

Cardoz offers a watermelon salad with chili powder, ginger and mint. He pairs watermelon gelee with lobster and bacon and, in the only preparation repeated year after year, turns the pureed fruit into a curry with fish. "My customers ask for it as soon as it starts getting warm out," says Cardoz of his watermelon curry, a dish first created at home eight years ago based on a suggestion from his then 3-year-old son.

BEYOND THE BARBECUE

With 92% of its bulk made up of water, it's no wonder watermelon is such an irresistible quencher — and such a natural match for pool party barbecues. In Greece, watermelon is often not just dessert but also a savory starter combining the cubed fruit with salty feta and olives. This winning marriage of the briny and sweet has become a popular summer salad in New York restaurants. At cheese-centric Artisanal on Park Ave. South, chef Terrance Brennan offers a version with arugula, black olive puree and sheep's milk feta from upstate New York. "It's one of those dishes our customers wait for," he says. At Brooklyn bistro Ici, chef Laurent Saillard combines organic melons from Lady Moon Farms in Pennsylvania with feta, red peppers and onions.

Swiss-born Daniel Humm, the ambitious new chef at 11 Madison Park, takes watermelon-based salads to new creative heights. In one preparation, he grills rounds on one side before combining them with heirloom tomatoes, basil oil and balsamic vinegar. "I first saw grilled watermelon in a tapas bar in Barcelona," he explains.

HOW TO CHOOSE A WATERMELON

Watermelons range from a handful to the size of a small child. It's not color or girth that determines their sweet succulence, but the degree of sun-stained ripeness. As they mature,

lycopene, the cancer-fighting compound found in tomatoes, reaches the levels of any fruits or vegetables at their prime, should be heavy. "There's this myth about thurms to find out if they're ripe," Coleman, spokeswoman for the Watermelon Promotion Board, suggests weighing the melon