

Beyond

PIE

Fresh Ways With Pumpkins

There's more
to pumpkin
than pie.

By Laura Pensiero, RD

The season's icon—the pumpkin—suffers from an identity crisis. First, it's typically used as a vegetable, when in fact, biologically, it's a fruit. What's worse, although it can be used in myriad ways, it's seldom called upon to show its extraordinary versatility. Instead, it's seen as merely a pie filling or decorative object. While pumpkins gorgeously announce the onset of autumn, many of us fail to see anything but a narrow glimpse of their culinary range.

COOKING WITH PUMPKINS

Native to Mexico, pumpkins became a New World discovery when Native American Indians introduced them to pilgrims. The Indians pounded the pumpkins flat and dried them so they'd have a source of non-perishable sustenance and a commodity with which to trade. They gave these fruits as gifts to colonists, who used them in stews, sweets, and to make ale, as we continue to do today.

Pumpkins are also perfect for roasting. Caramelizing the natural sugars and evaporating part of the moisture deepens the flavor. Stirring purées (canned or from scratch) into risotto, polenta, quick breads, muffins, and cookies adds flavor and moisture, and pumpkin makes a delicious filling for pastas such as tortellini and ravioli.

Pumpkins come in a variety of types, sizes, shapes, and colors (orange, red, white, and even blue). The smaller varieties tend to be sweeter and less mealy. Their protective outer skin can be intimidating, causing many home cooks to reach for the can when they prepare the Thanksgiving pie filling. One-hundred percent pure canned pumpkin filling (not pie filling, which is sweetened and contains spices) is convenient and more nutritious than fresh because it's concentrated, contains less water, and therefore has more nutrients and phytochemicals. However, using the purée can limit your cooking choices, especially when you want to see the bits of pumpkin flesh in the dish or toast the

pumpkin seeds for crunchy garnishes or snacks. Generally, canned pumpkin is a quick, tasty, and healthy choice for all recipes that ask for purée.

If you want to start from scratch, don't attempt to "peel" the skin of a pumpkin. Thanks to the pumpkin's curves and thick, hard texture, peeling would be time consuming and a bit dangerous (one slip of the knife...). Instead, use a sturdy knife to cut the pumpkin into large chunks or wedges. Then cook the chunks in lightly salted boiling water until tender, 30 to 40 minutes, and drain. When they're cool enough to handle, slip off the skins, and, using a potato masher or ricer, purée the pulp.

A SUPERFOOD

Festive, multifaceted, and healthy—pumpkins have it all. Among their many nutritional highlights is a super-high level of beta-carotene, which lends vibrant color. The body converts beta-carotene, as well as other carotenoids, to vitamin A. One half cup of canned pumpkin purée provides enough beta-carotene to supply 540% of the daily value (DV) for vitamin A. It also provides 25% of the DV for

AN AUTUMN TRADITION

The Jack O'Lantern is an Irish tradition that began with a hollowed turnip. It revolves around a character, real or folklore, named Stingy Jack, who made some unwise "deals with the devil." Without a place in heaven or hell, he eventually had to roam the Earth lighting his way with a Jack O'Lantern. On Halloween's Eve, the Irish carried hollowed-out turnips, rutabaga, gourds, potatoes, and beets to light their way and ward off evil spirits. In the 1800s, Irish immigrants discovered that pumpkins were more plentiful, cheaper, and easier to carve, and an American tradition was born.

vitamin K, 10% for vitamin C, 4 grams of fiber, and many trace minerals.

Like the majority of nuts and seeds, pumpkin seeds are exceptionally good for you. They can be seasoned (spicy or sweet) and roasted to crunchy perfection. Not only do they make a nice snack, but they can top pies, custards, sauces, and starch containing pumpkin such as pilafs, polenta, risotto, mashes, and gratins. The seeds provide not only great taste and add texture contrast but also healthy unsaturated fats (omega-3s for one), as well as fiber, iron, zinc, magnesium, and manganese.

GROWING, HARVESTING, AND STORING

Pumpkins are relatively easy to grow. In fact, they can make you look as if you have a green thumb. Space is the only issue; their vines spread over roughly a 10-foot diameter and can quickly overrun other plants in your garden.

Pumpkin picking is a right of passage into autumn. Whether harvesting your own or picking at a farm, look for pumpkins with a healthy green stem and a dull finish; if they're shiny, it's too soon. Again, smaller pumpkins tend to be more tender and flavorful.

A root cellar is the ideal place to store pumpkins because it's relatively dry and not too cold or hot. There, your harvest will last through mid-winter. If you don't have access to a root cellar, store your pumpkin in the refrigerator for up to one month. To increase a pumpkin's storage time, combine 1 tablespoon of chlorine bleach with 1 gallon of water. Scrub the pumpkins to remove any dirt that can later become rot or mold and hasten decomposition. Thoroughly dry and store the washed pumpkins. This technique also works with decorative gourds.

