

Though winter squash is now plentiful, many cooks ignore this veggie's edible pleasures.

DON'T SQUANDER THE SQUASH!

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY DENISE RITCHIE



Non-hybrid Seminole pumpkins are produced by open pollination, which results in a variety of shapes.

It's that time of year when the winter squash crop, planted in the summer through Labor Day, is at its peak. Hubbard, acorn, butternut, pumpkin, buttercup, banana and spaghetti – among the most common – are plentiful on supermarket shelves and at farmers markets. Winter squashes can be the base for an appetizer soup, a main

course, side dish or dessert.

Yet, despite their versatility, many cooks shy away from including winter squashes in their repertoire. As one local grocer commented, “We carry a few, but most people don’t know what to do with them.”

Sad, but true. In an era when “fast” home cooking is the norm and often the necessity, today’s cooks may be

daunted by the colorful and curvaceous squashes with their hard rinds – some smooth and others knobby – and unfamiliar origins. They may appear out of place in the produce section among such common green vegetables as broccoli and asparagus. Or they may be judged as something merely decorative and not edible. Elongated gourds used in centerpieces

and Halloween jack-o'-lanterns, as well as canned pumpkins, may be the closest that many cooks will ever get to a winter squash.

But once their hard shells are cracked open and the seeds removed, winter squashes can be baked, seasoned with butter and salt or spiced with brown sugar for a flavorful side dish. Or they can be mashed and laced with cinnamon and ginger and folded into the makings of traditional holiday pies or sweet breads. In addition, the dense meat of a winter squash can be substituted for sweet potatoes and carrots in any recipe. And the color of the flesh – pale yellow to rich, deep orange and red – means that winter squashes are loaded with important antioxidants. So these vegetables are as healthful as they are versatile.

In Indian River County we are fortunate to have farmers who are growing winter squashes in addition to other more popular and trendy vegetables such as green beans and heirloom tomatoes.

Kevin O'Dare, owner of Osceola Organic Farm, is one of these farmers. He grows acorn and butternut squash along with another variety of winter squash, spaghetti squash. "My wife and I love spaghetti squash. After baking it, you scrape it out and the strands look like spaghetti. You can top it with your favorite tomato sauce and basil and it's delicious."

Because of the neutral flavor of many winter squashes, they can go the sweet or savory route depending



Linda Hart displays a Seminole pumpkin grown on her farm in Fellsmere. "It is an indigenous fruit that has been growing around here for hundreds of years," she says.

on the accent spice or herb, Kevin says. "But some still swear by butter and salt. That's the old-fashioned way." When buying winter squash, Kevin says to look for a product that is firm and has no blemishes or mold spots.

Linda Hart is a licensed poultry farmer and entrepreneur who has started growing pumpkins on her

Crazy Hart Farm in Fellsmere. Her pumpkins are heirloom Seminoles, one of the oldest varieties grown in Florida. "I started experimenting with the Seminoles for personal consumption and they have really taken off," she says. She will likely have plenty to sell at the Oceanside Farmers Market on Ocean Drive this fall.

"The Seminole is very good-tasting



Mark Smith is seen with newly planted kabocha squash on his Aunt Zorada farm in Vero Beach.

– sweeter than other varieties of pumpkin – and it is an indigenous fruit that has been growing around here for hundreds of years. I think it is important to bring back the native foods of the area.”

Linda’s pumpkins grow on vines on the ground, but she says that Florida pioneers were surprised to see them climbing up trees where they picked the pumpkins high off the ground. “The Indians would girdle a tree with the vines to grow the pumpkins so

they didn’t have to pick through any foliage to harvest the fruit.”

Linda is also experimenting with ways to cook her pumpkins. For instance, the flowered blooms of the fruit can be battered and deep fried. “Basically, pumpkins are simple to cook. Just cut them in half, scrape the seeds out and put them face down in a pan and bake them. If you want to be traditional, you can make pumpkin bread and fry it. This is what the Miccosukee and the Seminole Indians

still do today for their powwows.”

In addition to their adaptability, pumpkins and other winter squashes have a long shelf life and will keep for months if stored in a cool, dry place between 55 degrees and 60 degrees.

Mark Smith is a life-long farmer who primarily grew corn and soybeans in Indiana before moving to Florida. He also planted 30 acres of jack-o’-lantern pumpkins. However, on his

20-acre Aunt Zorada farm in Vero Beach, this vegetable farmer grows a different winter squash. It is the red kabocha, a Japanese variety with a richly colored flesh in hues from deep orange to red. He favors it for its flavor and sweetness, as does John's Island Executive Chef John Farnsworth, who is one of Smith's best customers for kabocha.

A simple preparation is to remove the rind and the seeds and roast it, Chef Farnsworth says. "We like to cut it into large pieces – two-and-a-half to three inches – sprinkle with grape seed oil, salt and pepper, then roast it in a hot oven, 450-475 degrees, until it is tender." When it's cooled to room temperature, he dresses it with a Sicilian pine nut and currant vinaigrette and serves it as a salad or a side dish.

In addition he often prepares kabocha soup, and uses the winter squash, along with roasted chicken livers and wild mushrooms, in a savory flan.

"It's a great vegetable," Farnsworth says, but he cautions cooks at home to use a large knife when cutting kabocha or any other winter squash because of their size and hard rinds. "To be safe, when we cut them in half, we use a two-handed cheese knife."

