

Pumpkin Possibilities

The versatile orange fruit is a star in the kitchen

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Depending on where you live, the pumpkin crop this year was either abundant or abysmal. Some of the gourds suffered from torrential summer rains; others benefited from perfect weather to yield a bounty of plump orange. Reports say that rain is responsible for "skinny" pumpkins in Illinois. Rising fuel prices are to blame for Arizona's jacked-up pumpkin prices. Texas simply fears a shortage. Long Island reports its best crop in years. But whether you buy your pumpkin for \$1 from a farmer or \$17 from an urban center, the fact remains that these humble gourds are still in high demand. And they aren't just for carving anymore.

No longer are pumpkins carved with a ghoulish grimace or toothy grin, then confined to the front stoop to welcome (or frighten) Halloween trick-or-treaters and left to rot. Today pumpkins are hitting the home-fashion runway. Although the big, bulbous, orange ones are still used mostly for jack-o'-lanterns, dozens of varieties are readily available that aren't destined to go under the knife, but are used in their natural, whole form as home decoration.

There's one for every decor and taste: round ones, flat ones, pinks, grays, and even whites. There are ribbed pumpkins, smooth ones, warty ones, and those with splashes of mixed colors. Some are small enough to nest in a 5-year-old's palm. Others are grown strictly for their gargantuan size. They're trucked to autumn fairs where they can tip the scale at more than 1,500 pounds.

But as Peter, Peter Pumpkin Eater knew, where taste really matters is in the kitchen. Still, except when pumpkins make their appearance at Thanksgiving as the ubiquitous pie, they tend to be overlooked as an edible offering.

That's a pity. These members of the squash family are grown on every continent (with the exception of Antarctica) and are versatile enough to be used in any recipe calling for winter squash. They can be baked, steamed, boiled, fried, and microwaved. (To microwave, cut peeled pumpkin in 2-inch chunks, place in a covered dish, and cook for 8 to 9 minutes. A drizzle of maple syrup won't hurt.) And, like any squash, once pumpkin is cooked, it can be scooped in a freezer bag and frozen for up to six months.

Pumpkins have been welcome in the cuisines of Africa, Mexico, and South America for centuries. Argentines make a beef stew in hollowed-out pumpkins using the flesh scraped from the sides of the fruit to thicken the sauce as it cooks.

Adventurous cooks often serve soups in pumpkin terrines. (Simply hollow a large pumpkin, replace the lid, place in a large pan, and bake in a 400 degree F. oven for 20 minutes. Voilà!)

The first English settlers at Plimoth Plantation were introduced to pumpkins by the native Americans and it's thought that they were served their first pumpkin dish at their first or second Thanksgiving.

Colonists soon were developing their own pumpkin recipes. They would hollow pumpkins, fill them with milk, spices, and maple syrup, and bake them on hot coals. It was the precursor of today's pumpkin pie. Today, many Americans feel that Thanksgiving without a pumpkin pie is nothing less than sacrilege.

What better time to return to your Pilgrim roots and cook a fresh pumpkin from scratch? They're everywhere and they're easy to cook, so there's no excuse. You'll never reach for a can of pumpkin again.

Pumpkin Goat Cheese Crostini

These crostini make an interesting seasonal starter for a meal. They can also be made with any cooked winter squash, such as butternut or acorn. Serve with cups of cold cider. This recipe makes about 24 crostini; halve the recipe if needed.

- 3 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 medium onion, diced
- 4 ounces herbed or plain goat cheese, crumbled
- 2 cups pumpkin puree (canned or freshly baked)
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 24 slices French bread, sliced in 1/2-inch diagonals
- 1 cup shredded mozzarella cheese
- Dried cranberries for topping, about 3 or 4 for each crostini

Chopped Italian parsley for garnish. Heat the olive oil in a medium-size, heavy saucepan. When hot, add onion. Sauté over medium-low heat - stirring often and being careful not to burn - until onions are soft and golden brown, about 15 minutes; set aside.

When cool, mix in goat cheese, pumpkin, and salt.

Divide the pumpkin mix evenly over each slice of French bread. Top with mozzarella cheese, dried cranberries, and parsley. Arrange on a cookie sheet, and bake in preheated 350 degree F. oven for 10 to 12 minutes, or until cheese is bubbly.

Creamed Curry Pumpkin Bisque

This pumpkin bisque can be made a day or two ahead of time and

refrigerated. This will allow the flavors to meld. Simply reheat before serving.

