

Los Angeles Times

FOOD

Zucchini: How to choose, store and prepare

Zucchini
(Richard
Hartog /
Los
Angeles
Times)

How complicated can zucchini be? After all, most people's biggest problem usually seems to be getting rid of it. Well, actually there are more than 100 varieties of zucchini grown today, ranging in color from gray-green to almost black and in shape from long and thin as a hot dog to bulbous (and that's not including the round zucchinis, which are technically summer pumpkins).

Which to choose? It depends on how you're going to use them. Generally speaking, the more gray and bulbous a zucchini is, the firmer and milder the flesh will be. These are closer to what used to be called vegetable marrows, and they're great for cooking in soups. The darker and thinner zucchinis, closer to the Italian squash called cocozelle, are more tender but usually have richer flavor. You'll also find what farmers call "round" zucchini, varieties such as Tondo di Piacenza or Ronde de Nice. They're not really zucchini but what botanists call "summer pumpkins." Still, that's probably something that matters more to botanists than to cooks.

How to choose: Look for zucchini that are small to medium-sized (no longer than 6 to 8 inches). They should be firm and free of nicks and cuts. Really fresh zucchini will bristle with tiny hairs.

How to store: Keep zucchini tightly wrapped in the refrigerator.

How to prepare: Braised or "glazed" zucchini is terrific--cut the squash into pieces and put them in a wide skillet with a little olive oil, some minced garlic and about 2 to 3 tablespoons of water. Cover the pan and cook over medium heat until the zucchini is tender (about 5 minutes). Remove the lid and crank the heat up to high to evaporate the moisture and stir gently to coat the zucchini with the reduced juices.

