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Carla Hall, runner-up on last season's "Top Chef" on Bravo, was in Des Moines cooking for an event put on by the Mushroom Council.



MUSHROOM COUNCIL / SPECIAL TO THE REGISTER

Carla Hall prepares mushrooms for her Garlicky Mushroom Hearts over Sweet Potato and Poblano Hash recipe.



MUSHROOM COUNCIL / SPECIAL TO THE REGISTER

Hall advises cooking mushrooms in a hot pan with just a little oil to get them to sear properly. Resist the temptation to drown mushrooms in fat, she advises.

'Top Chef' Carla Hall shares love of mushrooms

BY TOM PERRY - TPERRY@DMREG.COM - JUNE 2, 2009

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When cable television viewers last saw Carla Hall in February, she was finishing as a runner-up on Bravo TV's "Top Chef."

Her many fans will be delighted to learn that her catering business in the Washington, D.C., area is booming. Meanwhile, requests for personal appearances and endorsements are streaming in from all over the country.

"Yes, you could say it's been nutty, or any other adjectives you want to throw in there," Hall said last month as she sat in the lobby of the Renaissance Savery Hotel.

Her one-day visit to Des Moines came on behalf of the Mushroom Council, a group dedicated to promoting the use of fresh mushrooms.

"They asked me to create a recipe using mushrooms," Hall said of the council and her creation, "Garlicky Mushroom Hearts over Sweet Potato and Poblano Hash."

With recipe in hand and ingredients at the ready, she was on her way to stage an unveiling of her dish at a cooking demonstration for editors at Meredith Corp.

The Mushroom Council gig is a perfect fit for her, she said.

"I love mushrooms all kinds of mushrooms, and I always have," Hall said. "A lot of people haven't had them cooked properly."

Cook them properly

Resist the temptation to drown mushrooms in fat, she advised.

"Cook them in a hot pan with a little oil and you can get them to sear properly just like meat," Hall said. "They're going to have a crust on them that will keep them all juicy and moist on the inside."

The technique also intensifies earthy flavor, she said.

One of her favorite ways to prepare and serve mushrooms is to sear them before adding a bit of sherry with salt and pepper.

Hall also suggested mixing different types of mushrooms together.

"One of the things I like to do is bulk up with white button and criminis and then throw in a small handful of other mushrooms," she said, explaining that just a few exotic, more expensive mushrooms, can bring a lot of flavor to a batch of lower priced mushrooms.

'Shrooms + spice = love

The garlicky mushroom recipe that she constructed for the council is an homage to the comfort-food flavors popular in the south, where she was born, she said.

"In my head, I wanted to do the whole southern thing — the sweet potatoes with some spinach on top in place of collards," Hall said, explaining that collards take a bit long to saute for a dish such as this.

Not counting the time it would take to blanch two sweet potatoes, the meat-free dish comes together in 10 minutes. Mixing a poblano pepper, which is a tad spicier than a green bell pepper, would give the sweet potato hash some bite because "mushrooms love spice," she said.

Her reason for crowning the hash with garlicky peppers and spinach:

"Everything is better over a hash," Hall said. "And spinach loves mushrooms."

Garlicky Mushroom Hearts over Sweet Potato and Poblano Hash

Recipe courtesy of Chef Carla Hall, owner of Alchemy Caterers

Serves: 4

Cooking Time: 10 minutes

INGREDIENTS

6 large white mushrooms

6 large crimini mushrooms

Olive oil spray

Splash white wine

1 garlic clove, minced

1 poblano pepper, finely diced

3 teaspoons olive oil

2 large sweet potatoes, finely diced and blanched (about 2 cups)

1/2 teaspoon smoked paprika

1 garlic clove, minced

2 tablespoons scallions, thinly sliced

2 teaspoons parsley, finely chopped

Salt and pepper to taste

GARNISH

1 cup spinach, julienned

DIRECTIONS

1. Trim the stem of each mushroom flush with the cap; cut a small piece to flatten each top. Trim the sides to create a cylinder shape. (Reserve mushroom scraps for mushroom stock or another recipe.)

2. Heat large skillet to high heat, spray with olive oil. Place mushrooms topside down in pan. Lightly season with salt and pepper. Allow mushrooms to brown before turning them over. Brown on all sides. Add a splash of white wine and garlic. Shake to distribute and cook until pan is dry. Remove mushrooms, set aside.

3. Using the same large skillet, heat to medium-high heat. Add 1 teaspoon oil and poblanos. Lightly season with salt and pepper. Sauté until poblanos are just tender, about 2 minutes. Remove and set aside in a small bowl. Bring pan to high heat; add 2 teaspoons of olive oil and sweet potatoes. Lightly season with salt and pepper; sprinkle with paprika and garlic. Allow potatoes to brown. Toss, then let sit again, about 2 minutes. Add scallions, parsley and poblanos and toss. Top with mushrooms and serve immediately. Reheat mushrooms if necessary. Garnish with sautéed spinach.

"I love mushrooms all kinds of mushrooms, and I always have, " Hall said. "A lot of people who don't like mushrooms, a lot of time, as it is with anything, haven't had them cooked properly."