

Pickled beet pesto,
Daniel Asher, Root
Down, Denver, Colo.
RECIPE, p. 92.

Turn your
vegetable
scraps, tops
and roots
into waste-
free pestos

Pesto CHANGE-O

by Kate Parham Kordsmeier

Pesto has almost always been about basil. But now that root-to-stem cooking is picking up steam, we're embracing the fact that the easiest way to repurpose stems, tops and other vegetable off-parts is to throw them into a pesto.

"Just because beet tops are worth pennies shouldn't mean they're easier to discard," says Daniel Asher of Denver's Root Down, who puts everything from bell pepper tops to zucchini ends in his pestos. "They're a great option for total utilization because they're forgiving from a flavor standpoint," he says.

Sean Fowler at Mandolin in Raleigh, N.C., agrees: "I was using cilantro for

garnish and throwing away the stems," he says. "But someone spent a lot of time growing that cilantro, and we were essentially throwing away half of it." Fowler uses the stems in his almond pesto

(\$4, recipe, [plateonline.com](#)). "A minimal-waste philosophy is two-fold: financial, because I'm getting the most money out of the ingredients, and sustainable, as I'm using resources," he says.

Asher credits beet tops and root tails leftover from a roasted beet dish as the inspiration for his pickled beet pesto (recipe, p. 92). "That color that was created became a part of our beet salad that's been on the menu for years," he says. Carrot tops from

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another roasted dish inspired his chamomile and carrot top pesto (recipe, [plateonline.com](#)). "We didn't choose carrot tops, carrot tops chose us," says Asher, who balances their earthiness with floral chamomile.

Chris Pandel actually prefers the flavors inherent in vegetable scrap pestos. He uses fava leaves to create a pesto to pair with gnocchi (\$16, recipe, [plateonline.com](#)) at Balena, one of his restaurants in Chicago. "We use fava leaves on pizzas because we liked the earthy quality they bring," he says.

For Mike Perez of Indaco in Charleston, S.C., carrot tops add a juniper accent to the hazelnut pesto he makes for his tortellini dish (\$20, recipe, [plateonline.com](#)). "It's a great way to use root vegetables after basil goes out of season," he says.

PERFECT SCRAPS

Whatever scraps you choose, Pandel says to make sure the greens are dry and unbruised, and he suggests adding ice cubes as you process them to prevent browning. Likewise, be careful not to over-process pestos to maintain color, warns Fowler, who recommends rough-chopping larger ingredients before processing, and breaking down the denser items before you add lighter herbs to avoid large chunks in the pesto.

Billy Allin of Cakes & Ale in Decatur, Ga., adds only half of the Parmesan to his beet green pesto before puréeing it, and then adds the second half after it's processed (recipe, [plateonline.com](#)). "Cheese can melt if it gets too hot in the processor, and the protein will help emulsify the oil in the pesto, so if you add too much cheese too early, the oil will break," advises Allin, who admits to tossing out beet green stems. "The stems get too stringy," he says. "But some tender stems, like chard, could make a great pesto. It's all about finding what flavor and texture you prefer."

Kate Parham Kordsmeier experiments with scraps to up her pesto game.