

In Absolute Best Tests, Ella Quittner destroys the sanctity of her home kitchen in the name of the truth. She's boiled dozens of eggs, mashed a concerning number of potatoes, and roasted more broccoli than she cares to recall. Today, she tackles kale.

Kale has lived a thousand lives.

It's spent decades as a frilly, slow-wilting garnish for salad bars and shrimp towers alike. Since the dawn of the 21st century, it's moonlighted as a status symbol for the tote-touting, farmers-market-evangelizing city dweller. It found an especially bright 15 minutes of fame as the single word emblazoned on a sweatshirt Beyoncé wore in her music video for "7/11." It was roasted into chips by Gwyneth Paltrow on primetime television. It's been the hero of 2,000-word profiles and the villain of snappy teardowns. It's frost-resistant, enjoys a harvest during the time of year when the rest of us hibernate, and one cup of it has 134 percent of your daily recommended vitamin C, for the love of god. So there's little to say about the leafy green that ceaseless trend pieces haven't already bellowed.

It has been around for millennia, at least since its proliferation through Europe and Asia during the Middle Ages. Consequently, there are more ways to cook kale than there are ways I can think of to entertain myself during this final stretch of self-quarantine. Convenient. Here, I've narrowed the list of kale

methods down to seven, and pitted them head-to-head in a competition of texture and flavor. Which bought me about two days. Shall we?

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If you ever want to feel like you're living in a Juice Generation, consider purchasing 10 bunches of lacinato kale and storing them front and center in your otherwise empty refrigerator. Should you then want to obliterate that fantasy instantaneously, simply toss in about 25 peeled garlic cloves and a bowl of crushed red pepper flakes. Which is a verbose way of revealing that for each test I used:

1 bunch lacinato kale, ribs removed, roughly chopped
(about 3 cups tightly packed)
3 tablespoons olive oil
Juice from 1/2 lemon
3 garlic cloves, thinly sliced
3/4 teaspoon crushed red pepper flakes
3/4 teaspoon Diamond Crystal kosher salt

Where specified, I employed additional ingredients like chicken broth and crushed tomatoes. Oil was naturally excluded in the **Steam Only** trial—as were the garlic and red pepper flakes, since I forgot to add both to the steamer and would have thus had to eat both raw. (I have boundaries.)

Join The Conversation

TOP COMMENT:

"I stumbled across on my own method for kale when I was in a hurry. While the kale is still wet from having been just washed, I give it 1 minute in the microwave just before I sauté it. It cooks and flattens it down enough so it fits in the pan easily and can be tossed around in whatever oil/ garlic etc are started. I micro in whatever bowl I'm serving in, which helps with cleanup later. This is probably closest to the steam /sauté version. "

— Haylee G.

COMMENT

Ninety-eight words on kale choice: I used lacinato, also known as dinosaur kale, because it's easiest to de-rib in a hurry (see above re: 10 bunches), and I love the earthy, vegetal flavor.

There are many varieties of kale, all of which are worthwhile, and would lend themselves well to these methods. These include curly kale (the dark green stuff with winding tendrils of leaves), Chinese kale (broccoli-like stems you should fully hang on to and cook, with smaller leaves), and red Russian kale (red-stemmed with leaves that need not be cooked quite as long as lacinato to achieve comparable tenderness), among others.

Methods

Sauté Only

Inspired by The Kitchn.

- 1 Heat 3 tablespoons of oil in a sauté pan over medium heat until shimmering.
- 2 Add 3 thinly sliced garlic cloves and 3/4 teaspoon of red pepper flakes. Stir for 1 minute.
- 3 Add 3 tightly packed cups of de-stemmed, roughly chopped

lacinato kale. Stir until the kale begins to wilt.

- 4 Partially cover and cook, stirring every now and then, for about 5 minutes, until the greens are tender. Finish with 3/4 teaspoon of salt and the juice from 1/2 lemon.

Forget what I said back there about having boundaries—I would like to propose to the **Sauté Only** kale and spend the rest of my life eating it (not in an Armie Hammer way). It was tender enough—though nothing like the velvety **Blanch & Slow Sauté** or **Braise** batches; more on those in a minute—with just an inkling of body and chew. The light scorch of the greens merged perfectly with the tart lemon, smoky-hot pepper, and piercing salt for an intense few bites. Crispy garlic was, as they say, the garlic on top. (Nobody says this.)

