegetable stock.

1. Prepare pickled tomato sauce: In medium saucepan heat 2 tablespoons olive oil over low heat; add diced onions. Cook until onions are translucent. Add tomatoes, orange, honey, apple cider and cider vinegar. Simmer until thickened, about 40 minutes.

2. While sauce is simmering, prepare barley: in a medium skillet heat 2 tablespoons olive oil over low heat, and add raw barley. Toast barley, stirring constantly, until it's lightly browned and has a nutty aroma, about 5 minutes. Cool in pan. Remove ½ cup barley, and grind in spice grinder until powdery. Place ground barley in small saucepan and add 1½ cups water. Place over medium-low heat, and cook, stirring constantly, until mixture has consistency of porridge, about 7 minutes. Season with salt and pepper to taste; set aside.

3. Add 3 cups of water to barley in skillet,

and bring to boil over high heat. Reduce heat to low, and simmer uncovered until barley is tender and water has evaporated, about 20 minutes. Remove from heat; set aside.

4. Remove 12 outer leaves from cabbage, being careful not to tear them. Set aside. Thinly slice remaining cabbage to make about 2 quarts. In large (14-inch or larger) sauté pan, heat 3 tablespoons olive oil over medium-high heat, and add sliced cabbage and onions. Sauté until well browned, about 15 minutes. Stir in mustard seeds and Dijon mustard. Add champagne or cider vinegar and stock; stir well to deglaze. Cook until cabbage is soft and liquid has evaporated, about 15 minutes. Add both barley mixtures to cabbage; toss to blend thoroughly.

5. Bring large pot of salted water to boil, and set aside bowl of ice water and 9-by-12 baking pan. Blanch the whole cabbage leaves in boiling water until tender, 3 to 4 minutes, then transfer to ice water. Preheat oven to 375 degrees.

6. To assemble cabbage rolls: spread half the tomato mixture in the baking pan. Place a single leaf on a work surface, and trim off thick stem. Place about ½ cup cabbage-barley filling in the center, fold sides over, and roll up leaf. Place seam side down in baking pan. Repeat to make 8 rolls, using extra leaves to patch tears, or to extend too-small leaves. Top rolls with remaining tomato sauce, and cover pan with foil. Bake until rolls are tender, about 50 minutes.

Yield: 4 servings.