

The New Geometry of the Plate

Rethink the American dinner plate. That means more vegetables, less meat, and whole grains. BY ELLIE KRIEGER

PICTURE THE OLD-FASHIONED dinner plate: Half is heaped with meat, one-third is taken up by potatoes (or white rice), and the remaining small fraction is left for vegetables. Unfortunately, these proportions haven't done our health and physical stats any good. The fact is, to be fit and healthy, we need to shift our focus toward more fruits and vegetables and away from refined grains and big hunks of high-fat meats. That's why it's time to rethink our plate geometry. By dedicating half of the plate to colorful vegetables, one quarter to lean protein, and the other quarter to whole grains, you can easily put together a better-balanced meal.

Vegetables rule

I tease my husband, Thom, because when he cooks and I ask him what's for dinner, he says "steak." And that's exactly what he'll serve—a plate of steak with no sides at all. (You'd think he'd pick up a thing or two, living with me for so long.) He might be an extreme example, but his mentality reflects that of many cooks: A meal is mainly about the protein. Sadly, this often means that vegetables are merely an afterthought, and as a result, not very interesting or desirable.

But when you think of vegetables as a major player, as more of a main course than a side, suddenly they merit more attention and creativity. For example, instead of serving a plate of steamed green beans, you can sauté the beans with ginger and garlic or toss them with a Dijon vinaigrette and garnish them with herbs and nuts. Or you can add a variety of spices and fresh herbs to a simple medley of roasted vegetables, as in the recipe opposite.

The other half of the plate

Moving the meat to a supporting role doesn't mean it's less important. Protein is essential to life and well-being—we just don't need it dominating our dinner: Three to four ounces of red meat, fish, or poultry more than covers our protein needs. And don't forget that beans and tofu contain protein, too.



“By dedicating half of the plate to colorful vegetables, one quarter to lean protein, and the other quarter to whole grains, you can put together a balanced meal,” says Ellie.

As for the last quarter of the plate, go for whole grains—they've gone from hippy to hip in just a few years. And that's a good thing, because whole grains—from brown rice and whole-wheat pasta to quinoa, bulgur, and barley—have the fiber and antioxidants you need but don't spike your blood sugar the way refined grains do.

This meal is an example of how you can rejigger your plate proportions without leaving your comfort zone. It has all the elements of a traditional dinner: succulent roast pork, rice studded with raisins and walnuts, and subtly spiced roasted vegetables. Only here the rice is whole grain, the pork is lean tenderloin and takes up only a quarter of the plate, and the colorful vegetables claim prime plate real estate. Geometry has never been so much fun.

Good to Know

1. The classic American dinner plate is more of a health liability than an asset: too much high-fat meat and too few vegetables.
2. For a more balanced meal, rethink your plate by dedicating half of the real estate to vegetables.
3. Think of vegetables as a main, not a side—you'll be inspired to cook them in more interesting ways.





Old think: The dotted line.
New think: Vegetables are
the new main.

brown rice with walnuts and golden raisins

Serves 4

- 2 Tbs. extra-virgin olive oil
- ½ small yellow onion, finely diced
- ½ cup brown rice
- Kosher salt
- 2 Tbs. golden raisins
- ¼ cup walnuts, toasted and finely chopped
- 2 Tbs. finely chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley
- Freshly ground black pepper

Heat the oil in a 2-quart saucepan over medium heat. Add the onion and cook, stirring frequently, until softened, 2 minutes. Add the rice and stir to coat in the oil. Add 1½ cups water and ½ tsp. salt. Bring to a boil over high heat, cover, reduce the heat to low, and cook until all the water is absorbed and the rice is tender, about 35 minutes. Remove from the heat and let sit for 5 minutes before fluffing with a fork.

Meanwhile, put the raisins in a small bowl and add enough boiling water to cover. Allow them to plump for 10 minutes; then drain.

Stir the raisins, walnuts, and parsley into the cooked rice and season to taste with salt and pepper.

coriander-crusted pork tenderloin

Serves 4

- 1 1- to 1¼-lb. pork tenderloin, trimmed
- 2 tsp. Dijon mustard
- 1 Tbs. coriander seeds, crushed
- 1 tsp. black peppercorns, crushed
- 1 tsp. kosher salt
- 1 Tbs. olive oil

Position a rack in the center of the oven and heat the oven to 450°F.

Spread the mustard evenly over the pork and then sprinkle with the coriander, peppercorns, and salt, pressing so the spices adhere.

Heat the oil in a 12-inch ovenproof skillet over medium-high heat. Cook the pork, turning it with tongs, until nicely browned on all sides, about 3 minutes per side. Put the skillet in the oven and roast until an instant-read thermometer in the thick end of the pork registers 155°F, 18 to 20 minutes. Let rest for at least 5 minutes before slicing thinly.

Registered dietitian Ellie Krieger is a Fine Cooking contributing editor.

sweet and spicy roasted vegetables

Serves 4

- 1 Tbs. honey
- 1 Tbs. chopped fresh thyme

Position a rack in the center of the oven, put a rimmed baking sheet on the rack, and heat the oven to 450°F.

In a large bowl, toss the carrots, onions, bell peppers, and squash with 1 Tbs. of the oil and a pinch of salt and pepper. Spread the vegetables on the hot baking sheet in a single layer and roast until tender, 30 to 35 minutes.

Heat the remaining 1 Tbs. oil in an 8-inch skillet over medium heat. Add the spices and cook until fragrant, 1 to 2 minutes. Stir in the honey and thyme and a pinch of salt and pepper.

Drizzle the spice mixture over the roasted vegetables and toss to coat. Season to taste with salt and pepper.

- 5 medium carrots, halved lengthwise, and cut into 1-inch pieces (about 1½ cups)
- 2 small red onions, each cut into 8 wedges (trim the root end but leave intact to hold layers together)
- 2 medium red bell peppers, seeded and cut into 1½-inch pieces (about 3 cups)
- 1½ lb. butternut squash, peeled, seeded, and cut into 1-inch pieces (about 3 cups)
- 2 Tbs. extra-virgin olive oil
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper
- ½ tsp. ground cumin
- ½ tsp. ground coriander
- ½ tsp. ground ginger
- ¼ tsp. ground cinnamon
- ⅛ tsp. cayenne