

'The arugula has complexity. It's very good—sweet and spicy and delicate all together.'

— North Pond chef Bruce Sherman

Arugula fever

The peppery green yields sweet rewards for a first-generation farming couple who specialize in Italian produce



David and Susan Cleverdon grow arugula and other Italian greens at Kinnikinnick Farm.



By Peggy Wolff
Special to the Tribune

The Evanston Farmers Market opens at 7 a.m., yet customers arrive not long after dawn, when the family enterprise that is Kinnikinnick Farm is still setting up tables and opening bins. The Saturday morning spectacle has by now become a regular sight: vegetable lovers, four deep in line, waiting for first crack at David and Susan Cleverdon's baby arugula greens.

"Can you break a \$100 bill?" The tall man with the wire-rimmed glasses and gray hair in a pony tail comes regularly to the Evanston site beside the Metra's Davis Street stop.

"Yes."

"Bag of arugula, please," he said, and turning to another customer, "This guy has the best arugula in the United States."

Today, after the long, difficult journey from their back-yard garden to a 110-acre, organic farm in the rolling hills of north-central Illinois, the Cleverdons have the distinction of being fine market gardeners—meaning they bypass middlemen and sell strictly to the end user: farmers market customers (they also are at Green City Market) or restaurant chefs.

Does the Kinnikinnick arugula have a rare flavor?

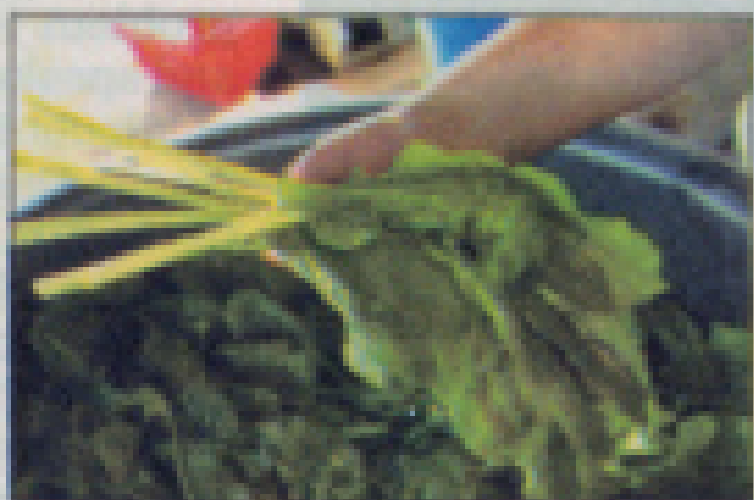
"Rare, no," said Michael Altenberg, chef/owner of Campagnola in Evanston and Bistrot Campagne in Lincoln Square, who is a big user of the Kinnikinnick Farm greens. "It's just like arugula should taste if it's picked at the peak of its freshness, from the farm." The Cleverdons grow it with no chemical input, with the right balance of minerals in the water, and in healthy soil.

"If Dave doesn't like the look of it, he won't pick it," said Jeff Muldrow, chef at Va Pensiero in Evanston, who makes a pesto of the farm's arugula and marjoram to serve with grilled lamb, and uses the arugula in salads. "With commercial growers, they'll pick the whole field. You'll get varying degrees of ripeness. I could buy industrial arugula in large three-pound cases coming out of southern California, but I don't."

Food that hasn't traveled long distances is better tasting, fresher and more nutritious, he added.

"Very often, Dave picks it the day of that

Arugula fever



Bietina is washed for the market.

Cooking arugula

Italian greens are among the easiest of vegetables to cook, according to Susan Cleverdon of Kinnikinnick Farms.

"I prepare greens several times a week, most often quite simply as an accompaniment to grilled meat or fish, in pasta or soup, or sauteed and served with polenta or couscous," she said.

"I prefer greens with a little tooth remaining in the leaf, not cooked to death."

After washing and draining the greens well, Cleverdon removes the fibrous stems and roughly slices the leaves into 1/2-inch ribbons. She blanches the greens very briefly in boiling water and cools them quickly in a sink filled with cold water. Then, she forms the drained greens into tennis-ball sized mounds in her hands and squeezes out the excess moisture.

