

Squashing Veggie-Phobia

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It's hard to be somewhat veggie-phobic. It's not that I hate vegetables, but I guess they just don't appeal to a self-confessed carnivore. With the recent ruckus regarding inflation, people have been advised to return to eating vegetables to cut down on food expenses. Not only would we reap the health benefits they bring, we would also be saving cash since vegetables aren't as expensive as meat, canned goods, and other commodities. Also, they are readily available and easily accessible. But the question is this: for those who aren't exactly herbivores (like me), how would they enjoy vegetables and save money to boot?

One Sunday afternoon, my Tita Riza asked me how she could reinvent the boiled chicken and squash she had just prepared. Her mother has diabetes and always eats food that is either bitter or downright plain. I wanted to help her make something far tastier, but my general dislike for vegetables kept me at bay. I was thinking that if squash didn't taste like squash, maybe I'd eat more of it (I hear children silently agreeing with me!) and be of better help. That's when I thought, if hard brown potatoes can be cooked into creamy mashed potatoes, can't the same be done using squash? Besides, I realized that if I were to mash and spice up the squash's flavor, not only would Tita Riza's mom have an easier time chewing her food, she would also feel better eating something new and appetizing. Right then and there, we decided to put the idea to the test.

After a couple of trial-and-errors, I came up with my very own "Curried Squash Croquettes". Squash was a perfect choice because of its versatility (it has a very plain, creamy taste that can readily adapt to different flavors), availability, and most importantly its affordability (one big squash retails at around P25 in the metro and even cheaper in other areas). When I tried the croquettes, I was pleasantly surprised that it tasted like fried potato balls! The squash is mashed and encased in a crispy breadcrumb exterior, sneakily hiding the vegetable from sight. On the other hand, the woody-onion fragrance of curry powder (which is noticeable but not overpowering) masks any trace of vegetable smell, making it hard to tell what the filling is made of. The garlic and spring onions that we used gives the dish a pleasingly bitter taste that is balanced by the slightly sweet flavor of the butter. Lastly, the turmeric gives the croquettes a deep golden yellow color which takes away the dullness of all the brown you get from frying. By experimenting with the ingredients available in our house and mixing them with the mashed squash, we were able to create a dish that was healthy, affordable, yet interestingly, deceptively delicious.

Later on, I served the dish to some family members and guests (including Tita Riza's mom), and they too were

delighted at the taste. No one was able to guess what the croquette's filling was made out of until they were told so. Needless to say, they enjoyed the meal and ended up finishing what I cooked, and I began to appreciate squash now more than ever (honestly, it wasn't really as bad as I thought it was).

Based on my experience, I believe the trick to beating veggie-phobia is to wake up the flavor of vegetables by adding more likeable ingredients. I realized that kids and the young-at-heart don't fancy vegetables because they are usually served "boring" and tasteless. I remember watching *The Oprah Show* one evening when one of her guests, a doctor, said that the reason why children don't like eating vegetables is that they equate bitter tastes to food that has gone bad. It makes sense especially when we understand that children haven't learned to appreciate bitter tastes unlike adults. It would therefore be wise to mask the taste that they (or we) hate by using flavor-rich ingredients. You can use butter, melted cheese, and even the different seasonings or sauces available in groceries to name a few. You can even try hiding the vegetables in burger patties, pureeing them into soups, or turning them into stuffing for chicken or fish to give them better appeal. The possibilities are endless, and it only takes a bit more creativity and imagination on your part.

As for the children, if being sneaky towards them isn't your thing, the best alternative would be to let your kids join in on the fun: the preparation and cooking of vegetables. Not only would they appreciate and learn about the goodness of vegetables, but out of excitement, they will also want to try the food that they helped make. Also, by adding your personal touch, you will end up making something deliciously your own which you can serve proudly to your family and guests.

For those curious, here is the recipe for Curried Squash Croquettes. Although the list of ingredients for the croquettes is a bit lengthy and takes a little more time and effort to prepare, the resulting dish is worth it. Being able to serve a vegetable like squash without the usual hitch will definitely be a step towards veggie-phobia freedom, and most importantly, the curried squash croquettes aren't expensive to make.