- 1 teaspoon olive oil
- 1 teaspoon butter
- 1 cup diced onion
- 3 tablespoons curry powder
- 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 1/2 teaspoon chili powder
- 1/4 teaspoon ground nutmeg
- 1/4 teaspoon ground cumin
- 1/4 teaspoon ground coriander
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon freshly ground pepper
- 2 cups freshly baked pumpkin (or a 15-ounce can of pumpkin puree)
- 2 tablespoons molasses
- 1/3 cup sugar
- 4 cups vegetable broth
- 1 cup heavy cream
- 1 cup fresh cilantro, rinsed and chopped

Heat the olive oil and butter in a large saucepan over medium heat. Add onion, reduce heat to low, and cook until soft and browned, about 10 minutes, stirring often.

Stir in all the spices, including salt and pepper.

Stir in pumpkin, molasses, and sugar. When mixture begins to bubble, slowly stir in vegetable broth.

Simmer, covered, for 18 to 20 minutes, whisking occasionally.

Whisk in cream and allow to heat. Serve when hot. Divide soup evenly into 6 bowls; serve with cilantro on the side to garnish. Serves 6.

Prize-Winning Pumpkin Cheesecake

This recipe is slightly adapted from one in "From the Cooks Garden" (2003), by Ellen Ecker Ogden. "Pumpkin cheesecake recipes abound, but this one is outstanding," writes Ogden. "Considering the praises it receives, it is a very simple recipe, and for several years in a row has won prizes at our local harvest festival."

I went out and bought a spring-form pan several years ago to try it. So, if you don't own a 9-inch spring form pan, or can't borrow one from a friendly neighbor, it's well worth the investment for this recipe alone.

Although the original recipe uses freshly cooked sugar pumpkin, and fresh is always better, it works well with canned. So if that little sugar pumpkin on your mantle is just collecting dust, take it down, dust it off, and make a pie out of it. (See note on how to cook sugar pumpkins following the recipe.)

For the crust:

- 1 cup graham cracker crumbs
- 6 tablespoons butter, melted
- 1 tablespoon sugar

For the filling:

- 2 8-ounce packages cream

- cheese, at room temperature
- 1 cup sugar
- 2 cups cooked, or canned pumpkin puree
- 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 1/4 teaspoon ground ginger
- 1/4 teaspoon freshly grated nutmeg
- 1/8 teaspoon salt
- 2 large eggs, at room temperature

- 2 cups sour cream
- 1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract

For the crust:

Mix graham cracker crumbs, melted butter, and sugar in a bowl until combined. Press firmly and evenly into the bottom of a 9-inch spring form pan. Refrigerate until cool and firm, about 20 to 30 minutes.

Preheat oven to 350 degrees F.

For the filling:

With an electric mixer, beat the cream cheese and 3/4 cup of sugar on high, scraping down the sides as necessary, until smooth.

Beat in the pumpkin puree, spices, and salt. Add eggs, one at a time, beating after each addition.

Spread pumpkin mixture evenly over graham cracker crust.

Bake until the filling seems almost completely set when given a gentle shake (the center will seem a little moist), about 50 to 55 minutes.

Remove cake from oven. Increase oven temperature to 400 degrees F. Mix sour cream, remaining 1/4 cup sugar, and vanilla in a small bowl. Spread over the top of the cheesecake.

Return to oven and bake until topping looks set, about 8 minutes. Transfer cheesecake to a wire cake rack and cool to room temperature. Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate until chilled, at least 4 hours. Run a sharp knife around the inside of the pan and remove the sides of the pan. Slice with a hot, wet knife. Serve chilled.

Cooking sugar pumpkins

Most canned pumpkin consists of just that, pumpkin. Nothing else. Some, however, do contain sweetener and spices. These are especially processed for pumpkin pies. Avoid these. It's always best to add your own spice blend.

For purists, only freshly cooked pumpkin will do. It's a simple process, and with pumpkins readily available this time of year, it's the way to go.

A 3- to 4-pound sugar pumpkin will yield between 2 to 3 cups of pureed fruit.

Preheat oven to 350 degrees F. Remove and discard stem from

pumpkin. Cut pumpkin in half. With a large spoon, scrape out seeds and stringy pulp. Pour about 1/2 inch of water in a baking pan. Place pumpkin, cut side down in pan, and bake for about 1 hour, or until pumpkin is soft when pierced with a sharp knife. Remove pumpkin from oven, and scrape out flesh with a spoon. Discard skin, and puree pumpkin in food processor until smooth.

Engagement



Thomas Deshong and Tina Faith would like to announce the engagement of their daughter, Tricia Deshong, to Tyler Gelvin, son of Mike and Tammy Gelvin of Hustontown.

Tricia is a 2004 graduate of McConnellsbury High School and is currently employed by F&M Trust in McConnellsbury.

Tyler is a 2001 graduate of Forbes Road High School and a 2005 graduate of Westminster College. He is currently employed by Entact, Environmental Services.

An April 25, 2009, wedding is planned.

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