"You can wrap and store the mounds of greens for a day or two in the refrigerator until you are ready to use them in any number of ways," she said. She likes to add them to pasta dishes, to sausages and potatoes and to couscous with currants and pine nuts.

Baby arugula, however, does not benefit much from cooking, she added. "We use it almost exclusively as a salad mainstay or to line a platter of grilled steak or salmon or sausages. The warm juices of the meat or fish mingle with the arugula and wilt it just a bit, producing a very flavorful, aromatic and attractive result."

She explained that arugula is a member of the mustard family so it will work quite well with foods that go well with mustard. Try leaves of baby arugula in a turkey sandwich, or with cheese or smoked salmon or that wonderful high summer favorite bacon and tomato.

"As a general rule, when you make a salad with arugula, keep it simple: a drizzle of the best olive oil in the house and some shaved Parmesan or slices of fresh mozzarella are usually enough," Cleverdon said. She added that a heavy dressing or too many ingredients will quickly drown the crisp-tender taste and appearance of the greens.

"I do make an exception to that rule, however," she said, "when I make the bread salad that has become a summertime favorite at the farm."

—Peggy Wolff



They don't have to, but David and Susan Cleverdon wash the arugula greens before delivering them.

Tribune photos by Bob Fila

GREENS:

CONTINUED FROM THE COVER

delivery," Muldrow said.

Kinnikinnick Farm, named for a creek that runs through the property, was a scheme that some might have called crazy. The Cleverdons, who knew more about mean city traffic than silty clay loam, decided to embrace the rural life on a small-scale farm and grow organic vegetables: herbs, lettuces, cooking greens, tomatoes and roots. They bought the property in the late 1960s.

"We didn't know squat about soil, or water, or topography and erosion potential," David said. "In fact, we didn't know much about farming." He learned that the soil wasn't great, "almost all Illinois Class C Flagg-Pecatonica silty clay loam. Low organic matter. It crusts over after a rain. It's not very fertile, but it does give vegetables great flavor."

At 61, David Cleverdon, chief grower, picker and pruner, has baby-faced features, husky, rounded shoulders, short-cropped hair and hazel eyes, which look even deeper when he ties a white rag around his forehead to wick off the sweat. He speaks with a Bronx accent, and has worked a number of professions, including CTA bus driver, civil rights activist and bond trader. His day is filled with intelligent meditations on everything from the joys of the culinary world and how food and hot, sweaty kitchens make people happy to portfolio management theories and Chicago politics. He almost exudes too much political know-how for the farmer role, but then he helped run Dan Walker's 1972 Illinois gubernatorial campaign.

"I always try to put myself where the action is, wherever something's going on," he said, referring to the meandering nature of his life. "In the '60s, it was civil rights and politics. In the '70s, it was about making money. And at the end of all that," he summed up, as if he had sensed what was coming, "[the] big issues were going to be in the environment, where men and the earth meet. Susan and I call it catching waves. We're always catching waves."

At the market, it is difficult to sell while clipping on price signs, but Susan, a tall woman with salt-and-pepper hair, can tirelessly multitask, chatting about how to saute the tender greens at the same time she assembles baskets of herbs, mops up water and makes change. For her, there is a mesmerism in the selling, in the all-morning hugging and hearing about customers' jobs, their children, their vacations, their dogs. She doesn't often get to the farmers markets because she fund-raises for Beloit College, but this day she has an unlimited capacity to talk about the food.

The Cleverdons had a garden at their weekend house in Sharon, Wis., and it grew to the point where they needed a farm to satisfy the bliss of feeding a family of four kids. David called a broker who drove him to Caledonia, near the Wisconsin border. While driving around, David fanned his arm in the air and said that he'd like something "like that," indicating an 1850s farmhouse. That afternoon, it was theirs: a rundown homestead with acres of untillable clay soil.

His job, David said, was "to convene it all—the people, the plants, the land, the machinery," with just "a rough idea of where it'll go," the outcome being a satisfying balance between chaos and order. Today the Cleverdons no longer worry about the location of the well or how to interrupt the life cycle of the flea beetle that consumes the leaves of the tomatoes and squash. They worry about the vegetables: the flavor; the color and the shape.

