Smoky Grilled Cabbage Wedges with Sweet-and-Sour Meat Sauce

This is my new-fangled variation on old-fashioned stuffed cabbage rolls, the first dish that my new friend Joe Kwon (a famous rock musician who knows his way around a kitchen) mentioned when I asked about his favorite comfort food dishes made with cabbage. The essentials -- cabbage, rice, meaty sauce -- are here, but in different forms than usual. Rather than boiling, filling, and rolling individual cabbage leaves, I streamline the process by cutting the cabbage into wedges and cooking them on a grill. The direct heat and smoke gives the cabbage character and depth of flavor, and it never turns soggy. (Sometimes all it takes to make a familiar ingredient feel fresh and interesting is to prepare it a new way.) I serve the wedges atop a bed of rice and ladle the flavorful meat sauce over the top. I describe these as unrolled cabbage rolls.

When grilling is not possible, you can use roast the wedges in a 450°F oven. The cabbage won’t taste the same, but it’s still delicious, and could become one of your go-to side dishes.

I usually opt for round heads of savoy or regular green cabbage here, but when I can find them, I prefer using one of the conical varieties. These pointy cabbages range from the single-serving size of a pinecone to large enough to feed a family. You can halve or quarter small ones, and cut larger ones into wedges, aiming for pieces that are about 2 inches thick.

Makes 6 to 8 servings

Sweet-and-Sour Meat Sauce
1 tablespoon vegetable oil
1 medium onion, chopped (about 2 cups)
1 1/2 pounds ground dark-meat turkey, ground beef, or plant-based meat substitute
2 (15-ounce) cans crushed tomatoes
3 tablespoons raisins
3 tablespoons packed light brown sugar
1/2 teaspoon ground cinnamon
3 tablespoons chopped fresh dill
Finely grated zest and juice of 1 lemon (about 3 tablespoons)

Grilled Cabbage
1 large or 2 small Savoy cabbages (about 2 1/2 pounds in all)
Vegetable or olive oil, for brushing
Salt and ground black pepper

Serve with: 6 cups hot, cooked white rice
Garnish with: lemon wedges and dill sprigs
1. For the sauce: Heat the oil in a large skillet over medium-high heat. Stir in the onion and pinch of salt and cook until tender, about 5 minutes, stirring often.
2. Add the beef and cook until no longer pink, about 5 minutes, crumbling with the spoon.
3. Stir in the tomatoes, raisins, brown sugar, and cinnamon. Simmer for 15 minutes, stirring occasionally. Keep warm over very low heat until the cabbage is done.
4. Just before serving, stir in the lemon zest and lemon juice, and the dill, if using. Season with salt and pepper.
5. For the cabbage: Heat a gas or charcoal grill to moderate heat.
6. Quarter the cabbage and then cut each quarter into 3 or 4 wedges, each about 2-inches thick at the widest part. Leave a piece of the core attached to each wedge to hold it together.
7. Brush the wedges with oil and sprinkle generously with salt and pepper. Arrange them cut-side down in a single layer on the grate. (I place the wedges in a single layer in a grill basket, which lets me flip them with ease.)
8. Grill until the cabbage begins to wilt and soften and the leafy edges are lightly charred, 6 to 8 minutes. Flip each wedge over, cover, and cook the other side. Reduce the heat or move the wedges to the cool side of the grill as needed to keep them from burning before they turn tender. They should still be firm, but not raw along the core.
9. To serve: Spoon rice onto serving plates. Top with warm cabbage wedges and meat sauce. Serve hot, with lemon wedges and a smattering of dill.

Make-Ahead Notes: The sauce can be made up to 3 days ahead. Cool, cover, and refrigerate. The cabbage does not reheat well and tastes best when served as soon as it is prepared.