

## Fennel: Beckoning Fronds

by Deirdra Harris Glover

*First published in Jackson Free Press*

I spent years casting sly glances at fennel in the produce section before I ever brought it home with me. I was fascinated by the strange beauty of its feathery chartreuse fronds and the folds of its voluptuous, fluted figure. When I finally worked up the nerve to walk across the aisle and put it in my cart, it was love at first sniff. I couldn't wait to get it home. It was intoxicating: spicy, cool and sweet with anise notes ranging from whispery to boisterous.

Fennel is an ancient plant, cultivated for culinary, medicinal and sacred purposes. It's a champ for combating hiccups and other digestive unpleasantness. Prometheus used the stalk of the giant fennel to steal fire from the gods, and the decadent followers of Dionysus used the stalks in Bacchic festivities. Fennel seeds were tucked into medieval church-goers' pockets and handkerchiefs to ward off hunger during long fasts. It provides an herbaceous top-note in Absinthe, the alcoholic muse of bohemian culture. Fennel seeds impart an earthy, green flavor to Chinese five-spice powder and are used in Indian cuisine as a seasoning as well as a post-meal digestive. Fennel figures most prominently in Italian cuisine: fennel seed is the key flavor in Italian-style sausage, with fennel bulbs and fronds being used in pastas, braises and risottos, as well as fish and egg dishes.

A good specimen will have an unblemished, milk-white bulbous body and thick green stalks that give it the appearance of an anatomical heart and branching arteries. Don't be fooled: some supermarkets incorrectly label it as anise because they share a fragrant licorice aroma and flavor. The fronds are delicate and lacelike, strongly resembling dill weed. Cooking greatly reduces the licorice flavor, which is most potent in the fibrous, celery-like stalks. The stalks never last long in my house, because I tend to devour them while everything else is cooking.

This Italian-themed stew is a balanced, easy way to feed a crowd without breaking the bank or resigning yourself to hovering over the stove. It has a great range of texture and color, and I love the way sweet fennel, bitter kale and bright red pepper play off one another. I make vats of this soup and freeze it in 2-person portions for nights when my husband and I don't feel like cooking. During the winter, we like this stew as hot as we can get it, in hand-warming oversized coffee mugs. For a summer get-together, serve it warm with a simple salad and crusty bread. Have your guests bring the wine!

While fennel's lovely in a stick-to-your-ribs stew, it's a culinary shapeshifter. Substitute raw fennel for celery in a chicken salad, or pair paper-thin fennel shavings with orange segments and pecans atop a bed of peppery arugula. While no culinary adventure can rival Prometheus' epic deeds, fennel may rekindle your culinary creativity.

-----

**Tuscan Stew** (for a friendly mob)

*Your choice*

2 cans of cannellini beans, rinsed; **AND/OR**

1 package of Italian sausages, slipped from their casings and crumbled

2 bulbs fennel, trimmed of their stalks and sliced

3 russet potatoes, coarsely cubed

1 large yellow onion, finely diced  
2 bunches kale, washed and torn, stalks removed  
1 head garlic, peeled and minced  
2.5 qts. vegetable or chicken stock  
1.5 tsp. fennel seeds, lightly toasted  
2 tsp. thyme leaves  
1 tsp. crushed red pepper (use Aleppo pepper if you can find it)  
2 large bay leaves  
salt and black pepper to taste  
Fennel fronds, for presentation

Heat a large stockpot on medium heat. If you're making a meatless soup, use 3 Tbs. olive oil; otherwise brown the sausage and set it aside, leaving the rendered fat in the stockpot. Cook the onions and fennel in the fat until the onions are golden and the fennel is tender (give or take 10 minutes), stirring frequently. Add garlic and the remainder of spices to the pan, giving the garlic two minutes to sweeten.

Add the browned sausage and/or beans, potatoes and stock to the pot, cover, and let the soup simmer for a half-hour or more. The potatoes will begin to crumble, adding body to the soup. Adjust the salt/seasoning if necessary. Stir in the torn kale just before serving. If you have picky eaters, you can add kale to individual bowls as you serve, as the soup's heat will rapidly cook the greens. Garnish each bowl with a few snips of fennel frond, and serve to an adoring crowd.