Italian inspiration

Kinnikinnick Farm began specializing in Italian vegetables because Henry's Farm, another market vendor, specialized in Asian vegetables, and David wanted to "concentrate on something" too. At the time, the Cleverdons sold a salad mix of Asian greens, lettuces, frisée and arugula, but it was like everybody else's—until one week when they had a lousy crop of the Asian greens. They separated them out of the salad mix, and began selling the lettuces and arugula separately.

They looked for a more distinctive-tasting arugula and found it. The seeds produced a milder and nuttier leaf than the one they used in the mix, with a slightly peppery taste.

On good days, they sell more than 100 pounds of baby arugula, at the market and on their

restaurant route, which includes Campagnola, Fortunato, North Pond, Va Pensiero, Blackbird and the Ritz Carlton.

Local chefs who buy Cleverdon's arugula use the tender, delicate, 2- to 3-inch leaf, which only has a four-week cycle from seed to harvest. It finds its way into salads and soups as well as pasta sauces, vegetable medleys, ravioli stuffing, fish, poultry and beef. In fact, the only course of a meal in which arugula does not appear is dessert.

"The arugula has complexity," said North Pond chef Bruce Sherman, who serves the arugula on the smoked trout mousse, and as a side salad with asparagus and goat cheese strudel. "It's very good—sweet and spicy and delicate all together. It's not too coarse texturally, or on the palate." It also has a killer shelf life: one to two weeks.

Baby arugula has a delightfully pungent, peppery flavor and it can easily bruise or wilt, so Cleverdon keeps it bagged in coolers until he makes a sale. He does not leave the greens out on the tables at the market to be manhandled and sniffed—that's just for the samples.

Cleverdon is meticulous, and before he delivers greens, he washes them. It's his standard: nobody asks for cleaned greens. At the Kinnikinnick barn, where an Italian flag is hoisted beneath the Stars and Stripes, and an Otis Redding soundtrack is playing a notch too loud, David's hands are in a big tub of water, cleaning up a batch of arugula leaves. He swishes the young greens around in successive baths until they are free of grit, then throws a fisherman's net bag over the greens, dragging it through the water to scoop up a batch.

Opening the top lid on an old, white Maytag



Arugula is picked by the Cleverdons and their crew. The green is grown under a white cloth to keep any insect infestation to a minimum.

washer, he reveals it's their greens spinner. He puts the fishnet bag into the washer, ties the bag off at the top, punches cold cycle, regular action, small load, then turns the wheel to spin and dry. One minute, tops. It is a swift and efficient, yet ingeniously simple, solution to cooling down and drying the greens.

Products not found 'anywhere else'

Inside a cavernous fridge are other Italian greens that would tempt any chef: *puntarelle*, a bitter salad green; *dente de liona*, the red rib dandelion; *minestra nera*, a kale with a curly leaf. Then there's Treviso radicchio, a chicory shaped like romaine; *spigarello*, a braising green; *bietina*, an Italian leaf chard; and *cavolo nero*, a black Tuscan kale with long, curly leaves, its center stem thick as a pencil.

Cleverdon said that a friend of his brought back cavolo nero seeds from Florence. The Cleverdons, Italophiles at heart, immediately started growing it.

"He has introduced products that I cannot get anywhere else," said Muldrow, who uses the cavolo nero, a fall vegetable, in *ribollita*, a Tuscan soup made with white beans.

This year, Cleverdon is selling micro arugula, grown in a germination chamber in the farm's own recipe of organic potting mix. Harvested after seven days and put in small boxes, "the stuff flies right off our stand, loads of it." Cleverdon suggested sprinkling it on a salad or a sandwich for a burst of flavor: "A little goes a long way."

Cleverdon sees optimism in nearly every opportunity, including calling the newly installed irrigation system "a conceptual joy ride," when, in fact, pipes have popped and he has needed to dig through four feet of mud.

"I can look at the books and see dips in income," he says about other years, "but it's not terminal. I know September's going to be different than now, I know next year's going to be, too."

Turning his attention to a fellow farmer, he says he feels like Judith Schad, an Indiana cheese producer who just wants to prove that she can make a living making great cheese.

"That's the same way I feel," he said. "We want to be able to live simply. We'd like to be able to go to Italy once a year."