This year, go beyond pie. Try these recipes that allow pumpkin to reveal its hidden qualities. ♣

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Thai Pumpkin Soup

Makes 4 to 6 servings

The sweetness of the fall sugar pumpkin lends itself well to Thai flavors, spices, and seasonings.

- 2 tablespoons peanut oil
- 1 medium onion, chopped
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 2 teaspoons minced ginger root
- 1 (3- to 4-pound) sugar pumpkin, peeled, seeded, and cut into ½-inch cubes
- ¼ cup mango chutney
- 2 tablespoons natural peanut butter
- 2 tablespoons red curry paste
- 1 teaspoon garam masala*
- ½ cup dry white wine
- 4 cups chicken or vegetable broth
- 3 cups water

- 1 small potato, peeled and cut into ½-inch cubes
- ⅓ cup “lite” coconut milk
- 1 tablespoon Asian fish sauce
- 1 tablespoon maple syrup
- Grated zest and juice from 1 lime
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 2 tablespoons chopped fresh cilantro or Italian parsley to garnish

Heat the peanut oil in a medium saucepan set over medium heat. Cook onion, garlic, and ginger, covered, stirring occasionally until onion is softened, about 3 minutes. Add the pumpkin, turn up the heat to medium-high, and cook, stirring often until lightly brown. Add the mango chutney, peanut butter, red curry paste, and garam masala and cook, stirring constantly for about 1 minute. Add the wine and boil, uncovered, until wine is reduced to a couple of tablespoons, about 3 minutes. Stir in the chicken or vegetable broth, water, and potato and simmer, covered, until pumpkin and potato pieces are easy to mash with the back of a wooden spoon, about 25 minutes.

Purée soup mixture in batches in the work bowl of a food processor or blender and return to the saucepan. Stir in the coconut milk, fish sauce, maple syrup, lime juice, and zest. Simmer, uncovered, for 5 minutes. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Transfer to soup bowls and garnish with cilantro or parsley.

*Available in many supermarkets and gourmet specialty stores, garam masala is a spice blend that can include up to 12 spices, such as black pepper, cinnamon, cloves, coriander, cumin, cardamom, fennel, mace, and nutmeg.

PUMPKINS IN PRINT

The Compleat Squash: A Passionate Grower's Guide to Pumpkins, Squashes, and Gourds by Amy Goldman (Artisan, 2004)

The Great Little Pumpkin Cook by Michael Krondl (Celestial Arts, 1999)

The Perfect Pumpkin: Growing/Cooking/Carving by Gail Damerow (Storey Publishing, LLC, 1997)

Pumpkin, Butternut & Squash: 30 Sweet and Savory Recipes by Elsa Petersen-Schepelern (Ryland Peters & Small, 2003)

Pumpkin, a Super Food for All 12 Months of the Year by DeeDee Stovel (Storey Publishing, LLC, 2005)

Pumpkin Chicken and Sage Risotto

Learning how to make risotto opens unlimited culinary doors. Risotto is the perfect under-30-minute meal—from scratch. This Italian rice preparation is also the ideal platform for leftovers: flake cooked fish, dice leftover meat or poultry, and chop prepared vegetables. Next-day risotto cakes also make for a delicious reminder of your efforts.

In this autumn-inspired recipe, fresh pumpkin is ideal, but a half cup of canned pumpkin purée can be substituted and will lend creaminess and pumpkin flavor to the rice.

Makes 6 first course servings or 4 main course servings

8 cups chicken stock
2 tablespoons olive oil
2 tablespoon unsalted butter
1 small onion, minced
2 cups short grain Italian rice (Carnaroli or Arborio)
½ cup dry white wine
1½ cups diced pumpkin*
8 ounces ground (or chopped) skinless chicken
Pinch nutmeg
4 to 5 fresh sage leaves, roughly chopped
½ cup grated Parmigiano-Reggiano or Grana Padana cheese
Salt

⅓ cup toasted pumpkin seeds

**See instructions for peeling, seeding, and chopping.*

In a medium saucepan, bring the stock to a boil. Reduce heat to simmer.

Heat the olive oil and 1 tablespoon of the butter in a 5- to 6-quart heavy saucepan over medium heat. Add the onion and cook, stirring until very soft but not browned, about 1 minute.

Using a wooden spoon, stir the rice into the onions. “Toast” the rice, stirring constantly, until it looks chalky, about 1 minute; do not brown. Stir in the wine. Cook, stirring until the wine is reduced, 1 to 2 minutes. Add the pumpkin (or pumpkin purée), chicken, nutmeg, and sage.

Add 2 cups of the simmering broth. Stir the rice until the liquid is almost completely absorbed. Continue adding broth, a half cup at a time, stirring after each addition and allowing the rice to absorb the liquid before adding more. After 14 to 15 minutes, taste a grain of rice. It should have a slight resistance to the bite. If it seems too hard, add a little more broth and continue cooking for another minute or two. When the rice has absorbed the last broth addition, remove from the heat.



