

Thanks to the Walt Disney Company youngsters on up know the name Ratatouille. What I want to talk about isn't a movie or a rat named Remy. It's the wonderful vegetable stew of the same name.

The south of France gave birth to Ratatouille – a mixture of vegetables that is one of the world's best side dishes and more. It's so simple but has complex flavors and looks mighty good, too.

In her book, "French Provincial Cooking," Elizabeth David said, "Ratatouille Nicoise most always contains aubergines (eggplant), sweet peppers (bell peppers), onion and tomato. Courgettes (zucchini) are optional." She also mentioned garlic as another option and olive oil as a necessity. In addition she tells us that mushrooms don't do well in her opinion.

What she observed was everything sort of being dumped together and cooked for a while. Then it was served hot or cold – as a side or an hors d'oeuvre.

Since my first contact with Ratatouille was when I read Julia Child's "Mastering the Art of French Cooking, Vol. 1," I got out my copy of the book and looked at what she said. Well she didn't say much - very little more than Elizabeth David.

Julia Child's version is reasonably unique in my experience however. She cooks each vegetable separately and then combines them for a final communal bath. She also uses zucchini as a mandatory ingredient.

"Mastering the Art of French Cooking" was first published in 1961. I bought my copy in 1969 and it changed my life forever, as it did the way we cook in America. I checked in the front of mine and in those few years this book was already in its 18<sup>th</sup> printing.

My first Ratatouille followed Julia's recipe in detail. I still make it that way 40 years later. It must work.

Eggplant can be difficult. First, many of them we get in the grocery store are not very good. When I buy a case of them, I may get 15 good ones or I may get 5. You never know. Make sure the ones you

buy are firm and have no soft or brown spots. They should be heavy for their size. The stem should be bright green and not discolored.

Eggplant needs to be cooked until totally done. Under-cooked eggplant is not good at all. Once it is done, it is very fragile. So stirring fully cooked eggplant must be done carefully.

Peppers take a while to get tender. Zucchini cooks very quickly. Your onions should be tender but not brown. They need to be cooked slowly. Cook your tomatoes last. The garlic can go in this step.

The important thing to remember is to season each vegetable as you cook it. Add salt, pepper, thyme and basil to each. That way the flavor of your final dish will be much better and more even.

What Juila Child does is layer her Ratatouille. You can do that or just mix the ingredients together being careful to not break anything apart. In fact I've seen a fancy version where the veggies are cut in circles and stacked like coins side by side – kind of like dominos that have fallen. This would be pretty on a buffet table.

Your Ratatouille can be baked right then or held until later. In fact it is better when baked the next day. It reheats just as well.

Traditional Ratatouille is best as a side dish. It has so much color and flavor that a simple main course is its best friend. Roast chicken, roasted or boiled beef or pork are great. Lamb is fantastic with Ratatouille.

Ratatouille is a vegetarian's delight. There's plenty of interest and flavor to keep them very happy.

Leftovers are good reheated, room temperature or cold. Spread some Ratatouille on toast for a killer bruschetta.

The Ratatouille police are not going to hunt you down if you add something else to your Ratatouille – or leave something out. I agree with Elizabeth David that mushrooms don't do well. Never use Portobello mushrooms in a dish that cooks for a while. They will turn it a dreadful color.

Yellow squash is fine. Artichokes are great. Fennel is good. Potatoes also work. Ripe olives are a nice touch. Just remember to cook everything separately and mix carefully.

As to seasoning I like to add some Cayenne and use plenty of garlic. Trust me, a werewolf wouldn't set foot in Jimmy's.

To me an anise-flavored liquer like Pernod or Herbsaint from New Orleans gives Ratatouille a nice sweet bite. There's nothing wrong with a little orange peel either.

If you want more substance, you can add chunks of cooked chicken or pork to make a full one-dish meal. You can also serve Ratatouille over rice. Done that way and offered with a salad, it will feed lots of folks.

My friend Jim Johnston always served his Ratatouille as a soup. He added more liquid and filled big bowls. With some French bread along side to sop up the juices, it was mighty good.

Give Ratatouille a try as vegetables come into season this year. It is a great dish that will add variety to your table and will taste good, too.

The last words Julia Child wrote in the introduction to "Mastering the Art of French Cooking" are really good ones that we all need to remember. In talking about cooking, she said something like, "Above all, have a good time." That's not a bad idea.