Macaroni and cheese with wilted arugula

Preparation time: 15 minutes

Cooking time: 30 minutes

Yield: 6 servings

■ You can use any good quality melting cheeses. The pecorino used in this recipe is available at Whole Foods Markets. Tear the arugula leaves in half if they are large. If you use an oven-safe pot to cook the pasta, you can bake the dish in the same pot. Adapted from a recipe by Olivia Casey of Rockwall, Texas.

- 1 pound gemelli or penne pasta
- 1 teaspoon salt
- ½ cup buttermilk
- 1 cup each, grated: Italian fontina cheese, pecorino tomatillo cheese
- ½ cup grated Parmesan cheese
- 1 bunch (about 6 cups) arugula, stemmed
- 1 Italian turkey sausage, cooked, casing removed, crumbled, optional

1. Heat large pot of water to a boil; add pasta and salt. Cook until al dente, about 15 minutes; drain. Meanwhile, heat oven to 350 degrees. Warm buttermilk in small saucepan over medium heat until almost boiling; set aside.

2. Return pasta to the pot; stir in warmed buttermilk. Add cheeses; stir to coat the pasta. Stir in arugula and sausage. Cover; bake until arugula just wilts, about 10 minutes.

Nutrition information per serving:

442 calories, 29% of calories from fat, 14 g fat, 8 g saturated fat, 43 mg cholesterol, 55 g carbohydrates, 22 g protein, 911 mg sodium, 3 g fiber

Greens soup

Preparation time: 20 minutes

Cooking time: 25 minutes

Yield: 6 servings

■ Susan Cleverdon often uses the chopped stems of cooking greens as a base for this soup. Here we use the whole greens. Bietina, an Italian chard that tastes like spinach, is particularly good, Cleverdon says, but any chard or kale can be used. Other green vegetables and fresh herbs can be added with the broth; try zucchini, basil leaves or flat-leaf parsley.

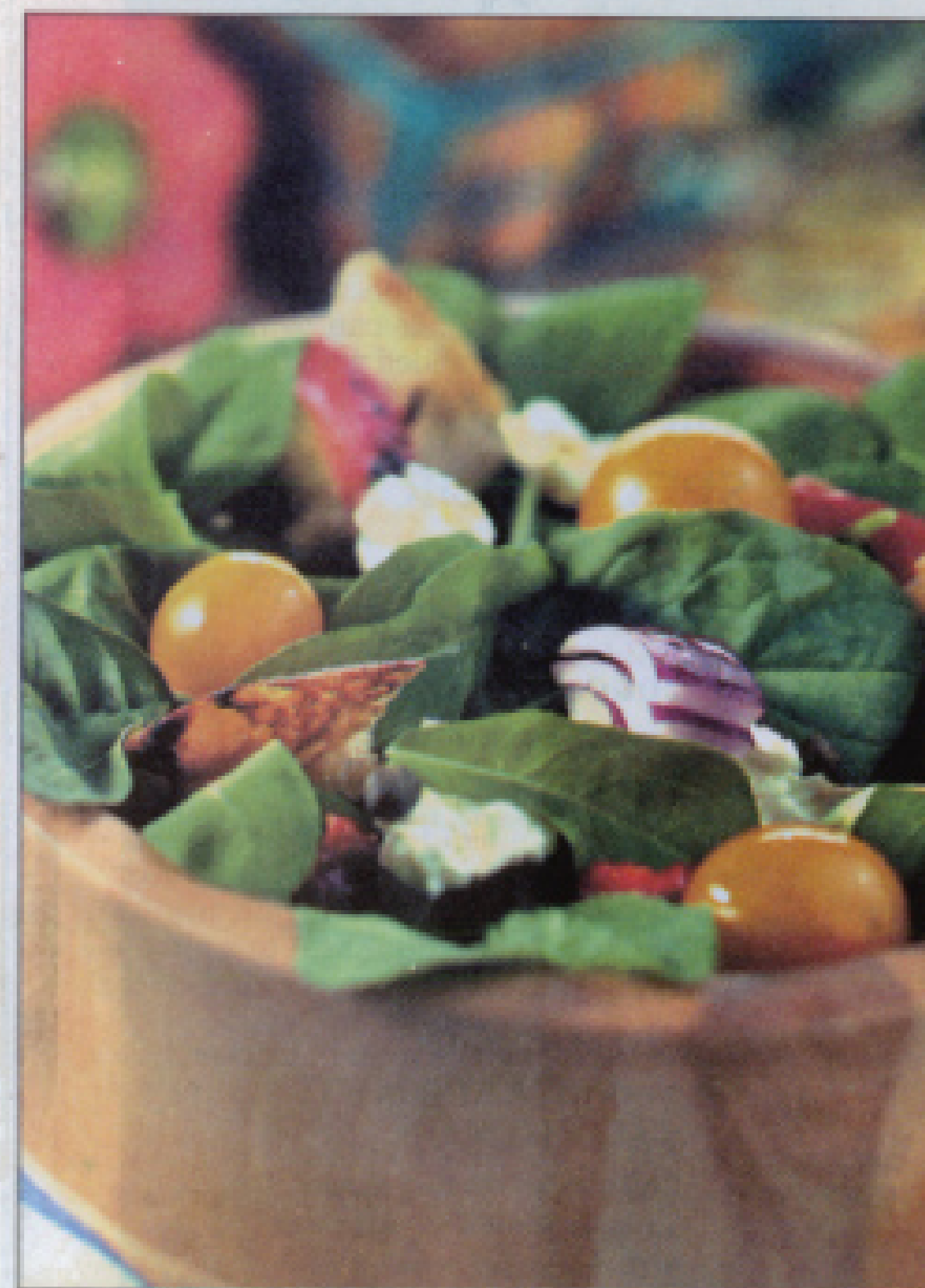
- 3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 small red potatoes, diced
- 2 carrots chopped
- 1 large onion, chopped
- 1 rib celery, chopped
- 1 pound bietina or other greens, stemmed
- 2 cans (14½ ounces each) chicken broth
- 3 sprigs thyme
- 1 bay leaf
- ½ teaspoon salt
- Freshly ground pepper

