

THE VERSATILE *pumpkin*

Pies, coaches and
Headless Horsemen

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*For pottage and puddings and custards and pies,
Our pumpkins and parsnips are common supplies:
We have pumpkins at morning and pumpkins at noon,
If it were not for pumpkins, we would be undone.”*

— Pilgrim rhyme, circa 1630

'Tis the season for all things pumpkin. Whether prepared in pumpkin pie, pumpkin pancakes or pumpkin spice latte, this member of the squash family is ubiquitous both in autumn and winter.

In fact, pumpkin is so beloved that it even has its own annual holiday, National Pumpkin Day on Oct. 26.

Except for the stem, every part of the pumpkin can be eaten.

The love is there for good reason.

Although squash is often served as a vegetable on dinner plates, it is actually a fruit with relatives in the Cucurbitaceae family (e.g., cucumbers, zucchini and melons). Due to its sweetness, the pumpkin member of the clan is often used in desserts. However, just because squash is a fruit doesn't necessarily mean that you'll want to eat it. Cousin gourd, for example, is not edible. While pumpkins can be used for both cooking and decorating, gourds are purely for show.

Pumpkins are native to North America. In the Oaxaca Highlands of Mexico, archaeologists have found the oldest pumpkin seeds yet, dating back about 9,000 years, even predating cultivation of maize. Pumpkins and their squash cousins were grown here for generations before Europeans began exploring this side of the Atlantic. And over the centuries, they evolved from small, hard and bitter-tasting to tender-fleshed and sweet. Because pumpkins were both easy to grow and to preserve for the long, harsh winter, they formed a critical component of the Native American diet.

In fact, it was the Native Americans who perfected the "Three Sisters" method of cultivation. They grew squash, corn and beans — major components of their nourishment — together in such a way that the crops protected and sustained each other. Beans climb the corn-stalks so that squash vines don't overshadow them, but they in turn help to stabilize the corn during strong windstorms. Beans also provide nitrogen to fertilize the soil. And the large squash leaves? They provide shade that helps both to retain soil moisture and prevent weeds.

When explorers finally did make it over here around the middle of the 16th century, they enjoyed the fruit and brought samples back home with them. The English called them pumpions and incorporated them into pie, a recipe for which appeared in a 1675 cookbook. However, this was not the pumpkin pie with which we're familiar. The English version consisted of sliced, spiced and sweetened pumpkin baked in a pastry shell.

So, when the English set foot on New England shores in 1620, they were probably already quite familiar with the fruit. The earliest Colonial pumpkin recipes on record called for scooping out pumpkin shells, filling them with a ginger-spiced milk, and roasting over a fire. Pumpkin pie as we know it, with its smooth and silky custard filling, didn't



Just before serving Pumpkin Fudge Cake, sprinkle with confectioners sugar.

appear on dinner tables until the late 18th century.

Pumpkins now grow on every continent but Antarctica. The United States alone produces about one and a half billion (that's billion with a "b") pounds of pumpkin in over 45 varieties. And while we are probably most familiar with the bright orange ones that brighten the landscape every fall, they also come in an array of other colors, including white, red, yellow, green and blue.

For reasons that elude me, pumpkins seem to inspire competition. For example, Illinois boasts that it is the largest grower in the country, and the village of Morton in that state claims the title "Pumpkin Capital of the World" because it packs 85% of the world's canned pumpkin. Not to be outdone, Circleville, Ohio, is home to the Circleville Pumpkin Show, the largest festival of its kind in the country. At that fair, you'll see everything from a contest for largest pumpkin to a Miss Pumpkin Show pageant.

Circleville may have the largest festival and its pumpkin size competition, but according to Guinness World Records, one Stefano Cutrupi, a gardener in Tuscany, has produced the largest example. He grew a whopper of a pumpkin that weighed in at 2,702 pounds, 13.9 ounces.

Except for the stem, every part of the pumpkin can be eaten. The squash's flowers can be dipped in batter and fried or incorporated into a frittata, and its seeds can be roasted and salted for a crunchy treat. In parts of Africa, the leaves are eaten as vegetables. A traditional Zambian dish called chibwabwa calls for boiling the leaves together with tomatoes, onions and ground peanuts into a thick stew.

And while you can cook with any kind of pumpkin, using a "pie" or "sugar" variety will give you more success with less work. Pie pumpkins are smaller and usually squatter than the type used for jack-o'-lanterns.

And speaking of jack-o'-lanterns, it was the Irish who brought them to our country (the name should have been a clue, no?). The moniker comes from the legend of one Stingy Jack, a character famous for playing tricks on the Devil. Originally, jack o'-lanterns were carved from potatoes or turnips, but Irish immigrants found that pumpkins proved much easier to cut. Hence, the bright orange face that glows from front porches every Halloween.

Aside from the jack-o'-lantern, the big orange orb features prominently in at least a half-dozen popular folktales. For example, Cinderella was able to travel to the royal ball because her fairy godmother turned a pumpkin into a coach. The Headless Horseman of Sleepy Hollow threw his prosthetic pumpkin head at Ichabod Crane, thereby eliminating competition for the lovely Katrina (was he really Brom in disguise?) And Linus of Peanuts fame? He still sits in his garden, waiting for the Great Pumpkin to arrive.

Pumpkin Fudge Cake

The pumpkin makes this cake so rich and moist that it is my kids' choice for their birthdays.

Ingredients:

Cocoa

1 c. butter or coconut oil

5 oz. semisweet chocolate chips

1¾ c. all purpose flour

1 t. baking powder

½ t. baking soda

½ t. salt

3 eggs

2 c. sugar

1 15-ounce can pumpkin

¼ c. coffee liqueur

Confectioners sugar

Directions:

Preheat to 350 degrees. Coat a 9-inch Bundt pan with baking spray and dust with cocoa powder.

Place butter and chocolate in microwave for about 1 minute, or until melted (microwave ovens differ in power, so it's better to start slow to avoid the danger of burning).

Sift flour, baking powder, soda and salt.

In a large bowl, beat eggs and sugar.

Add melted chocolate mixture and beat.

With mixer at low, add flour mixture alternately with pumpkin.

Blend in liqueur.

Pour into pan. Bake 1 hour 15 minutes.

Cool on rack 45 minutes.

At last possible second before serving, sift some confectioners sugar over the top to make snow. If you don't have a sifter, you can rub it through a strainer.

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