Pumpkin Pudding



Stir in the cheese and the remaining butter. Whip with a wooden spoon to bring out the creaminess of the rice and incorporate all the ingredients. Season with salt. Divide the risotto among serving plates and top with toasted pumpkin seeds.

Next-day risotto cakes: Spread leftover risotto into a baking pan lined with baking paper. Risotto should be at least 2 inches high. Place a sheet of the paper on top and chill for at least 3 hours to overnight. Using a round cookie cutter, cut approximately 3-inch circles of risotto. Heat about 1 tablespoon of olive oil in a nonstick skillet over medium heat. Add the risotto cakes and cook, turning once, until browned on both sides and heated through, about 2 to 3 minutes per side.

Pumpkin Pudding

This festive pudding is an easy, sweet ending to an autumn or winter meal. Garnish, if desired, with a dollop of whipped cream and a sprinkle of Sweet & Spicy Toasted Pumpkin Seeds.

Makes 6 servings

2 cups pumpkin purée (fresh, boiled, and puréed or 100% pure canned pumpkin purée)

½ cup sugar

¼ cup maple syrup

½ cup reduced fat sour cream

½ cup evaporated skim milk

1 large egg plus 2 large egg whites

1 teaspoon ground cinnamon

1 teaspoon grated lemon zest

½ teaspoon ground ginger

½ teaspoon ground cloves

Pinch salt

Combine all of the ingredients except the evaporated skim milk in the work bowl of a food processor or mixer. Purée (or beat) until smooth. With the motor running, slowly pour in the evaporated skim milk; blend until just incorporated.

Preheat the oven to 375°F. Lightly grease 6 (8-ounce) ramekins (or spray with vegetable cooking spray). Divide the custard mix among the ramekins, then place them

in a baking pan with sides. Pour just enough hot water into the baking pan to come halfway up the sides of the ramekins. Bake until set, about 35 to 40 minutes. Let cool. Cover and refrigerate until ready to serve.

Sweet & Spicy Toasted Pumpkin Seeds

Makes 2 cups

- 1 egg white
- 1 tablespoon water
- 2 cups fresh pumpkin seeds*
- ½ cup sugar
- 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 1 teaspoon coarse sea salt
- ½ teaspoon ground ginger
- ¼ teaspoon cayenne

Preheat oven to 250°F.

In a medium bowl, whisk the egg white and water until frothy. Add the pumpkin seeds and stir to coat. Transfer the seeds to a strainer or sieve and allow them to drain for about 5 minutes.

Combine the sugar, cinnamon, salt, ginger, and cayenne in a large zippered plastic bag and shake vigorously to blend. Add half of the seeds to the bag and shake to coat thoroughly. Remove the seeds and place them in a baking pan with shallow sides. Repeat with remaining seeds. Arrange the sugar coated seeds in a single layer on the baking pan. Bake for 15 minutes, then gently stir, smoothing them back into a single layer. Lower the oven temperature to 200°F and bake until the seeds are caramelized and crisp, about 30 to 40 minutes. Midway through baking, rotate the pan to ensure even browning.

Allow the pumpkin seeds to cool completely. Store in an airtight container at room temperature for up to one month.

*Purchase raw green (hulled) pumpkin seeds or use the “waste” from carving. Using a strong spoon with a long handle, scoop the seeds from the cavity of the pumpkin(s). Rinse them thoroughly to remove flesh and strings, then pat dry between sheets of paper towels.

Maple Pumpkin Polenta

This autumn polenta is made from ground cornmeal (a whole grain), pumpkin purée, and maple syrup. The pumpkin adds a seasonal twist but also a lovely hue and a slightly sweet note. Like the next-day risotto cakes, leftover polenta makes wonderful little patties. Spread warm, soft polenta to about a 2-inch thickness in a baking pan lined with a lightly oiled piece of parchment paper. Let the polenta firm to room temperature. Cut into squares, then grill or sear in a nonstick pan. Topped with a spoonful of mixed autumn mushroom ragu or just a shaving of Parmesan cheese, they make fantastic hors d’oeuvres or side dishes.

Makes 6 servings

- 5 cups water
- 1½ teaspoons kosher salt
- 1 tablespoon extra virgin olive oil
- ¼ cups coarse ground cornmeal
- 1 cup pumpkin purée (boiled, drained, and puréed or 100% natural canned pumpkin)
- 3 tablespoons 100% pure maple syrup
- ¼ to ½ teaspoon cayenne pepper (depends on desired hotness)
- ½ cup grated Parmigiano-Reggiano or Grana Padana
- 1 tablespoon butter

Bring the water to a boil in a medium-size saucepan. Add the salt and olive oil, reduce the heat to simmer, and gradually whisk in the cornmeal a small amount at a time to prevent clumping. Cook the polenta, stirring often until it is tender and pulls away from the sides of the pan, about 25 minutes. Stir in the pumpkin purée, maple syrup, and cayenne. Cook another minute or two, remove from the heat, and stir in the Parmigiano-Reggiano and the butter. Adjust seasoning with salt, if necessary. Serve warm.