1. Heat oil in a Dutch oven over medium heat; add potatoes, carrots, onion and celery. Cook, until onions are translucent, about 3 minutes. Stir in greens, chicken broth, thyme, bay leaf, salt and pepper to taste. Heat to a boil; reduce heat to a simmer. Cook, covered, until potatoes are soft and greens are cooked through, about 15 minutes.

2. Remove thyme and bay leaf. Pour the soup in batches into a blender; puree to a smooth texture. Return to pot; heat over medium heat.

Nutrition information per serving:

159 calories, 42% of calories from fat, 8 g fat, 1 g saturated fat, 0 mg cholesterol, 18 g carbohydrates, 6 g protein, 805 mg sodium, 4.7 g fiber



Foodstyling by Corinne Kozlak

Kinnikinnick grilled bread salad

Preparation time: 35 minutes

Cooking time: 5 minutes

Marinating time: 1½ hours

Yield: 8 servings

- 1 large day-old ciabatta or Italian bread loaf, cut into ½-inch slices
- ¼ cup olive oil, about
- 1 clove garlic, halved
- 3 red bell peppers, roasted, cut into narrow strips, see note
- 2 tablespoons balsamic or red wine vinegar
- 1 teaspoon salt, plus more if needed
- ½ pound baby arugula, sliced into ½-inch ribbons
- 1 pint cherry tomatoes, halved
- 1 medium red onion, coarsely chopped
- ¼ cup each: capers, chopped fresh basil leaves
- 3 ounces feta cheese, crumbled
- Freshly ground black pepper

1. Prepare a grill or broiler for high heat. Brush about 1 teaspoon of the olive oil on each side of ciabatta slices with a pastry brush. Rub with garlic halves. Grill or broil until crisp on both sides; cut into bite-size pieces.

2. Combine bread, red pepper strips, vinegar, salt and ¼ cup of the oil; set aside to combine flavors, about 1 hour.

3. Mix in arugula, tomatoes, onion, capers, basil and feta cheese; let rest at room temperature at least 30 minutes before serving. Adjust salt, if needed. Sprinkle with pepper.

Test kitchen note: To roast red peppers, blacken on all sides under a broiler or on the grill. Place in brown paper bag until cool, about 15 minutes. Remove skin and seeds.

Nutrition information per serving:

339 calories, 47% of calories from fat, 18 g fat, 4 g saturated fat, 9.4 mg cholesterol, 37 g carbohydrates, 8 g protein, 881 mg sodium, 4 g fiber