Another innovative chef and proponent of winter squashes is Chris Bireley, who opened his Osceola Bistro on 13th Avenue in downtown Vero Beach just over a year ago. He buys the vegetables locally at the peak of freshness and turns them into festive creations. If you ask him about the so-called blandness of a winter squash, he quickly counters with, "There is nothing to compare to the taste of a butternut squash!"

He worked for a time at a small family restaurant in Northern Italy, and during that important phase of his culinary training experimented with Italian pumpkins.

"During the winter the gardens of Italy produce beautiful pumpkins that are smaller and sweeter than the variety we have in the United States," he says. "They are a center point of flavor for the holidays." He brought back a wonderful recipe for pumpkin-filled tortellini, which is featured in this article.

Bireley also served as chef at Ellie's, a popular restaurant on Royal Palm Pointe that closed in 2004. While there he introduced a butternut soup which became a staple of the restaurant. He provides the recipe for this delicacy that features one of his favorite winter squashes. "It's not a creamy version but rather a consommé that is an almost translucent orange color."

One final note to this article on winter squash: Don't forget the seeds. Winter squash seeds are edible and delicious. Rinse and dry the seeds and then roast them at 275 degrees until they just begin to pop, about 15 to 20 minutes. Then season with salt and enjoy.



Red kabocha is rich in important antioxidants.



Chris Bireley, Osceola Bistro owner and chef, is a fan of all kinds of winter squashes.

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Fresh Pasta Tortellini With Pumpkin Filling And Brown Butter And Sage Sauce



Fresh Pasta Tortellini

- 1¼ pounds all-purpose flour
- 1 pound semolina flour, fine
- 4 whole eggs
- 3 egg yolks
- 3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 1 tablespoon kosher salt

Mix all ingredients in a mixer on speed #2 with dough hook or paddle for 3 minutes. (Can also be mixed by hand.) Dough should be in a firm ball when finished, peeling away from sides of mixing bowl. Begin to work dough using pasta maker or pasta rollers starting at #10 on the dial. Work down to the thickness of dial #3, finishing in a perfect sheet for creating the tortellini.

Cut sheets of pasta into squares, 3 inches by 3 inches. Place 1 tablespoon of pumpkin tortellini filling in the center of the square; fold pasta square corner to corner to create a triangle with the filling enclosed. Join two sides of the triangle and pinch to create the finished tortellini with the look of a bishop's hat.

Yield: Makes 16 tortellini for 4 servings.

Pumpkin Filling

- 4 baby pumpkins (8 inches in diameter). Cut in half and clean
- 12 Amaretto cookies
- 2 tablespoons butter, soft or room temperature
- ½ cup apple jelly
- 3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 2 tablespoons kosher salt
- ¼ cup grated Parmesan Reggiano
- Freshly ground pepper and additional salt to taste

Season pumpkin halves with salt and extra virgin olive oil and roast in oven skin side down on a sheet pan at 375 degrees until golden brown (40 minutes to an hour). Let cool; then remove flesh from pumpkin skin using a large spoon. Place flesh in food processor along with the next six ingredients from the list above and process for 1 to 2 minutes until filling is firm, smooth and well combined. Then season with salt and pepper to taste.

Brown Butter And Sage Sauce

- 3 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 6 sprigs of fresh sage (leaves only)
- 4 tortellini
- 3 tablespoons grated Parmesan Reggiano
- Salt and pepper to taste

In a pot of salted boiling water add tortellini and cook until floating, about 2 to 3 minutes. Water must be at a heavy boil and once pasta is floating, it is done.

In a sauté pan on medium heat, place butter and let it come to a brown (butter should be brown but not burnt). Under no circumstance, use burned butter. If it burns, please try again.

Remove pan from any heat source and combine fresh sage leaves into pan with brown butter. Then add 4 tortellini and salt and pepper to taste. Place the pan back on medium heat and toss/stir for about 10 to 15 seconds. Plate and sprinkle with grated Parmesan Reggiano.



Butternut Squash Consommé

- 6 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 1 onion
- 2 medium butternut squash, halve length-wise, then crosswise, peeled and seeded
- 1 leek white only, wash well
- 8 cups water or chicken stock
- 2 large eggs, whites only
- Salt and pepper to taste

Melt 2 tablespoons of the butter in a large skillet over low heat. Sauté the onion for 5 minutes until translucent. Remove from the heat and set aside.

Set aside the squash bottoms and cut the stem ends (top halves) into 1-inch cubes. Melt the remaining 4 tablespoons of butter in a large pot over medium heat. Sauté the squash cubes, turning occasionally, for 10 to 15 minutes, until lightly brown.

Add the onion and water or chicken stock and bring to a gentle simmer. Reduce the heat to low; skim any foam that may float to the top. Simmer for 1½ hours. Strain and cool. Season the broth with salt and pepper to taste.

In a food processor, puree the leek and 2 of the remaining squash bottoms. Add egg whites and blend/pulse. Whisk this mixture into the cold broth. Bring

the broth to a gentle simmer over low heat, whisking occasionally until the liquid gets hot to the touch. Once the egg mixture comes to the surface, stop whisking and let simmer for 40 minutes.

Gently remove the egg white mixture with a slotted spoon or spatula. Strain the consommé through a double layer of cheese cloth. (The consommé may be prepared at this point, cooled, covered, and refrigerated for up to 3 days. To reheat, heat it very slowly and never boil hard.)

Cut the remaining squash into small cubes or triangles, all the same size. In a pot of salted boiling water, cook the squash for 7 minutes or until tender. Drain. Ladle hot consommé into bowls and garnish with squash cubes and serve.

Yield: 6 servings. ❁