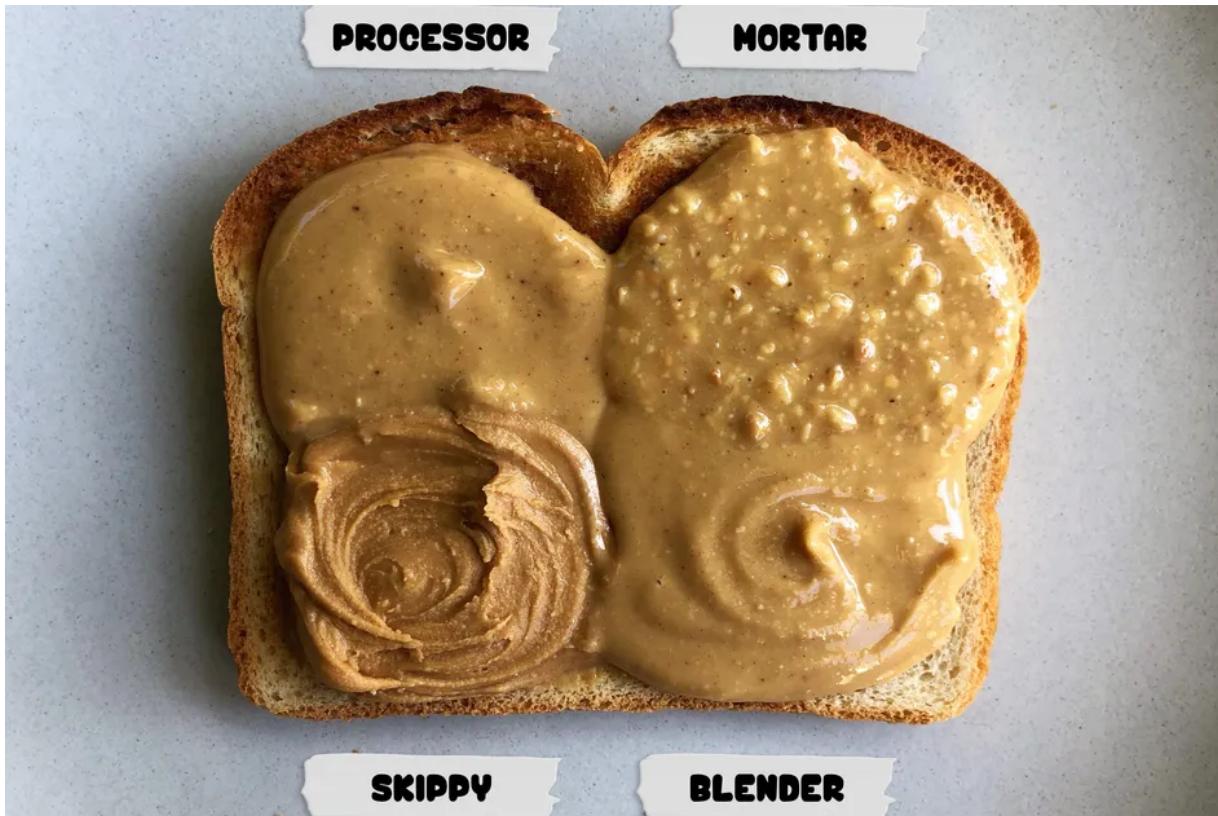
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Sauté & Steam

Inspired by Food Network.

- 1 Heat 3 tablespoons of olive oil in a sauté pan over medium heat until shimmering.
- 2 Add 3 thinly sliced garlic cloves and 3/4 teaspoon of red pepper flakes. Stir for 1 minute.
- 3 Add 3 tightly packed cups of de-stemmed, roughly chopped lacinato kale. Stir until the kale just begins to wilt.
- 4 Add 1/3 cup chicken broth. Cover and cook until the kale is tender, about 5 minutes. Finish with 3/4 teaspoon of salt

and the juice from 1/2 lemon.

The **Sauté & Steam** kale ranked top of the class for efficiency, but bottom for texture and flavor. The kale itself wasn't as fully seasoned as **Sauté Only** kale—the broth diluted things somewhat, and I suspect also prevented the greens from taking in as much salt and acid. The kale's texture was the tiniest bit gummy rather than silky. But it was perfectly edible (a crispy fried egg would've done wonders) and a little softer than the **Sauté Only** kale, so I will still use this method when I'm after gentler textures. But I'll be sure to layer in more seasoning when I do.

Steam Only

- 1 Set up a stockpot with a few inches of water over high heat and fit with a steamer basket. Cover.
- 2 When the water reaches a boil, add 3 tightly packed cups of de-stemmed, roughly chopped lacinato kale to the steamer basket. Cover.
- 3 Steam for about 10 minutes, until the kale is tender. Remove and finish with 3/4 teaspoon of salt and the juice from 1/2 lemon.

My first impression: The kale appeared fluffier than any other batch, like it had lost less water in the cooking process. (Plus, there was no oil to weigh it down.) Its texture reflected this, with a softness that seemed plusher and lighter than the leaves of other methods. Flavor-wise, this was the grassiest of the bunch,

so if you're in it for the fresh green vibes, **Steam Only** could be your method. Perhaps because of the lack of garlic and red pepper flakes, the lemon punched through in a big way.

Roast

- 1 Heat the oven to 325°F.
- 2 Toss 3 tightly packed cups of de-stemmed, roughly chopped lacinato kale with 3 tablespoons of olive oil, 3 thinly sliced garlic cloves, 3/4 teaspoon of red pepper flakes, 3/4 teaspoon of salt, and the juice from 1/2 lemon.
- 3 Spread out on a sheet pan, avoiding overlapping the leaves as much as possible to encourage crisping.
- 4 Roast for 20 to 25 minutes, until each leaf is stiff and crunchy.

