

Vegan Stuffed Acorn Squash

From:

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- 1/2 cup balsamic vinegar (optional - for balsamic reduction)
- 2 tbsp extra virgin olive oil divided
- 1 1/2 cups diced white mushrooms
- 1/2 cup white basmati rice
- 1/4 tsp salt plus more to taste
- 3 whole acorn squash roughly 1 pound each
- 1/2 cup chickpeas cooked or canned
- 1/3 cup pecans chopped (substitute sunflower seeds to make nut free)
- 1/3 cup fresh chopped parsley divided
- 1/2 tbsp fresh chopped thyme leaves or 1/2 tsp dried thyme
- 1/2 tsp ground cinnamon
- Pinch cayenne pepper (optional - adds spice)
- Pinch allspice

If making the balsamic reduction, you can make it ahead by up to a week. Pour your balsamic vinegar into a small saucepan and bring to a simmer over medium-high heat. Continue to simmer, stirring frequently, until the vinegar reduces by half and thickly coats the back of a spoon, about 4-5 minutes. Don't let the vinegar become too bubbly or dry.

Remove from heat, pour the thickened vinegar into a heat-safe dish and allow to cool to room temperature. As it cools it will thicken further. Store in an airtight container in the refrigerator until ready to use, or keep covered at room temperature if making the same day. If refrigerating, let it come back to room temperature before serving.

Sear your diced mushrooms. Start by coating the bottom of a medium skillet evenly with 1 tbsp olive oil. Heat over medium until hot (not smoking) Add a few pieces of mushroom to test - the oil should sizzle but not splatter. When heat is right, add the diced mushrooms in a single layer in the skillet, turn the heat to medium high, and let cook undisturbed for 2-3 minutes. No stirring yet!

Check a few mushrooms by turning with a spatula. They are ready to stir when they are dark golden on the bottom side.

Stir mushrooms over medium high heat for 1-2 minutes longer until they have reduced in volume by roughly 2/3.

Preheat oven to 400 degrees F. In a small saucepan, combine basmati rice, 1 cup of water, 2 tsp of olive oil, and 1/4 tsp salt. Bring to a boil, then cover the pan and reduce to low heat. Let the rice cook for 15 minutes. At the end of 15 minutes, turn off the heat but keep the rice covered. Continue to steam for another 10 minutes

While rice is cooking and oven is heating, slice the stem tip off of each acorn squash, slicing as close to the stem as possible. The stem end should be flat at the very end after it's sliced. This will help the squash to slice evenly into two halves.

Slice the acorn squashes in half lengthwise. Start by placing an acorn squash on a sturdy table or cutting board. Choose a natural groove in the squash that divides the two sides as equally as possible. Use that groove as a guide for your chef's knife to slice the squash in half. If you encounter resistance as you slice, remove the knife and insert the knife tip into the slice, sawing gently to work your way through.

When the squash are sliced, remove the seeds and thready pulp from the center of each half using a melon corer or a spoon with semi-sharp edges. If you've even carved a jack-o-lantern, this will feel familiar to you. (Note: you can roast the seeds and snack on them, just follow the same seed-roasting method outlined in [this butternut squash post](#).)

Pour remaining 4 tsps of olive oil into a small bowl. Brush your baking sheet with olive oil, then brush each squash half with oil on the cut fleshy side. Place the squash halves flesh side down on the baking sheet. Roast the squash for about 20 minutes, turning the sheet halfway through cooking, until the squash is tender throughout and the edges are starting to turn golden. Check the squash around 15 minutes - if any of the halves are browning too quickly on the cut side, flip them over so the cut side faces upward for the remainder of cooking.

When basmati rice is fully steamed and hot, take off the lid. Fluff rice with a fork, then stir in the chickpeas, seared mushrooms, chopped pecans, 1/4 cup of the parsley, thyme, cinnamon, cayenne pepper, and allspice. Cover the lid again to let the other ingredients gently warm in the hot rice. Reserve 1 tbsp of the chopped parsley for garnish.

When squash is fully roasted, remove from oven.

Divide the filling between the 6 acorn squash halves, stuffing each half with a heaping helping of stuffing. Sprinkle the stuffed squash with the remaining fresh chopped parsley.

If using the balsamic reduction, drizzle roughly 2 teaspoons on top of each squash half. Serve warm.