

# The leek's time to shine

## Vegetable is versatile and sophisticated

Story by Ching Lee • Photos by Tony Pinto

Even though she didn't know much about leeks until she started cooking professionally, chef Mayet Cristobal has no trouble these days ticking off some of her favorite ways to use the vegetable—and it doesn't even include the obvious: potato-leek soup.

The potato-leek combination remains “very classic,” she acknowledged, but there are myriad ways to incorporate leeks into recipes or to feature them as a main attraction.

“I think it's time for leeks to be the star. It's a great vegetable,” said Cristobal, a Bon Appetit Management Co. executive chef in Los Angeles. “Leeks are actually very versatile, just like onions. I definitely think it hasn't been given enough credit.”

With a flavor similar to onions and garlic, but milder and more delicate with a touch of sweetness, leeks may get overlooked because they haven't been subjected to the spotlight enough, she said, noting that at grocery stores, “you just see a small stack of it.”

Having grown up in the Philippines, where leeks are not commonly grown, Cristobal said she was not familiar with the vegetable either. Her mother, who cooks traditional Asian food, always opted for regular onions, green onions or chives—all relatives of leeks.

### From neophyte to advocate

Cristobal's love for leeks came early in her career as a chef. The first time she used it was for a charity event when she had to take over for another chef who canceled at the last minute. The dish: braised pork shank with melted leeks.

“I didn't know how to ‘melt’ leeks, so I had to do some research,” she recalled.

Melting leeks traditionally calls for cutting the leeks into round, quarter-inch-thick slices and then sautéing them slowly in melted butter over low heat until they're soft and wilted. A simple seasoning with salt and pepper is all it needs, she said, although sometimes she adds fresh thyme if it's available. Buttery and aromatic, the dish goes well with not just pork but fish and “so many things,” she said.

“Really, I could eat it on its own with some steamed rice,” she added.

For contrasting textures, Cristobal said she likes to pair melted leeks with crispy leeks, which are cut into long, thin strips and then deep-fried. Chefs often use crispy leeks as a garnish, she said, and they remain one of her favorites to adorn fish. Leeks also work well braised in wine, butter and stock, and then topped with Parmesan or blue cheese, she said.

Chef Mayet Cristobal holds one of her favorite Filipino dishes—okoy—a vegetable fritter that features leeks as a main ingredient.







Ventura County farmer Charles Muranaka, left, holds harvested leeks, which are picked by hand.



Cristobal uses leeks in one of her favorite Filipino street foods called okay, a vegetable fritter traditionally made with bean sprouts, shredded hard squash or sweet potato, shrimp and green or white onions. Her recipe replaces the onions with leeks to add “brightness and texture,” she said.

Leeks also show up in one of her go-to side dishes for Thanksgiving—a savory leek and wild mushroom bread pudding. The leeks, she said, “add another layer of flavor to the dish.” If she has leftover rice, Cristobal said she likes to turn it into basic fried rice by sautéing leeks with garlic and Chinese sausage, and then adding the rice to cook until it becomes crispy.

“It’s a really easy, simple meal for me and my family that takes maybe 15 minutes to do,” she said.

### Demand spreads year-round

Though leeks have long been popular as a winter-soup ingredient, Ventura County farmer Charles Muranaka said he’s seeing “more consistent demand for leeks year-round.” He still prefers to use them in soups and stews, he said, adding that he finds cold versions of leek soups to be “very tasty” and “more suitable for nonwinter months.”

Muranaka’s family has been growing leeks in Moorpark since the late 1960s, though they’ve been farming since 1947. His grandparents, Minoru and Matsue, were introduced to farming through their trucking business hauling produce from Japanese American farms in the Los Angeles region to markets in downtown L.A. They

broke into farming as celery sharecroppers and became independent growers in the 1950s with a 60-acre farm in the San Fernando Valley, moving to Moorpark in 1969.

The Muranakas initially grew leeks less for consumption than as protection from the fierce Santa Ana winds for their signature crops—green onions and radishes. Back then, their farm was much more exposed, he said, as it was surrounded by open fields.

“At this time, no one was farming any type of row crops in Simi Valley and Moorpark. We were the first,” he said.

They tried growing turnips and daikon first, but those crops weren’t strong enough to stop the wind and wouldn’t grow straight, rendering them unmarketable. His grandfather suggested they try leeks, not only because the plant is more robust but because he saw a good potential market for the crop.

“He was aware that leeks were very popular in Canada,” Muranaka said. “Leek-potato soup was a staple in meals throughout eastern Canada, where the French primarily resided.”

### Leeks elevate menus and start conversations

Today, Muranaka Farm ranks among one of the largest U.S. growers/shippers of leeks, which the family grows year-round along with green onions, radishes, cilantro, parsley, kale, beets and Brussels sprouts. The farm still has its share of Santa Ana winds and high-heat days, Muranaka said, “but the winds overall are much quieter compared to when

there were no houses or development here in Moorpark.”

Though leeks are “highly marketable” and have potential for high returns, Muranaka said, they are also very expensive to grow because they require a long growing season. From seed, the plant takes an average of 90 days in the greenhouse before it’s transplanted to the field. Once it’s in the ground, it can take 116 days to harvest during warmer months “but slows to a crawl of 180 days during the winter months,” he noted.

“I think this is why many growers shy away from them,” Muranaka added.

For those who may still be unsure what to do with leeks, Cristobal encourages home cooks to be creative. Instead of topping burgers with caramelized onions, for example, try melted leeks, she said. For a new twist on the potato-leek combination, she suggested scalloped potatoes and leeks.

“Really, it elevates your dish,” she said. “If you’re having guests at home and you’re cooking for them, wouldn’t it be more interesting to show them something that has leeks versus onions? It’s the start of a conversation.”

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### MORE ONLINE

For chef Mayet Cristobal’s recipe for okay, visit [www.californiabountiful.com](http://www.californiabountiful.com).

## What about the green parts?

### How to use the whole leek

Most recipes with leeks call for using just the white parts, as the green, leafy parts tend to be tougher and more fibrous. If discarding the green tops seems wasteful, chef Mayet Cristobal recommends saving them for making stock.

“If you’re making soup with it, chop it up really fine,” she said. “If you’re going to puree your soup anyway, use the entire thing.”

The greens also work well as a “rack” under roasted meats. For roasted chicken, for example, Cristobal uses the leek leaves along with celery and carrots for the base to impart flavor to the drippings.

Chef Cristobal encourages cooks to consider leeks as a star, rather than supporting, ingredient, such as in this leek tart.