Despite how dire and limp the situation appeared about 15 minutes in, by the 22-minute mark I had crisp, boldly flavored chips that shattered like fiberglass or my self-confidence in almost any workout class. While lacking in structural integrity—the hummus I dipped these in looked like it hosted a shipwreck—the roasted kale chips disappeared quickly, thanks to the little ones. (That's what I call my alter-egos. I do not have children or pets.)

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Braise

Inspired by *Food & Wine*.

- 1 Heat 3 tablespoons of olive oil in a Dutch oven over medium-high heat until shimmering. Add 3 thinly sliced garlic cloves and 3/4 teaspoon of red pepper flakes and sauté until fragrant, about 1 minute.
- 2 Add 3 tightly packed cups of de-stemmed, roughly chopped lacinato kale, 1 cup of really good canned crushed tomatoes, and 3/4 cup of broth. (I used chicken but follow your heart, I'm not your mom.) Scrape up any garlicky,

peppery bits as you stir to wilt the kale. Add 3/4 teaspoon of salt and the juice from 1/2 lemon.

- 3 Partially cover and let simmer over medium heat for 8 to 12 minutes, until the greens are tender and the braising liquid is delicious.

Oh, baby! About once a week, I encounter a cooked vegetable situation that makes me want to drop everything and boil a pound of rigatoni so I can mix everything together and cover it in cheese. The kale from the **Braise** method officially joined the ranks of Most Pastable Vegetables as soon as it was ready. The braising liquid and leaves created something reminiscent of ribollita and Sunday sauce at the same time. Which is to say, I poured it directly into my mouth. Was this fair to include in the trials since it added delicious tomato to the mix? Probably not. To even the playing field, I admit that the cooked kale on its own tasted a little bitter, a flavor not present in any other method. Okay, back to pouring hot kale–tomato juice into my mouth.

Simmer In Broth

Inspired by *The Zuni Café Cookbook*, via Orangette.

- 1 Heat 3 tablespoons of olive oil in a Dutch oven over medium-low heat until warm. Add 3 thinly sliced garlic cloves, 3/4 teaspoon of red pepper flakes, and 3 tightly packed cups of de-stemmed, roughly chopped lacinato kale. Stir until the kale is wilted.

- 2 Add 6 cups of broth, or enough to cover the kale by 1/2 inch. Bring to a simmer. Partially cover and simmer until the kale is tender, about 30 minutes.
- 3 Finish with 3/4 teaspoon of salt and the juice from 1/2 lemon.

The texture of the **Simmer in Broth** kale was so wonderful and unique, it inspired me to draw a series of stars around the phrase “buttery roughage” on my to-do list. The kale was beyond soft, like silk slapped with a meat tenderizer and, despite its faded hue, had a delightfully subtle flavor. Like the **Sauté & Steam** kale, if I were making this outside the bounds of a restrictive head-to-head test, I would add additional seasoning, as the broth dilutes most of the salt, pepper, and lemon.

Regardless, this batch begged to be poured over stale sourdough with a dollop of chile crisp. (Seriously, it wouldn’t stop begging, until one of my “little ones” threatened to pour it in the trash.)

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Blanch & Slow Sauté

Inspired by Suzanne Goin’s Slow-Cooked Cavolo Nero.

- 1 Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil. Add 3 tightly packed cups of de-stemmed, roughly chopped lacinato kale and blanch for 2 minutes. Drain. Once cool, squeeze out any excess water.
- 2 Heat 3 tablespoons of olive oil in a Dutch oven over low heat until warm. Add 3 thinly sliced garlic cloves, 3/4

teaspoon of red pepper flakes, 3/4 teaspoon of salt, and the blanched kale.

- 3 Cook over low heat, stirring occasionally, for about 30 minutes, until soft and nearly black. Finish with the juice from 1/2 lemon.

So much to unpack. Obviously, after being slow-sautéed for 30 minutes with lots of garlic, oil, and friends, this kale tasted like something I would pay \$14 for at a Tuscan restaurant. Less obviously, whoa, blanching kale! What a trip. The resulting greens lost so much volume that by the time they hit the Dutch oven, I was working with less than a cup of leaves. The blanching stripped away any hint of bitterness, which was cool, and I suspect gave the greens a jump-start in softening.

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Conclusions

There are so many delightful ways to cook kale:

For a snack, **Roast** kale at 325°F after you've tossed it with oil, salt, and any aromatics or seasonings that appeal.

(Nutritional yeast, garlic powder, cheese powder, paprika, za'atar, and gochugaru all come to mind.)

If time is not of the essence—but the most supremely buttery, deeply flavored kale *is* of the essence—turn to

the **Blanch & Slow Sauté** method.

For kale that tastes a lot like kale, **Steam** away.

If you're looking to get yourself halfway to dinner, you'd better **Braise**.

For efficient and excellent kale: **Sauté**.